

The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 48 March 5, 2023

Practical Expressions of Love and Holiness

Hebrews 13:1-6

Introduction to Chapter 13

This final chapter of Hebrews functions as an epilogue to the book. Its contents fit well with the rest of it, as it expands on what was introduced in chapter 12 – What does the worship and or service to God that is pleasing to Him, look like? Fittingly, this is well developed in practical ways in chapter 13. In this way, it is closely connected to Hebrews 12:28 – *“to offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe...”* because of who God is and what He has done.

Richard Phillips observes that, in John 15:12, as Jesus readied Himself and His disciples for His departure, He commanded them to love one another as He had loved them. As chapter 13 begins, the A.H. points out something similar – note 13:1 – *“Let brotherly love continue.”* The author is about to complete his letter / sermon, and so, in farewell to wrap up the practical application of his exhortations, he begins by stressing that their *“brotherly love continue.”*

This chapter organizes into 4 sections: vv. 1-8 – life within a church community; vv. 9-14 – belief of the church in an unbelieving world; vv. 15-19 – a call to lives offered sacrificially to the Lord; and lastly, vv. 20-21 – one of the great benedictions of the NT, followed by the almost obligatory greetings in vv. 22-25, along with news regarding Timothy and his release (from prison, we assume), and the potential visit of Timothy with the author to those to whom he is writing.

Love and Hospitality

vv. 1-2

As we’ve seen throughout Hebrews, the main theme is perseverance, through which one will avoid apostasy. The word translated here in v. 1 as ‘continue’ is a synonym for ‘persevere.’ The type of love to be practiced is brotherly love (the Greek, *phileos*). This emphasis is distinctly Christian, and especially marked out the early Christian movement. The church is to be a community characterized by love for one another, because we are all brothers and sisters in God’s family.

Francis Schaeffer was a powerful defender of Christian doctrine and a well-known apologist, whose chief ministry focus was to strive to maintain love within the body of Christ. Here is one of his comments, cited by Richard Phillips;

“Through the centuries men have displayed many different symbols to show that they are Christians. They have worn marks in the lapels of their coats, hung chains about their necks, even had special haircuts...But there is a much better sign...it is a universal mark that is to last through all the ages of the church until Jesus comes back.” That mark is love among Christians, and

Schaeffer proves it with Jesus' teaching of John 13:35, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."¹

Also, from the pen of John the Apostle, is I John 4:7-8. Loving others is an outflowing of our relationship with God; it is how we show gratitude for His love for us. Note also Matthew 25:34-40. 'Love' is not so much mentioned here, but is demonstrated as the motivation described by millennial kingdom-bound believers. Love is always expressed in concrete actions, and where those actions are notably absent, one could conclude that the person not loving others is not a believer. Take notice of the message of Matt. 5:46-48.

The scope of brotherly love is to be broad, not confined to biological or ecclesiastical siblings. The Parable of the Good Samaritan was on topic here – Luke 10:25-37. Showing mercy to those in need is a form of selfless love being displayed in a very practical way.

Here in Hebrews, given the time of its writing – 60's AD – the exhortation of v. 2 is that of bringing people into believer's homes. Travel outside of one's own town in that era was dangerous, and there were few inns. Today, we live more compartmentalized lives, and we tend to be almost hermits when we get home from work or school, without inviting even fellow believers into our personal lives and homes as often as we should. Certainly Covid-19 made this social condition even more difficult. And the exhortation here is *"to show hospitality to strangers."* Unfortunately, and to our shame, we are like strangers to some in our own congregation, where, if we are honest, just don't seem to be people we can share our lives with because relationships can be messy. We need to seriously consider heeding this verse at least within our own church family – to reach out to the lonely, the shut-in, the ill, to encourage and support them. We all know this is easier to say than to do, but it is what God wants us to be like.

The NT points out the need for Christians to be hospitable – note Romans 12:13; I Pet. 4:9; I Tim. 3:2; 5:10; & Titus 1:8.

The A.H. now points to one reason to offer hospitality to strangers – *"for some have entertained angels unawares..."* Is this a modern phenomenon as well – if we have done it unawares, then it probably is, but the author is more likely thinking of Abraham and Lot here – from Genesis 18:1-8 & 19:1-9. (and maybe Judges 6:11-14). Both Abraham and Lot showed hospitality to strangers who turned out to be angels, and if we read both passages, we see they both took hospitality very seriously.

Remember Those in Prison

v. 3

Just as v. 2 told us *"Do not neglect..."*, v. 3 now adds the same concept, in positive form – *"Remember those who are in prison."* Both verses reveal a problem we must be

¹ Francis Schaeffer as cited by Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 587

aware of about ourselves. We tend to forget about other people and what they are going through, because we are too immersed in our own issues – I am guilty of this as well, so I am teaching this to myself too. As believers, we are supposed to take care of one another, look out for one another, especially when we become aware that beloved church members, other loved ones, neighbours, co-workers, etc. are having real pain &/or serious problems in their lives.

In the case of those in prison, and in the context of this letter, this almost certainly would be those in prison because of their faith. This may be easier to ‘forget’ because it would be inconvenient to visit them, because it would expose us as a friend who is likely also a believer, making it possible we could also end up in prison. That was Peter’s emotional concern when Jesus was arrested. He had promised Christ he would die defending Him, yet his fear of man led him to deny any association with Jesus 3 times when confronted by a servant girl and others – cf. Matt. 26:33-35, 69-75 & Phil. 2:1-11.

Even within this epistle, in Heb. 10:32-34, it was a reality that these people had been dealing with. Note especially vv. 33-34. Some had been ‘remembering’ their fellow believers and persevering in the faith by exposing themselves to “*reproach and affliction*,” sometimes even being a “partner” with those so treated. The exhortation of 13:3b, “*as though in prison with them...*” is a high call, and includes 3c, “*and those who are mistreated...*”; in other words, the ones fortunately not in prison, must pray for, visit, perhaps bringing food and water to those in prison or being mistreated for their faith, or perhaps, just because they are weaker physically or mentally. – IOW – those being persecuted. In those times (1st century AD) there was no social system in place to ensure prisoners of the state would be fed, receive water, or even blankets, etc. Note II Tim. 4:13.

The reality is that they (we) wanted to fit into society and avoid suffering. But there is a real conflicting heart issue here. Worship God openly, trusting Him to protect us when we ‘put ourselves out there’ for the cause of Christ – a very unpopular position and getting less popular every day, it seems – or sit back and forget what you should be doing for others.

Daniel is an excellent example in many ways of how a believer is to comport oneself in a pagan society. Daniel and his three friends provide us with a lot of examples of how to make decisions in secular situations when God’s honour is at stake. However, for me, one example stands out – Daniel 6:1-28. Facing certain death (not just prison) as a result of King Darius’ coerced and ill-thought-out law (v. 7) for 30 days against the worship of any god but Darius himself; Daniel (v. 10) would not just sit out the 30 days (it’s only a month, after all), but knowing he would be watched, prayed openly, with his windows open, once “*Daniel knew the document had been signed.*” That is the dauntless spirit of a true believer, fearlessly doing what God wants done, regardless of the consequences.

Then, finally, in v. 3d – *“since you are in the body.”* If you are ‘in the body’ and can empathise with people also ‘in the body’ who are going through circumstances you may or may not be able to alleviate; you can still pray (at a minimum), show them you care in practical ways, and given the opportunity to give them blessings, even encouragement, you are obligated by Christ’s commands to do so – note Matt. 22:34-40.

On Marriage and Money

v. 4

The church (that is, the people, not the building) is called to love one another. We are also called to be pure and free from the corruption of sin as believers. Besides being loving and pure, we are especially called to live holy lives – cf. I Pet. 1:13-22 (esp. v. 16 & Heb. 12:14), and I can’t resist also drawing our attention to II Pet. 1:3-11.

Richard Phillips again cites Francis Scheaffer regarding the balance between love and holiness:

“The Christian really has a double task. He has to practice both God’s holiness and God’s love...Not his love without his holiness – that is only compromise. Anything that an individual Christian or Christian group does that fails to show the simultaneous balance of the holiness of God and the love of God presents to a watching world not a demonstration of the God who exists, but a caricature of the God who exists.”²

Specifically, the A.H. points first to a specific aspect of human life – marriage. We live in the midst of a depraved society, many of whom within it look on a lengthy, monogamous marriage as a bore and they prefer the sexual freedom of many partners, regardless of gender, use divorce like the tossing out of an old, broken chair, and celebrate sexual sin publicly and shamelessly. According to Romans 1:28-31, they even applaud those who sin this way. This was an issue in the first century, and every century – it is just made more obvious by the communications / media available to us today.

The NT, in virtually every book, denounces sexual sin – cf. Gal. 5:19-21. In Ephesians 5:22-33, Paul shows marriage to be a metaphor for the relationship of believers (the Church) to Christ. So, as married believers, we hold a sacred trust before God and His church – and sexually immorality within a Christian marriage is the worst decimation of that God-sanctioned relationship imaginable. Richard Phillips says, “One of the greatest witnesses in our age will be Christian couples who faithfully meet the struggles of marriage with the grace and power of God.”³

The last part of v,4 is critical for us to keep in mind – married or single alike; *“for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.”* We need to honour our marriage commitments and encourage one another to do the same. Sexual immorality is likely

² IBID, p. 590

³ Phillips, p. 591

the worst culprit for those who have (or will) walk away from the faith and commit apostasy.

I Will Never Leave You

vv. 5-6

The second example of holiness has to do with being content with what God has given us, and not longing for what He has not, especially money. Note, just as in I Tim. 6:6-10 (esp. v. 10) says, *“the LOVE of money is a root of all kinds of evil.”* The author of Hebrews says to *“keep your life free from the love of money.”* The point of both these passages is godly contentment – an attitude towards your possessions that flows from faith, not covetousness. Notice Paul’s words in Phil. 4:10-13 - notice the word “content.”

Here, in this quote that follows, Richard Phillips cites first the Puritan, Jeremy Burroughs, then A.W. Pink on topic;

“In his priceless book *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, Jeremy Burroughs wrote, “You worship God more by [contentment] than when you come to hear a sermon, or spend half an hour, or an hour, in prayer, or when you come to receive a sacrament. These...are only external acts of worship...But [contentment] is the soul’s worship, to subject itself thus to God...by being pleased with what God does.” Arthur Pink adds: “Contentment is the product of a heart resting in God...It is the blessed assurance that God does all things well, and is, even now, making all things work together for my ultimate good.”⁴

Part of what it means to be devoted to God rather than to society, is to be content with what God has given us and to give Him thanks and praise for what we have. What follows in v. 5 is an extraordinary promise that helps us to accept in contentment what we have been given. It is a quote from (loosely, not word for word) Deut. 31:8, and Joshua 1:5. In both contexts, the promise is associated with the impending conquest of Canaan, and that Israel need not fear – God will be with them and will never leave them nor forsake them.

Because of what v. 5 says, the author now cites (in v. 6) Ps. 118:6 and part of Ps. 27:1. Since God has promised to never leave nor forsake us, then we need not fear, because man and/or anything else can do anything to us that has not first passed through God’s hands. Job 1 & 2 are likely the first passages that come to mind to support this contention. Imprisoned for our faith, a lack of needed resources like money, nothing can do to us what God will not allow to happen to us. I would add here, what God is using in our lives to lead us to where and into what situation He wants us to arrive at.

By saying “God is our helper”, the author is connecting this OT promise not to just love of money, but all he has said so far in chapter 13. Sam Storms comments on these 2 verses;

⁴ Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 592

“Although the promise of vv. 5b-6 follows immediately on the exhortation not to love money, I believe our author intends for us to understand that this is how we fulfill all 5 exhortations. We can love each other because God is always with us as our helper. We can be hospitable to strangers because God is always with us as our helper. We can find the energy and resources to help the oppressed and needy because God is always with us as our helper. We can live in sexual purity because God is always with us to help us. And we can break the power of money over our lives because God is always with us to help.”⁵

A good passage to consider here is Phil. 2:12-13. Here is part of how we can practically “*work out your own salvation in fear and trembling.*” Cf. I Cor. 15:10.

But why can we be confident that no man can do us harm? We all recognize that man can do all sorts of harm to us both physically and psychologically, so what does this mean? Note Matt. 10:16-33 (esp. v. 28). Storms reminds us there are at least 3 reasons that God’s continued presence with us gives us the confidence to accomplish these 5 exhortations of Heb. 13:1-6;

- 1) No one can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:35-37). We are absolutely safe in God’s arms (and hands – see JN 10:28-30).
- 2) Romans 8:28 – God is able to cause all things people do to us, even the evil things, to work together for our good (and His glory)
- 3) God enables us to respond with everlasting joy to whatever they do because we have a better possession and an abiding one – Heb. 10:34.⁶

Thomas Schreiner comments,

“No enemy or opponent can finally deprive us of what we need, for the Lord is our helper. We need not fear man, for human beings can do nothing apart from God. He is always the Lord in every situation, caring for us and providing every need.”⁷

⁵ Sam Storms, One Thing, Christian Focus, 2004, p. 155

⁶ Storms, p. 155

⁷ Schreiner, p. 415