

“OUR HOPE: JESUS EQUIPS AND USES US”

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Hebrews 13

Let love of the brethren continue. ²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body. ⁴Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge. ⁵Let your way of life be free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, “I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you,” ⁶ so that we confidently say, “The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What shall man do to me?”

⁷Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the outcome of their way of life, imitate their faith. ⁸Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever. ⁹Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, through which those who were thus occupied were not benefitted. ¹⁰We have an altar, from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. ¹¹For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest as an offering for sin, are burned outside the camp.

¹²Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. ¹³Hence, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. ¹⁴For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come. ¹⁵Him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. ¹⁶And do not neglect doing good and sharing; for with such sacrifices God is pleased. ¹⁷Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you. ¹⁸Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things. ¹⁹And I urge you all the more to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner.

²⁰*Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord,* ²¹*equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

²²*But I urge you, brethren, bear with this word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly.*

²³*Take notice that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom, if he comes soon, I shall see you.* ²⁴*Greet all of your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you.* ²⁵*Grace be with you all.*

Who Jesus is and what Jesus did have been two of three major strands threading throughout the book of Hebrews. The third, what this means in terms of life for today and hope for tomorrow, has intertwined the other two so tightly at times it has been difficult for us to tell them apart. But, as our author draws his letter to a close, he spotlights this third emphasis, focusing our attention on certain practical applications of authentic Christianity, particularly those qualities we Jesus people must project in our working relationships with each other and in our witness to the world.

A list of these virtues might read as follows: empathy, hospitality, sympathy, purity, simplicity, loyalty, fidelity, charity and true piety. Capping them off is a blessed doxology followed by a grand amen. On the twin notes of peace and praise, the book of Hebrews ends.

Empathy

The first of these vital virtues we should point toward as Christians is empathy. “*Let love of the brethren continue*” (13:1). What our author commends here is more than a warm, tender feeling of affection. It is love in long trousers. Mature. Level-headed. Dependable. A core-deep tie which will bind Christians together, come what may.

Taken in the context in which it is set, brotherly love is an awareness of and sensitivity to the inner struggle through which our fellow saved sinners may be going.

Suspiciousness was a grave temptation for those early Hebrew converts. It was easy for them to be constantly evaluating the orthodoxy of their fellows because reversion to a religion of Jesus-plus was a constant threat. Brotherly love is that which can help them support each other, while avoiding the lurking impulse to become heresy hunters when right believing was so important to their spiritual survival.

For Jesus people today it means that, and more. As we have seen, the Christian life is not easy. To have empathy for one another is to climb into the other guy's skin and look back at life through his eyes, fears, doubts and tears, being so sensitized by what we see we can only nestle our fellow Christian in supportive, redemptive, liberating love and understanding.

This is what each of you needs and deserves from the other, the writer of Hebrews says. Don't judge or be forever suspicious of each other. Don't constantly test the other person's theological blood-type. Cling to God in Christ and hang loose on everything else. Let sensitized, empathetic, brotherly love continue.

Hospitality

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it” (13:2). Our author employs an intensely interesting Greek word in writing about *“hospitality to strangers.”* I can find only one other place in the New Testament where this particular Greek word is used. Every other Biblical mention of “strangers” uses Greek words having to do with foreigners. Aliens. Those who are completely unknown to us. Both of these New Testament references (13:2 and Romans 12:13) are to fellow Jesus folk. The strangers our author mentions here are strangers who should not be strangers! Members of the Christian brotherhood we should know better and love more than we do.

To those first-century Christians, where each local church fellowship was so small it was possible to be on a first-name basis with everyone, this *“hospitality to strangers”* probably meant being open and friendly to itinerant preachers who might be passing through town. Or to fleeing refugees who had been driven from their homes because of their Christian commitment.

In our time, I think it means something quite different. We are to be kind to Christian guests, of course. But the primary application of this principle for us today is the extending of hospitality or plain, old-fashioned Christian kindness to the “stranger” who sits next to us in the pew. The person we meet in church every Sunday, but only nod to. The isolated soul who is a member of the same Sunday School class. Who attends the same woman’s circle. Who participates in the same Bible study group. Who shares in the same youth activity, yet, whom we don’t really know or even care about.

In California, where I live, this may be a carry over of “the six-foot fence philosophy” which separates us from our neighbors, their hurts and their needs. In other parts of our country and world, different methods are used to isolate one’s self from the pain and problems of others. When these isolation methods creep into the church, as they often do, and become standard practice, as in many cases they have, we need to be jerked up short by this stern admonition, “*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it*” (13:2).

How true that is! Often we set out to provide some small ministry to another, only to wind up being ministered to ourselves. We sometimes entertain an “angel”-- a ministering spirit -- and discover we have been more blessed than we were a blessing. I recall a hospital call I made on a dear saint. Her name was Arnola Hershey. Though very old, she was as bright as a silver dollar. We visited about the many things of interest to her. Then, taking her hand, I prayed. For her son and daughter. Her grandchildren. Her church. The needs of others which were always high on her list of loving concern. I said, “Amen” and drew my hand away. She reached out, pulled it back, and without a pause began praying for me. “And God, bless Dr. John, too. Bless his wife. His children. His work for our church. And never let him down in any important way.” For several minutes she held me up before the Lord.

I’ve made thousands of hospital calls and prayed for hundreds of sick people. But this was the

first time a patient ever prayed for me! I couldn't hold back the tears. As I left Arnola's room that day, I knew I had entertained “an angel unaware.”

Sympathy

“Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body” (13:3). The characteristic here is sympathy, but it is sympathy of a very special kind. Not the clinically sterile, legislated variety so common today. That kind of pitiful pity demeans and dehumanizes people. Instead of a patronizing, professionalized sympathy, we are to express the compassion Christ expressed by doing as Jesus did. We are to take our place alongside those in need as if we were one of them. Remembering that, but for the grace of God, the tables might well be turned. It might be we rather than they in need of kindness and caring.

Purity

The fourth virtue our author says must spring from a vital life-changing relationship with Jesus is personal purity. *“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge”* (13:4). According to my friends close to the Jesus movement, particularly as it relates to college and career young people, sex is one of the last areas they are willing to put under the Lordship of Jesus.

In that regard, these Jesus kids are not terribly different from some segments of the first-century church. A proper use of the sex energy has been a challenge to many, if not most, Christians. Failure in this area has often been devastating to the spiritually newborn.

Dr. Earl Wilson, one of our Project Winsome lay leaders, holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and trains doctoral candidates in that specialty at the University of Nebraska. One night Earl and I were talking about the various crisis points for Christians. He indicated they had learned, on campus at least, the major danger point was immediately after a new Christian's first moral failure, which was usually of a sexual nature. Unless these young people had been told in advance that being a Christian did not make them immune to evil, that they would still be tempted and on

occasion might fall, they were so devastated by this failure they were ready to junk the Christian life on the premise, “It didn’t work.”

“But,” said Dr. Wilson, “if we can be there after that first big failure with the message of recurring repentance and forgiveness for recurring sin following conversion, they usually pick themselves up and go on from victory to victory, handling the various and occasional other defeats as a Christian should.”

Recent converts are not the only ones who have trouble in the area of sex. Some who become Christians before they could even spell s-e-x have had similar struggles in later years. In every instance, God has resorted to discipline. The question is, which form of discipline do we force Him to use? The gentle form springing from a burning conscience which must be cleansed through confession, repentance and forgiveness? Or the severe kind resulting in emotional, physical and spiritual illness of one sort or another? Let it be said again: God dares to discipline. He cares deeply about the well-being of His own. He knows the importance of stable Christian homes and will do everything He can to protect them. Therefore, the writer of Hebrews says, let personal purity be the hallmark of all your relationships. *“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled”* (13:4).

Simplicity

Next, strive for simplicity in your life-style. *“Let your way of life be free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, ‘I will never desert you, nor will I forsake you’”* (13:5). Hence we can confidently say, *“The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What shall man do to me?”* (13:6).

These verses are open to easy misinterpretation leading to the quite erroneous conclusion that money is evil and wealth is anti-Christian. Neither is true. The teaching here is not that we should avoid money, but the love of money. We are to steer clear of letting gold be our god.

There is a vast difference between love of money and a talent for making money. The first is hell-born. The second is God-given and, if used for His glory and mankind's good, can be an enormous blessing.

Simplicity in the Christian's life-style is, of course, a highly relative thing. Most Americans enjoy a standard of living exceeding that of kings a few hundred years ago. It seems to me, therefore, a safe guideline in this area for Christians is whether we own our possessions or they own us. Whether we are the user or the used. If the latter is true, we are in trouble. We are vulnerable to what men can do to us. But if we can say, *“The Lord is my helper,”* we will be able to take whatever comes with Christian grace, knowing God works in everything, wealth as well as poverty, for good to those who love Him (Romans 8:28).

Loyalty

Loyalty is another quality commended to Jesus people. *“Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the outcome of their way of life, imitate their faith”* (13:7). *“Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you”* (13:17).

In a sentence, be like my friend, Mel Anderson. Mel made a commitment to Jesus as a young man, that he would try, with God's help, to be the kind of layman who would cause his pastor's heart to rejoice. Whose name would precipitate feelings of gladness and gratitude, rather than grim regret at having to deal with such a difficult, negative person.

I can say from seven years of delightful experience as one of those privileged to be his pastor, Mel Anderson reached his objective. He was a pastor's layman in the highest sense of that term. I was able to watch over his soul *“with joy, not with grief”* (13:17b). Be that kind of Christian, the writer of Hebrews says. Be a person who always gives more than he takes.

In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul has a lovely sentence all Jesus folk might well wish was written to them. *“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you”* (Philippians 1:3). What a beautiful thought! But even better, what a beautiful way to be thought of! It’s just that kind of memory I want your leaders to have of you, the writer of Hebrews says. I want them to be able to say, *“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you.”*

Fidelity

The seventh of these spotlighted virtues is doctrinal fidelity. While our author gives considerable space to this (verses 8-15), we shan’t, because it is a recapitulation of everything we have already covered in great detail: the unrivaled supremacy and unchanging sufficiency of Jesus who is the same today as He was yesterday, and as He shall be tomorrow (13:8). He identified Himself with us in our disgrace *“outside the gate”* (13:12). Therefore, we should be willing to bear any abuse for His sake (13:13), remembering it is no virtue to conform to this world when our true citizenship is in heaven (13:14).

Charity

Moving on, we discover charity to be a virtue of great value for sinner-saints. *“And do not neglect doing good and sharing; for with such sacrifices God is pleased”* (13:16). How reminiscent of the words of our Lord: *“Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me”* (Matthew 25:40).

In Barre, Vermont, there is a famous granite quarry called “The Rock of Ages.” It is tremendous. Over 200 feet deep, I’m told. One day a friend of mine, Dr. Clarence Cranford, visited the quarry. As the superintendent pointed out the vastness of this excavation, he made an interesting comment. “We’ve gone as deep as we can without going wider.” “What do you mean?” Dr. Cranford inquired. “Just that,” the man explained. “Even though the walls of the quarry are solid granite, the pressure from the surrounding earth is so great that if we go deeper without going wider, we could have a cave-in. We’ve gone as deep as we can without going wider.”

Many of us Jesus folk say, “Oh, God, deepen my Christian life!” Could God be saying, “Oh, child of Mine, widen your Christian life! You can’t go deeper till you go wider. Reach out to those about you. Share what I have given you in such abundance, both materially and spiritually. In the process of going wider, you will go deeper. You will find your own relationship with Me growing stronger and sweeter.”

Piety

The last of these qualities elevated in our thinking is piety. Not “pietism,” a situation in which the means often become an end in themselves, but piety. That is, true spirituality defined as prayer, a clear conscience, an honest life (13:18). “*I urge you all the more to do this*” (13:19a).

Volumes could be written on the next two verses. They contain one of the most gracious of all benedictions. One of the most inspiring of all doxologies. “*Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen*” (13:20,21).

Our God is the God of peace. Our God is the God of life. Our God is the God who both shows us His will and equips us to do it through Jesus. Jesus, the Great Shepherd, who not only guides God’s flock, but also gave Himself for our eternal safekeeping through a new relationship signed and sealed in His blood. On the twin notes of peace and praise the book of Hebrews ends.¹

The persistent theme throughout our study has been Jesus. Who He is. What He did. All He means in terms of life for today and hope for tomorrow. A book such as this on a theme such as that cannot properly end without one last invitation to let Jesus Christ be Saviour and Lord. I extend it through the pen of Billy Rose.

Years ago in one of his newspaper columns, Mr. Rose told the story of an Albany surgeon who was awakened at 2:30 one morning by a call from a fellow physician at the hospital in Glenn Falls,

New York, some sixty miles away. A small boy was critical. Without immediate surgery, the child would die. He was the only qualified surgeon within driving distance. They could keep the boy alive for up to an hour and a half. Would the surgeon come? Of course!

He quickly dressed, backed his car out, drove down the residential streets to the main intersection of downtown Albany. While waiting for a red light to change, the door opposite him opened and a man jumped in. The doctor noted the intruder wore a dirty brown cap pulled low over his eyes, a brown suede jacket, a sport shirt open at the throat and a pair of grey slacks. In his hand was a gun.

“Drive on,” he said. The doctor did as he was told. Each time he tried to engage the man in conversation, the reply was, “Shut up and keep driving.” When they were well outside the city, the man said, “Pull over and stop.” The doctor obeyed. “Get out,” the man ordered. Risking his life the physician pleaded, “I’m a surgeon on an emergency mission. A patient will die unless I am there within a very short time.” “I don’t care about that,” the man retorted, “get out!” He forced the doctor out of the car and drove off into the night.

The surgeon hurried to a nearby farmhouse, awakened the family and, using their telephone, called a cab company in Albany. As quickly as possible, the taxi transported him to Glenn Falls. By the time he arrived two hours had elapsed. The surgeon dashed up the steps to the hospital and through the doors, where he was greeted by the physician who had called him. “It’s too late. The boy just died.”

Crestfallen, the surgeon explained the delay. His friend understood. They could talk about it later over coffee. “But right now, come into the waiting room. The boy’s father is here. It will comfort him to know you tried so hard to get here.” The doctor entered the waiting room. There sat the father, head in hands, his shoulders shaking convulsively with grief. On the chair beside him lay a dirty brown hat. He wore a brown suede jacket, a sport shirt open at the throat and a pair of grey slacks. Here was the father who had pushed out of the car the only man on earth who

could have saved the life of his son.

The application is clear. Do not push out of your life the only One who can complete it. Do not reject Jesus! Or, if you have already received Him, do not neglect Jesus. He is “*the same yesterday, today and forever.*” (13:8). To paraphrase another, as far as your own life and time are concerned: yesterday is already a dream and tomorrow is just a vision, but every today lived with Jesus, will make every yesterday a dream of happiness, and every tomorrow a vision of hope!

Notes

1. Barclay, The Letter to the Hebrews, p. 299ff.