

INTRODUCTION

As we come to the last chapter of Hebrews, the writer packs in a lot of practical truth. He just spent twelve chapters on the doctrinal truth of who Jesus is and how we should put our faith in Him and keep our eyes on Him as we run the race. Then he squeezes in a lot of application as he ends the letter. It reminds me of a limerick that was one of Ray Stedman's favorites:

There was a young poet in Japan
Whose poetry no one could stand
When told it was so,
He replied, "Yes, I know,
But I try to get as many words in the last line as I can!"

That's what we have here in Hebrews 13. It is packed with a lot of principles about how we can put our faith to work.

Hebrews 13:1-4. "Let brotherly love continue. Don't neglect to show hospitality, for by doing this some have welcomed angels as guests without knowing it. Remember those in prison, as though you were in prison with them, and the mistreated, as though you yourselves were suffering bodily. Marriage is to be honored by all and the marriage bed kept undefiled, because God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterers."

I clipped a funny story from *Reader's Digest* years ago entitled "Keeping the Faith." It was supposedly a true story told by a Catholic priest. The priest was walking out of a church late one night wearing an overcoat. A few steps down the sidewalk he was accosted by a robber. The robber shoved a pistol in the priest's ribs and demanded he surrender his wallet. As the priest reached inside the coat for his wallet, his priest's collar became visible.

The robber was surprised and asked, "Are you a priest?" The priest replied, "Yes, I am." The robber said, "Well, I don't rob priests, so you can keep your wallet. I'm sorry, Father." The priest was relieved and as he removed his hand, he brushed against some cigars he had in his pocket. He offered one to the robber. "Would you like a cigar?" The robber said, "No thank you, I've given up cigars for Lent."

So the take away is that the robber was a deeply religious man. But apparently he had no problem robbing people, but he drew the line at robbing priests and smoking cigars, at least for a time. You may chuckle at that story, but it demonstrates the huge gap that often exists between our faith and our practice. Just because a person is religious doesn't that they are good. Hebrews 13 is about putting your faith to work.

First there is the encouragement to "Let brotherly love continue." It's the word *philadelphia*, exactly like the ancient city, and the modern city in Pennsylvania. It's a combination of two words, *phileo*, which means "love" and *adelphos*, meaning "brother." The writer then proceeds to give four practical ways we can demonstrate love to one another. We'll look at three of the principles in this message and the fourth one next week. Then on Easter, I will bring a message

from Hebrews 13:8 about "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever." Here are three practical ways you can put your faith to work:

1. Show hospitality to strangers

The Bible says, "Don't neglect to show hospitality, for by doing this some have welcomed angels as guests without knowing it." (Hebrews 13:2)

During the first five hundred years of Christianity, a dangerous spiritual teaching arose that stunted the growth of God's church. There were several hundred years of belief that the best way a Christian could be holy was to totally isolate themselves from sinful society. That led to the establishment of monasteries and monks who would spend their whole life hidden behind walls from the world.

That is a terrible error because the Bible teaches that God has sent us out into the world to demonstrate His love. In John 17:18 Jesus prayed, "Just as you have sent me into the world, so I am sending them into the world."

Where there is true love, there will always be hospitality. This word is a mixture of "love" and "stranger." So you may be thinking, "I really excel at hospitality because I have my friends and family in my home all the time." That's loving-kindness to those already close to you. But the word in our text describes opening your home to total strangers. This was an important ministry in the early church because persecution often drove people away from their homes. Many Hebrew Christians were probably ostracized from their Jewish families for following Jesus.

This was written at a time when there weren't hotels dotting the highways and on every corner of a city. There were very few inns in the rural areas, so it was important for people to be willing to open their homes to traveling guests.

There are many examples of hospitality shown to strangers in the Bible. In Genesis 24:43-44 Abraham's servant was sent to a foreign land to find a wife for Isaac. He arrived at a watering hole. He said, "Lord, let the woman who gives me a drink and offers to provide water for my camels be the one you choose for Isaac's wife."

And just like that, Rebekah showed up and this stranger said, "Will you give me a drink?" Rebekah said, "Sure. And I'll give water to your camels, too." Bingo! The servant knew the wife of Isaac needed to excel at hospitality. She passed the first test with the camels. And then the servant said, "Would there be room at your father's house for me to lodge tonight?" Again, she said to the total stranger, "There is more than enough room for you and for all your men—and we can feed all your camels as well." She had passed the hospitality test with flying colors!

And the writer adds an added bonus to hospitality. He says when we show hospitality to strangers, we could possibly have entertained angels without knowing it. Have you ever seen an

angel? Nobody can say "No" to that question, because this verse says we might have shown hospitality to a stranger, and it was an angel and we didn't know it.

One of the biggest misconceptions about angels is that they are cute little chubby babies with wings, like cupid. Only the cherubim and seraphim are described as having wings. The vast majority of angels in the Bible appear as ordinary men.

Sometimes the strangers we meet are actually angels and we might not even know it. In Genesis 18 Abraham showed hospitality to three strangers. He welcomed them into his tent, washed their feet and fed them. He didn't understand until later that two of them were angels and one of them was identified as the Lord, a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus. Abraham demonstrated hospitality to these men, not knowing they were from heaven. We should follow his example of hospitality to strangers.

There was a time during the Great Depression when people were so poor that they would come to their door asking for food. One Christian lady told the story of living near a railroad track during the 1930s. She had a steady stream of hobos asking her for a meal. She said her family was poor, but they had a farm, so she usually had some food to share with the strangers who came to her door. She always made sure she asked them about their salvation.

One day they slaughtered a hog and she had some ham. A nervous looking hobo knocked at her door asking for food. She invited him in and was using a huge knife to slice the ham to make a ham sandwich. As she was cutting away she suddenly realized she hadn't talked to him about the Lord yet. So she straightened up and pointed that butcher knife in the face of the hobo and said, "I forgot to ask you a question. If you died today, would you go to heaven?" She said the man looked at that knife, and then he turned and bolted out the back screen door. She said she never used the butcher knife again when she witnessed to those who came to her door asking for a handout.

I thank God for those of you who have the gift of hospitality. Sometimes you think this gift isn't as valuable as the gift of teaching or leadership. But opening your heart to open your arms and your home to strangers is a tremendous ministry. Thank you in advance for those of you who open your homes to our visiting Chinese students and other strangers who come to our city. You are investing in their lives.

According to this verse, you may show kindness to a stranger and then never see them again. But when you get to heaven, an angel will come up and say, "Do you remember that time when you showed kindness to me? Thanks!" But our motivation to show loving hospitality isn't because the person might be an angel, but because it is what God has commanded us to do as an act of love. The second way to put your faith to work is to:

2. Care for prisoners and the oppressed

Hebrews 13:3 says, "Remember those in prison, as though you were in prison with them, and the mistreated, as though you yourselves were suffering bodily."

Sometimes Christians are reluctant to spend time with prisoners because they have the attitude that they are getting the punishment they deserve, so they don't need kindness from us. But that is exactly the opposite attitude of love. The Bible commands us to care for them and to minister to them.

I know it's a sin to be proud, but I'm proud of the extensive ministry that our church members are already providing for those in prison. We call this ministry our Restorative Justice Ministry. For instance, we have a couple of men in our Intercessory Prayer Ministry who have been writing letters to inmates for the past twenty-five years. Emmett Lawhon and Mickey Harper have written thousands of letters to hundreds of inmates through the years. The chaplains in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice provide us with prayer-grams and we need more people to write notes to the inmates.

Jim and Betty Born participate each week with other members of our church in a Kairos ministry in which they gather with hundreds of inmates and lead them in prayer and Bible study.

Dr. Bruce King and his wife Judy teach Christian courses to inmates in the Faith Based Unit at Michael Prison. They use the curriculum of Shalom University. They always need more volunteers and donations to keep this ministry going.

We even have a sports outreach team that travels to prison locations to play softball and basketball with the inmates. They share the love of Jesus with them before and after the games. In fact we have a team who will be playing softball at the Coffield Unit next Sunday afternoon. I've been told we need some younger, faster softball players. So if you're interested in joining this sports outreach team, contact Andria in our Missions office. Or just call the church and say, "I want to learn about the sports ministry to the prisoners."

We have teams that visit the Smith County Jail each week. Recently, Joe Fauss, who works with Calvary Commission, performed their first baptism in the Smith County Jail.

This verse also talks about ministering to those who are mistreated. That includes many of the most vulnerable in our society and around the world. I spoke a few weeks ago about our ministry in Kenya to the girls who have been rescued from early forced marriage and female genital mutilation. Others who are mistreated include those who have children who are in our foster care system and desperately need Foster Care. Those of you who volunteer for CASA and other ministry to those who are at risk are showing God's love to these who have been mistreated.

Let me tell you a true story about a man named Kevin. He was arrested for second-degree murder that happened during a robbery for drug money. He was sentenced to ten years to life. In prison he thought his life was over. But a man came to visit him and talked to him about Jesus. Kevin said, "I have broken one of the Ten Commandments—thou shalt not kill—so I know I'm going to hell." The visitor from the church told Kevin about the grace and forgiveness Jesus could provide. Kevin prayed to receive Christ, and while in prison he became a man of

God. He received several educational degrees and helped the chaplain lead the ministry there. After serving for twenty years, he was released. He said, "Today I believe that God sent me to prison so He could rescue me and change me." Today Kevin leads a ministry to reach inmates with the Good News of Jesus Christ. That story has been repeated thousands of times.

If you show kindness to strangers, you might be showing hospitality to an angel without knowing it. Well, when you minister to those in prison and those who are at risk, you can KNOW it's like showing your love to Jesus Himself.

In Matthew we learn that at the end of the age, Jesus will say, "I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you took me in. I was sick and you cared for me. I was in prison and you visited me. Then the people will say, "Lord, WHEN did we feed you, give you a drink, show hospitality to you, care for you, and visit you in prison?" Jesus will reply, "Whatever you do to the least of these, you have done it to ME." (Matthew 25:35-40)

You've heard me say before that people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. An elderly lady named Mamie used to go to the post office to get stamps at the window because the workers were friendly. During one Christmas season, the line stretched out the door. Someone said to Mamie, "You don't have to stand in line. You can get stamps from the machine." Mamie smiled and said, "I'll wait. The machine won't ask me about my arthritis." We make a difference in the lives of people when we show them we really care.

The third way to put our faith to work is to:

3. Honor God's plan for marriage

Hebrews 13:4 says, "Marriage is to be honored by all and the marriage bed kept undefiled, because God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterers." Marriage is in trouble in America. We have one of the highest divorce rates of any country in the world. More and more couples are living together without getting married. And two years ago our U.S. Supreme Court redefined God's definition of marriage.

Marriage isn't easy. Tony Evans says every marriage involves three rings: the engagement ring, the wedding ring, and then the suffering!

But as followers of Jesus Christ, we should honor God's plans for marriage. The very first relationship God established was that of marriage. He looked down in the Garden of Eden and saw that man was alone. God said, "It's not good for a man to be alone."

I like the joke where God says to Adam, "I've got a great surprise for you? I'm going to create a woman for you. She is going to be perfect in every way. She is always going to agree with you. She will be beautiful. She will always be asking you how she can best serve you. And she will never complain about anything. How does that sound?" Adam said, "It sounds too good to be

true. But what's it going to cost me?" God said, "It will cost you an arm and a leg." Adam thought about it and said, "What can I get for a rib?"

So God created woman to complete the man, and then He performed the first marriage ceremony. In the current debate about sexuality and marriage, some people claim Jesus never addressed the definition of marriage. But he spoke about it directly and clearly. In response to a question about divorce Jesus said, "Haven't you read," he replied, "that he who created them in the beginning made them male and female," and he also said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate." (Matthew 19:4-6)

God's plan for marriage is simple: One man married to one woman—united until death. When Hebrews 13:4 speaks of the "marriage bed" it is addressing the topic of sex. And when it comes to honoring God's plan for marriage it involves two important values: commitment and purity.

We honor God's plan for marriage when we stay committed in our marriage relationship. Marriage is tough, even for those who have good marriages. Cindy and I have been married almost 44 years. If people ask her if she has ever thought about divorce she'll say, "Divorce no. But I've thought about murder a few times!"

There is great value in just staying in a marriage relationship through the good times and bad. I heard about an elderly married couple sitting on their porch in rocking chairs. The wife patted her husband's hand and said, "I'm proud of you." He turned to her and said, "I'm TIRED of you too." She said, "I think you need a hearing test." He said, "What do I want with a hairy chest?"

When it comes to hearing problems, a study at Johns Hopkins Hospital found that five times as many men have hearing loss than women. One man was asked why he thought more men had hearing loss than women. His wife was particularly vocal. He smiled and said, "I suppose it is another example of God's mercy." Another man told me that the best thing about a hearing aid is that you can turn it off!

Seriously, we need to celebrate those who have demonstrated commitment in their marriage. If you have been married for fifty years or more would you allow us to recognize you now? Even if your spouse isn't here today, or your spouse is in heaven, but you made it to fifty years, would stand up so we can express our gratitude to you?

This verse says God will judge those who are sexually immoral. There must be more than commitment in a marriage; there should be sexual purity. The only sexual relationship that God blesses is that between a husband and wife. God created sex for two reasons. First, to provide a way for a husband and wife to experience intimacy; it is two people becoming one flesh. The other reason for sex was to populate the planet with people.

One of God's first commands to Adam and Eve was, "Be fruitful, and multiply." (Genesis 1:28) God is good. He said, "I want you to make babies, and I'm going to give you a pleasurable way to

do that." And the Bible says that the man and the woman were both naked and felt no shame. Our brains have a shame meter installed. We're born with it. Sex is one of the things that sets off the shame alarm. The only sex that doesn't activate the shame alarm is sex between a husband and wife. But anyone can disable the shame meter, and tell themselves that any sexual activity is okay. And this verse says that God will judge those who are sexually immoral. The Bible says in Romans 1 that those who are sexually immoral are often judged in their own bodies.

Sometimes those who love God commit sexual sins, and God will forgive that sin. King David is a perfect example of this. David had sexual relations with Bathsheba when she was married to Uriah, one of the David's mighty men. Then David tried to cover up his sin and had Uriah killed. He was guilty of adultery and murder. But David repented of his sin, and experienced full forgiveness. But David still had to suffer the consequences of his sexual sin and those consequences were seen in the sexual sins and deaths that happened to his children. Yes, God can and will forgive your sexual sins, but you have to deal with the consequences of those sins.

CONCLUSION

God put us in this world to deliver his message to others. And we do this by putting our faith to work. Hospitality, prison ministry, and marriage may seem to be three random topics. But they all show us how believers relate to others. First, our relationship to strangers should be one of hospitality. Second, our relationship with prisoners and those mistreated should be one of compassion and caring. And third, our relationship in marriage should be one of commitment and purity.

Warren Wiersbe relates the following true story. In 1930, King George V of England was about to deliver an important live radio broadcast. But minutes before the broadcast, someone tripped over a wire in the CBS radio studio in New York City, and over a million radios went silent. A young mechanic named Harold Vivian quickly fixed the problem. He picked up both ends of the cable and allowed the current to pass through his body. It was low voltage, but still his arms shook from the current. But he hung on long enough for the King's message to be heard until the wire could be repaired. He became a conduit for the King's message to be heard.

That's a powerful image for us. The King of Kings is speaking and He wants to broadcast His message of hope and healing through us. Are you willing to be the channel through which others can hear His message? You can do that by putting your faith to work.

OUTLINE

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Hebrews 13:2

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"Marriage is to be honored by all and the marriage bed kept undefiled, because God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterers." *Hebrews 13:4*

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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