

How to Be a Loving Church

a sermon in the series
Hebrews: An Epistle of Encouragement

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by S. Michael Durham
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Hebrews 13:1-6

Let brotherly love continue. 2 Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. 3 Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body. 4 Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge. 5 Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. 6 So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.

The Bible is a practical book. It can lift us up to the highest pinnacles of heaven and give us glimpses of glory upon glory or it may show us the lowest depths of hell, but in the end it is still a practical book. It is a book through which we are shown how to live and given the tools to follow its standard. For twelve chapters in the book of Hebrews we have attempted to peer into some of God's grandest and greatest doctrines. We have examined the superiority of Christ as a revelation of God. We have seen His superiority to angels and His superiority as High Priest, as a Sacrifice for Sins, as the Author and Finisher of our faith. Jesus has eclipsed Moses the Lawgiver. We have considered the great doctrines of Christ's incarnation, of justification and of sanctification. We have studied the weighty teachings of perseverance and of apostasy. We have compared the contrasts between the Old and New Covenants. We have tackled the controversial passages of Hebrews chapters six and ten. My, it has been a wonderful trip through twelve of the Bible's richest chapters!

Now we come to the final chapter of Hebrews, and we discover a change of tone and teaching. No longer it would appear that we are in the deeper waters of this book. It would seem that we have found shallow waters in which to wade and relax. We are not so taxed, and now we can relax. But not so! The very first verse sends us back to rich and deep truth, "Let brotherly love continue." However, it shows us the practical side of the truth we have previously looked at in the book of Hebrews. We have learned through the course of these twelve chapters that you cannot really love one another, as we ought to, until you have first loved Jesus. And when you start to mention the name of Jesus and love to Him, well, my dear friend, if you are not careful you will again be in deep truth very quickly. It will take you back to Christ Jesus Himself. I would hope that you would hasten to find the deeper meat of this word.

These Hebrew Christians had demonstrated in the past such brotherly love.

For God [is] not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister (Hebrews 6:10).

The author's message is clear and simple to this church. Let this kind of love be your hallmark. You have been known for this kind of love and may you always be known for it. Today, I want us to examine Hebrews chapter thirteen verses one through six. Let's discover how we can let love be our hallmark; how love can be the distinguishing characteristic of our church; and how men will know that we are His disciples in that we love one another. I want to speak upon the theme How To Be A Loving Church.

In verse one the author sets the stage for what he is going to do, if not for the entire chapter, at least in these six verses. He lays out three simple principles.

LOVE FOR THE STRANGER

First, he says in verse two we are to have love for the stranger.

Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Loving strangers is a part of the New Covenant commandment, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another" (John 13:34). Now the very nature of this command must begin within the household of faith. Jesus demonstrates this kind of love the very night He gives this new commandment as He takes a wash towel and girds Himself with it. With a basin of water He one by one washes the disciples' feet and dries them. He did this as an example and to minister to them. We are to love one another with the love of Jesus Christ which means in essence you and I must become servants to each other.

If Jesus' demonstration of service is how we demonstrate love then we can equally say that the new commandment is also to serve one another as Christ has served us. This is the force of Jesus' demonstration and His words. There is no love in just words. Words are empty and idle without corroborating action. Loving acts of service minister. So this type of love is to begin first of all among the household of faith, and this type of love becomes a test of faith, of whether or not you are in faith.

First John chapter three and verse fourteen states that this kind of love is a test of faith. John says "We know that we have passed from death unto life because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death." It is so important that you love like Jesus loved that it is the very test and evidence that you are saved. I did not say that if you love your brothers and sisters God will save you. No amount of works can earn our salvation. But if you have genuinely been saved you will love the church and the members that comprise the church. You will serve

them in the love of Christ and by His love. So today can you test your heart and see if Christ is in you? Yes, you can. Here is how. Do you love? Do you serve one another?

But today most churches are an example of how to find your own needs met rather than to meet the needs of others. Most churches are structured in such a manner and form that everybody comes and gets whatever they need. They are stroked, they are coddled, and they are made to feel like the whole church revolves around them. In fact, that is what church growth experts are telling us today, if you really want to have a growing, dynamic church learn how to meet people's felt needs. This however is in opposition to what the Bible says. The Bible tells us that the people of the world will know that we are Christians by how we go out to minister to others' needs. The Bible teaches us to not look to our own affairs. This is the admonition of the Apostle Paul in Philippians chapter two and verse three, "Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves." In other words, before a Christian should be concerned about his or her own needs, he or she must be sure their brothers' and sisters' needs are being met.

But here in our text the writer says that our love is to go beyond the boundaries of Christians that we know personally. We are to love and to reach out to strangers. In Galatians chapter six verse ten, "Let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith." Our love is to go beyond the walls of this fellowship and to reach out to all men. Again we find the same words, "to all men," as Paul commands the same thing in I Thessalonians chapter five and verse fifteen, "See that none render evil for evil unto any man but ever follow that which is good both among yourselves and to all men." Who is "all men?" Surely it would include the stranger.

The writer of Hebrews fleshes out Jesus' new commandment. He says "love the stranger." In order to fulfill this commandment we need to understand the New Testament concept of hospitality. That is what the word "entertainment" means. It comes from a Greek word that means to be hospitable. It is one of the qualifications of an elder, a pastor; he must be given to hospitality. It is the same Greek word found in Titus, "Given unto hospitality."

What is the New Testament concept of hospitality and how was it practiced? Inns and travel lodges were very scarce in the days of the Bible. What few there were, were very expensive or they were not the kind of place a Christian would like to stay. Most were places where very dangerous sorts of people stayed and sordid activities took place. Therefore, Christians would take in strangers, mainly Christian strangers. When strangers came to their cities or towns or villages they would take them in, entertain them, and provide them lodging, food and hospitality. This was the way many Christians who had to travel could survive the long journeys, by the hospitality of Christians.

The writer of Hebrews gives us an incentive here for being hospitable. He says

For thereby some have entertained angels unaware.

Surely the author is making reference to, or at least had in mind, Abraham and Sarah. One day they had three visitors. They did not know their real identity but saw them as three men. Abraham and Sarah became their servants. They took them in, washed them, gave them rest, and prepared a very sumptuous meal for them. Finally, it was revealed to them who these visitors really were. It was the Lord Jesus Christ and two angels. The two angels would later go on to Sodom, and there Lot would take them in and be hospitable and entertain them, not knowing at first that they were angels. For both Abraham and Lot there were blessings for their being hospitable hosts by entertaining strangers, especially for Lot. These angels protected his daughters and him and warned them of the judgment that would come.

I am not here to tell you spooky stories or mystical experiences, but I am here to tell you that the New Testament says that it is very possible to entertain angels and not even know it. It may be very possible that you have met an angel, and you never knew it was an angel. Angels are creatures of a higher order, spiritual agents of God, and ministers to those who are the heirs of salvation. I could tell you story after story of that happening but that is not the purpose of this message except to say that these entertainings of angels unaware do happen. I will tell you one story of a girl who went to get a doctor to help her sick mother. She was about seven years of age and her mother was deathly ill. The girl knew there was a doctor that lived around the block, and so she ran out into the stormy and rainy night to retrieve the doctor and brought him to her mother. Just in the nick of time he came and saved the sick mother. She was on the brink of death, but he was able to resuscitate her and get her the necessary medical attention that saved her life. Before they loaded the lady on the ambulance, the doctor spoke to the woman saying, “It was such a fortunate thing that your daughter came when she did.”

The woman said, “What daughter?”

He answered, “Your daughter, the young girl that came and brought me to you.”

The woman said to him, “Sir, my daughter died six months ago. In her closet are her clothes.” He went to the closet not believing what she said. He opened the door and there were the very clothes that the girl had appeared to him in, and they were dry as a bone. Was it an angel? I believe it was. Be hospitable to strangers.

LOVE FOR THE PERSECUTED

Secondly, how to be a loving church—the author says, love for the persecuted. Look at verse three.

Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity...

He is talking about the afflictions of Christians in prison. Now again we must remember the culture of that time. Prisons were not like prisons today. They did not have televisions and air conditioning. They didn't have some of what we would consider minimal comforts, but had no

comforts whatsoever. Prisons would never provide the essential needs of the prisoner such as food, clothing, or medical attention. If a prisoner was to eat, it was because family members or friends risked their own freedom and brought him or her food. If he was to have changes of clothing, it was because of the same. And even when he or she was sick, the only medical attention that they received came not through the prison, but from concerned family members or friends. Beyond these essential needs was the problem of loneliness and being forgotten in prison. I have heard more than one prisoner tell me how lonely it is to be in a prison cell all alone. How many men sit in a cold cell having being written off by their families. The idea of being alone and forgotten was part of the afflictions of being imprisoned for your faith in Christ.

The Hebrews had shown a past record for caring of their persecuted brethren and were commended by the author in Hebrews 10:33-34. He says

Partly whilst ye were made a gazing stock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used.

They took mercy upon their fellow brothers and sisters who had been imprisoned for the cause of Christ. They fed them, clothed them, met their needs, and while doing so actually became imprisoned for being identified with this “criminal element.” Not only had they done that for their fellow brothers and sisters, but also, verse thirty-four says, they did it for the writer of Hebrews.

For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.

Because of visiting the writer of Hebrews and ministering to him, many of them had their own homes confiscated or their property destroyed. Their association with this Christian brother was costly.

The application is very clear, we must not shrink back from helping our brothers and sisters who are suffering simply because it causes us hardship. We must not resign from loving them and helping them in their affliction because it is going to create adversity for us. It is the heart of a believer to go out to a fellow brother or sister in need. Don't say, “But, Pastor, I don't have the gift of mercy, that is not my responsibility. Let those mercy people do it. They are good at doing that.” The Bible says we all are to show mercy. Mercy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, therefore, friend, whether you have the gift or not, mercy ought to be exhibited in your life. And when you come upon a brother or sister who is in need, mercy ought to well up in your heart and motivate you to alleviate their suffering if at all possible. Love is to minister to them in their pain, to comfort them in their grief. That is the love of Christ being demonstrated, and that is how a church is to love. When there is suffering we are to minister to the need.

Such love is a test of faith. This kind of loving, helping those who have been persecuted or who are suffering adversity, is a test of faith. Jesus tells a parable of the kingdom of God and His final judgment. In Matthew chapter twenty-five and verses thirty-four through thirty-six, the King shall say to them on His right hand

Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you before the foundation of the world. For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

Those who will be at the right hand of God will look with astonishment upon the King, and

Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed [thee]? or thirsty, and gave [thee] drink? (Matthew 25:37).

Take note how the Master answers in verse forty.

Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto the one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

Dear friend, when one of us is sick and we minister to them, it is not ministering to them only, we are also doing it unto the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the way we become a loving church. This is the visible expression of God's love as it is demonstrated in our love one to another. Certainly such kind of love will not be convenient nor will it be easy. But God's kind of love enters the realm of difficulty and pain and cares for the hurting.

BROTHERLY LOVE'S ENEMY

Before tackling the question of why in a discourse on letting brotherly love continue does the writer speak about marriage and adultery, let's look at these two verses independently, first, verse four.

Marriage [is] honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge. Hebrews 13:4

Upon reflection it is easy to see how this verse continues the Holy Spirit's exhortation on continuing brotherly love. He moves next to loving your spouse. Love must begin at home. If love does not first begin at home then love will not occur within the larger family of God. Nothing can be more shameful than for a Christian man to show more respect to others than to his own wife. Love must flow from the homes of the church if the church is to be nourished by love.

Within Christianity there are many assaults on marriage. For example there are false views on marriage. This is not new but occurred during the days of the apostles. Paul said,

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; Forbidding to marry, [and commanding] to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth (1 Timothy 4:1-3).

Some have suggested and teach that men and women could be holier if they remained unmarried. Other have a completely inaccurate view of sex and espouse that sex is evil, that even within the confines of marriage it is not holy. So the writer of Hebrews responds. First of all he says marriage is honorable. He elevates marriage to a position that God intended. God invented marriage, therefore it must be holy. Marriage is given as a gift to prevent you from sexual sin. First Corinthians chapter seven and verse nine the apostle says as much. "But if they cannot contain let them marry for it is better to marry than to burn." "To burn" means to burn with sexual desire. God has given sexuality and blessed it between a husband and a wife as a means to prevent them from committing all sorts of sexual sins. Sexuality is a gift between a husband and wife. This is the meaning of the words, "the marriage bed is undefiled." It is a gift from God and it is undefiled. It is a pure thing. Sexuality between a husband and wife is worshipful because God created it, and it is an expression of Jesus' love for the church. Thus the admonition and warning, "whoremongers and adulterers God will judge."

Now it is very important that you understand that a man can be against the institution of marriage, and still teach that marriage is wonderful. He can do so by simply doing one of these two things, committing fornication or adultery. Sexual immorality is as much an assault against marriage as a false teaching that forbids marrying, and probably more destructive. God has ordained sexuality and marriage to be a wonderful experience for two people. When you as an unmarried person have sexual relations, you are going against God's word and God's best plan for your life. You are robbing the institution of marriage of something beautiful and wonderful. One day when you get married you will know what you have done, but then it will be too late. I pray you heed my warning. It's the devil's tool to destroy a future marriage. It will destroy more marriages than any other marriage problem, and there are many problems and assaults on this sacred institution.

Obviously the act of adultery is destructive to marriage. The spirit of fornication and the spirit of adultery are counter to the spirit of love. It is the spirit of selfishness. It is not only a sin against your body as Paul says to the Corinthians, and not only a sin against God, but also a sin against your wife or your husband. When one commits this terrible crime they are taking that which does not belong to them and giving it to another—all for their own gratification. Such a spirit of selfishness is a demonic spirit. It comes against the institution of marriage, it comes against God, and that is why the author of Hebrews includes it here. There is no way you and I can love unselfishly when we are consumed with such selfishness to satisfy our self at the expense of everyone else. If you can't keep yourself pure until you are married, you are exhibiting a very selfish spirit. You are declaring about your self that you are a proud and arrogant; that you must have your needs gratified now. You don't care what God's word says, you don't care about God's best for your life, you want what you want and you want it now. That is a spirit of arrogance and pride. It is not love.

I don't care that a man or boy tells you he loves you young ladies. If he is not your husband and he wants to take the relationship to a sexual level, he does not love you. That is not the spirit of love; it is the spirit of selfishness. He doesn't care for you if he would take advantage of you, and I must also add quickly that neither do you care for him like you think you do if you give yourself sexually to him. True love does wait.

The writer of Hebrews follows this exhortation with the idea of covetousness in verse five.

Let your conversation be without covetousness.

Covetousness is mentioned in this exhortation of brotherly love. The same answer for its insertion in this text is selfishness. The spirit that says I want, I need, I will obtain, is covetousness. That spirit will destroy brotherly love. For brotherly love to occur you must become unselfish and look to the needs of others before you look to your own needs.

Let us discuss the antidote to selfishness. The author lists three antidotes, and they're all three components of love. The first is found in the last part of verse five and the first part of verse six.

And be content with such things as ye have: so that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.

Contentment is an antidote against selfishness. First Corinthians chapter thirteen verse four says "charity envieth not, vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up." In other words, true love does not seek its own. A spirit of contentment is a spirit of love not seeking anything but to give. Now as we look at this in relationship to verse four we know that you must be content with your spouse. You must be content, and if you are not, you must pray that God will give you grace to be content. Discontent in a marriage leads to adultery.

Satisfaction with your material wealth is also admonished of us all. We should be content. Contentment with your physical means frees you up to be concerned with the needs of the brethren. Notice the second antidote for selfishness,

For he hath said I will never leave thee or forsake thee.

You and I must trust and rely in God's promises. Love believes. It believes God's promises. The promise is ours, "I will never leave you or forsake you." The Lord is my helper. God has given me everything I need, and as I often say, "if I don't have it today, I don't need it today." He has never left me, He has never forsaken me. The Lord is sufficient; He is enough for me. What do I need if I have the Lord? Paul made a blessed statement when he said "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" (Romans 8:32) I am rich in Christ. Oh, but if your heart is discontented you will look to the things that you don't have. You must believe the truth of this promise, otherwise you will be carried away by greed, envy and desire.

We must be people of God's word. There is no love if it is not based upon the truth of God's word. Without truth, it is merely a feeling, it is ethereal, it will not last, it is fleshly, it is sensual, but it is not godly. Godly love is based upon godly truth. All the truths of chapters one through twelve are the bedrock and foundation on which the author can now say love one another and be content.

The last antidote is fearlessness. He says “that we may boldly say the Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.” Why do I say fearlessness, why does he add this? Well, the answer is again found in the word “love.” There is no fear in love. I John chapter four and verse eighteen the Apostle John writes, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.”

John is talking, of course, about fearing God and God’s judgment. The Christian does not fear God’s judgment because he or she has the perfect love of Christ in them. Christ received the judgment of our sins. But, dear friends, this perfect love works also in our relationships one with another. If I have the perfect love of God in me, I don’t fear men because the Lord is my helper. Jesus said don’t fear him who can harm your body; but fear Him who can harm your body and soul in hell (Matthew 10:28). Men have nothing in you and so if you want to fight the spirit of selfishness, which is the very enemy of brotherly love, you must be fearless, abounding in the perfect love of God, believing in God’s promises. We must not only be content in whatever state we are but also with who God is making us to be.

As we look at this passage and ask the question “how does a church love?” I think we are struck with this awesome idea that this exhortation is so unlike our present world. Look at it, love the stranger. The Bible says to love the stranger, entertain them, be kind and hospitable. The world doesn’t believe that. The world says you better not do that, they might rip you off. The Bible says “Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body.” Minister to those who are under affliction, and visit those that are in prison is the Bible’s admonition to us. The world says that if they are in prison or in affliction they probably deserve it. The Bible says “Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled: but adulterers and fornicators God will judge.” And the world says perversion is better. Sex is good as long as it is “safe” today. The Bible says marriage is binding, but the world believes marriage is no big deal; it’s just a piece of paper. God says be content with what you have, and the world says success is getting more and having more than the other guy.

This list is so contrary to the culture in which we are living. It is counterpositioned against what society is today. Why, friend, if you follow this list, I guarantee you are going to be in the minority. But I plead with us today, let us be in the minority. Don’t compromise; do not bend; do not give in! These are the ethics of a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. The world has its own standard of ethics and that standard will damn everyone who follows it. We are of those who have a higher calling; we are God’s people, and as God’s people we are constantly bombarded by this world to follow its drumbeat. But don’t you dare do it! Our text today is the drumbeat of the living God. You and I cannot blend in to the sin-crazed culture of today. We are different because we are of a different culture—the kingdom of God.

And remember you are never alone. You are part of a community of faith. And should you become isolated from the rest of your family here, you still have an elder Brother and a Father whose promise is “I will never leave thee or forsake you.” Oh no, you are never alone. Amen.