

## Final Thoughts: Part 1

Hebrews 13:1-14

June 6, 2010

As with Paul's letters, the end of Hebrews is a little disjointed. This week and next will cover a variety of topics. While the verses we are looking at this morning may seem unrelated there is an underlying theme. Let's see if we can tease it out.

As our author draws to the end of his letter, he begins the ending with the command that we keep on loving one another. The assumption is that love has characterized the church and the expectation is that it will continue to be one of the marks of the church. We are to have more than **cordial** acquaintances in the church. To love someone implies that you know them and that you act with their best interests at heart. Biblical love also involves the idea that you would sacrifice on their behalf. Our author expects that we will continue to act in this way with one another.

After all, we are **family**. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. We are children of the Most High God. All who in Christ are blood relatives through His shed blood. If there is nothing closer than family, than there ought to be no one closer than us.

In fact, our love and concern is to extend to strangers. God expects us to practice hospitality. In our culture and in our day it is much more dangerous to invite a stranger into your home. Still, we are to be as hospitable as we can because you never know who God may be sending your way.

As I grew up my parents practiced this. Some of my most vivid memories come from the strangers they

would occasionally bring home. We first learned of the Covenant Players when their van broke down at a local gas station and my father brought them home after learning they didn't have a place to stay that night. They ended up staying the week and they fixed the van in our driveway. My first real exposure to different cultures came when my father was introduced to an immigrant from Zimbabwe who had lost his apartment. My father helped him get a job and he stayed with us for several months.

My mother tended to bring home co-workers from the hospital. One day she brought home an Indian coworker of hers to cook us curry. Other times an orderly, or even a patient. Many other times people we did not know, or barely knew, were invited into our house and I learned a lot from each of them. Not one of them ever caused a problem for us or posed any danger to the family, though we were occasionally inconvenienced. Some of them, like the Covenant Players, turned out to be real blessings year after year. You never know who God may send your way. Be wary and cautious. Use your head and don't do anything foolish. But if the Holy Spirit urges you to invite someone in, I recommend you do it. They may be a messenger from God, an angel in disguise, and the blessing might be yours.

Next comes the call to remember those in prison as if we were in prison with them, and those who are mistreated as if we were suffering with them. It has always been the case that God's people have been called to be good citizens. Being good neighbors and obedient to the law are part of what God wants us to do. The

problem comes when the law of the land is in violation of the desires and expectations of God. The biblical command is always to be obedient whenever we can, but to remember that God's law is higher and we must not deny Christ or accept any authority over Him. This is the meaning of the phrase, "Jesus is Lord." There is no higher **authority** to whom we must give account than our Savior and King.

In the first few centuries of the church it was illegal to be a follower of Christ. The law was in direct opposition to the church, but the early Christians kept on worshiping and witnessing anyway. This meant that they would often be arrested, jailed, have their property confiscated, tortured, and even executed. The call in our text is to express our kinship through the blood of Christ by remembering, praying for, and caring for those who are persecuted for their faith.

By extension, we should also seek to minister to those who are in jail or mistreated for other reasons. Those who are guilty of crimes are no less worthy of God's love than those who are innocent before the world's law, because we have all sinned and are all guilty before God's law. There are many good prison ministries seeking to bring God's presence and the gospel of a new, transformed life to those who are in prison. We should pray for those who share that good news. We should pray for the guilty that they may see the light, repent, and allow the Holy Spirit to recreate them. We should also remember that our justice system is not perfect and there are innocent people in our prisons. They need our prayers as well that the evil that surrounds them will not infect them.

Next, we move onto marriage. Our author says, "*Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.*" (v.4) Not much more can be said than that. It seems pretty clear. We are each to remain pure in our marriage and we are to help each other remain pure in all of our marriages. Each of us should not only be concerned with his or her own marriage, but also hold in high regard the marriages of those around us.

Unfortunately this clear directive needs to be heard in the church. This is one of the ways we look too much like the world around us. Jesus' standards are very high because He expects us to live out of the new life He gives us, not out of the desires of the old life. His Holy Spirit works to strengthen us in obedience to Jesus' high calling. Yet this is one of our biggest problems, even in the church. We allow our hearts to get tangled up with other things and other people and we begin to lose the mentally, emotionally, and physically intimate relationships we are to have with our spouses.

Some studies suggest that a majority of men in the church have a problem with pornography. Defiling marriage and drawing men's hearts and commitments from their wives is a multi billion dollar industry that has been catapulted ahead by the internet. Meanwhile, social networking sites draw wives' attention and affection away from their husbands.

As brothers and sisters in Christ we are to stand firm against anything that would hurt our or each others' marriages. We need to live our lives together, transparent about our fault, failures, shortcomings and

weaknesses so that, in love, we can lift one another up , strengthen our feeble knees, and fight for one another's marriages. Scripture is clear God's righteous judgement awaits those who fail and thus deny Christ.

Right there with sexual purity is the devotion of our hearts. We should not be lovers of **money**. Having money is not a sin, but putting our trust in it to preserve us is. We must learn to be content with what we have. This is another area where our culture has real problems and the church is following. Over the past one-hundred years the size of the average family has shrunk while the size of the average house has dramatically increased. We are a society that simply accumulates stuff. Our houses are larger, and we still don't have room for all our possessions so we go out and rent extra rooms for the extra stuff. The whole advertising industry is designed to keep us from being content so we will go out and buy the things that they say will bring us contentment. We have too many things, no place to put them, we are drowning in debt, and still we buy on.

God's call is to be **content** with the things He provides for us. He knows our needs, and while He will not provide everything our flesh desires, He will keep His promise to give us Himself when He is our hearts' desire. He meant it when He said, "*Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.*" (v.5) We can't depend on money. We can't depend on things. We can depend on **God**.

The next command is to remember the leaders in the church who preach and teach the word of God. If a church has godly leadership the people are to follow that leader, both in the things he or she says, and in their

behavior. As the pastor of this church, everything I do or say must be measured against the scripture. Where you find my teaching to be biblical you are to follow it because it is not my **word** but God's. Where my life reflects the gospel of Christ you are to imitate me. Where my teaching and life fall short you are to pray for me and help me, just as I am to pray for you and help you. This is not true of me only. It is true of all who hold offices or positions in the church, but mostly of those who are tasked with teaching. Jesus doesn't change and so the things we teach about Him are not subject to change. We don't get to change the **truth** we simply need to share it.

This is why the author goes on to tell us to not be carried off by strange teachings. For the first century church one of the issues was how to handle food sacrificed at pagan temples. We know that there is no magic in certain foods or that praying over a piece of candy will not make it healthy (you do know that, right?). We understand that God wants us to eat a healthy, balanced diet with everything in moderation.

We have other strange teachings that too often carry us off. Things like the teaching that God helps those who help themselves or that God's main goal is our happiness draw the church away from the biblical teachings that God help us because we cannot help ourselves and that God's main goal for us is our holiness and transformation into the likeness of Jesus Christ. Now, as then, the world is full of strange **teaching** and it must all be measured against the word of God. That which is conformed to God's word should be kept. That which is opposed to it must be thrown away.

This is why it is so important to study the Bible together. If we do not study the Bible we have no standard by which to measure what is being said. If we only study the Bible on our own we tend to read into it the bad teaching we have received instead of allowing it to correct us. One thing I have noticed in my years in ministry is that, when people come to Bible study many of the wrong teachings they have received begin to get corrected without my having to directly address them. I may mention that a particular belief is not accurate, but I usually don't pound on it. This is the strengthening by grace the author mentioned. I have learned to trust the Holy Spirit to use the text as we study it together to bring about a realization of the truth. After all, that is one of the things Jesus said the Holy Spirit would do.

The mention of food sacrificed on altars reminded our author that the altar we seek is not on the earth. He brings us back to fundamental things—the basis of our salvation and our response to it. We do have an altar, but the priests of the Old Covenant have no right to it. The altar on which the sacrifice was made for our sins is the **cross** and it stood outside the city gates.

When we come to Christ our identity changes. It's kind of like getting married when the couple's primary affiliations move from the people with whom they grew up to each other. When we come to Christ we are called to identify with Him exclusively. There is no place to worship other things. We are to give our spiritual lives to Him, and to Him alone. This was a problem for everybody in the early church, and it is a problem today as we set aside what our society and culture say are important for the things God says are important.

Those who do not belong to Christ receive no benefit from the cross. Like the Old Testament law, it stands to condemn them because they have rejected the one Who was sacrificed on it.

Those who belong to Christ must be willing to accept for themselves the shame and **disgrace** He bore. Every culture, including our own, has things opposed to the leadership of Jesus Christ and to the demands of His gospel. We must be willing to stand with Jesus and against the things that are against Him. He shed His blood to make us holy, to separate us from the world and set us apart for God's use. We ought to go out from among our society and join Him.

Finally this morning, we find our motivation in all of this. *“For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.”* (v.14) Our true citizenship is not here. As the hymn says, “This world is not my home. I'm just a passin through.” We are looking for a city built by God. Our treasure is there. Our hope is in the one Who is preparing it for us. Our citizenship is with those who have gone before and those who wait with us for its consummation. If we are in Christ we are guaranteed a place there because God raised Him from the dead and we know He will raise us as well.

We will look at the implications of that next week. Now, we gather around the table and celebrate Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf and our acceptance by God because of it. This table is not an altar. It is the place we eat the meal to remember the altar on which Christ was sacrificed for our sin. Come to the table.