

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 22, 2019
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Hebrews 13:1-8 Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. **2** Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. **3** Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

4 Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. **5** Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said,

“Never will I leave you;
never will I forsake you.”

6 So we say with confidence,
“The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me?”

7 Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. **8** Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

“Life with Holiness”

What do teachers dream about? When they close their eyes and imagine a workplace paradise, what do they see? A classroom. Yes. And filled with students. And those students are all learning and reaching their full potential. They are all active and engaged, but behaving and following the guidelines. You know, those guidelines that are given out at the beginning of the year so everyone knows the policies and procedures, but they forget them until they really need them.

At first the first verses of Hebrews chapter 13 gives the impression that the writer to the Hebrews is trying to cram in all sorts of miscellaneous instructions before he gets to the end. A bunch of policies and procedures he needs to get down on paper before he hands it over to his audience. But on further examination, we see there is a connection. Hebrews chapter 13 gives us natural and practical ways to live out our lives in ways that are pleasing to God. Behavior and conduct aren't the sole focus. These last few chapters in Hebrews have encouraged us to fix our eyes on Jesus. When we focus who Jesus is and what he's done, then it becomes more than just a bunch of random instructions. We see the holiness of Jesus. And we see what life is like with his holiness.

1) Focus on Serving others

We can address these instructions one at a time. The first three verses help us focus on serving others. Hebrews 13:1 tells God's people: **“Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters.”** Connected to the previous verses, we see that brotherly love is one way to serve God by serving God's people. Love for each other binds together the family of God as brothers and sisters.

Serving others isn't just reserved for the people we know and feel most comfortable around. Hebrews 13:2 continues: **"Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers."** Hospitality had different standards and different purposes 2,000 years ago. Hotels and inns were sometimes places where unsavory activities took place. The gathering of Christians in the first few generations after Jesus generally took place in people's homes. So they could extend the family feel to people from a wide range of backgrounds. That's how most Christians first heard about Jesus and that's how they could welcome new people to the faith.

In context of Hebrews, many people were imprisoned and persecuted because of their faith. So Hebrews 13:3 instructs: **"Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering."** Persecutions were designed to divide and conquer Christians. Someone all alone will be more likely to crumble under pressure and lose hope in Christ. So apply that to people who are incarcerated whether they are innocent or guilty. This verse calls Christians to identify with their struggles. Be there for them. The reality of being in isolation without freedom means people need compassion and prayers more than anything. Victims need care and healing no matter what caused them to be mistreated. Identify with those who suffer to draw them closer to the community of faith when they need it the most. Draw them closer to their Savior.

2) Major morality concerns

This chapter then moves on from ways we can serve other to ways we can combat negative cultural influences on major morality concerns. Let's go to verse 5 and then come back to verse 4. In Hebrews 13:5 we hear: **"Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have."** We see some of these huge cultural issues are really heart issues. Especially for this group of Christians who were reading these words. They had already experienced one round of persecutions. So the natural response was to prepare for possible outbreaks by stockpiling resources for the next round. The problem is a focus on ourselves translates into a failure to be generous toward those in need.

We hesitate to give up control over our finances for the same reasons why we aren't naturally inclined toward brotherly love, hospitality or showing compassion for the mistreated and imprisoned. We tell ourselves we will be generous once we have our own house in order. Once I've got everything locked down personally, then I'll take care of the people around me.

When Hebrews 13:4 addresses marriage and sexuality, we see how entangled societal trends are with the natural impulses of our hearts. Greeks and Hebrews who first read this letter had different moral standards, but none were God-pleasing. Israelites tended to get married at a young age. So keeping oneself sexually pure before marriage wasn't a huge problem. But after years of marriage, they grew bored. So they treated that bond and vow as something disposable. Something they could toss aside once they got tired of it. Greek culture, on the other hand, treated sexual impulses as something in line with cravings for food and water. So it almost became expected that people would experiment sexually. Even

when they were married, it was common to just wink or nudge at extra relationships outside the marriage.

One of my summer jobs when I was in school was working as a painter. So I was able to hear lots of chatter from guys on construction crews. You can guess they way the guys talked about sex and mad jokes about women. But what struck me was the way they referred to their own wives and girlfriends. Constantly complaining about the 'ball and chain' or insulting them for nagging or spending too much money. I know it's not any better with women whether their man doesn't make enough money or is a constant slob around the house. Hebrews 13:4 calls us to fight against the tide of whatever dominant culture we find ourselves in: **"Marriage should be honored by all."** Hebrews calls every person, whatever culture we were raised in, whatever our marital status, to treat marriage as something precious and valuable.

God calls us to treat this gift the way we would a precious jewel. Value it highly. One Bible scholar says it this way: "marriage is to "be held in honor by all" because the institution of marriage as an exclusive life-long union between a man and a woman is God's precious, priceless gift to humanity, to men and women created in His image." (Kleinig, p. 697) When God says: **"the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral,"** God is addressing all of us. (Hebrews 13:4) When he talks about the adulterer, he means any married person who engages in sexual activity with someone who is not his wife or who is not her husband. When he talks about those who are judged for being sexually immoral, he refers to those who engage in sexual relations outside of monogamous heterosexual marriage.

3) Objections and Excuses

God's Word for us in Hebrews chapter 13 doesn't mince any words. God judges us for abuses of his will for marriage and sexuality. At their roots, those abuses comes from a rejection of God, an expression of selfishness. We put our own personal gratification above our desires to please God and do what is best for God's community. That's true for sexual sins just as much as it is for sins of greed and covetousness. It's true for our lack of compassion and generosity toward those in need.

It took me a while to understand these verses aren't a random collection of instructions, God's policies and procedures What connects them is that none of them come naturally. Selfishness that seeks to make me happy flows most naturally out of my heart. I was privileged to grow up in the 80s. So at the end of one of my favorite cartoons, I always heard the tagline: "...And knowing is half the battle." How many of you think this motto from G.I. Joe is accurate? If knowing is half the battle, it must be the easier half. Doing it is much harder. Just knowing God's will for our lives doesn't automatically translate into holy conduct. Our habits have to overcome the natural inclinations of our hearts.

4) Faith focused on Jesus

Hebrews shows God's people Jesus isn't primarily a teacher. The Bible isn't mainly an instruction manual. It's all about the good news of what Jesus has done for you. It's the good word that has the power to give and create holiness in all the hearts that receive it. Holy

living can only come from a holy God at work in your life. Fear, love and trust in God come as a result of God's holiness given to you by Jesus.

The writer to the Hebrews says in verse 6: **"So we say with confidence."** The instructor with the pen and the pupils seated in the congregation are lumped together. Then the author quotes Psalm 118:6-7 **"The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me? The Lord is with me; he is my helper. I look in triumph on my enemies."** This isn't just a nice motto that can give you a boost when you are feeling down. Taken in the context of the rest of the book of Hebrews, it helps us see Jesus is the one facing your enemies. The triumph from Psalm 118 comes through what Jesus did: **"he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death."** (Hebrews 2:14) Jesus established a new standard for your relationship with your holy God. Instead of a two sided covenant where your behavior would be rewarded or punished, you get the one-sided covenant in the blood of Jesus. (Hebrews 8:8-13) Hebrews 10:10 tells God's people: **"we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."**

5) Lives under Christ's holiness gives lasting results

Now we can go back to put these instruction in Hebrews 13 into context. God's people can remember, consider, and imitate Christian leaders. It's because God's messengers deliver God's Word of salvation and God's effective promises. We believe what our leaders believed in the way they believed it. Those leaders will change, but they point us to the same Jesus.

God's people show sexual self-control and restraint in marriage because we cherish God's precious gift to us. Husbands and wives serve and love in marriage, with the love of Jesus who put our needs ahead of his own, our interests before his ego, what was necessary in front of what was easy.

We identify with those who suffer because Christ suffered for us in our place. We live in community with all those who comprise the Body of Christ. Hospitality expresses God's love to fellow believers and gives opportunities to share God's grace with unbelievers. Brotherly love celebrates who we are in Christ. Jesus took on flesh and blood to make us his brothers and sisters. The love we show to each other has a future in God's kingdom even when so many other human accomplishments have faded to dust.

It's important to know what God says, to understand what the Bible teaches. But what you need more than another teacher is a hero. Jesus is your hero who kept himself pure throughout life. Jesus is your hero who sacrificed his life to give you his holiness. Jesus is your helper now. You can fearlessly face your foes and boast in God's victory. Jesus isn't someone who gives you nudges on your journey toward personal holiness. Jesus is your holiness. You have life with his holiness. Amen.