

A WAY TO LIVE
 Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
 First Presbyterian Church of Georgetown, Texas
 Dr. Michael A. Roberts August 29, 2010

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

13Let mutual love continue. 2Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. 3Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. 4Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. 5Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." 6So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" 7Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. 8Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

15Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. 16Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

This passage in Hebrews 13 is one of the best summaries of Christian ethics in the scriptures. Here we are called in very specific ways to lead our lives in a manner that honors Christ.

The dictionary defines ethics as "standards of conduct and moral judgment." It also says that ethics is "the system or code of morals of a particular person, religion, group, or profession."

Conduct, morals, behavior. You can have an ethics of a person, the ethics of Bonhoeffer, or of Aristotle, or of Mother Theresa, the ethic of Jesus. Professional groups have codes of ethics: attorneys, medical practitioners, accountants, educators. Pastors study ministerial ethics. And whole religions have ethics or ethical systems. Each religion lifts up particular behavior and standards of conduct.

The Christian faith has an incredibly rich tradition of ethics. Our ethics is informed by the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Our ethic is shaped by the life and teaching of Jesus. And then we have 2000 years of rich, deep thinking on the ethics of the Christian life.

If one were to read the Bible through, one realizes that God is greatly concerned with our ethics, God really cares how we live morally. Ethics fills the pages of the Bible. Ethics is intertwined with stories and doctrines throughout the Bible. They go together.

For the Christian then it is not just what we believe that is important. It is also important the way we behave, the way we conduct our lives. For the Christian, ethics is as important as theology. This is what the scriptures teach. It is not enough to say and believe that Jesus is

Lord, one must also allow that lordship to impact and influence our behavior. All throughout the Bible, we read this is what we believe, therefore this is the way we are to live.

In the Old Testament, of course, we have the ten commandments: *“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”* therefore *“Honor your father and mother, you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness.”* Ethics.

In the Levitical code, we read *“you shall love your neighbor as yourself”* (Lev. 19:18). In the prophets, we hear *“what does the Lord require of you? To do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with your God* (Micah 6:8). Jesus’ teaching has a strong ethical emphasis: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, beware of practicing your piety before others, do not worry about your life, do not judge, care for the hungry, the sick, those in prison.

The New Testament epistles are packed full of ethical insights and challenges. Live this way. Love these people. Behave this way in the church. To explore Christian ethics comprehensively would take a great deal of time. I once took a semester length class on Christian Ethics. There’s a lot to cover. Instead, let’s focus this morning on the ethics described in Hebrews 13. Lewis Donelson of Austin Seminary says *“it would be hard to find a more representative account of Christian ethics in the New Testament”* than Hebrews 13. I agree. This account may not be comprehensive but it is truly representative.

In the epistle to Hebrews, the writer has highlighted the superiority of the Christian faith, of Christ’s priesthood, of the many saints who have served faithfully. In chapter 13, ethics takes center stage. These are ethical admonitions on how God’s people are to live. As I read over these, I am struck by how ancient these ethical admonitions are and how central they are to the Christian ethical tradition.

First of all, *“let mutual love continue”*. The Greek word here is *philadelphia*. Literally, the text says *“let philadelphia continue”*. Brotherly love. Sisterly love. Mutual love among the family of God.

Love is the heart of the Christian ethic. It is not duty or responsibility or even justice that is the heart of Christian moral behavior. It is love. Jesus quoted the ancient book of Leviticus when he said *“you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*

Jesus said that the way we treat each other is the criteria of discipleship. *“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”* (John 13:31). In the church, love matters most of all.

We are encouraged to let this love continue, to nurture this love. It is so easy to neglect love even in the church. John Calvin is so right when he says *“nothing evaporates more easily than love.”* Some specific forms of mutual love are encouraged in these verses.

In the church, we can not understand this command too narrowly. For the writer immediately extends this command to include the stranger: *“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some have entertained angels without knowing it.”*

The strangers referred to here were more than likely itinerant Christians who went from place to place and who depended on the hospitality of fellow Christians. First century inns were notoriously immoral, unhygienic, and expensive. These Christians neglected to be hospitable because the church was being persecuted. They were suspicious of outsiders and this made them reticent to always be hospitable. The visit of the angel probably refers to the three men who visited Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18 and told them they were going to have a child.

The Christian is to be welcoming and hospitable to those who are strangers to them. We are to be open to newcomers in our midst, doing everything we can to help them feel welcome and helping newcomers integrate into the life of our church. We are to be welcoming to those of the transient population who move through town and often come to the church for help. We are to do what we can to help refugees who are fleeing one form of disaster or another.

The ethic of mutual love is then extended to the imprisoned and the physically abused. The original words here in Hebrews referred to Christians who had been imprisoned or tortured for their faith in Christ. This is not a common situation in the United States but it is a situation present in other places in the world.

We are called to be in solidarity with these: *“Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.”* Empathy. Identification. One person calls it “imaginative sympathy.” We connect, we suffer with those who suffer, and then of course we seek to provide some support and healing for those who do suffer. In the past, we have been involved in prison ministry. In the present, we are involved in ministries and mission that seek to alleviate suffering, neglect, and abuse.

Today, with our Crop Walk emphasis, the author of Hebrews would probably say, “remember those throughout the world who are hungry, as those you were hungry too.” We remember, we seek to identify with a situation that most of us are very unfamiliar with, and then we seek to help. The Crop Walk motto echoes this identification when it says “we walk because they walk.” Other ministries of ours that stress identification and help would include Meals of Wheels, Backpack Buddies, Manos de Cristos, and Presbyterian Children’s Homes to name just a few.

Some of these situations may seem remote from our everyday life. But this is not so with marriage. Everybody has some connection with the institution of marriage. It is natural then that the writer’s emphasis on mutual love would lead to marital love.

Verse 4: *“Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.”*

There have always been some, even in the church who have not had respect or appreciation for marriage. Some think the epistle of Hebrews is addressing an ascetic group who disdained marriage and healthy sexuality.

In our wedding services, there is an opening statement which states clearly and strongly the Christian theology of marriage. That helpful statement ends with these words: "We rejoice that marriage is given by God, blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ, and sustained by the Holy Spirit. Therefore let marriage be held in honor by all."

Let marriage be held in honor. Let marriage be respected. Let marriage be held high and esteemed. The church needs to do this. The society we live in often does not.

Our text lifts up sexual faithfulness as a way to honor marriage. Certainly, sexual unfaithfulness dishonors the institution of marriage. Sex is a gift from God. It is intended by God to be a life-uniting act. My ethics professor in seminary, Lewis Smedes, said it succinctly: "Sex is designed by God to be a life-uniting act coupled with life-uniting intent and life-uniting commitment."

We believe, as we say in our wedding services, "God gave us marriage for the full expression of the love between a man and a woman. In marriage a woman and man belong to each other, and with affection and tenderness freely give themselves to each other."

We dishonor marriage in multiple ways in our society. As God's people, we are called to honor marriage.

The next area of ethical guidance relates to what we have: "***Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have.***" The believer is grateful for the material possessions that they possess and rejoices in the more satisfying spiritual possessions. Once again, this is a pervasive teaching of the New Testament. It was Jesus himself who warned his hearers that "*no one can serve two masters...you cannot serve both God and wealth*" (Matthew 6:24). "*One's life*", Jesus said, "*does not consist in the abundance of possessions*" (Luke 12:15). So "*do not worry, he said, saying what shall we eat? or what shall we drink? or what shall we wear? For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first the kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*" (Matthew 6:31-33 NIV).

Money is not the means of security for the believer. Loving money, pursuing money can only take you so far. One's life does not consist in what we have, according to Jesus. Contentment is a Christian virtue. The apostle Paul puts it well when he writes: "*I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.*" We may not be there yet. We may still be learning to be content. But we do know that is God's desire.

This is a challenging word to the American church, one of wealthiest churches ever in the history of Christianity. *“Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have.”*

The last dimension of ethics in our passage is leadership. Verse 7: *“Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; **consider the outcome of their way of life**, and imitate their faith.”*

There is a role here for members of the church but I want to focus on the role of leaders. We are to set an example of the Christian life. Leaders should know, and I include myself here, we should know people are watching. They are watching the way we live, the way we talk, what’s truly important to us. Nobody’s perfect, everybody sins, but people have a right to expect certain ethical behavior from their leaders in the church.

The news is filled with pastors and other Christian leaders who do not live ethical lives. There is way too much scandal, way too much greed, way too much improper behavior. All of this unethical behavior harms the church of Christ and the cause of Christ. Leaders need to pay great attention to the way they’re living, to their ethics as they lead the church of Christ.

Hebrews 13 is full of good examples of the kind of ethical guidance the scriptures present to us as God’s people. We tend to think that some of these are right on and others don’t apply to us. Some are good advice. But some are meddling. We are called upon to be loving, be hospitable, be faithful, be content, be a good example. This is just a small slice of what it means for the Christian to live an ethical life.

In conclusion, let me remind all of us, that we don’t do this alone. We don’t do this without the help of one another. We need each other to live ethical lives as Christians. We need each other’s support, guidance, and challenge.

We also are most dependent on God’s help to live as God’s people. God calls us to live in certain ways but God also provides the resources, the power to live such a life. The Holy Spirit empowers us to live a way to live that is truly Christian.

The epistle of Hebrews concludes with a benediction to the people of God. *“May the God of peace, who...brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him.”*

God is at work among us- teaching, equipping, and empowering us to live ethical lives.

