

## The Same Forever

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

This reading is the Christian primer giving some basics of Christian belief and Christian behavior. The author is not attempting to bring us to faith but remind us that wearing the name of Christ requires something of us. The author of Hebrews, writing in the late first century, has written a letter of encouragement to tell his readers to keep the faith. As he ends he reminds them of an array of matters basic to Christian living: mutual love, hospitality, solidarity with prisoners, sexual morality, wealth, community leaders, and generosity.

Two of the admonitions are introduced by the phrase "do not neglect" (vv. 2 and 16) and two by the word "remember" (vv. 3 and 7); most are given a brief rationale, and a few echo the main body of Hebrews. By and large they are, like much early Christian paraenesis, a potpourri of freestanding, undeveloped exhortations. While they promote social cohesion, their cumulative impact has more to do with their sheer number than with a unifying theme.

Mutual love refers not to broad-based love of humanity but to community-based love of believers for believers. Such love entails willing the good of others in the group and involves doing as much as feeling. In Hebrews 6:10 the writer had already acknowledged "the love that you showed for his name in serving the saints, as you still do." So we are told not to get tired of loving each other.

Hospitality is one way in which this love is shown. Travelers of many sorts— itinerant preachers, letter carriers, Christians on nonchurch business, migrants, and others—were crucial to the spread of early Christianity and the sense that otherwise-isolated communities had of belonging to a much larger whole. It was dangerous to travel in the ancient world and visitors needed secure lodging, food, and whatever encouragement their hosts could provide. Even those without letters of recommendation, it seems, were to be received on trust. This was a tall order in any time! It is not surprising, then, that the author strengthens the injunction that hospitality not be neglected by grounding it in biblical precedent: in providing

for strangers "some" have entertained angels (divine emissaries) unknowingly. This would have reminded them of Abraham and Sarah, Lot, Gideon, and Manoah. This reminds us that we each may be called to entertain angels even today.

Prisoners and Victims of Torture were to be kept in mind through the full force and focus of the imagination: "as though you were in prison with them," and "as though you yourselves were in the(ir) body." Remember they are isolated, degraded, powerless and easily abused. But beyond remembering they were to visit the prisoners and provide for their emotional and material needs (Matthew 25:36, 43; 2 Timothy 1:16-17; 4:9-13; Philemon 10-11, 23-24). The readers had already "partnered" with the persecuted and imprisoned; and some had suffered persecution and imprisonment themselves (Heb. 10:32-34). The author is advocating that a new ministry be initiated or that an old one be sustained. In our time we are to use our political power to condemn torture in any and all circumstances. Although the admonition in this verse provides no direct warrant for an all-out ban, it is so emphatically centered on solidarity with the oppressed as to be congruent with one.

Sexual Morality and Wealth (vv. 4-6 and 15-16). Instructions on chastity and warnings against the love of money are staples of first-century and Christians today (the former in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; Ephesians 5:3-5; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7; and the latter in Matthew 6:19-21, 24-34; Luke 12:22-34; 1 Timothy 6:10; James 5:1-5). The exhortation to chastity is grounded in the prospect of divine judgment (v. 4b), and the warning against avarice in the promise of divine assistance (v. 5b). To emphasize the promise of assistance, the author gave two scriptural citations. First: "I [God] will never leave you or forsake you," from Deuteronomy 31:6, 8 and Joshua 1:5, and secondly: "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" from Psalm 118:6. We are to trust in the ability of God to provide and to be content with what we have. When we trust God we can and will be generous (v. 16). These are the ways we give "sacrifices pleasing to God."

Community Leaders and Christ (vv. 7, 8). Throughout the passage the author speaks with striking confidence based in part on the knowledge that the community has been blessed with leaders whose conduct and faith were worthy of imitation (v. 7). They ranked with the

exemplary "cloud of witnesses" of earlier times whose faithful persistence inspired (Heb. 11). But the author's confidence derived above all from Christ. His "sameness" (v. 8; cf. 1:12), his unshakable reliability, no matter the circumstance or passage of time, was and is the ground of Christian hope and endurance. **David R. Adams**

We are people that are together because of our mutual love of God, with Jesus Christ as our Savior and guide – we are members of a religious congregation. We come together in this place of worship and practice the arts related to worship with music, prayer, spoken word and drama. This is the place where we learn together about the will of God for our lives. Our scripture offers much that is vitally essential for making the transition from people that go to church and people who are the church. There are three vital elements. The first and most basic is found in verse 15: "Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name." The first is Worship. When the New Testament churches thought of worship, they did not follow the bulletin or order of the day within the one-hour slot. No. They described it: "a sacrifice of praise to God." The work of actually praising God and meaning it was and is transformative; it changes us.

One writer put it this way: You come to resemble what you admire. People who admire money get green and crinkly. People who admire computers grow user-unfriendly. People who admire youth get juvenile. People who actively and deliberately admire Jesus Christ come to resemble him as he actually was and remains today, unchanged from age to age: generous, merry, tender, fierce, courageous, somewhat mischievous, fully open to others after the self is sorted out. Real worship is the source of personal transformation. We must craft our worship out of love for our Lord.

The second element in becoming a vital congregation is fellowship. "Let mutual love continue" (Heb. 13:1). We are to leave a worship service on fire to do God's will and with praise on our lips and seeking others who had a similar experience. The issue then is, how will our blazing souls be molded? Will we rush back into our normal routine, to be shaped again by the world's mold? Will we sit quietly in Sunday School or Bible study where a teacher tells us exactly what to believe and practice and exactly how to do it? We are look

around the coffee hour for eyes equally ablaze and forge relationships with them, letting our transformation be shaped in our mutual discovery of Jesus' high adventure.

The third element of congregational vitality is ministry. By ministry the New Testament means visiting those in prison and those being tortured; and feeding the hungry; assisting others in the ways we are able; and praying for each other earnestly. We know the most meaningful ministries, both within and outside the church building, grow spontaneously out of the new relationships forged between worship-ablazed souls; those on fire for God.

These three elements occur in this Hebrews passage together. This suggests they should not be separated. If we allow them to be separated from one another, we might result in a dysfunctional congregational life. Because worship that does not set our souls on fire and lead to deepened relationships with fellow servants of our Lord becomes a fussy customs. It becomes a cause of strife and contentiousness rather than a fresh way of addressing our love to God. Fellowship that does not grow out of spirited worship and point into courageous ministry becomes gossipy, and, as this passage warns, potentially adulterous. Cliques in a congregation are fine, provided they are sources of positive energy, but disconnected from worship or ministry, they are a circle of wagons on the congregation's prairie. Ministry that does not grow out of worship-forged friendships becomes proprietary and sour, something to fight others about, rather than something to offer to them. If the payoff for ministry is not the love of God and your fellow ministers, it will decay into prestige maintenance. **Gray Temple**

Clarence Jordan, who offered a radical model of strangers finding reconciliation in the segregated South by establishing Koinonia Farms, has a great paraphrase of verses 4-5: "In every way consider marriage a precious thing, don't let sexual intercourse be perverted. For God will pass judgment on those who go around tomcatting and having illicit relationships. Don't let the desire for money dominate your life. Make do with what's on hand, for [God] has said, 'Never will I abandon you or run off and leave you.'" **Lanny Peters**

Suppose our congregation, or any other, were to face into and lay claim to the energies with which we have voiced contentious discontent, asking God's forgiveness only for its target, not for its voltage and amperage? Suppose we were to direct that same energy into

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passionately adoring Jesus Christ in church? Suppose we applied the judgment that formerly shaped our gossip into appreciating the excellence of potential friends in the congregation? Suppose those energies made us brave in the face of the world's many needs?

Just imagine it. There would be no institution quite like the active and growing church anywhere in the world. **Gray Temple** This is possible because the God we serve is the same yesterday, today and forever. The one that empowers us to do ministry is the same yesterday, today and forevermore. Amen.

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