

Practical Service to God
Hebrews 13:1-6

This morning we are going to consider the first 6 verses of Hebrews 13. Next Sunday we'll finish up the whole series in Hebrews. Today's passage is five rapid-fire commands. These commands describe what the author meant at the end of chapter 12 by "acceptable service" to God. Listen again to the last two verses of chapter 12:

28 Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; 29 for our God is a consuming fire.

The five commands we'll consider today explain the type of life that is compatible with the fact that we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shake (i.e., we are entering the safest, most secure place in the universe - the place where God Himself reigns).

The author of Hebrews isn't merely throwing in some morality at the end of his letter just to keep everybody in line. No, these commands flow out of everything we've seen in the book of Hebrews. In other words, these commands flow out of the gospel, which means "good news." If we hear these commands as "bad news" we've misunderstood them. Even though they may be demanding, these commands are really "good news" because they reflect the good character of God and they reflect what God is doing in Christ in the new covenant. And so to resent or reject these commands is an insult to the new covenant in Jesus' blood.

It would be easy to do a feature-length message on each of these commands; but since I'm teaching all five of these commands in one message I'll be selective on what I share.

Love within the body of Christ (*Hebrews 13:1*) The first command reiterates one of the most frequent commands in the NT, namely to "Love one another" (John 13:34, 15:12; Romans 13:8; 1 Thess. 3:12; etc.) within the body of Christ. Verse 1 simply says:

1 Let love of the brethren continue.

"Love of the brothers" is the word *philadelphia*. There is a type of love that is appropriate for "family," for brothers and sisters. The next verse will speak of loving "outsiders," but the call here is to "let love of the brothers continue." This wasn't a new command for the Hebrews. They were supposed to "continue" loving each other as brothers.

This illustrates something that we see throughout the New Testament: we are supposed to treat each other the way God has treated us. This especially true of love. In 1 John 4:7 we find:

7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

Four verses later we also read:

11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

Not surprisingly, when the author of Hebrews wants to urge his readers to “offer an acceptable service to God” he begins with loving one another in the body of Christ. Forty-five years ago Francis Schaeffer wrote his little book, “The Mark of the Christian” and pointed out that down through the centuries people have worn symbols that identify themselves as followers of Jesus: a cross on a chain, a pin on their lapel, even “Christian” haircuts. But Jesus didn’t say, “By your haircuts all men will know you are My disciples.” He actually said, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).

Jesus Himself says that people have a right to judge whether or not we’re actually apprenticed to Him - by whether or not we love one another. You can know the Bible better than all your friends; you can serve in the church and in the community until you burn yourself out; you can have amazing spiritual gifts. But those things aren’t the defining “mark of the Christian.” People can tell if we’re actually Jesus’ disciples by whether or not we love each other. And if you want objective criteria for evaluating whether or not you love other believers, Paul’s description in 1 Corinthians 13 is hard to beat: “Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous. . .is not provoked. . .does not hold a grudge. . .” Our author says, “Let love of the brothers continue.”

Love toward “strangers” (Hebrews 13:2) The next verse tells us that there should be great continuity between how we treat fellow believers and how we treat everybody else - even people we meet for the first time.

2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.

He states the command negatively, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.” He is flagging the tendency to feel like we don’t owe anything to random people we happen to come across. In verse 1 the term translated “love of the brothers” was *philadelphia*. Here in verse 2 the term translated “hospitality to strangers” is *philo-xenia*. And so it’s the same kind of love (*philo*) directed at strangers - people you don’t really know. These strangers could be fellow believers, but they could be anybody in need of food or shelter or anything else you have to share.

In the first century hospitality was especially important for traveling missionaries and teachers (such as Paul and Barnabas) as well as for believers who were fleeing persecution. Hotels/inns were both expensive and known for immorality, so believers in each city opened their homes as a practical expression of hospitality (love for strangers). Even today there are many opportunities to share our resources with people we come across. Some of you actually excel at this.

The rationale given is intriguing: “for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.” This statement brings to mind Abraham and Sarah’s experience described

in Genesis 18. Abraham was sitting in his tent when he saw “three men” standing before him. Abraham showed “extravagant hospitality” toward them: he brought them water for washing their feet and bread to eat; he killed the choice calf and brought it to them along with curds and milk. One of these three men gave the prophecy that within a year Sarah would have a child in her old age. Only later was this “man” identified as “the angel of the Lord.” The other two were also later identified as angels when they went to Sodom. Abraham and Sarah had “entertained angels without knowing it.”

I like to think of this statement as one of those “wildcards” that God keeps in His pocket. In every interaction we have with somebody who comes across our path, there’s the possibility that there’s more going on than meets the eye. There’s the possibility that we are showing hospitality to one of God’s messengers (“angel” = messenger). This possibility should prompt us to be consistent in the way we treat everybody: our friends, our family, our brothers and sisters in Christ, our enemies, and total strangers.

Compassion for fellow believers who are persecuted (Hebrews 13:3) You may remember that back in chapter 10 the author had commended his readers for “showing sympathy to the prisoners” - to fellow believers who had been imprisoned for their faith. Here he urges them to continue such compassion.

3 Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body.

He mentions two categories of believers: prisoners and those who are ill-treated. To “remember the prisoners” means more than simply bringing them to mind. It meant identifying with and showing compassion to them. In that day the prison didn’t provide food and clothing; if fellow believers didn’t provide these necessities, the prisoners would languish and die. The Hebrews were supposed to remember prisoners “as though in prison with them.” This mindset is inherent in the concept of the body of Christ or “the household of God” (Hebrews 3:6, 10:21). If one member suffers (e.g., your arm), the whole body suffers with it.

He also tells us to “remember. . . those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body.” Since we still live in flesh-and-blood bodies, we should remember our brothers and sisters who are suffering bodily. Again, we identify with and show compassion to those who are being ill-treated. In Hebrews 11 Moses was singled out as someone who embodied this command. He “chose to endure ill-treatment with the people of God [rather] than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin” (11:25). By identifying with God’s people Moses considered “the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt.”

Living here in the United States it’s very easy to “forget” (i.e. NOT remember) those who are being persecuted around the world. Organizations such as Voice of the Martyrs (www.persecution.com) can keep us informed so that we know how to pray and advocate for the persecuted church around the world. (See also: <http://www.gordonconwell.edu/resources/CSGC-Resources.cfm>) This command is very

convicting to me; I tend to forget about fellow believers around the world who are imprisoned and tortured and discriminated against for their faith.

Honor for marriage (and sex within marriage) (Hebrews 13:4) When I signed up to be a pastor and preacher 26 years ago it didn't occur to me that I would be talking about sex on Sunday mornings. It's not particularly easy or comfortable; but that's actually one reason we primarily teach through books of the Bible. Teaching through Hebrews ensures that we don't neglect hard topics or those that are uncomfortable to teach - like sex and marriage.

4 Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge.

Instead of viewing marriage as "no big deal," marriage "is to be held in honor among all." The term honor is sometimes translated "precious" (1 Peter 1:19 speaks of "the precious . . . blood of Christ"). And so "among all" of us - among the married and unmarried - marriage is to be viewed as precious and valuable. Our author specifically had in mind honoring marriage through our sexuality.

For those who are married, "the marriage bed is to be undefiled" (or "pure"). In other words, husbands and wives should remain faithful to each other sexually. To be unfaithful is to "defile" the marriage bed. He also mentions fornicators and adulterers. Those two terms are not synonymous. Adultery is when a married person has sex with someone other than his/her spouse. Fornication is a more general term for any sexual activity outside of marriage. P.T. O'Brien comments, "Together the two terms cover all who engage in illicit sexual behavior." The Bible teaches that sex is good and right only between a husband and wife in the covenant of marriage.

The reason the body of Christ should honor marriage (and sex within marriage) is: "for fornicators and adulterers God will judge." With our 21st-century, American grid, we immediately ask the question, "Is that saying that people who commit sexual sins can't be forgiven or won't go to heaven?" The answer to that question is "NO." There are many examples of people in the Bible who are forgiven sexual sins (King David, Mary Magdalene, the Samaritan woman, the woman caught in adultery, etc.). Then you might be asking, "Is this saying that if I still struggle with sexual sins that I'm not yet saved?" The answer to that question is also "NO." If you're really "struggling" and you really want to get past some sexual sin or addiction, that's likely an indication of the Holy Spirit convicting you of sin. When somebody has no desire to be obedient to God sexually, that's when I would wonder if that person really knows God through Jesus. One of the things the Holy Spirit does in the life of the believer is give the desire for godliness.

So why does it say that we should honor marriage and sex within marriage because "fornicators and adulterers God will judge"? My understanding is that these are two of many sins that characterize people who don't yet know God. If a person has a settled lifestyle of fornication or adultery (they **are** adulterers, not that they have merely committed fornication or adultery), that person can expect to experience God's judgment. When the book of Hebrews mentions judgment, it's talking about final

judgment by God (see 6:2, 9:27, etc.). This is consistent with other passages in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, adulterers and fornicators are included in a larger list of people who will not inherit the kingdom:

9 Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, 10 nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

And such were some of us. If God rescued you from a lifestyle of sexual sins, you may still be tempted to sin sexually. Temptation does not equal sin. And even if you sin sexually you are not defined by your sin. God can give you obedience because you were washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

There are several ways that we at Faith E Free seek to “hold marriage in honor” and to keep “the marriage bed undefiled”: we teach the Scriptures, we encourage accountability relationships and support groups for those who need to get past sexual sins, and we encourage the ongoing pursuit of spiritual maturity. We also provide premarital counseling for couples before they get married. Couples are sometimes surprised that we talk about sex in the very first session. Our elders have adopted a set of guidelines for couples that want one of our pastors to perform their wedding. One of those guidelines is to wait until they get married to enjoy each other sexually. If they’ve already had sex, they agree to abstain until they get married.

This isn’t some arbitrary rule that Faith E Free has made up. This reflects a biblical view of sexuality and marriage. There are about a dozen reasons why this is good and right. Couples who are sexually active before they get married are putting themselves at a great disadvantage after they get married (there’s actually research to back that up; see Tim Keller’s discussion in *The Meaning of Marriage*). On a practical level when you get married, your spouse needs to know that you won’t sleep with somebody to whom you’re not married; the only time you can prove that is before you get married. I realize that this is **completely** out of step with our culture; but that’s not always a bad thing!

Contentment and Freedom from the love of money (Hebrews 13:5-6) Verse 5 begins with two complementary statements about being free from the love of money and being content:

5 Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, “I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you,” 6 so that we confidently say, “The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What will man do to me?”

The statement in verse 5, “Make sure that your character is free from the love of money,” presupposes that you and I have a degree of influence over what we love. We

have a say over the things upon which we set our affection. We are responsible to make sure that we don't love money. In affluent culture like ours, we might be tempted to think, "I can love God and money." But Jesus taught something very different in places like Matthew 6:24.

24 "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth [money]."

How do you know whether or not your character is free from the love of money? By whether or not you are "content with what you have." Contentment is somewhat difficult to evaluate - especially in a culture and economy like ours in which those who do their work well often (depending on the type of job) get promotions and pay raises. If you do your work heartily (as Paul wrote in Colossians 3:23 - as if Jesus is your boss), you will often have more money. But if you are content with what you have, you won't necessarily increase your standard of living or put it in the bank or spend it on yourself. You're more likely to be generous. Down in verse 16 we are told, "And do not neglect doing good and sharing. . ." If you're content with what you have, whether you have a little or a lot, you will be more willing to share with others in need.

Did you notice the reason given in verse 5 for being free from the love of money and being content with what you have? The reason given is God's abiding presence in our lives and in our circumstances: "for He Himself has said, 'I will **never** desert you, nor will I **ever** forsake you.'" If you think you're all alone and that nobody else is going to help you when you're in need, then loving money and craving more makes a ton of sense. But our author here alludes to statements in the Old Testament to assure us that He won't abandon us in our time of need.

Notice the reply of those who have **this** confidence: "so that we confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What will man do to me?'" You don't have to fear your circumstances or other people if you're convinced that the Lord is your helper - that the Lord is eager to help you in your time of need. Back in chapter 10 the author reminded them that there was a time in the past when they had such confidence in God; they "accepted joyfully the seizure of [their] property, knowing that [they had for themselves] a better possession and a lasting one" with God (10:34).

And so he's challenging us to live our lives as if God is real and that He really is our Helper. He's challenging us to make sure that we don't love money and that we are content with what we have.

This passage gives us five areas of obedience. We are going to have a few moments of silence. During this time would you invite the Holy Spirit to impress upon you one or two of these commands that are most pressing in your life right now. Maybe there's **something brand new** for you; perhaps you learned for the first time today that you're supposed to show love to total strangers or that you're supposed to wait until you get married to have sex or that you're supposed to care about believers who are being persecuted. Maybe you've been **reminded of something you've forgotten**: that you

shouldn't love money and that you should be content with what you have or that the true mark of discipleship is loving fellow believers. Let's listen to the Spirit now and follow His promptings.