

1. Living Together

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[0 : 00] Now, if you would turn in the Bibles, please, to page 1009. As I said, we are going to be looking at this chapter, Hebrews 13. At an earlier stage in the lunchtime services, we looked at chapter 11 and into chapter 12.

This chapter 13 is less well-known, perhaps. But he's got many great things to say. And I'm calling this series, The Gospel Changes Everything. I'm going to begin, actually, in chapter 12, verse 28, which really leads us into chapter 13.

Today we are going to be looking at verses 1 to 6, but I'll read the whole chapter to give us the flow. The author says in 12, 28, Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.

[1 : 28] Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, I will never leave you, nor forsake you. So we can confidently say, The Lord is my helper, I will not fear.

What can man do to me? Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God, consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods which have not benefited those devoted to them.

We have an altar, from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat, for the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest, as a sacrifice for sin, are burned outside the camp.

So Jesus also suffered outside the gate, in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore, let us go to him outside the camp, and bear the reproach he endured.

[2 : 41] For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Through him, then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.

Do not neglect to do good, and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Obey your leaders, and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.

Let them do this with joy, and not with groaning, for that would be no advantage to you. Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things.

I urge you the more earnestly to do this, in order that I may be restored to you the sooner. Now, may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good, that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.

Amen. I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you, if he comes soon.

[4 : 07] Greet all your leaders, and all the saints. Those who come from Italy, send you greetings. Grace be with all of you. Amen.

That is the word of God, and may he bless it to our hearts, and our minds. I think it's probably true to say, that the art of letter writing is dead, in our day.

Emails, texting, and all these sort of things, have destroyed the art of letter writing. Very few of us now get a handwritten letter. At least, it's a long time since I've had a handwritten letter.

But there is still something rather attractive, about seeing a handwritten envelope, and finding a letter inside. I'm always rather amused, when I read Hebrews, chapter 13, verse 22.

I have written to you briefly, or as the NIV says, I have written to you a short letter. I think if we had written a letter, as long as a letter to the Hebrews, we would feel we had done justice, to our subject.

[5 : 11] But consider the theme. The theme is so vast, so great, so wonderful, that even a letter, the length of Hebrews, can't exhaust it.

And what is the theme? The theme is that Christ, who is the image of God the Father, came down in the last days, and by dying and rising again, opened the kingdom of heaven, to all who believe.

Verse 20, by the blood of the eternal covenant. That's the great theme. The story of Christ, not just from Bethlehem to Calvary, but from eternity to eternity.

This is a book about the covenant, that God makes. And the essence of covenant, is that it is given to us by God. Not something we, not something we dream up, not something we sit down with God, and discuss, but God has spoken in his Son.

That's what the message of the letter is. But there needs to be a response, for that to be effective in our lives. And that response is coming in chapter 13. That's why I read verses 12, 28 to 29.

[6 : 22] When God gives us this great offer, and that offer is nothing less, than taking us out of our sin, out of the death, and the judgment that belongs to us, and accepting us into his family, because of what Christ has done for us.

There's two things that the author says. We must be thankful. We must be grateful. And secondly, we must fear God. We must tremble at his holiness.

Our God is a consuming fire. Not a tame lion. He is terrifying, as well as wonderful. You see, covenant is rather like a wedding.

A ceremony. Now, the ceremony is important. But suppose when I was married, a good many years ago, once the ceremony is over, I'd say to my wife, well, it's nice meeting you.

Maybe sometime we'll meet up again. That would hardly be a marriage, would it? The ceremony would have happened. The words would have been pronounced. We'd be legally married.

[7 : 25] But unless there was a lifetime together, giving, sharing, and receiving, then it would be ineffective. And so it is with God's covenant. We need to respond.

What are the practical implications? And this is chapter 13. And I've called it, what did I call it? Yes. Living together. Hebrews is full of this together.

Some wag said Hebrews is a salad epistle. It's full of lettuces. That's awful. But the author is continually exhorting us, let us do this. Let us do this.

Let us do it together. And first of all, he says, let brotherly love, sisterly love, family love, continue. We are part of God's family.

And it seems to me that he's developing three areas here where this is true. First of all, it's like three circles. First of all, there's the very wide circle. The circle of strangers and those who are in prison.

[8 : 25] If you like, the outer circle. Then he moves further in, the inner circle, husband and wife. Then he moves still further in to our own inner lives.

That's how he's developing it. We move from those unknown or whom we hardly know to the intimate relationship of marriage and then the relationship with ourselves.

Now, it's important to realize that this flows from God's covenant and God's spirit. I really am annoyed when people say the Bible is a rule book or a guide book.

I have never yet known a rule book or a guide book to change people's lives. You could have a wonderful shelf of cookery books and yet be totally unable to produce anything edible anyone wants to eat.

You could know the highway code backwards but you could still be a dangerous driver and so on. This is not rules. This is saying because Christ has accepted you because he wants you to be part of his family live as members of that family.

[9 : 31] So let's look then very briefly at these three things. First of all, verses 1 to 3 what I would call wide sympathies. Brotherly love means having wide sympathies.

And there are two illustrations of this. First of all, hospitality to strangers. Now that obviously includes meals but it includes more than that.

It means a generous and welcoming home. A place where people feel welcome. I don't know if you've sometimes gone to someone for a meal and you're not sure if you're welcome or not.

You almost feel you'd like to sidle out of the place and run away. Well, that's not what hospitality means. Hospitality means not just giving meals but giving yourself. Now remember at that time inns were very few and they were often dirty and dangerous.

So the author is saying open your homes and make them welcoming places. Not just for meals. It could be homes open for the gospel.

[10 : 34] After all, that's what really lies behind the whole concept of Christianity explored, isn't it? Opening up a place where people meet together around a meal and where they share the gospel.

Not just share a meal but share the gospel. So wide sympathies are shown in hospitality. Second illustration is helping prisoners. Now this would particularly mean for the author those who are in prison because of persecution.

But it does mean of course that the Christian has a duty to those who are, if you like, on the margins of society. Those who have offended against society's norms.

It's always been a mark of the Christian church at its best that it's opened its arms to those to whom Christ has opened his arms. It's more than that.

It's not just prisoners as such. It could be, for example, the housebound and the lonely. Those who are prisoners in their own homes because they're no longer able to get out.

[11 : 34] And you can see how this is another form of hospitality. You can't welcome those people into your home so you go to where they are and show them that same warmth, that same empathy, that same brotherly love.

The point about this is if we realize that we are sinners, we're in a mess of our lives, that Christ has accepted us, then we need to accept others.

Not just those we like, not just those we have a rapport with, but all of those who are particularly on the margins. That's the first area.

But then the circle comes in much more narrowly to the circle of holy, what I would call holy intimacy. There's wide sympathies and there's holy intimacy. Now, marriage, he says, let marriage be held in honour.

Now, very often in those days, and it would be hard to deny in our day, that marriage is not held in honour. Marriage tends to be denigrated and despised by many people.

[12 : 40] And at that time, it was often despised by those, as now, who scorned exclusive relationships, who advocated a kind of promiscuity, sleeping around and so on.

Although, on the other hand, it was despised by those who wanted a kind of asceticism, a kind of mortifying of the body and so on.

Held in honour. That's the thing that we need to hear today, isn't it? Not let marriage be held in honour. And sadly, many people don't.

Now, we expect that in the world, but sadly, many in the church don't see that today. In a day when civil partnerships, for example, are seen as equal validity to marriage, the word of the apostle says, let marriage be held in honour.

And notice why he says that. It's not because we happen to feel that way. It's because God will judge. It's, and you can see how, you can see what the author is doing.

[13 : 44] The author is saying God has entered into an intimate and personal relationship with his people. The illustration of that on earth is marriage. Marriage is the illustration of what is true of all God's people now and will be particularly true in heaven.

And therefore, when that's flouted, when that's dishonoured, when it's rejected, then God will judge, both in this world and in the world to come. And of course, it's not easy.

It doesn't just happen. And good marriage doesn't just happen. There's a lot of hard work. There's a lot of give and take as two imperfect people begin the journey together towards the full likeness of Christ.

But it is this illustration of God's people. And it is a special example, isn't it, of brotherly love, of family love, the faithfulness and the affection, the love which is at the very heart of marriage.

And that's what, let the marriage bed be undefiled. And this really reflects the Old Testament book of Leviticus where every room, not just the, not just church, but every room, the bedroom, the kitchen, the workroom, the office, these must be places that reflect the holiness of God.

[15 : 09] The old, the old marriage service speaks about that, that part where everywhere there's a hush of breath there's anyone who knows any reason why these two should not be joined.

and then goes on to say to the couple, if you know any reason why you should not be joined, answer now, as you will answer on the day of judgment. Because what's happening is something that's done in the eye of God.

God will judge the sexually immoral and the adulterous. Now, sexually immoral is all sexual activity outside of marriage and adultery, of course, is having an affair with someone whom you're not married to.

Now, we all have lapses in this area. Even if we don't do it physically, most of us commit emotional adultery.

Now, that is a reality and we better recognize that we all fail. But the author is not talking about failures which we bring to the Lord and confess and put right with him.

[16 : 15] He's talking about continual and deliberate and unrepented sin. which God hates and God will judge. And one of the greatest, one of the greatest pictures, one of the greatest object lessons of God's love on earth is a godly marriage.

That's why they must be preserved at all costs and must never be put at peril by impulses and by our fallen desires.

But as I say, no one in this room, I'm sure, has not committed emotional adultery. I certainly have. But, it's whether we bring it to the Lord and ask for forgiveness.

forgiveness. That's the point, surely. So, there's the wide circle. Those who are strangers, those in prison of various kinds, the holy intimacy of husband and wife.

And finally, the third circle comes right down even closer. Our inner life. Our relations with ourself, if you like.

[17 : 29] Verse 5, keep your life free from love of money. Now, this isn't just a series of disjointed ideas. As you can see, we've had the outer circle, the love that God shows to all humanity.

The inner circle, which illustrates on earth as an object lesson of God's love for his people. And now, the inner contentment. Because, what lies behind both indifference to strangers and unfaithfulness in love purely is greed and covetousness often.

If you read the Ten Commandments, you'll find the last commandment says, you shall not covet. And in a sense, I used to think that I was an anti-climax. Why does he say this?

Surely there's nothing particularly wrong with that. I see a guy with a nicer car than me, that would be very difficult. And I begin to envy it. I see somebody who's got a better house or that sort of thing.

And I say, that's just human. The point is, coveting is putting myself as number one. Coveting says, there is no number but one.

[18 : 39] There is no pronoun but me. There's no family but my family. No job but my job. No church but my church. Me, me, me. That is covetous and that's idolatry.

And that's what the apostle here is warning against. He's basically saying, these other failures spring from that failure. Failure to put God at the centre of our lives and putting ourselves.

And just two things quickly. Loving money, relying on money can stop us relying on God and can also make us indifferent to others.

Now in the economic crisis we are in, there's been a great deal of criticism of fat cats and wealthy individuals and wealthy institutions. And the trouble of course is that we have grown up in a society which has taught us to worship money, to worship possessions.

Remember Jesus called that mammon which means not just money but what money brings. You cannot serve God and mammon. So too much reliance on that stops us relying on God and by doing that makes us indifferent to others.

[19 : 49] Makes us despise others. And often leads us to unfaithfulness. And verse 6 once again leads on direct. How are we going to deal with this so we can confidently say the Lord is my helper I will not fear.

What can man do to me? Now our author is not advocating the so-called British stiff upper lip where we pretend everything.

I'm always worried when I ask people how they are. Oh fine, fine, I'm fine. Oh dear, oh dear, something's gone badly wrong. And it's not advocating that at all.

Our author was not British and he didn't think in that way. It's not stiff upper lip, it's trusting in the promises of God. If we are short of money, we trust in a God who holds the wealth of the world in his hands.

The silver and gold are his. If we are lonely, if we are despised, if we are on the margins, we trust in a God who took flesh and became someone who took the form of a servant and became obedient to death.

[20 : 59] And we look to his past deliverance. The Lord is my helper. I will not fear. Now, saying not fearing doesn't mean not being afraid. It means being afraid and still going on and doing what's right.

So as we finish today, let me just say a couple of things very briefly. If we already belong to the family of God, here is a challenge to us to live out the fact that Christ has chosen us and therefore we need to show that love to others.

If we haven't yet come to Christ, if we're not yet part of his family and considering it, then there never is a better time than now. Relax in his love.

Whatever you've been, wherever you've come from, he can forgive that, he can remake that, and he can make you into the kind of person he wants you to be. May God bless each one of us.

Let's pray. Lord, we are very human. We are fickle. We are fallen. We make all kinds of mistakes and we get it wrong.

[22 : 10] And yet, you love us. You care for us. You respond to repentance and faith in us. And so help us, Father. whatever stage we may be, especially if we've not even begun the journey yet, give us the grace, give us the courage to start to make that step of faith and become part of your family and join with others throughout the world as part of that great family of God who one day will all stand before you in heaven.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.