

## An Unselfish Life

*The Book of Hebrews*

By Chris Hand

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**Crich Baptist Church**  
Market Place, Crich  
Derbyshire. DE4 5DD (UK)

**Website:** [www.crichbaptist.org](http://www.crichbaptist.org)  
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Well, tonight we're taking in Hebrews 13 and verses 1 to 6, the title being this, "An Unselfish Life." An unselfish life.

With chapter 12 having finished our considerations there verses 25 to 29 which we completed last week, that actually ends the main body of this letter. The main argument of the writer has now come to its conclusion and he's shown, hasn't he, with relentless logic the supremacy and the sufficiency, all sufficiency of our Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. No other high priest we need. No other prophet that we need. He and he alone is the one that we must put our trust in.

So from that, he then draws some conclusions in chapter 13, a variety of conclusions, some of them shorter than others but moral duties, spiritual, religious duties, things that we ought to do, ought to be, behavior that we should be showing, believers should be showing, and our relations within churches, towards pastors or whatever else it might be. And then it finishes in the end and we didn't read that far, but with personal news and then with a doxology beyond that.

So these first six verses which have quite a variety, don't they, of things but just holding them together there with the title unselfish life, an unselfish life. This is what it would look like and the first heading is loving people. Loving people. Let brotherly love continue. There we have it, don't we, in verse 1. It gets illustrated in a moment by categories of people that we might love, people that we might not think to love but whom we ought to love. But if we just start with love itself, let brotherly love. We notice the qualification there, it's thinking about actually within the life of the fellowship, within the life of the church. Brotherly love, let it continue. Don't let it stop. Don't let it be stalled but let it continue, let it carry on, let it be like a kind of neverending stream in that way.

Sure enough it has rewards does love, that will prove faithful to friends, they often will prove faithful to us in return. It does have its rewards but that is not what is uppermost in our thinking. We love because that's what love's about. It's the best of things to do, the best of life to follow. We follow it in the sense even though it may not have any immediate rewards here and now, so that's a little bit in the territory that we have this morning. But we are to starve ourselves of self-love, as if self-love is really true love at

all. It's a denial of love. Love is centered on others. It goes out from ourselves and reaches out to others, wishes their best interests to be forwarded, wishes them to know that we love them, that we appreciate them. And of course, we show it in different contexts there, as husbands to wives, children, or within the life of the church, how that is to be distributed.

So it's away from ourselves and it's towards others. It's the opposite, isn't it, there of what we're thinking about this morning a bit and holding on to our own resources. No, love says, no, let go of those things and reach out to others warmly and willingly and truthfully. Be unselfish in it and no malice, no hypocrisy but to show it truly. And we learn of its importance by what happens when it's absent, so Revelation 2:4-5 in the church in Ephesus, that the risen Christ had something to say, one of the seven churches in Asia that he addresses, and the fault that he finds there is that they are not loving, that they've lost that. Let me read those verses, verses 4 and 5 of Revelation 2.

"Nevertheless," our Lord says, "I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place--unless you repent." There's a warning that it's saying, in fact, there that if there is no love in the church, soon enough there will be no church, that it's absence, that the first love, those works that were being done at first would include warmth within the life of the church and an outreach in that way to each other. And something had gone wrong in the church in Ephesus. It lost that. It had doctrine all right and it was good for that, but love had disappeared and soon the church would disappear because its lampstand, that which is at the heart of it, that Christ looking at the churches, walking among the lampstands, they meant to give light. When that ceases to be, if there's no love, then the light is diminishing and the Lord threatens judgment, that they must repent, they must do again what they were doing at the first else he will come to them in a way of judgment and take away their lampstand. There will be something called the church in Ephesus left behind but it will cease to be a church. It's no longer functioning as a church.

So we can see that this is very very important and not gathering together, which was one of the features actually that things weren't right in these churches, in this church that the writer was writing to, they weren't gathering together, something was going wrong, there's no willingness, no interest there, and that was a sign of decline. They weren't coming to have the Lord's Supper together. They had been told to remember to do that but they weren't doing that and that was a sign of decline.

So we are to keep love. We are to let it continue. We are to be jealous for it to be fanned into flames. A few other verses surrounding that, 2 Peter 1:5-7. It says, "But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love." That's not a kind of what you work up a ladder here, you begin somewhere there with faith and then virtue is your next sort of aim, you're kind of like in some game or other, you move on to the next stage, when you pass that stage, now you complete gradually up and then you get to love,

but it's saying that this in its entirety is what we are to pursue. And brother kindness and love, well, the love is locked together, isn't it, with the brotherly kindness. That's there.

1 Thessalonians 4:9 to 10 and we read there, "But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more." So the church is commended, actually, because it does have love, that the people there are looking out for each other and concerned for each other, praying for each other, helping each other. But he urges them, "Well, you are doing well but do even better. Don't ever think that you've reached that point nothing more to be done. Let it therefore continue."

And as relation to chapter 2, the church there in Ephesus, brought a warning, 1 John, and just a few verses from there in chapter 2, verses 9 to 11 show that actually no love for brethren, no love for Christians, some antipathy there means no love for Christ actually, as Christ loves the church, and if we love Christ, we love the church too. So 1 John 2:9 to 11, "He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes." That's what hate does, doesn't it, blinds the eyes. It makes us confused in our thinking. We're not rational, we're irrational and stumble around, we don't know where we are going, and such a person may say that they are in the light, they may claim that but if they hate their brother, if there's hatred rather than love working, then actually they're in darkness, not in the light. They've denied the light because if they were in the light, they would be loving their brother because that's what Christ does, loves the brethren.

Or in chapter 3 of that same letter and just verses 14 and 15, "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." Very strong. That's how it is. That's how it's to work when God looks for that love, that sense of belonging and fellowship together of being in the same kind of pilgrimage and encouraging each other. That's to be very much found there.

Well, what stops it? What stops it? Let brother love continue, be adding these various things to your virtues and to your self-control and godliness and so forth, well, what stops it happening? Well, what's happened here in the writer to the Hebrews, this company of people that he's writing to, there's spiritual decline, that inasmuch as Christ, his value declines to us, then the gospel declines in its value. Won't stand with others in this proclamation, you'll find that not so interesting. You'll not want to be with other believers, in fact, you feel a bit uncomfortable that they are enthusiastic perhaps and you're not, they are zealous and you're not, and you're feeling a bit uncomfortable with that because you've lost something, you've lost your love for Christ, your appreciation of his cross.

The blood of Christ is not precious as once it had been because the thing we should do is repent, or that we are maybe just taken up with the world, aren't we? That the world has become too important. We'll come back to that theme in a moment but it's a big theme, isn't it? It's just become too important, this world, and getting good outcomes here and so we don't value, don't value our spiritual progress, don't value spiritual joys and benefits, they're disappearing. And so where you go to find those things, the life of the church, that that becomes less important. Hearing preaching, reading the Bible, studying for ourselves, looking to grow, that just isn't on the agenda, it just isn't on our kind of wavelength.

Unfortunately, too, people's bad behavior in church life can also make brotherly love cool, that sometimes people do, don't they, join churches, get badly hurt, never want to join another church again. Various people have let them down, disappointed them as they understand it, and they want no more to do with it and find churches not to be helping them but hindering them in their Christian lives. That's tragic but I fear at times it's actually true, but it's tragic and that that can sometimes mean that brotherly love is held back. We don't trust anymore, that they've seen what Christians do to each other and how they can take offense, how they can be judgmental, how they can just hate people and whispering campaigns and backbiting and all these things, just downright distasteful. They think, "Well, I really could stand apart from this, thank you." And that, again, is sad.

So loving people, well, we love people, don't we, and we follow that up in our Christian life together, pray for each other, pray for our spiritual progress, pray that love may abound and that there would be that togetherness and standing together. It's not as if there are hundreds of us in the first place to do the standing together, and how much more valuable it is in a small church that brotherly love should continue.

But we notice that there are some other specifics where loving people or a kind of unselfish life is to come to the fore. So verse 2, strangers, giving hospitality in that way. "Do not forget to entertain strangers." This was a big feature in life in the early church, that there would be visiting prophets, perhaps, visiting ministers, visiting apostles, and the other people too who may not be known to the church so much, who would be commended to the church and were to be looked after when they came.

So in that vein in the third letter of John, that short letter, but where we read there verses 5 to 8 the following, "Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers, who have borne witness of your love before the church. If you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well, because they went forth for His name's sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we may become fellow workers for the truth." That there were visitors, visiting preachers or Christians on a journey having to go from A to B and, well, the inn, travel lodge, whatever, wasn't around then and there weren't the places to stay. And so people in the church would provide hospitality for these people and the Apostle John here is commending this, isn't it, that you bore witness of your love before the church. You have entertained people. And he calls them, doesn't he, strangers, you hadn't met them

before. That they might come with letters of commendation, already letters have gone ahead of commendation about these people and that they're worthy of that support of interest.

The end of Romans in chapter 16 and verses 1 to 2, there is an instance of this and the apostle writing here, he says, "I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also." Well, that's that commendation. He writes in advance that when she comes you might not say, "Well, who are you? Why should we bother looking after you?" But rather, "Ah, we know about you and you're here on a good work and we want to support you and show you Christian friendship and hospitality." So that's the manner worthy of the saints and then to offer the assistance that she might need.

We know, don't we, that in the final judgment when the Lord's people, unbelievers will be there too but the Lord's people will stand before him, that this is also a feature that we might think of entertaining angels, we'll come to that in a moment, but Matthew 25:35, for instance, where it says what the Lord will say, "for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in." And the righteous wonder, "When was that that we did that?" "And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'" They were showing kindness toward people they didn't actually know that well, maybe, to strangers, but as they were brethren and Christians and therefore beloved of Christ, it was as though doing it unto him.

Well, the writer talks, doesn't he, in Hebrews 13 that actually this giving of hospitality, there had been some remarkable instances where those who were being looked after were actually angels, that there's been a blessing beside in doing it well beyond what Abraham maybe at first had thought when he, as we read in Genesis 18, saw these three visitors and showed them hospitality, got people busy preparing the calf and his wife to make special cakes and this was actually there what we call a theophany, a pre-incarnation visit of the Lord Jesus, the second person of the Trinity to the earth. He was one of the three and the two others were angels, and the angels actually went on then to Sodom and Lot entertained them. So he, well, maybe at first didn't quite realize that they were angelic beings but he quickly caught on to that fact when they blinded the people that were there wanting to know, well, Lot's visitors, these angels carnally and the angels struck them blind. I think Lot had their full attention after that.

So there a remarkable couple of instances of people who showed hospitality to people they didn't know and they ended up actually showing hospitality to angels. They were unwittingly entertaining angels. So he commends to us there look out for people we don't actually know that well maybe, Christians that we don't know much about but where maybe we've had a good report about them. Christians overseas. We are thinking about a harvest gift aren't we there for Joseph and, well, for many of you, you've never met him. I've had the privilege, I should say, of meeting him last year and his wife and some

members of his church and very much commend him to you for a man worthy of our support and we hear how unwell he is, don't we?

But then in verse 3, another category: prisoners, remember them. And at this point, we might imagine the people he's writing to have got their freedom. Well, he says remember those who don't, they are in chains and you think of yourself as being chained with them. You think of yourself being there with them by an act of imagination, if you like. You think yourself, "What's it like," because you're in the body too. You would feel it, deprived of food, deprived of liberty to move around. So remember them. Don't forget them because it's easy, isn't it, just to think parochial, just be thinking about our own district or our own country. No, he says think of others and there are plenty of countries, aren't there, that we could remember in that way where there's persecution and we're reminded of them, not to forget them.

Well, moving on. Unselfish life, well, our second heading: love not lust. See lots of kind of short applications that he's bringing out which should flow from the fact if Jesus Christ is central and supreme, then there will be this implications. And here, of course, it's taking us to the seventh commandment. We love Christ, we love his commandments and we will do them.

And verse 4 is very much in support of marriage, traditional marriage. Well, that's becoming something that's a rarity, isn't it, just? That Wikipedia now censoring supportive things about traditional marriage. That's now being regarded and says it's not appropriate to say that, that you support one man, one woman, that what happens in a bed is of importance, and that the right people are in that bed doing the right things, if you will. And that has now fallen foul of large companies and organizations. Actually some of the founders of Wikipedia have actually just entered and said they're not happy with this, that this is not being neutral, this is actually taking up a political position they'll describe it as being. But that's as it is and we know, too, don't we, that just recently the Christian Institute has warned us that some of the thinking that in gay conversion type therapy or just to actually say to homosexual people, "Repent. Turn away from these affections," whether that could be regarded as hate speech and could be regarded actually as criminal.

So here we have actually what God's word says, marriage is honorable, it is to be held in high esteem and that the bed is to be regarded undefiled. Keep away fornication, keep away adultery because God will judge these things. Fornication, premarital sex, adultery, extramarital sex. And it is the destructive effects of lust here. Lust rather than love. Lawless affections which overstep the boundaries, the biblical boundaries but where those things are to be expressed, the marital bed in that way.

And it promises God will judge. God will judge. He will bring confusion and unhappiness and disease and guilt and depression and a host of other things if these things are disobeyed. And I'd have to say it too when we think of our own government, but he'll judge governments that deny this, that make divorce easier, or reward cohabitation, or approve of same-sex marriage. And one can tremble, can't one, when it

looks at the governments of the world who, not all of them but many of them, are singing from the same song sheet when it comes to same-sex marriage. And one might wonder when we suddenly get a pandemic, that is a worldwide implication, whether that has something to say to governments and nations that have disobeyed God in this. Just a thought.

Well, finally, do not covet. Third heading, that's next up, isn't it: let your conduct be without covetousness. So it's the commandments, it's supplying the commandments and here it's the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment. Exodus 10:17, and the writer is saying, "Well, no, don't always be looking at other people and what they have. Don't be eaten up with that. Don't be thinking that that's your be-all and your end-all." That's idolatry because if you're following that, you're not following God. You can't have both, can't have God and manna. And the warning then is given here which is a warning often given in scripture, and rather that we are to be content with such things as you have. Content with such things as you have.

Well, you know and I know that the whole advertising industry out there, it is designed to do the very opposite of that. It's designed to make you very unhappy with what you have and that you'll only be happy if you have this other thing, you have what your neighbor has or something like that. Well, there's plenty in scripture to warn us that, no, we should be content with what we have. John the Baptist preaching and on occasion there, Luke 3:14, what has he got to say when the soldiers say to him, "And what shall we do?" So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages." I guess many of them grumbled about their wages and felt they should have more, and perhaps didn't want to hear this, be content with your wages.

And warnings given to the pursuit of wealth, and famous ones, of course, actually in 1 Timothy 6:6-8. Let must just quickly turn to that. 1 Timothy 6:6-8, "Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content." It's saying there, isn't it, be content with what you have. Don't let it be eaten up into covetousness. Then he goes on to talk about the misery, those who desire to be rich falling into temptation and a snare.

Then the Apostle Paul himself testifies to a contentment that he found even when he didn't have very much. Philippians 4:12 and 13 and he says, "I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." And that's an interesting thought, isn't it, that not having very much, well, he can be content with that, or when more things are there and he's reflecting here on the kind gift that's come from the church in Philippi, but he can do all things, he can manage it in all these situations through Christ who strengthens him.

And that's really where the writer here leaves us, doesn't he, that having placed that before us, he then really says, "Well, the Lord is your portion. He will look after you so don't fret and don't be taken up with what you're going to eat or what you're going to

drink, what you're going to wear because the Lord has said, 'I'll never leave you nor forsake you.'" So we may boldly say we're strengthened in that, you see, just as Christ strengthened Paul in prison. So we say, "The Lord is my helper. I will not fear. What can man do to me?"

People were perhaps losing their property, perhaps risking if they stood up for the Lord that their property would be taken from them. Well, he's saying, "Well, make the Lord your helper. You trust in him. You take away fear of possessions and being taken up with them or fear of losing them and declare actually that the Lord is your helper, that you're not going to be afraid, you're not going to be so intimidated or so distrustful of God's care that you cannot imagine not being able to look after you. Let man do what he will. He'll try and do his worst but trust in the Lord. Let him be your strength. Let him be your shield. Let him provide for you. You might have to work, you might have to use your brain a bit in finding resources. He doesn't leave us just to sit and wait for something just to drop into our lap from heaven, for sure, but believe if you're praying, believe that if you're asking, you're seeking his help, that you are declaring and believing that he's not going to forsake me and that I can rely upon him as my helper.

Well, then keep your eyes and your ears open. There may well be some wonderful surprises, some resources, some help that will come and that will prove the fact that don't covet, don't need to just be ever preoccupied about the world and its things, that God can be with his people. And of course, covetousness is the opposite of an unselfish life that sucks away love, certainly love for God and just makes us focus on love for ourselves. The very opposite of what true love should be.

So we finish there in these first six verses of Hebrews 13, these directives, these moral imperatives which, as we've seen, draw upon the commandments in really many ways, very straightforward in what they teach. Oh, it may be straightforward in how it's expressed but we know only too well that to do it, we've got to overcome internal resistance and lovelessness that is just still there as a dead weight in our sinful nature. May God, indeed, be our strength. May he be our helper when we fear what can man do to us. Amen.



# **AN UNSELFISH LIFE**

## **(Sermon Summary)**

### **Reading: Hebrews 13: 1 – 6.**

We have now reached the end of the main part of this letter. The writer has completed his demonstration of the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of the Lord Jesus Christ in all matters to do with our salvation and eternal security. He has finished this by issuing a warning about failing to listen to what the Lord is saying through His Son. Chapter 13 begins a series of concluding exhortations.

#### **1. Loving people.**

Hebrews 13:1-3 is straightforward in teaching us about the importance of love. Love, as the writer goes on to show, does have its rewards although these are not the main thing in our minds when we do acts of love.

There is to be brotherly love in the church. This is so important that when it is absent there is the danger that the absence of love will lead the Lord to remove the church from His presence (see Revelation 2:4-5). The first love that He speaks of here includes our love for each other in the church. Failing to meet together had been an issue in the church and shows that there is a decline in love for the Lord and for His people. We should therefore aim to ensure that our hearts are loving and warm. We can see the place that brotherly love is meant to occupy in the life of the believer from 1 Thessalonians 4: 9-10 and 2 Peter 1: 5-7. Such love is to continue and not to stop. To not love the brethren is to not love the Lord Himself (See 1 John 2: 9-11; and 1 John 3: 14-15).

What stops us loving the people of God? Sometimes it is that we are in spiritual decline and that we are not valuing the things of God, our spiritual joy and welfare, nor that of others. Sometimes it is the bad behaviour of other believers that may make our love grow cold.

In verse 2 we see that showing hospitality to fellow Christians, who are not especially known to us, receives the blessing of God. It is an act of love to do this. In the early church, there were occasions when there would be a visitor to the church and it was good to show hospitality to such people (3 John: 5-8). An example was that of Phoebe whom Paul commends to the church in Rome (Romans 16:1-2). In showing such love to fellow believers, we are doing this unto the Lord (Matthew 25:35-40). In Genesis 18, there was the famous occasion when Abraham gave hospitality to angels. Lot also did

the same in Genesis 19. Acts of kindness to fellow believers that we do not know receive the blessing of God.

In verse 3, our love is to be shown to believers who are imprisoned and suffering for the faith. Christians in distant countries, who are being persecuted, can often be forgotten. We must make sure that we are not only interested in what is happening in our own country but be aware of and pray for believers in other countries.

## **2. Love, not lust**

In verse 4, the writer gives a strong support for the place of marriage in God's design for humankind. This includes His jealousy over what happens in bed between people. Marriage is between one man and one woman and lies at the heart of what family life is. There is a strong warning here for any who would disobey and defile marriage through fornication or adultery. It shows the destructive effect of lust on the estate of marriage and the ease with which lawless affections overstep God-given boundaries. God judges such sin with confusion, guilt, shame, depression and unhappiness. He will also judge nations that tamper with His will by approving of same-sex marriage and relaxing divorce laws.

## **3. Do not covet**

Verse 5 takes us to the Ten Commandments and to the Tenth Commandment (Exodus 20:17). To behave like this towards other people and to want what they have is to act against the dictates of love. Covetousness instead leads us to be jealous of people, to wish them harm. When we covet, we lose a lot of energy and momentum that should have been used in loving and serving God and our neighbour.

Instead we should be content (Luke 3:14; 1 Timothy 6: 6-8; and Philippians 4: 12-13). To be content is to enjoy peace. We are at rest about trusting in the Lord to be our helper in everything. We look on Him as being our portion and our provider. We are freed from feeling dependent upon men, fearful of what they might do to our property. We learn to be reliant on the Lord and to be satisfied with what He has given to us.