

JESUS CHRIST THE SAME

Hebrews 13:1-8

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, May 17, 2009

[God] 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. *Hebrews 13:5-8*

When Jesus Christ readied to leave his disciples on the night of his arrest he gave them one clear command that was to guide them in days ahead. "This is my commandment," he said, "that you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn. 15:12).

Likewise, when the writer of Hebrews was finishing his letter of exhortation, he charged them as Jesus had done: "Let brotherly love continue" (Heb. 13:1).

This passage occurred to me as I was thinking of a message to bring prior to the important matter of our election of new elders. One danger is to think that all our church needs is good elders. This is false, since it is the godliness of the entire church that matters. These words of exhortation to the ancient Hebrew congregation address our needs as well, Christ's call to the congregation and to the leaders who serve as examples to the flock.

A LOVING COMMUNITY

This passage begins with a command Christians are required to take seriously: "Let brotherly love continue." The church is the family of God, a community to be characterized by family love.

One person who wrote about this was Francis Schaeffer. Much of his life was caught up in church disputes that were quite divisive. Schaeffer was known as a powerful defender of Christian doctrines,

yet at the same time he strove to maintain love within the body of believers. One of his books began with these words:

Through the centuries men have displayed many different symbols to show that they are Christians. They have worn marks in the lapels of their coats, hung chains about their necks, even had special haircuts... But there is a much better sign... It is a universal mark that is to last through all ages of the church until Jesus comes back.¹

That mark is love among Christians, and Schaeffer pointed to Jesus' teaching: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn. 13:35). There is a condition, an *if*, he points out – namely, if we love one another – and a result, that people will know us as Jesus' disciples. Schaeffer comments:

Evangelism is a calling, but not the first calling. Building congregations is a calling, but not the first calling. A Christian's first call is to... return to the first commandment to love God, to love the brotherhood, and then to love one's neighbor as himself.²

We are to love because God is love and we are called to God-likeness. The apostle John puts this in challenging terms: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 Jn. 4:7, 8). Loving others is an outflowing of our relationship with God, and it is how we show gratitude for his love to us.

Love is always expressed in concrete actions, and our passage provides two important examples. First, verse 2 says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers." Here we find that the scope of our family love is to be broad indeed, which is what Jesus taught in the parable of the Good Samaritan. A Pharisee had asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus showed him that his neighbor is anyone in need and that we must show mercy to others as we have received it from God (Lk. 10:37). That same principle animates verse 2's call to hospitality.

The idea here is bringing people into our homes. In the ancient world, where traveling was dangerous and inns were few, this was an

¹ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian*, from *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1982) 4:183.

² Francis A. Schaeffer: *Genesis in Space & Time*, from *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, 1:85.

important ministry. Today, when there is so little community and friendship, hospitality is no less significant. To that end I want to ask you a diagnostic question: How many people in the church could describe the inside of your home? If you are married, are there any singles who could give directions to your dinner table? If you are single, are there any widows or children who have seen the park where you go to unwind? Is there *anyone* you have entertained simply because you have been looking on them as brothers and sisters in the family of God and have sought to minister to their loneliness or need for encouragement and support? While this exhortation applies mainly to other Christians, it includes all sorts of people who, even if they are strangers, we must embrace with the love of Christian hospitality.

The second example has to do with those in prison: “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body” (v. 3). If the first example is that of hospitality, here is the principle of sympathy for the trials experienced by others. It is probable that this refers to fellow Christians jailed and mistreated for their faith, but again we have no warrant for limiting this teaching only to believers. Ray Stedman writes, “Even those imprisoned justly merit Christian help, since Jesus ministered to the guilty and the condemned simply because they were human beings.”³ In this ministry, Jesus is both our example and the ultimate recipient of our acts of love. “Truly, I say to you,” he said, “as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (Mt. 25:40).

There are two key verbs that go together here. Verse 2 says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.” Verse 3 adds, “Remember those who are in prison.” Do not neglect... remember. It seems that the problem is the way we view our lives and each other – the difficulty is that we forget to love other people, probably because we are wrapped up in ourselves.

Verse 2 includes an interesting statement : “Thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” The most prominent example is that of Abraham and Lot. Seeing strangers, Abraham rushed from his tent

³ Ray Stedman, *Hebrews*, p. 150.

and slaughtered a calf for them, only later learning that they brought good news as messengers of the Lord. Lot defended two angels who visited him from the lustful mob of Sodom, and ended up being delivered from that city's destruction by those he had served.

The point is that there is more to the people we meet than meets the eye. I suppose it is possible that when you sit in church, the person next to you will really be an angel. But he or she is likely something even more wonderful. There beside you in the pews is probably a saint of God in light. Across the room from you are those destined to serve as priests and kings in the very presence of the living God, who are now being prepared for their glorious raiment. To meet an angel might be wonderful, but in the church are those for whom angels are "ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation" (Heb. 1:14). There is a work going on in their lives that angels wonder at and rejoice to see.

C.S. Lewis, in his extraordinary essay, *The Weight of Glory*, remarked at what a serious thing it is to live among those in whom eternal destinies are being worked out. He wrote:

The dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare... There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal... It is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit -- immortal horrors or everlasting splendours."⁴

The most powerful force in the lives of such creatures, made in God's image, is love. Christopher Morley said, "If we all discovered that we had only five minutes left to say all that we wanted to say, every telephone booth would be occupied by people calling other people to stammer that we love them."⁵ Our job is to meet them outside the phone booth in the real world, there to contrast the self-gratifying love of the world with the self-sacrificing love of Christ.

⁴ C.S. Lewis: *The Weight of Glory*, p. 19.

⁵ Cf. Ravi Zacharius, *Can Man Live Without God?* (Dallas: Word, 1994) p. 105.

A HOLY COMMUNITY

The church is called to love, but also to purity and freedom from sin. Love is not the only virtue, but it stands together with the holiness of God, who said, “Be holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:15). Francis Schaeffer again puts it well:

The Christian really has a double task. He has to practice both God's holiness and God's love... Not His love without His holiness - that is only compromise. Anything that an individual Christian or Christian group does that fails to show the simultaneous balance of the holiness of God and the love of God presents to a watching world not a demonstration of the God who exists, but a caricature of the God who exists.⁶

The writer of Hebrews provides concrete examples of holiness, starting with the purity of marriage: “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous” (Heb. 13:4).

The first readers of this letter were in a position similar to ours, living within a society awash in sexual perversion and indulgence. Then, as now, it was a mark of Christian purity that we should be dramatically different in just this area. Paul strongly denounces sexual immorality in many of his letters, often listing it first among the sins we must shun. On one occasion he wrote of the sexually immoral, “I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:21). Our text likewise says, “God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.” God is judging, even now, the wantonness of our society, as well as would-be Christian churches that espouse or tolerate it. Unless Christians are willing and able to be different at precisely the point of our society's greatest depravity we cannot expect our testimony to be taken seriously, and our own profession of faith is brought into question.

Who is to honor marriage? Verse 4 says, “Let marriage be held in honor among *all*.” It is *all* of us. We have a special interest in upholding the institution of marriage and the actual marriages among us. Marriage is the first institution established by God and the basic building block of the church and society. There may be no better

⁶ Francis A. Schaeffer: *The Mark of the Christian*, pp. 193, 194.

gauge today for the spiritual health of a congregation than the health of its marriages. One of our great needs today is the example of strong and godly marriages, to encourage those who never seen true love and to provide them a model. With that is the astonishing witness, as our world now judges it, of Christian singles who keep the marriage bed pure through self-control and godly chastity.

The second example of holiness has to do with contentment versus greed. “Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have” (v. 5). It is our attitude towards possessions that is in view here, the love of money contrasted with the grateful contentment that flows from faith. Paul described greed as “idolatry” (Col. 3:5), and it may also be said that contentment is one of the purest signs of true worship of God. Jeremiah Burroughs wrote what I think is the greatest book on contentment, titled, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, and there he said:

You worship God more by (contentment) than when you come to hear a sermon, or spend half an hour, or an hour, in prayer, or when you come to receive a sacrament. These... are only external acts of worship... But (contentment) is the soul's worship, to subject itself thus to God... by being pleased with what God does.⁷

Arthur Pink adds: “Contentment is the product of a heart resting in God... It is the blessed assurance that God does all things well, and is, even now, making all things work together for my ultimate good.”⁸

If this seems challenging, verses 5 and 6 contain a great *because* that transforms our thinking: “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?’” Here is the engine that drives Christians to both love and holiness, namely God’s faithful presence as our sustainer and helper.

This is faith’s line of reasoning: If God is my helper, then what can man do to me? God gave us his only Son and therefore he will surely give believers everything else he has. If this God is my helper, then why should I be afraid? Here is the antidote to the fear of man which otherwise so dominates our lives and leads us into sin.

⁷ Jeremiah Burroughs: *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, p. 120.

⁸ Arthur W. Pink: *Comfort for Christians*, pp. 85, 86.

I have an old friend who used to say there are only three things that can happen to a Christian and all of them are good. First, God can bless us and that, of course, is good. Second, we can have trials, and God in his grace makes that good by refining our faith. Third, we can die, and what is that but our ticket to the courts of God in heaven? That is the way the writer of Hebrews wants us to think, relying on God to be with us with blessing in every situation.

AN IMITATING COMMUNITY

The knowledge of God's presence and help is the greatest of our encouragements, but there is also the example of Christians who lived before us. In them, in the outcome of their life and death, we see living testaments to the faithfulness of God and the blessedness of trusting in him. This is what verse 7 commends to us: "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith."

This is the third thing we are to exhorted to do. First is the call to love, then to holiness, and now to remember that we are not the first to have tried this kind of life. Known to us are excellent examples of how a Christian is to live. Here is the place of leaders in the church, especially the elders. Elders do not replace the congregation in the matters of love and holiness, as if only their conduct matters, but the leaders are to set an example that others can follow.

Note what it is we are to learn from leaders. Not their personalities, not their ministry techniques, but "the outcome of their way of life." The text seems to be pointing to both their lives and to their deaths and asks, "What is the lesson to be learned from these?"

This verse is not saying that we should put celebrity Christians on a pedestal for worship: the writer's confidence is not in men of God, but in the God of men. Yet God, in the course of his peoples' lives, and especially in the lives of those set apart to lead his flock, reveals the glad result of walking with him in faith over the course of a life. This is one benefit of membership in a multi-generational church, and one of the main problems in churches that so worship youth that they drive out virtually all mature adults. I find that I not only benefit from the wisdom of older Christians, but I also find great solace and motivation through the radiant godliness of so many senior saints. It

reminds me that if I continue to walk with the Lord, I may yet become something like the spiritual man that God desires me to be.

Note what it is we are to imitate in leaders and teachers is not their worldly methods, not their sins – most of which we will be aware of – not their fancies or foibles, but their faith. Imitate *their faith*. Study and reflect upon the times in their lives when they especially relied on the Lord and boldly stood for him. Observe that it was faith that gave their ministries power; it was faith that sustained them through crises. Through their example, resolve to trust the Lord yourself, to stand firmly on his Word and rely completely on his matchless grace, especially when others are giving way and times are hard. This is the greatest legacy any of us can impart from the pattern of our lives, and it is by providing such examples that Christian leaders most powerfully serve the church. This is why, when we are considering candidates for the office of elder, the Scripture directs us to look not for money or stature in the world, but faith in Christ that issues forth in a godly example for others.

JESUS CHRIST THE SAME

Verse 8 completes our passage, and without it everything we have said might be lost on us. Times change, we say. What was good for others may not be good for us. What worked before might fail today. Against such concerns the writer points out this vital truth: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” The point is not just that Jesus, being the Second Person of the eternal Godhead, remains today as he ever was before, true though that is. The point is that we may confidently embrace this biblical pattern for our own lives as Christians because Jesus is the same.

This means that if you are a Christian these commands are not given to you as just some by-gone philosophy that served a prior generation. Rather, by a life of love and holiness, you are now serving and following Jesus Christ, who was and is and is to come, who lives and reigns now in the heavens and by his Spirit on the earth. The Leader you truly follow, the Lord you serve and hope upon is none other than Jesus Christ himself, who in his Word speaks to you as he did before to others, and whose call will never be superceded or set aside.

I can think of three vital implications that flow from this verse. First, since Jesus Christ is the same, his ministry and call is the same as it ever was. The Christ you see in the Gospels – cleansing the leper, raising the dead, stilling the storms, feeding the hungry, speaking words of forgiveness to sinners – is our own Lord, the Son of God, mighty to save. The salvation he promised before remains the same today. He still calls us, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Mt. 11:28).

Second, the Christian life is ever the same, unchanged in all generations. The stories and teachings in the Bible are not irrelevant to modern or post-modern man. In the face of the world’s complaint that ours is an out-moded creed, we reply: “Jesus Christ is the same.” This is why we should study church history and Christian biographies, because other lives of faith are examples for us. A.W. Tozer wrote, “One of the most popular current errors, and the one out of which springs most of the noisy, blustering religious activity in evangelical circles, is the notion that as times change the church must change with them.”⁹ In contrast, our wisdom is that of Jeremiah 6:16: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls” (NIV).

Because Jesus Christ is the same, now is our turn to live as Christ’s people in a manner that those who came before us would recognize. All times are different in some ways, but Jesus Christ is always the same. If we could interview the faithful forefathers of our churches, is there anything that would delight them more than to know that the gospel they preached is the gospel we preach, that the faith they displayed is now the pattern for us as we walk in faith? If that is true of mere men and women who lived in generations past, what a blessing must it be for our Lord Jesus, who lives still, to see us display in our lives and churches the truth and love and purity to which he called his disciples from the earliest days!

Third, because Jesus Christ is the same today as ever, it is Jesus we represent and display before our own generation. It is not a tradition, not a philosophy of man we serve, but Jesus Christ the Savior of

⁹ A.W. Tozer: *Renewed Day by Day: A Daily Devotional*, Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1980, Feb. 7, c.f. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Old Testament Evangelistic Sermons*, p. xvi

sinner, the Son of God who bears his love in our world, who calls men and women through us to a living hope as he did in ages past.

Ravi Zacharias tells of an evangelist named Jakov, who preached the gospel in communist-held Yugoslavia. In those days the formal church was a pawn to the cruel regime and a haven for wolves in sheep's clothing. Because of this, Jakov had a hard time getting people to listen to his claims about the love of Christ. One time, an old man named Cimmerman sharply upbraided him on account of the terrible record of those who called themselves Christians. "They wear those elaborate coats and caps and crosses," he exclaimed, "signifying a heavenly commission, but their evil designs and lives I cannot ignore." Jakov replied by comparing the situation to a man who stole Cimmerman's coat, put it on, broke into a bank, and ran off into the distance. "What would you say to them if they came to your house and accused you of breaking into the bank?" he asked. Cimmerman had no reply, and Jakov went on to continue his work. Zacharias concludes the story this way:

Jakov continued to return to the village periodically just to befriend Cimmerman, encourage him, and share the love of Christ with him. Finally one day Cimmerman asked, "How does one become a Christian?" and Jakov taught him the simple steps of repentance for sin and of trust in the work of Jesus Christ and gently pointed him to the Shepherd of his soul. Cimmerman bent his knee on the soil with his head bowed and surrendered his life to Christ. As he rose to his feet, wiping his tears, he embraced Jakov and said, "Thank you for being in my life." And then he pointed to the heavens and whispered, "You wear His coat very well."¹⁰

This is what we are to do: wear the coat of Jesus Christ before the world. This reminds us that we rely on Christ's own coat of righteousness, imputed to us, for our standing before God. But then we are to represent him before the world in the manner of these verses from Hebrews. 13. We should therefore select leaders who will help us to wear Christ's coat well. But the power of our witness together will in large part depend on how each of us wears the coat of Jesus Christ, who calls us to be a loving church, a holy church, and a church that imitates the faith of those who go before us, all of us following Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever.

¹⁰ Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God?* (Dallas: Word, 1994) sp. 102.