

Let Love Abide (Heb. 13.1-3)
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Let brotherly love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. ³ Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.

Introduction

If you were addressing a group of Christians on a series of themes where each theme took you, and then, higher and higher until you all got lost in the glories of the city of God, what do you think you would take up as your very next topic? How would you descend from the heavenly heights to earthly challenges? To what theme would you go after striking the high note of worship with Jesus our Lord here with us within the doors? Well, that is what our author does in Hebrews 13.1-3. He "descends to the plane" from Mount Zion. There is clearly a shift from detailed elaboration of the Christian race and worship to a seeming hodgepodge of specific duties to end the book in chapter 13. When he does so, he begins with the topic of love or "let love abide." We might wonder why he starts with love. Perhaps the reason is simple. The shift from worship to love is simply a shift from heavenly love, the love of heaven that we experience in worship, to the taste of heaven that we have on earth when we walk together with love.

In making this shift from worship to love, the author gives the over all impression that true zeal for the race and the true devotion of your worship corresponds with the ardor of your love. So, let's take a look at how he develops the theme of love at this point in his sermon. There are two main ideas in 13.1-3: 1) some details about this love, and 2) some examples of this love.

1A. Some details about the love that is to abide

We have three details in 13.1, a tightly written short sentence: **Let brotherly love continue.** They are activity, family, and radicality.

1B. Activity

The way the text opens with the word "let" does not point us to inactivity and passivity, though it may sound like that. It is not saying, "Sit back and let love come to you, let other people do this and that for you, and in that way you do your part to allow love to flow unhindered." Granted, this injunction to let love continue must surely include receiving love and not hindering its progress. But what is obviously wrong here? The wrong here is the restriction of love to something passive. That is like emphasizing what you want others to do for you when you read the golden rule. Thus, you may quote the verse like this: **wish that others would do [things] to [for] you** (Mat. 7.12a) while you forget the rest of the verse: **do also to them** (7.12b). Of course, you want others to do right by you and promote your well-being. Of course, it is not wrong to receive good things from others. It may be better to give than to receive, but receiving is something good too. However, the true accent and emphasis is on activity not passivity; the key to the golden rule and the key to love is doing, doing things that bring benefit to other people.

By using the passive sounding word "let," the author carries himself in a gentle manner. Instead of saying, "you dirty rotten sinners, get your act right and start showing some love," he calmly states the command to love in a passive way that *understates* the call to this duty; it is subtle but forceful. In line with this soft way of carrying a big stick, he roots the exhortation in past performance: "I am going to begin with the fact that you do show love toward each other, I am a witness of it (10.32-34), so now I am putting an arrowhead on my calls to perseverance. They all come to this profoundly practical point: let love flow like a river." This is profoundly important in understanding the warnings of this book. So let me restate the significance. Active love for the Christian family is the hallmark of genuine, persevering Christian faith. A true Christian will put forth effort to "get outside of himself or herself" to show love.

2B. Family

Notably, we know that this seemingly passive "letting" of love is fully active from the fact that the kind of love he has in view is **brotherly love**. In other words, the summons here is to let the flood tide of love flow from each of you to the others. Therefore, it must involve both the passive *and the active*, both receiving *and giving*. Thus, your perseverance in the Christian journey, in the race set before you, has an important component. What is it? Well, he added worship to the race, acceptable worship on the mountain top of Zion. True, but he "lands the plane" and says, "*you stay in your running lane with acceptable worship by continuing to show love to one another in the Christian family.*"

What makes us brothers and sisters? It is much more than a bond of flesh and blood. It transcends the physical relations of parents, children, brothers, and sisters. It is a spiritual bond in Christ, a bond of believers from all families of the earth that make up a single, new, and redeemed family; they all know the Lord and make up the assembly of the firstborn (Heb. 8.11).

This family has its roots in eternity, in the eternal covenant between the Father and the Son for the saving of particular people out from the fallen human race. They become His children in time by faith because they were His children before time by covenant union: the Father gave them to Christ and because they share in flesh and blood, Jesus partook of the same to be their Savior (Heb. 2.10-15). This is an amazing privilege that you and I have by amazing grace to be part of the family of God that has its roots in everlasting love, love that transcends time arising in eternity past, overflowing the present, and reaching out into eternity future. It should not, then, come as a surprise to discover that this love is radical.

3B. Radicality

The duty of abiding love has the astounding foundation of God's love holding it in place. It is family oriented; it is brotherly and sisterly love *that is to be like that of the Father and the Elder Brother*. This is something to never forget; it is a goal to always pursue. It means to aim at, and make concrete progress in, self-sacrificing love, the kind God has shown to you in Christ. What remarkable love is that that comes with abundance from God to you! It is undeserved and unconditional. Therefore, true brotherly and sisterly love is not based on what you get from the object of your love, but is based on what you can give and how you can bring good to the one you love. This is the new command that Jesus left with us in His departing words: ³⁴ **A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.** ³⁵ **By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another**" (Jn. 13.34-35). The love that He commands is one anothering love and it is to this love that His self-sacrificing death ought to move you: ⁹ **In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.** ¹⁰ **In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.** ¹¹ **Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another** (1 Jn. 4.9-11).

Can we ever overstate His command to "love as I have loved you!"? If you know His love for you, then this call to brotherly and sisterly love must prick your conscience with regard to radical family action. If you look to Christ and want to serve Him, then you must find ways to actively display family love, even in some radical way. Examples are helpful and we have some.

2A. Some examples of the love that is to abide

The examples he cites are hospitality to strangers and pity to sufferers: ² **Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers...**³ **Remember those who are in prison** (13.2-3).

1B. Showing hospitality to strangers

We need to figure out how to read the reference to strangers. The context here and a parallel text will guide us. 1) First, the flow of thought here relates to the fellowship of the saints, which suggests that though the word is usually used of strangers (those unknown to you), it has a narrow usage as a reference to the Christian family. 2) Second, a parallel text helps fill this out. In 3 John 5, John commends a Christian man by the name of Gaius. The commendation gives insight on the term stranger: **The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth...**³ **For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth.** ⁴ **I have no greater joy than**

to hear that my children are walking in the truth. ⁵ Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, ⁶who testified to your love before the church (3 Jn. 1.1-6a). Clearly the strangers to whom John refers were brothers in Christ (fellow workers, v. 8). What then made them strangers? Why does he use this term? They were family members that were unknown for some reason, say, because they came from a distant locality and were unknown in a full personal way. This yields an extremely important fact about hospitality: it is a key to the transition from not knowing family members to knowing them. This parallel context gives us a central feature of hospitality. At its core, hospitality is encouraged in Scripture because it is a way for us to get to know one another better within the family, to remove the strangeness and fallen estrangement.

To be sure, hospitality means that you receive others into your home to share a meal together. You cannot miss that in the account that our author alludes to when he speaks of entertaining angels unawares. That happened to Abraham when he received three strangers (one of whom was our pre-incarnate Lord, Gen. 18; cf. Hughes, 563). You may recall that Sarah laughed in unbelief at the promise the Lord reiterated that she would have a son in her old age. Remarkably, Abraham showed hospitality to two angels and our Lord when he **entertained angels unawares**. To entertain is to think, and to entertain others is to think about others by doing for them and sharing with them of your food, home, and time. It means sharing of your self.

The relevance of hospitality in this context is clear. If there are members of the assembly that you do not know very well, then the duty to love by showing hospitality is one important way for you to remedy the situation. That is a central way to obey your Elder brother and to continue in brotherly and sisterly love, to initiate it and to deepen it.

Relevance is also suggested by the orientation of things to the truth in 3 John. Hospitality is not only for getting to know one another to improve the bonds of love, to let love continue in a God-honoring family way, but it is also a way to give and receive benefit unto edification in the truth. I will comment on this more in the conclusion, for now I have this to say, loving hospitality opens the door of divine blessing in the gospel. Here is a way to picture it: by showing hospitality to the brothers and sisters, you open the door to your Lord and welcome Him into your home. Of this, you can be aware.

2B. Pity to sufferers

When the text says, **Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated** (Heb. 13.3), it is telling us to find ways to assist as though you were in prison with them, or as though you were being mistreated with them. This involves empathizing with them fully and thoughtfully (Hughes, 564), so you can bring them some kind of refreshment like Onesiphorus gave refreshment to Paul in prison, not being ashamed of Paul's chains (2 Tim. 1.16).

"**In the body**" (Heb. 13.3b) means that you can begin to identify with them in their plight by reference to whatever bodily ailments you have had from stubbing your toe to being severely sick. They suffer in the body and you are in the body too. Their plight exasperates common physical pains. Thus, by comparison, you are to be sensitive and understanding, ready to help. They cannot leave the prison to receive hospitality in your home, but you can take the essence of hospitality to them. What is that essence? The essence of hospitality is to think about others, share with them of your food and of your time with the goal of giving them physical refreshment, and refreshment in the truth of the gospel. Hospitality is fundamentally a sincere person to person welcome. It is a true bond of friendship; in one sense it *is* brotherly and sisterly love.

Conclusion

Brotherly love is the hallmark of the genuine Christian. A hallmark is a distinguishing feature. Returning to a comment I made earlier, the author indicates that true zeal for the Christian race and the true devotion of your worship corresponds with the ardor of your love.

So you can test yourself here, let's focus a bit more on hospitality in its wholeness.

1) First, sharing gospel food

Our Lord tells us that true Christians are learners who display love in their mutual learning: **By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another**" (Jn. 13.35). That involves a lot of give and take. You cannot let pride get in the way as if recognizing that you are wrong means the annihilation of your person. You can be wrong and you can be uncertain and say so, like this: "I am wrong; I have taken that view prematurely; I have to back up to a place of uncertainty on x, y, or z." Or, with openness and to promote discussion, you may say: "Correct me where I am wrong." It takes great faith in Christ to doubt things with confidence, confidence that that is not the end of the world, the Lord is still with you, and actually, that this is probably the only way to truly begin to understand and grow in Christ. When you do not know x, what do you do? You cling to the saints and you cling to Christ! In brotherly and sisterly love, you seek out more facts, different perspectives, and how these things impact your daily life. That last point is the rub, but it is crucial. It is one reason that you may back off from a teaching because, intuitively, perhaps without even laying it all out in your head, you know that it calls you to some action or to some change. So, you resist but by grace you drop your pride and seek His face.

Again, you need this active truth-oriented kind of brotherly/sisterly love of Hebrews and the teaching of Jesus. It is vital in your struggle with remaining sin: because of the deceitfulness of sin. Hence, the important verse: ¹² **Take care, brothers [and sisters], lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.** ¹³ **But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin** (Heb.3.12-13). This one anothering dialogue helps you ...**pay much closer attention to what [you] have heard, lest [you] drift away from it** (Heb. 2.1). So, this kind of loving interaction ought to be a regular part of your life. You ought to avail yourself of every opportunity for interaction with the saints on the gospel, to talk over a passage, and to interact on any subject. An important duty in this regard is the sharing of your food, possessions, self, and time in gospel hospitality.

2) Second, balancing your diet

Granted, hospitality is a key example here in Hebrews on how to let brotherly love abide and thus on how to be truly and genuinely Christian, not in word only but also in deed (**Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth**, 1 Jn. 3.18). However, as we open this up, we have to remember that there are circumstances to consider and qualifications to make, but in the end, for balance, we need to give serious attention to hospitality. Hospitality may be difficult to do because it can be expensive. It may be difficult for some of you because you do not have your own home to open up for others. Your schedule of work and family may make it hard to stretch out to the Christian family. So, it is something that takes effort, some self-sacrifice, and planning (sounds like it may take athletic-like strenuous effort). In the end, you will benefit in proportion to the benefit you give. For the good of the brotherhood, for the edification of the church, for the glory of your Savior, you need to put some effort down this pathway to let brotherly and sisterly love continue. Empathizing with the afflictions of others and helping one another grow in the grace and knowledge of God is surely a marvelous way to let brotherly and sisterly love flow like a flood all around us to taste some of heaven here on earth, to please our Elder brother, and to glorify God in our bodies. May the Holy Spirit enable you to love, to grow as a loving person in an overflow that pleases the Lord Jesus who loves you with an everlasting love.

May we fall down before the majesty of our God in humble acknowledgment of our sins regarding brotherly love and hospitality; may the Holy Spirit convict us of our unloving actions, and our neglectful conduct, so that our love will grow in spiritual discernment and abundant fruitfulness to the praise and glory of the triune God, amen.