

June 1, 2008

Choosing the Good We'll Do Hebrews 13:1-3, 5-6, 16

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“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to **show hospitality to strangers,** for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. **Remember** those who are **in prison,** as though you were in prison with them; those who are **being tortured,** as though you yourselves were being tortured. **Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have;** for he has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.”

So we can say with confidence,

“The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?”

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”

The New Testament book of Hebrews would be better called, a sermon because that is what it is. The formal part of the sermon is the first 12 chapters, then in chapter 13, the preacher reminds the congregation about some of the basic, routine aspects of congregational life – including the ministry of hospitality, the prison visitation ministry, the stewardship emphasis, keeping relationships appropriate, and so on. It is like the sermon is followed by the announcements and joys and concerns of the congregation. The most basic thing is to Let Mutual Love Continue and the different behaviors then described are examples of continuing in mutual love for those we know and for those are not yet known to us.

John Wesley in writing about love as Paul described it in his letter to the church at Corinth said, *“We should always remember that love is the highest gift of God. All our revelations and gifts are little things compared to love.*

There is nothing higher in religion.

If you are looking for anything else, you are looking wide of the mark.

Settle in your heart that from this moment on you will aim at nothing more than that love described in the thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians. You can go no higher than this.”¹

Love is the distinguishing characteristic of a Christian.

Love is the authenticating mark of a follower of Jesus.

Paul teaches us to aim at love above all else.

“Love, is patient, kind, free of jealousy and arrogance, is not rude or self-seeking, is not easily angered and keeps no record of wrongs, takes no joy in things that

¹ Richard Foster and James Bryan Smith, Editors, *Devotional Classics*, Harper San Francisco, 1990, 282.

are wrong but instead in what is true. It always protects, always accepts, always hopes, and endures everything. And it never quits.”

It is love that does these things, not us, and what we are to do is to pursue love. As we “catch” love, then we find that these things are actually being done by us. These godly actions and behaviors, are the result of dwelling in love. We become the kind of person who is patient, kind, and free of jealousy. Hebrews tells us to let mutual love continue and then gives some specific examples of what mutual love continuing looks like in action.

It includes showing hospitality to strangers, remembering those in prison, remembering those who are being tortured as though we were the ones being tortured. These are teachings that certainly challenge us in how much we put them into practice. When I was talking to my parents last night and as always my dad asked what I was preaching about today and when I told him I asked, “Does that spark anything in you?” He then told me a story that was formative for him when he was in the United States Air Force in the 1950’s. He was on his way to Denver and then Japan. He was trying to hitch a ride on a plane and one guy was incredibly helpful trying to help him get from one air base to the next one trying to find a space on a flight, even offering to drive him to a train station so he could board a train to Denver. My dad was touched by his kindness and effort and finally said, “Is there any way I can thank you?” The man simply replied, “Just help the next guy.” My father never forgot it and has spent the last 50 years of his life trying to do that – trying to help the people who cross his path. We always were hosting people in our home when I was growing up from all over the world including Cambodia, Vietnam, Mexico, you name it.

The second announcement has to do with ministry to the wounded – those in prison and victims of torture and abuse. We are to empathize with those in these situations as if we were in prison or being tortured ourselves. This is teaching we need to grow in and our guest Sheryl Sohn in her testimony has spoken to it more eloquently than I can. The third thing the preacher warns about is loving the wrong person and getting into trouble or loving the thing – namely money.

We are admonished to keep our lives free from the love of money, be content, do not neglect to do good and share what we have – such sacrifices are pleasing to God. This afternoon we will celebrate the dedication of the first three Habitat Homes in Brewster including the one we sponsored which has been a wonderful example of BBC doing good and sharing what we have.

It is in the very nature of Christians to do good and to show and share God's love. It is simply what we do as God's people. Last year in a Cape Cod Magazine about Philanthropy, I was struck by how many of the people and organizations cited did what they did out of their Christian faith – Habitat for Humanity, A Baby Center, Champ Homes, the Lower Cape Outreach Council are all hugely impacted by faith and people of faith. As followers of Jesus we seek to feed the hungry, visit the sick, cook meals for bereaved families or those just back from the hospital, work on homes with Habitat, welcome the homeless into our church, teach Sunday school and Vacation Bible School, go on mission trips, the list of what we do is long, and the list of what we could do is endless and therein lies the problem.

Hebrews 13:16 is a core Christian teaching, **“Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”**

I have told you before that this has always been and continues to be a key teaching in my family. My grandparents' gravestone in Maine simply has the name **“Scalise”** and the words, **“Do good and forget it.”**

As the people of God we are to do good because that reflects the nature of our God – God is good, as the Bible teaches us over and over. I told several children as they left church last Sunday eating cookies to look up Psalm 34:8 when they got home.

Psalm 34:8 and 14, *“O taste and see that the Lord is **good**; happy are those who take refuge in him. Depart from evil, and do **good**; seek peace, and pursue it.”*

Jeremiah 31:12, **“And they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord.”**

Hosea 3:5, **“They shall come in awe to the Lord and to his goodness.”**

Psalm 68:10, “In your goodness, O God, you provided for the needy.”

Statistics can be numbing but listen to a few: 14 million children under the age of 15 have lost one or both parents to AIDS. Four out of five of them live in sub-Saharan Africa. In developing countries, every fourth child lives in abject poverty, in families with an income of less than \$1 per day (UNICEF). The wealthiest fifth of the world's people consumes 86 % of all goods and services, while the poorest fifth consumes 1% (www.undp.org). According to Church World Service, the United States spends about **\$20.7 billion** each year on foreign aid – while Americans spend **\$34.7 billion** on diet and weight loss products.

Nearly 200 years ago, Adoniram and Ann Judson arrived in the country of Burma. The Judsons and other early Christian missionaries introduced Jesus to the Burmese, Karen, Chin, and other ethnic groups of Burma. Over the past 10 years,

Burma's army has destroyed more than 3,000 villages of these ethnic peoples. As a result, an estimated 500,000 civilians currently are internally displaced in eastern Burma, and there are believed to be more than 2.5 million civilians from Burma, including migrant workers and refugees, in Thailand (Church World Service). The United States has been accepting Karen refugees from the camps in Thailand and Chin from Malaysia for permanent resettlement and eventual U.S. citizenship. Their historic connection with American Baptists is leading many of these people to seek out our churches and they are adding their faith and energy to our congregations. \$60,000 of the OGHS is going to our National Ministries Refugee Resettlement program to help some of the Burmese refugees who have come to the United States. Other grants are going to construct a Health Center in Burundi, a nation in central Africa that is one of the poorest countries in the world and conditions only got worse during a 12 year civil war. Food security is not a phrase that is common to many of us with the abundance of supermarkets, mini-marts, restaurants in the United States. However, securing food is a daily struggle for hundreds of millions of people each day. \$10,000 of the OGHS will go to providing seeds and small animals to families in the Baptist Federation of El Salvador in Central America. The American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts are working with partners in the Ghana Baptist Convention to free young women and girls from slavery and providing a school where they can find healing, education, and trade to help them support themselves. So funds are being designated toward building a dormitory and training center. In Palestine, Pastor Hanna Massad and the people of the Gaza Baptist Church, the only evangelical church in the Gaza Strip, seek to meet the needs of people in most trying conditions. As Israel has imposed strict internal and external controls the economic and living conditions have declined to the point where as of 2006 **81% of the people in the Gaza Strip are living at or below the poverty level.**

The Baptist Church continues to try and meet the basic needs of the people with food, medical care, and trauma counseling for about 500 families a month! Assistance is given without regard to ethnic or religious identification.

Hebrews 13:16, **Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.** Our goodness begins with the recognition that any good we have – within us as a person or around us materially comes from God. **Psalm 16:2 affirms, “I have no good apart from you.”** Oswald Chambers wrote in *My Utmost for His Highest*, “We have to do something. We are in danger of forgetting that we cannot do what God does, and that God will not do what we can do. We cannot save

or sanctify ourselves – God does that. But God will not give us good habits or character, and he will not force us to walk correctly before him. We have to do all that ourselves (May 10).

Today we receive the One Great Hour of Sharing offering to assist people in the United States and around the world whose lives have been devastated by disasters that most of us have not experienced and cannot comprehend. Our gifts are also used to assist with development projects that enable people to meet their most basic needs for survival such as food and shelter. It is an opportunity for letting mutual love continue; for sharing what we have, and for remembering others in conditions far more challenging than our own.

Blessing: “Grow in the grace and knowledge and goodness of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Let all that you do be done in love. Amen.”