

Hebrews 13:1

“Let Brotherly Love Continue”

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Ordinary Time

*“Long ago, at many times, and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”*

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In this way, the Apostle begins his letter to the Hebrews. And like every good preacher, he lays the foundation for the overall argument for his letter in his opening sentence.

In these last days, the Apostle wants us to know, the last days brought about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ - God has spoken to his people in a fundamentally new and better way - for he has now revealed himself to them by his Son.

This Son, the Apostle proclaims, is the heir of all things from his Father, indeed, it was by this eternally begotten Son that God created all things and laid the foundations of the world.

This Son is radiance of God’s own glory, and the exact imprint of God’s nature - he is the perfect image of the Father - and he rules over all things in his ascension to heaven such that the universe itself and everything in it is upheld by the word of his power.

In his ascension, the Apostle argues, God’s eternal and now incarnate Son has effected the purification for sins, and has been elevated, in his humanity, over the Angels.

And the rest of the Apostle's letter is a working out of his argument regarding the primacy and significance of God's true Son - Jesus.

One of the central features of the apostle's argument is the importance of Jesus' divinity as well as his incarnation - he is the God-man.

Jesus, the apostle tells us, is without beginning or end, he is fully God, and yet because we share in flesh and blood, he himself has partaken of these very same things - binding himself to our flesh and our nature for the rest of eternity that we might be united to him as our elder brother.

Jesus, indeed, Hebrews tells us, was made like us in every way - he can sympathize with our weaknesses and our temptations, for he knows these things intimately - he experienced human weakness, he experienced real temptation - and because of these experiences, because of this knowledge, he is uniquely suited to be our eternal high priest.

And it was actually for this reason, Hebrews goes on to explain, that Jesus was incarnate, lived a perfect life, died an innocent death, and was raised in glory - that he might ascend into heaven for us, so that we might draw near to God's presence with absolute faith and confidence that the holy presence of God is a place where we are actually welcome.

In the past days, the apostle tells us, the high priests of Israel were deficient for two reasons - one, they sinned; and two, they died - but Jesus is not like that. He is innocent and holy, and he lives forever with the power of an indestructible life, and thus is able to save even to the uttermost all who draw near to God through him.

In this way, the apostle compares Jesus to a steadfast anchor for our souls - he holds us fast to God, he refuses to let us go, and his power to both save and keep us for God is without limitation — his blood has fully and permanently atoned for our sin a way that the blood of animals never could.

And so, the apostle says, Jesus is not only an anchor for our souls, he is also the new and living way into the actual presence of God - the real Holy of Holies - into heaven itself, and when we approach God through Jesus, we do so confidence and faith - for our union with him has made us, even in our sin, righteous and holy before God.

And it is for this reason that we *must* persevere in faith and obedience. The stakes could not be higher. Hebrews is not only full of dramatic pictures of the beauty and glory of the Son of God, it is also full of sober warnings and exhortations to those baptized in his name.

Again and again, the Apostle hammers home this point — because of the supremacy of Christ - we who belong to him must endure in faith and obedience, we must not shrink back, we keep on pressing forward.

And in fact, he reminds us of all those who are with us on this journey of faith and perseverance - not only the living members of the church today, but all of God's people from the very beginning of history itself are with us, even now, surrounding us even as the deceased members of this church are with us, like a great cloud of witnesses as we, in this present moment, fix our eyes on Jesus and put off sin, enduring even the loving discipline of God as we come to Mount Zion itself in our worship Lord's Day by Lord's Day, offering to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe.

Hebrews is an epistle that requires us to take both Jesus and our own selves with incredible seriousness. It is a glorious salvation that are given, and yet we are told that we must strive, in union with Christ, for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Thus far the argument in Hebrews through the first 12 chapters. And now, this morning, we begin to take up chapter 13.

Chapter 13 is easily recognized as a significant shift in the rhetoric and argument of the letter.

For 12 chapters, the Apostle has given us a complex and riveting theological argument, filled with powerful images and stirring phrases.

But here, in chapter 13, the Apostle's instructions are simple and straightforward. Let brotherly love continue. Show hospitality. Remember those in prison. Protect the marriage bed and ensure that it is undefiled. Keep your life free from love of money. Remember your leaders and obey them. Pray for us.

It would be easy to skim through chapter 13, to see it as an unimportant appendix to the remarkable theology and rhetoric of the first 12 chapters.

But that would be a mistake. For it is here that the apostle spells out for his readers the holiness of the life for which they must strive. It is here that the apostle defines the particular actions, the particular practices that must characterize those who persevere in faith and obedience.

And so, over the next month or so, we're going to take our time with chapter 13. We going to consider these instructions in some amount of detail. These particular exhortations, these particular imperatives are important to the Apostle - they are, quite literally, the conclusion of his letter. And we're going to seek to give them the attention and reflection they're due.

We begin today with the first verse of Hebrews 13. Just one verse. I'll read also the last two verses of Hebrews 12 to give us some context.

Listen now to God's holy and inerrant word.

*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, 29 for our God is a consuming fire. 1 Let brotherly love continue.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

*Blessed Lord, who caused all the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear this portion of your word, and to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these words, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Beloved, what do you want out of your life?

Assuming your eternal future is secure, assuming that in the resurrection of the dead, your self-same body will be raised from the ground and you will be given eternal life forevermore, what is it that you want to experience and accomplish in whatever years remain for you in this mortal life as you look forward to the resurrection of the dead?

How you think about and answer that question is incredibly important. Most of us have desires, a vision for what we want our life to be, even if those desires and that vision remain mostly unarticulated.

All of us are aiming toward something, although most of us, I think, don't always have a clear idea of what that something is.

Maybe our vision for our life is to get married and buy a home and raise a family. Maybe it's to see our children grow up and have the opportunity to know and love our grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Maybe our vision is to accomplish certain things in our careers, in our professional lives. Maybe it's to write a book. Maybe it's to achieve a certain level of success or renown or influence. Most of us want to make a mark on this world in some way.

Maybe our vision for our life is simply to be happy, and secure, and to have enough money at the end to leave at least a little bit to our descendants.

Now, all of those things are fine, so far as they go. There's certainly nothing wrong with family, or happiness, or success, or achievement, or even wealth. Those are a good things for a human life to accomplish and experience in the short time that is given to us.

But still, I hope that when I ask you that question, when I ask you what it is that you want out of your life, I hope there is at least some part of you that leaps up and says - "*Holiness.*"

I hope there is some part of you that says, what I want is *holiness*.

What I want, more than anything else, is that I might be made just as holy as I can possibly become in this life.

Yes, I know I'll always be a sinner, and whatever holiness in this life I can possibly attain will always be limited, but still, what I want is purity of heart, what I want more than anything else is to yield as much of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, as much love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, as I can possibly can.

I hope that when you think about your life, and what you want out of it, that holiness is on your radar.

In fact, I would suggest that there is nothing more glorious for a human being in this mortal life than to be made holy. There is nothing more remarkable. There is nothing more worth dedicating our lives to experiencing.

Better to be holy than to be happy.

Better to be holy than to have a family.

Better to be holy than to be successful.

Better to be holy than to have wealth.

And here, in this chapter, we get a vision for what it means to be made holy, according to the Apostle of our Lord.

And the apostle's instruction begins with the simplest of commands: *Let brotherly love continue*, he says.

Here, the apostle echoes the teaching of Jesus himself, who left his disciples before his death with this very simple and very costly command: *Love one another. As I have loved you, you also are to love one another.*

Jerome, the 4th-century theologian, tells a story about the Apostle John.

John was old and frail, unable to walk, so his disciples would carry him into the gathering of believers on the Lord's Day.

Every week these were his words to the congregation: "Little children, love one another."

This went on week after week, until at last, more than a little weary of these repeated words, his disciples asked him, "Master, why do you always say this?"

"Because," John replied, "it is the Lord's command, and if this only is done, it is enough."

Let brotherly love continue. Love one another. It is the Lord's command, and if only this is done, it is enough.

What is this kind of love that our Lord Jesus calls us to, that the Apostles instructs us to continue in?

It's a bit of a shame that 1 Corinthians 13 has been sort of co-opted by all the marriage literature in our day and age, because there's no indication that Paul is particularly thinking of the love between a husband and a wife when he writes those words - no, he is describing the kind of love that should be characteristic of *all Christians* for *all other Christians* in the body (remember that life in the church is actually what Paul is describing in 1 Corinthians 12).

And he describes the love we are called to in this way: *"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."*

This is the kind of holiness we are called to in the church, beloved. This is the kind of love we are called to remain in.

It is a love that considers our neighbor in the church better than ourselves, their needs more important than ours.

Remember, when Jesus chose to give us a picture of what this love is like that we are to extend to others in the body, he chose an act of menial service.

In the ancient world, no one paid much attention to the servants who washed guest's feet.

We read John 13, and we think, "Oh, Jesus chose this profound and heroic thing to demonstrate the love we're to have for one another! He washed his disciples' feet!"

But that's not the point at all. If a servant washed your feet, you didn't think about the servant in the least. You barely even noticed him. It was just a menial, humble act of service, barely worth commenting on.



And that, Jesus says, is how we're to love one another. To put others before ourselves. To elevate their needs above our own. To be humble and patient and kind.

But do so in a way that doesn't win any awards, that barely draws any attention at all. To love those around us in the church so well that they hardly notice us — that they almost take us for granted.

That's holiness, according to Jesus. That's the kind of love with which we are to love one another.

Now, you might say, well I can imagine loving my family that way, maybe. At least I can imagine attempting that kind of love in my marriage or for my children, or with my siblings or parents.

But for my fellow Christian? My fellow church member? Even people I barely know or people that just plain get on my nerves? I'm supposed to love them like that?

But here's where the apostle hits us hard. Remember, the command is "*Let brotherly love continue.*"

But clearly, he's not just talking about love within our family units. The Apostle means here - you in the church are holy brothers and holy sisters. You have been joined into a new family by God's Son. And now, you are to love one another as though you are family. Because that's actually what you are.

And notice also what the apostle says about the duration of this love that we are called to in the church, this love that is at heart of what it means to be holy and conformed to the image of Jesus.

*Let brotherly love continue*, he says. This kind of love is not a calling for a moment, or some great, non-repeatable act of heroic service. No, this is the love in which we are to remain. It is to be the characteristic of our heart and our actions every day of our life. This is the holiness to which we are called.

But how do we do this?

The secret is hidden in the command. It's right there in plain sight. But we have to dig a little to see it.

Jesus, when he instructed his disciples about brotherly love told them: *Love one another. As I have loved you, you also are to love one another.*

*As I have loved you*, Jesus says, *you also are to love one another.*

Consider, for a moment, how Jesus has loved you, how he has loved you all of your life.

Consider the patience Jesus has shown you. The gentleness with which he has borne with your inadequacies, your selfishness, your irritability, your sin.

Consider the faithfulness by which Jesus has loved you. How he has never forsaken you - not even once. Even when you pushed him away. Even when you had had enough. Still he did not leave.

Consider the strength with which Jesus has loved you. Consider how he has forgiven you your sins, and delivered you from the power of the fear of death. Consider how Jesus has defeated Satan and brought you into his own kingdom, consider how he has promised to raise your body from the dead on the last great day.

Surely, a love like this demands our everything, our constant gratitude, our constant affection. But even here, we fall short. There are days that go by where we hardly think of the love of Jesus at all.

In fact, it's fair to say that there is nothing in the world we take for granted so much in our flesh as the constant, steadfast, always continuing love of Jesus for us.

But still, he loves us. Even in this, even in our blindness toward him, Jesus loves us.

He does not grow weary interceding for us at the Father's right hand. He does not grow impatient forgiving our sins. He does not stop loving us and serving us, keeping us as the apple of his eye, hiding us under the shadow of his wings.

Beloved, this is the kind of love that will make us holy.

Only being loved by Jesus will transform us those who love one another, those in whom brotherly love continues.

And the good news is that this is exactly what Jesus promises to do for us, all the days of our life - to love us, and to lead us, and to make us holy even like unto himself.

Little children, love one another. It is the Lord's command, and if only this is done, it is enough.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.