

STUDIES IN HEBREWS No. 24

Hebrews 13:1-6

December 1, 2002

It was the intention of the Puritans to “reduce to practice” – that was their own phrase – reduce to practice everything that God taught them in the Word. [Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 29] They also spoke of “breaking up grace small.” Following the practice of Scripture, they would work out the Bible’s general principles with specific applications. That is what we have before us in the opening verses of chapter 13.

We may well wonder why our preacher breaks off the great subject of his long sermon on the absolute necessity of a persevering faith in Christ, all the more when he will return to that same subject later in this final chapter, breaks off his main subject and lists some specific duties that do not seem to bear too directly on what has been said before. But it is characteristic of the Bible to specify particular ways in which a believer would practice and work out the faith and the obedience to which he or she has been summoned in the sermon or letter. Hebrews is no different in this respect. Real, persevering faith, in other words, will demonstrate itself in all manner of very specific acts of obedience and service.

The Bible doesn’t say everything, of course. There are many questions of life and conduct that we must work out from general principles given us in Holy Scripture because we cannot find in the Scripture any specific direction to guide us. The longer I live and work in the pastorate, the more of these questions there seem to be. How much easier if we could always simply cite a verse and answer our question or resolve our problem or find our guidance. But we are given only representative answers and only a few examples of biblical direction in any particular area of life and conduct. From those few examples and from the basic principles of biblical ethics we must work out answers to the other questions and find guidance for ourselves. And, as we shall see, even the specific instructions that we are given, as here, are only general. Many questions are left to be answered by a biblical mind motivated by a heart of love for God and man.

- v.1 There is a sense in which the sermon proper could be regarded as finished at 12:29. Chapter 13 becomes then something of a postscript, the sort of addition one might well add to a letter, but which one would may not have added to a sermon delivered orally.

Brotherly love commanded in v. 1 is then broken down into very specific forms or applications. The world is full of folk who claim to love mankind. Loving specific human beings in specific situations is another matter altogether. Intellectuals and people of a political stripe are particularly prone to wrap themselves in the mantle of humanitarianism when those closest to them know only too well how little they care for the actual human beings they know. Once, when Tolstoy was off seeing to one of his very public and self-aggrandizing humanitarian projects, his wife, whom he had left behind in Moscow with their sick fourth-month old son, Alexei, wrote to him:

“My little one is still unwell, and I am very tender and pitying. You...may not especially love *your own* children, but we simple mortals are neither able nor wish to distort our feelings or to justify our lack of love for a *person* by professing some love or

other *for the whole world.*” [Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals*, 125] The record of Tolstoy’s friendships, his dismissing of people he lost interest in, his contempt for the weak, even in his own family, his penchant for taking and never giving makes dismal reading. All the more alongside the account of his careful cultivation of the reputation of a humanitarian!

- v.2 The reference is to Abraham and the hospitality he offered to the three men (as we read in Gen. 18), one of whom was the Lord and the other two were angels. Manoah and his wife, the father and mother of Samson, are another illustration (Judg. 13:3). The illustration encourages us to believe that there will be blessing for a Christian who is a gracious host.

Notice “brotherly love” in v. 1 is extended to “strangers” in v. 2. Probably fellow Christians are meant, those who come from other places. In any case, we cannot confine our Christian love only to those whom we know well and who are our friends.

Let me read you from George MacDonald’s novel *Sir Gibbie*. Young Gibbie’s father had died and he was now a little boy alone in the world and he was traveling, he knew not where. And barefoot, and hardly clothed, tired and hungry, he came up to a Scottish croft. He knocked at the door and a woman’s voice invited him to come in.

“A woman sat on a crepie, her face turned over her shoulder to see who came. It was a grey face, with good simple features and clear grey eyes. The plentiful hair that grew low on her forehead, was half grey, mostly covered by a white cap with frills. A clean wrapper and apron, both of blue print, over a blue winsey petticoat, blue stockings, and strong shoes completed her dress. A book lay on her lap: always when she had finished her morning’s work, and made her house tidy, she sat down to have her comfort, as she called it. The moment she saw Gibbie she rose. Had he been the angel Gabriel, come to tell her she was wanted at the throne, her attention could not have been more immediate or thorough. She was rather a little woman, and carried herself straight and light.

“Eh, ye puir ootcast!” she said, in the pitying voice of a mother, ‘hoo cam ye here sic a hicht?’ Cratur, ye hae left the warl’ ahin’ ye. What wad ye hae here? I hae naething.”

“Receiving no answer but one of the child’s bewitching smiles, she stood for a moment regarding him, not in mere silence, but with a look of dumbness. She was a mother. One who is mother only to her own children is not a mother; she is only a woman who has borne children. But here was one of God’s mothers.

“Loneliness and silence, and constant homely familiarity with the vast simplicities of nature, assist much in the development of the deeper and more wonderful faculties of perception. The perceptions themselves may take this or that shape according to the education – may even embody themselves fantastically, yet be no less perceptions. Now the very moment before Gibbie entered, she had been reading the words of the Lord: ‘Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.’; and with her heart full of them, she lifted her eyes and saw Gibbie. For one

moment, with the quick flashing response of the childlike imagination of the Celt, she fancied she saw the Lord himself. Another woman might have made a more serious mistake, and seen there *only* a child. Often had Janet pondered, as she sat alone on the great mountain, while Robert was with the sheep, or she lay awake by his side at night, with the wind howling about the cottage, whether the Lord might not sometimes take a lonely walk to look after such solitary sheep of his flock as they, and let them know he had not lost sight of them, for all the ups and downs of the hills. There stood the child, and whether he was the Lord or not, he was evidently hungry. Ah! who could tell but the Lord was actually hungry in every one of his hungering little ones.” [67-68]
 Sometimes it is easier for us to appreciate a picture of such a thing as a hospitable spirit than a simple definition. I know this congregation has a reputation for hospitality, for its open homes. But there is more for us to do, many more brothers and sisters, more strangers to welcome to our hearths and homes.

- v.3 This was a practice in which these Jewish Christians had already excelled, as we read in 10:33-34. No doubt those in prison are, in the first place, Christians who have been imprisoned on account of their faith. Here we have another form of the golden rule: do to others as you would have them do to you.

So Christians give loving attention to others both by bringing them into their homes and by going out of their homes to meet others where they are and in their need. They don't extend their charity only in that way most convenient to them. The needs of others become their own obligations. They practice what one commentator calls an “imaginative sympathy” with those in need.

Of course, it is not at all difficult to believe that if their faith in Christ was beginning to flag, their brotherly love for other Christians might well be withering also.

- v.4 We know from other statements in the NT that the church, even in apostolic times was troubled by some ascetic teachers who, as Paul puts it in 1 Tim. 2:3ff., “forbid marriage.” There is certainly nothing in the Bible that begins to suggest that celibacy was a higher form of spiritual life or that ministers, in particular, should be celibate. Very interestingly, the “by all” was omitted in some later manuscripts when the passion for celibacy and perpetual virginity had taken hold in the church, and there are a number of church fathers who leave it out in their citation of this verse!

It is hard to know what may have prompted our author to include this in his short list of exhortations. Was there an ascetic element in the Judaism that was tempting these Jewish Christians? Or was there instead an element of license in their spiritual culture?

- v.5 We assume that the love of money was likewise a strong present temptation to those to whom Hebrews was sent. Very often it is the tug of this world and its pleasures and the prospect of greater success here that weakens faith. It is hard to keep hoping for what cannot be seen when seductive pleasures are immediately visible to the eye. The number of professing Christians lost to living faith and obedience because of the love of money is very large. You will notice that the positive virtue that stands opposite covetousness is

contentment. And where does contentment come from but that very faith in Christ and in the promises of his Word that our preacher has been urging upon his hearers in his sermon.

In English a double negative is a grammatical *faux pas*. In Greek it is emphatic. That is what we have here: “Not not will I leave you; not not will I forsake you.” They needn’t worry about provision for their lives here. The Lord will provide according to his will and, as he has said repeatedly through his sermon, what is anything in this world, passing away as it is, compared to the inheritance of the saints in the eternal world of joy. So this little section on ethical duty finishes with faith: it is the person who *believes* in what Christ has done and said that will keep his commandments.

So often faith wanes under pressure from many directions at the same time: the love of the world, fear of want, desire for sinful pleasures, the burden of the work Christian faithfulness requires. No doubt that was the case here.

It is a very easy thing to think oneself spiritual, a man or woman of faith. But the Bible is always putting our sincerity to the test, and not some subjective test of inner attitudes that we might easily give ourselves and pass with flying colors, not some subjective examination of attitudes that are hard to verify, but the demanding test of conduct and even conduct that is particularly difficult. And conduct capable of the most objective test.

So, a great sermon on the necessity of a persevering faith in Christ, on the absolute requirement that Christians live in the hope of unseen things, that they base their living on their confidence in Christ’s salvation past and future, ends with commands that we extend ourselves for the sake of fellow Christians, especially those that are in some special need, that we maintain a life of sexual purity, and that we eschew the love of money and practice contentment. And twice in these few verses we are promised that God will reward our faith in him, a promise that has been made throughout the sermon as well.

Now let me set before you just a few general considerations to be drawn from these commandments, one after another, that follow on the great sermon of Hebrews.

1. Like all of God’s commandments recorded for us in the Bible, love must be the casuist, love must determine the specific applications. To whom do we give hospitality? Which strangers do we take in? For how long should we take them in? The Italians have a proverb: “A guest is like a fish; after three days he stinks.” How generous do we have to be? In *The Death of Peregrinus*, a 2nd century work by the pagan satirist Lucian, in which Christians are portrayed as ethical but ignorant, gullible people who have been duped by a charlatan, we get this account of the hero, who was then a Christian, being thrown into prison.

“The Christians left no stone unturned in their endeavor to procure his release. When this proved impossible, they looked after his wants in all other matters with untiring solicitude and devotion. From earliest dawn old women, widows, and orphan children might be seen waiting about the prison doors; while the officers of the church, by bribing the jailers, were able to spend the night inside with him. Meals were brought in, and they went through their

sacred formulas.” That is an account by a pagan who had no particular regard for Christianity, but it bears witness to how extravagant many Christians were in heeding the command in v. 3. How extravagant must we be and in what particular cases? Those are questions that can be answered rightly only by a man or woman who loves God and desires above all things to please him and serve him. There is no formula; no rule. Love must decide. When anything else decides, not only will the obedience be less, but there will be less brotherly love in that obedience.

Even v. 4 raises its own set of questions. Many church fathers and other great minds have weighed in on what it means to keep the marriage bed pure. And every manner of opinion has been offered: from those who have held that sex without the intention of having children is sinful to those who regard all second marriages as adulterous, to those even today who have sought to have certain standard Christian books on sexual love banned because they did not explicitly disavow certain forms of love-making. Here too, where the Scripture is not as specific as we may wish it had been, love and a desire to obey the Lord completely for love’s sake will tell the tale.

And this is certainly so with regard to the love of money. How much industry in work is allowed before it is too much and so an instance of the love of money? How much contentment is allowed before it can be judged indolence instead. How many things that money can buy are permitted a Christian? How rich can he be? How careful should he be of his investments? And on and on it goes. True love for God and man alone will answer those questions rightly. The love for Christ is the only reliable interpreter of God’s law. Love is the law’s eyes, as the Puritans used to say.

2. Every Christian must sooner rather than later face the demanding character of the law of God. God makes terrific demands upon us. He does not apologize for complicating our lives, for making us go out in the dead of night to help someone else, to inconvenience ourselves mightily to give aid to someone in need, to forsake many pleasure in this world that are extremely attractive.

Every believer who reads a short passage like this one, in Hebrew 13:1-6, should force himself or herself to come to terms with the very obvious fact that there should be obvious evidence of an extravagant devotion to God and others in our lives. It is so easy for us to hear such commands and then to go out and promptly forget all about them. No. As we force a puppy’s nose down into the mess he has made on the kitchen floor, forcing him to come to terms with what he has done, holding him there as he struggles to get away, so we must force ourselves, unwilling as we often are, to hold ourselves before these searching test until we have come to terms with what they must mean for us ourselves. We should be unlike the world around us and obviously so in the time and care and attention we give to others; in the purity of our lives; in the otherworldliness and contentment of them. These are not small things. Obey these six verses and *you will stand out!* So, are we standing out? Is our faith really working through this kind of love? No Christian should ever read such a text without pressing this test home to his or her own conscience. And when we stand together, as here in the church tonight, let us put the same test to ourselves: will folk outside the church look at us and say, “My how those Christians love one another!”?

There is nothing mundane, nothing ordinary or predictable about Christian piety. It is an extravagant, demanding, other-worldly life we are called to live. We should glory in this and then be sure, day by day and week by week, that we are actually living *that* life, Christ's own wonderfully extravagant and demanding life, and not rather some ordinary and very pale imitation that only *we* think is obviously different from that of those who live around us.

3. Finally, let us all take a look once again at the commandments of God and confess to ourselves what Christians in this day and age rarely think to confess: viz. that the law of God is a beautiful thing. What a marvelous life is the life lived according to God's commandments. In the case of these commandments: a generous life, a self-sacrificial life of charity and good will; a pure and faithful life with committed relationships and no abusing of others for the sake of one's own pleasure; and, finally, a contented life, with the heart fixed on higher things than the pursuit of money or its pleasures. That was the life of the Son of God when he came among us, and it is the life to which he summons us as his followers.

What an unspeakably ennobling thing it is to be asked ourselves to imitate the Son of God! It is said that Alexander the Great always carried about with him, in a box studded with jewels, a copy of Homer's *The Iliad*. His life of conquest and great exploits as a warrior rose out of his desire to imitate the martial virtues of the warriors of Greece and Troy that he read about times without number in that great classic. We have another book and another set of heroes to imitate and a far nobler life to live in imitation. But, if it was obvious that *The Iliad* had made Alexander what he was, how much more obvious should it be that Jesus Christ has made us what we are; that faith in him is the principle of our lives and can be seen in our brotherly love, in our purity, and in our contentment.

In a world so full of positive hate or of active indifference toward others; in a world soaked in impurity; and in a world anxious and troubled about everything and lusting after more and more of what so quickly passes away, we Christians should stand out like a sore thumb. If those are the orthodoxies of our culture, it should be obvious to everyone that we are heretics!

Brothers and sisters, ponder this evening and in coming days why it was that this great sermon on faith in Jesus Christ should end with a list of things for you and me to do: hard things, holy things, things that make sense only if we really believe but, believing, make all the sense in the world. And then you be sure that your faith manifests itself in precisely this practical and counter-cultural behavior.