

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (20-5-1979 Strandtown Baptist Church)

Hebrews 13:1-6
Additional Reading: Joshua 1

Introduction

The concluding chapter of Hebrews is full of practical Christian duties in the light of all the teaching about redemption, which filled the earlier part of the letter. “The theology is grace; the ethics is gratitude”, i.e. Christian belief is about grace; Christian behaviour is an expression of gratitude. χάρις means both grace and gratitude. C.f. Hebrews 12:28 is translated “Let us have grace” in A.V., and as “Let us be thankful, or grateful” in R.S.V.

The theology is grace, God coming to me. The ethics is gratitude, saying thank you, not by cheap phrases, but by a life that is lived for God. Here the Christian life is described. Sets out how we may say “Thank you” to God.

Live a life of brotherly love

Let brotherly love continue (Hebrews 13:1). Evidently this brotherly love was already a great reality in this church. The writer urges it to continue. It is to be carefully safeguarded, because we can easily lose brotherly love. A finely balanced thing – we are soon upset by a look, a thoughtless word, a misunderstanding. A harsh, critical, fault-finding spirit can soon enter and destroy brotherly love.

The theme of brotherly love dominates the New Testament. **Love one another as I have loved you** (John 13:34,35). **Do good to all men especially those of the household of faith** (Galatians 6:10). **See that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently** (1 Peter 1:22).

This love is expressed in two ways. Firstly, hospitality. **Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares** (Hebrews 13:2), e.g. the incident in Genesis 18 when Abraham entertained three angels when they visited his tent in the heat of the day on the Plains of Mamre. They had come to announce that Sarah would have a son. So also an angel told Manoah he was going to have a son, Samson (Judges 13:3ff).

Hospitality was dominant in the New Testament, and very important in the ancient world. People tried to avoid inns if possible, because they were filthy, expensive, and centres of immorality. Some innkeepers held travellers to ransom. Gentiles often had a system of “guest friendships”, families in various places with an arrangement to open their homes for one another if they were at each other’s town on their travels.

Hospitality was even more important for Christians. Fellowship was so vital. The wandering preachers and prophets were always on the road and therefore in need of hospitality. Christians on ordinary business likewise needed hospitality so they could avoid the expensive, corrupt and immoral public inns. Christianity was, and still should be, the religion of the open door. “Given to hospitality” was the mark of the early church (see Romans 12:13; 1 Timothy 5:10; Titus 1:8; 1 Peter 4:9).

The second way to express brotherly love was to give practical service to Christians who were prisoners. **Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them, and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body** (Hebrews 13:3). Here we see the Christian church in the early days at its loveliest. Christians were often in prison for their faith, and therefore persecuted. Or were captured by pirates. Then the Christian church went into action.

In early days this concern for fellows in prison was outstanding. It astonished the pagans. There were visits, food parcels, payments for liberty if held ransom by pirates. Some Christians even sold themselves into slavery to ransom their friends. No Christian in trouble was ever neglected or forgotten by his fellow Christians.

For us, we have a duty to pray for fellow Christians in countries where there is persecution. This principle is applicable in so many ways of bearing one another's burdens.

Life of purity

Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge (Hebrews 13:4). The writer seems to be fighting a battle on two fronts about purity. There was a tendency to despise marriage as a necessary evil, or concession to weak natures. This attitude has to be shunned by those seeking perfection. It continued in early centuries – low view of marriage in the early fathers. Some suggested marriage differed from fornication only by being legalised. St. Jerome prized marriage and wedlock, because “they give me virgins”. Led to vows of chastity. Virgin life was for super-Christians, virginity was the supreme virtue. Marriage was for those of common clay.

Into this situation comes the writer to the Hebrews declaring marriage to be honourable. It is God's plan for His created order. The unmarried state was not morally or spiritually superior, or more “pure”. One of the gains of the Protestant Reformation was the recovery of this emphasis.

But on the other hand, the New Testament contains warning against the privileges of married state being exercised outside marriage. Hence vigorous condemnation of adultery, fornication and perversion. In a world of moral chaos and distorted values, the Christian standard is clear and unwavering - continence before marriage, faithfulness in marriage. Cannot tolerate erosion of these standards.

Can we excuse it as a result of the pressures of today? The pressures were even greater in the first century, but Christ and the Apostles were not prepared to bend the rules – because that was the way to distortion of God's purpose and unhappiness. In the present situation, the Christian is not to be self-righteous, but should seek to help those in moral trouble. Mindful of tragedies – even in Christian circles – he ought to take heed to himself. Must stand clearly for divine standards. This is a black and white issue.

Life of contentment

Let your conversation be without covetousness (Hebrews 13:5), i.e. way of life to be without covetousness or love of money. **Be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee or forsake thee.** No need to join the spirit of the grasping greedy world, which is ever shouting “more” and “not enough”. That is all they have to live for. We have the continual presence of God. Hence the writer quotes from Joshua: **As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee. I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee** (Joshua 1:5). **The Lord is on my side, I will not fear; what can man do unto me?** (Psalm 118:6).

This is the greatest possession of all. No money can buy or improve on that. He will never let down His people. Never leave – nor forsake $\alpha\nu\omega$ ($\alpha\nu\eta\mu\iota$) - never withdraw the hand that sustains, i.e. fail us or drop us. He will never let His hand slacken or withdraw His sustaining power. He will keep on communicating His strength, and we will feel the conscious security that comes from having a strong gentle hand closing round us and keeping us tight. He will never release His grasp, nothing can come between His and our hand.

“Nor forsake thee” – here is word for us in loneliness, when we long for companionship, have needs which human love cannot meet, dark secrets which no one can share. When we receive little understanding and sympathy from others when we are missing loved ones who are far away or are now no more, when we feel we dare not open out our whole selves to anyone. In those times we can be assured God will not let us go, He will always be there for us.

N.B. Five-fold negative here $\sigma\upsilon \mu\eta \sigma\epsilon \alpha\nu\omega \sigma\upsilon\delta \sigma\upsilon \mu\eta \sigma\epsilon \epsilon\gamma\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\lambda\iota\pi\omega$ “never, never leave, never, never, never forsake”. (Montgomery’s hymn):

“I’ll never, no never, no never forsake”

This is His promise, it is absolutely sure. His honour guarantees His promise. Those who have gone before, and also our own experiences in the past all suggest He is as good as His word. **Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ our Lord** (Romans 8:39). This must lead to contentment and courage and an end of despondency. If God is our helper, then we can embrace all He has said to us. Take His promises for our trust. Take Him as helper – fear not what men do. We will be delivered from fear if we build on the foundation that He is our helper.

George Muller’s diary in 1884 recorded, “We have been greatly helped and blessed. Peacefully we are able to enter 1885, fully assured that as we have God for us and with us, all will be well”. With God as helper, all earthly conditions are tolerable. We can be content. Then the threats of men are unimportant – as long as the order is right and we begin with God.

Life of contentment, courage, banishment of despondency and for faith. We can cast ourselves on God, depending on His faithfulness. Man can be confident in God in all his works, sufferings and circumstances. What a stay of soul is found here. **If God be for us – who can be against us?** (Romans 8:31).

Conclusion

The Christian life should be marked by brotherly love, purity and contentment. Or put another way – concern, continence and contentment. Have you taken possession of all God's promises, or only some? They are the exclusive property of men in Christ. To be in Christ – promises of God are then to be enjoyed.