

Sunday 24th November – Hebrews 13:1-17 ‘Living for Christ now’

Very few people write letters anymore. I used to write a lot – I’m probably the last generation that did – and I’ve kept a bag of letters from the time when I would exchange lots with my friends. I haven’t read them for some years now, but when I do take them out, I still get a sense of joy and excitement from the uniqueness of each one. The writing style, the type of paper, maybe the type of pen. One thing that I notice often – and I’m sure I did it myself when I wrote back – are the times when the writer has material they want to finish, and they end up writing very small, or even moving back up the border of the page on one side to fit in the last pearls of wisdom.

Today’s passage is titled ‘Concluding exhortations’ and like many last chapters of New Testament letters, it has that feel of writing your PSs very small and continuing back up the border. Having covered their argument very carefully over 12 chapters, this last chapters has lots of reflections in quickfire succession, some of which recur or repeat themselves. It’s very different – it feels a bit like those PSs: by the way don’t forget this – or this – oh, I just said, that but I’ll say it again.

If it feels a bit odd, remember that paper was much rarer and more expensive than it is today, or 30 years ago. The length of Hebrews suggests it was written on two pieces of papyrus – and space is running out. So, there’s lots to cram in at the end!

I’ve deliberately included quite a long segment of this last chapter to give you a flavour, but to help us get a handle, you can broadly summarise the main themes with 3 Ls:

The first is love – or as the author begins the chapter: ‘Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters.’ In fact, he or she goes on to talk about love in verse 2 as well: ‘do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers’. At first sight, this seems like a another quickfire instruction, but actually the first two verses are two halves of the same instruction. This is one of those places where the English translation means we miss something, because the original Greek talks about two related words: in v1 *philadelphia*, and then in v2 *philoxenias*. The first means love for your siblings, the second love for strangers. So what they’re basically saying is: **love your fellow Christians, but don’t forget to love people you don’t know, too**. It’s not either/or – it’s both/and. Yes, special love for our church family, but not at the expense of reaching out to embrace others.

The natural way to show love to strangers in the culture of the day was through hospitality – hence the translation. But let’s not miss the connection here – it’s *love*. And it’s the word for love which means ‘liking’, not the more usual *agape* which means selfless service. What the writer is talking about here is that warmth of feeling that inspires loyalty and generosity – keep that, they say, whatever challenges you’re facing. Not only will you bless those you naturally come into contact with, you’ll have love left over to bless strangers and even remember those in prison for what they believe and all who suffer for the sake of Jesus’ name.

It’s a healthy reminder for us: love your church family, but also keep reaching out in love to others. It’s not rocket science, and perhaps after the dense theology of much of the letter it comes as a welcome relief to hear such simple, practical instruction – but you can never hear the basics too often. *Keep loving, for love covers over a multitude of sins*.

An aside on the ‘entertaining angels unawares’ bit: there’s been a lot of ink spilt over this, whole theologies constructed – but I don’t think that’s what the author intended. The idea of entertaining angels is a clear reference to Abraham’s visitors in Genesis 18 – a story his Jewish audience would have known very well. If your hero Abraham did it, the author is saying, so can you – and you never know who you might have blessed. There’s a thought....

So, love – **second, lifestyle**. And here, the author covers lots of things in rapid succession: stay faithful in your marriage (v4), don't fall prey to love of money but practise contentment (v5) and finally, watch your mouth (v15) – or, more precisely, be bold to keep professing Jesus' name, an act which the author calls 'a sacrifice of praise.' Marriage, money, mouth. Just as relevant today, and maybe take a moment to reflect whether any of those particularly speak to you. The temptation to give up or water down our faith takes many forms: we might struggle with a wandering eye, or powerful ambition, or we might just keep silent too often for an easy life. In many ways, the bold decisions to choose purity, contentment and open witness are all sacrifices of praise. Made in love to our glorious Saviour.

Love, lifestyle, and **finally, leadership**. The bible is a big believer in the power of leadership – for good or ill. Wicked leaders destroy communities and nations – but good and godly leaders are a blessing. Much as we've tried to create societies without leaders over the ages, there is just something in human beings which creates order and needs leaders.

A good leader, as v7 says, teaches the word of God faithfully and has a way of life worthy of imitation. For all that we rightly stand against leaders who misuse their power to abuse, let's remember that good leadership is a blessing. And let's pray for our leaders, because they have to meet a higher bar and pay a higher price for failure. They are, as v17 says, 'those who must give an account' – in the kingdom of God there is no such thing as unaccountable leadership, because we all serve a higher leader.

Every leader experiences leadership as both a joy and a burden – and today's passage finishes with a healthy reminder that we can all play our part in helping the leader's experience to be more one than the other. In the end, that blesses everyone – a burdened leader is of little benefit to those they serve.

So there we go – but, as this amazing letter draws to a close, there's one last treat, one last golden nugget hidden away: a little phrase that's probably the best-known verse that nobody knows where it comes from – but it's here in Hebrews chapter 13, verse 8: **'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.'**

Here is the anchor we can hold fast to. For all the deep theology we've savoured, for all the encouragements and warnings, for all the wisdom we've heard even today, what anchors it all? This: *Jesus never changes*. His heart of love doesn't change. His salvation doesn't change. His peace and purpose for your life doesn't change. His promise of life with him forever doesn't change. The truths of this letter don't change or fade away, because Jesus doesn't change – he is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Thank you, Jesus, that you never change. And may this Jesus keep speaking his unchanging love and grace into our lives today, and forever. Amen.