

SERIES: The Absolute Supremacy of Christ in Hebrews  
 SERMON: *Marks of Authentic Christianity*  
 SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 13:1-6  
 SPEAKER: Pastor Josh Black  
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### **Introduction:**

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One of the most frustrating things for parents is how selfish our kids can be. Two things that especially frustrate me are when my kids refuse to share with their siblings and when they exclude one another, or reject one another. As a father I want my kids to get along and so I'm hurt when I see my children being mean to one another or leaving one another out. When one of my kids refuses to share I get especially frustrated. I sometimes find myself saying some of the most ridiculous things like, "How would you like it if your mom and I didn't share this house with you, or this food?" What I'm getting at with a question like this is how much of my kids' very life is dependent on what others have freely shared with them. Sharing is part of the livelihood of a family, and so children should share with one another.

While it may be easier for parents to share with their children than for their children to share with their siblings, all of us struggle with sharing. We also all have a tendency to ignore people who are not important to us. The world we live in makes it easy to live this way. We live in a world where self-reliance is applauded along with individualism and autonomy. We are very self-focused as a society. But this worldview is contrary to the biblical worldview. We are called to focus on God. Specifically, we're called to worship God.

At the end of chapter 12 the author of Hebrews commands his readers to "*worship God acceptably*" (12:28). To worship God acceptably means we give ourselves fully to him in service. The reason we are commanded to give ourselves fully to God is because he has given himself fully to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Our text last week told us how to serve God (with a grateful heart) and gave us a reason to serve God, but it didn't deal with the specific actions that are considered acceptable service. Chapter 13 elaborates with specific actions that are acceptable.

**13:1-6** *Keep on loving each other as brothers. <sup>2</sup>Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. <sup>3</sup>Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. <sup>4</sup>Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. <sup>5</sup>Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." <sup>6</sup>So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"*

There are twelve commands in chapter 13. In our text this morning we'll look at the first five commands. Mike will cover the remaining seven next week and conclude our study in this book. The five commands in our text this morning show us that true service to God involves serving God's people, not yourself. Let's look first at what it means to serve God's people.

## Serve God's People (1-3)

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These verses divide God's people into three categories. The first category is a general category, while the next two are more specific.

### Love your brothers and sisters in Christ. (1)

**13:1** *Keep on loving each other as brothers.*

We're called to love and care for all people, like many of you did who helped out with Love Wichita yesterday, or the Numana event a month ago, but as **Galatians 6:10** says, we are to love and care "*especially [for] those who belong to the family of God.*" Verses 1-3 are dealing specifically with serving other believers. I'd like to share two reasons why it is important to love your brothers and sisters in Christ.

**1. We are all a part of the same family.** In chapter 2 the author develops this theme where he calls believers *sons* (10); he says believers are all in the same *family* as Jesus (11); he calls Jesus the *brother* of all believers (12); he says believers are the *children* of God (13). This is good news! In our sin we are spiritual orphans, but through faith in Christ we have been adopted into God's family. We're actually brothers and sisters in Christ who are bound together by Christ. And because we're family we need to love one another.

Many of you have heard of John Piper. He is a very gifted preacher who serves in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. His ministry has had an impact on thousands of people, including me. When Piper was 50 years old he and his wife Noel decided to adopt a child. Maggie and I were talking once about how amazing it was that a couple would choose to adopt a child at an age when many other people were just beginning to enjoy the empty nest. Then Maggie said something that didn't have an impact at the time, but has since stuck with me. She said, "Can you imagine what it would be like to be adopted by John Piper!? That baby didn't have any clue when she came home with the Pipers how amazing of a family she had been adopted into; what a privilege!" If we have faith in Christ we too have been adopted. We've been adopted into God's family. Do you have any idea how amazing it is that you have been adopted by the glorious God of the universe? What a privilege!

It is a great privilege being a part of God's family, but with great privilege comes great responsibility. We have been adopted into a huge family with lots of brothers and sisters. We love our heavenly Father and he wants us to love all his children. But loving each other as brothers and sisters is not merely a sentimental feeling; it requires right attitudes shown in tangible behavior.<sup>1</sup>

One way we love our brothers and sisters in Christ is by sharing with them. In the same way that it breaks a human father's heart when his kids refuse to share with their siblings it breaks our heavenly Father's heart when we refuse to share with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

**2. Our relationships with other believers will last forever.** The ESV translates this verse a little differently than the NIV. It says, "*Let brotherly love continue.*" The word which is translated "continue" is important in Hebrews. In **1:10-12** we're told the Son *remains* [or

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<sup>1</sup> O'Brien, 2010.

continues]. In **7:3, 24** we're told that Jesus' priesthood *continues* forever. In **10:34** we're told that the eternal inheritance that awaits believers is an *abiding* [or continuing] one. In **13:14** we're told that the eternal city is *enduring* [or continuing]. Notice that every other use of this same verb points to the everlasting nature of its subject. So, when we come to **13:1** I'm persuaded that there are two meanings to the word "continue". It is important to *continue* showing brotherly love, because these relationships will *continue* into eternity; they will remain.<sup>2</sup> There are not many things in this life that will remain in the next life, but our relationships with other Christians will. They're unshakable, like the kingdom we will inherit. Therefore, we should spend time loving our brothers and sisters in Christ now, because those relationships will last forever.

We've seen that we are to love all our brothers and sisters in Christ. Let's look now at two specific groups of Christians we're to love.

### **Love strangers in Christ (show hospitality). (2)**

**13:2a** *Do not forget to entertain strangers...*

When the text tells us to entertain strangers it is not referring to unbelievers, though we are certainly called to reach out to unbelievers. In verse 1 we're commanded to love our brothers and sisters in Christ. In this verse we're commanded to love our brothers and sisters in Christ *whom we don't yet know*.<sup>3</sup>

In the ancient world inns were expensive and they weren't safe. So traveling Christians in the early church, such as missionaries, itinerate preachers, traveling business people, or persecuted refugees would stay with other Christians.<sup>4</sup> This was especially important with persecuted Christians who often had no other place to go.

We may not know a lot of Christians who are being persecuted and in need of our hospitality. However, I still think this verse applies to us. First of all, if we are able, we should seek opportunities to provide financial support for ministries that serve persecuted Christians. But this verse doesn't apply strictly to persecuted Christians; we can also show hospitality to missionaries on furlough and to Christians who are traveling.

I was shown great hospitality when I went to seminary. Tommy and JoAnn Thomas put me, a stranger, up in their home for eight months, free of charge. That is an example of what it means to entertain strangers. Many of you are already involved in these types of ministries. I encourage others of you to look for opportunities to extend the same hospitality. Why is it important to show hospitality? The second half of this verse sheds some light on this question when it says...

**13:2b** *...for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.*

This is a reference to Genesis 18, where Abraham extended hospitality to angels. While I *do* think it is possible that we could entertain angels unawares, I don't think that is the point the

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<sup>2</sup> O'Brien, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Lane, 1991. O'Brien holds the position that this verse is speaking primarily of unbelievers.

<sup>4</sup> Guthrie, 1998.

author is drawing out here. If you remember the story, the angel Abraham hosted brought with him a message from the LORD: *"I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son"* (**Genesis 18:10**). The angel brought a blessing to Abraham; the angel actually brought more blessing to Abraham than he received from Abraham's hospitality. So the point for us this morning is this: We should eagerly show hospitality to other believers because we may well receive more blessing from our guests than we'll give to them.

### **Love those who suffer for Christ. (3)**

**13:3** *Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.*

The author is not referring to general prison ministry here, though there is a place for prison ministry. He's referring to people who have been thrown in prison for their faith. Those who have been thrown in prison for their faith are surely being mistreated. But he doesn't limit this command to those who are in prison, but to anyone who would have been mistreated for their faith.

When verse 3 tells us to "remember" those in prison and those who are mistreated it is asking us to do more than simply call to mind those who are suffering. In those days prisoners relied on family and friends for their basic needs, like food.<sup>5</sup> So, when the author commands us to remember those who are suffering he has in mind tangible, financial care.

Chapter 10 seems to indicate that *at one time* the readers had experienced suffering and had provided care for their fellow believers who were suffering (**10:32-34**). But, it seems as though that had changed at the time this letter was written. Now they were shying away from associating themselves with those suffering; they were shying away from people whose situation was just too messy.

But we can't shy away from suffering Christians. And the reason for this is we are all part of the same family. If one of your biological family members was being mistreated you wouldn't forget about them. You would do everything you could to help them. The same should apply to your brothers and sisters in Christ. That's why the text tells us we are to remember them *"as if you were their fellow prisoners,"* and *"as if you yourselves were suffering."*

We may not personally know any Christians who are being mistreated like these early Christians were, but there are likely Christians you know who you would rather not associate with or get involved with because their situation is just a little too messy? What about people who are still suffering emotionally from a previous time in their life when they were mistreated? There are people in our lives who we may need to extend an extra measure of patience to when interacting with them. It's easier to steer clear of people whose situation is messy, but we're called to treat them as though we were suffering with them.

I'm so thankful that Jesus didn't shy away from our messy situation. In each of these three categories Jesus can relate. He became like us in every way. He was our brother. He was a stranger on this earth when he came from heaven. And he suffered with us. But that's not all. He

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<sup>5</sup> Guthrie, 1998.

also suffered for us. He served us in a tangible way – he died for us so that we wouldn't have to die; he suffered for us in order to rescue us from an eternity of suffering.

If we believe this, we are a part of God's family. And if we are a part of God's family then we will serve God's people, not ourselves.

### **Don't Serve Yourself. (4-6)**

There are two sins and two commands listed in verses 4-5. The two sins both involve "gross self centeredness."<sup>6</sup> Sexual immorality and greed both set *personal* gratification over responsibility to God and the Christian community.<sup>7</sup> These sins are in direct opposition to the three commands listed in verses 1-3. You can't serve both yourself and the body of Christ. We are called to be generous toward the body of Christ, not greedy for our own gain. So the author offers two commands as antidotes to these two sins.

### **Honor marriage. (4)**

**13:4a** *Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure...*

What does it mean that marriage should be honored and the marriage bed kept pure? To honor marriage means marriage must be highly valued; it must be very precious to us.<sup>8</sup> We live in a day when the biblical idea of marriage is not honored in society. But it should be honored in the church. If we are going to serve God by serving his people there is no better place to start than in Christian marriage. Marriage must be held in high esteem among Christians. And this should be shown in our faithfulness to our spouse and our purity. If you are struggling in your marriage don't give up, please get help.

One reason it is so important to maintain purity is because marriage is a reflection of our relationship with Christ. Christ has been faithful to us; therefore we should be faithful to our spouse. When we don't honor marriage and instead live impure lives we reject God, by rejecting his plan for the family.<sup>9</sup> And when we reject God by dishonoring marriage there are consequences.

**13:4b** *...for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.*

Marriage should be honored by all, not just those who are married. Adultery applies specifically to those who are married. When a married man or woman has sex with someone who is not their spouse they commit adultery. But sexual immorality is a more general term and applies to everyone. Any sex outside of marriage is considered sexual immorality. So, an unmarried person can honor marriage by staying away from sexual immorality. The author's idea of sexual immorality may include more than just sex outside of marriage. I think it could also include other forms of sexual impurity, including fantasy and pornography. The Greek word translated as "sexual immorality" is  *pornos* which is where we get the English word pornography.

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<sup>6</sup> Guthrie, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> O'Brien, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Ellingworth, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Lane, 1991.

The point in this passage, however, is not to iron out the details of what exactly constitutes sexual immorality; rather it is to show how important marriage is. Without a strong view of marriage, sexual purity will be difficult to maintain. If you're involved in a pattern of sexual immorality talk to someone in the church who can help. When we don't honor marriage we don't honor God.

### **Be content. (5)**

**13:5a** *Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have...*

The ability to be content seems predicated on our belief of what is really valuable. C.S. Lewis once said, "He who has God and everything has no more than he who has God alone."<sup>10</sup> If God is of infinite worth to us, then we won't love money which is of limited and temporal worth. If we have been given an unshakable kingdom, then it doesn't make sense to put our stock in the things that moth and rust destroy (**Matthew 6:19**). But it makes perfect sense to invest in the lives of people who we will spend eternity with. Instead of loving money we can share our money with the body of Christ because we realize that the treasures we have in Christ are of much more value.

Contentment will show itself in how we care for the needs in the body. When we share with others who are in need we prove that we are content. That type of contentment will not go unnoticed.

In the fourth century the Roman Emperor Julian "wanted to breathe new life into the ancient pagan religion but saw more and more people drawn to Christianity. He wrote with frustration...: '[The Christian faith] has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that the godless Galileans care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them'" (Piper).<sup>11</sup> I find it to be a strong testimony to the contentment and generosity present in the earlier church that even the Emperor of Rome took notice. When we love our brothers and sisters in Christ people will notice.

**1 Peter 3:15** says we should always be ready to give a reason for the hope that we have. Have you ever been asked why you have hope? If not is there a reason? Could it be that you're hoping in the same things that the world is hoping in?<sup>12</sup> Contentment shows how valuable we find God; contentment shows the world that we have hope in God's eternal rewards. Contentment works itself out in sharing what we have with the family of God.

In verses 5-6 we're given two reason or motivations why we should serve God by serving God's people and not ourselves.

### **1. God is with us. (5b)**

**13:5b** *...because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."*

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<sup>10</sup> Guthrie, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Piper, 2003, pg 87.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pg 109.

If I remember anything from my Greek grammar classes this phrase is called an emphatic negation; it is the strongest way you can negate something in the Greek language.<sup>13</sup> I would translate it something like this: “I will never *ever ever* leave you, and I will never *ever ever* forsake you...*ever*.”

Not only is the strength of this statement supported in grammar, but also in the Old Testament examples it is alluding to. These words are found in three places in the Old Testament. Remember when Jacob was running from Esau? He was discouraged, but God said to him, “*I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you*” (**Genesis 28:15**). Remember when Moses spoke to the Israelites right before he died? The people were discouraged because they didn’t know who would lead them. Moses said to them, “*Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.*” (**Deuteronomy 31:6**). Remember when Joshua was commanded to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land? He would have to face strong armies, but God said to Joshua, “*No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you*” (**Joshua 1:5**).

These people in the Old Testament were encouraged in the face of uncertainty and in the face of their enemies by this promise. The Hebrew Christians were to be encouraged by that same promise and we can find confidence in that promise. Serving God is not easy. But we can have confidence when life gets hard, for God will never *ever ever* leave us, and he will never *ever ever* forsake us...*ever*.

## 2. God is our helper. (6)

**13:6** *So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"*

We’ve been exhorted throughout the book of Hebrews to live the Christian life with confidence. In **3:6** we’re told to *hold firmly to [our] confidence*. In **4:16** we’re told to *approach the throne of grace with confidence*. In **10:19** we’re told to have *confidence to enter the most holy place*. And in **10:35** we’re told to *not throw away [our] confidence*. We need to be reminded to live the Christian life with confidence over and over again, because there are many reasons to be afraid. But there is a bigger reason to be confident: the Lord is our helper. We don’t need to be afraid to serve God because the Lord is on our side. The motivation to serve God in our passage last week dealt with looking forward to the future reward. The motivation to serve God in this passage deals with the present reality that God is with us and he is our helper – right now!

We’re not called to live the Christian life in isolation – we’re called to serve the family of God. But we’re not called to serve the family of God alone – God is with us and he helps us. We don’t have to fear what man can do to us. We can serve God with boldness because God is on our side.

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<sup>13</sup> Wallace, 1996, pg. 468.

Everyone agrees selfishness is bad and service is good. But this isn't a sermon on being a "do-gooder" – there is a reason for all of this. Christ gave himself fully for us. The motivation to fulfill these commands is never to earn God's favor. It's out of a response for what Christ has done for us. Because Christ has given himself fully to us, we are to give ourselves fully to him. We're to serve him by serving God's people, not ourselves.

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