

A Better Love

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 30th of November 2003. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled A Better Love and is based on Hebrews chapter 13 verses 1 to 6.

Please be seated. And you may like to turn in the Bibles to page 979 to the first of the two Bible readings today, Hebrews chapter 13, page 979.

And this is resuming a sermon series from the Letter to the Hebrews. We're on the final home stretch, two more after this week, a series that began in February with various breaks during the year.

So let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. And as we gather around it now with reverence and awe, we pray that you may teach our hearts, our minds and our wills so that we may not only understand but do your word.

[1 : 0 8] And we pray this for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. I remember when usually my sisters, very occasionally perhaps me, was in trouble as a child.

Or perhaps when usually my sisters were making excessive demands on my mother, occasionally me, wanting something. My mother would say, stop doing that or no.

And then she might say, mother has spoken. And hers was, or at least it was supposed to be, the final word. After that, no more arguing, no more complaining.

Her word was final, a word to be heard and heeded, a word to be obeyed and a word not to be argued with. Now in effect, the Letter to the Hebrews began like that.

God has spoken. And we were told in the very opening paragraph of this letter that God's final word has been spoken in his son, Jesus Christ.

[2 : 0 6] That through the Old Testament, God has spoken in various ways, but now fully and finally in Jesus Christ, God has spoken his final word, an incontrovertible word, an unarguable word, a word to be heard, a word to be heeded, a word not to be refused either.

However, we saw that in the end of chapter 12, if you look up to verse 25, see that you do not refuse the one who is speaking. And throughout this letter, we've been exhorted not to refuse God's word, not to disobey it.

Because this is a word that comes with a severe warning. If you read on and remember back into chapter 12, we're told there that if we do refuse it, if they in the Old Testament did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven?

Because at that time, God's voice shook the earth, but now he's promised yet once more and I'll shake not only the earth, but also the heaven. So, God's final word is a word of warning, not to refuse his word.

But at the same time, it's a word of promise. And so, the end of chapter 12 goes on to say in verse 28, that we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

[3 : 25] So, though there is this warning that God will shake the heavens and the earth, the promise is that in faith in Christ, we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, even when this world passes away and even when the heavens themselves will shake at God's judgment.

And in response to all of that, this word of warning, a word of promise, a word that we ought not to refuse or decline, we are to give thanks, verse 28 said of chapter 12, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe.

Now come some of the details of that. Now come some of the details about how we live with thanks, by which we offer up acceptable worship to God.

But it's also in the context of the kingdom that we're receiving that will not be shaken. That is the kingdom that will remain. In verse 28, sorry, 27, the end of verse 27, we're told so that what cannot be shaken may remain and that is the kingdom that we're receiving that cannot be shaken.

That kingdom will remain, will endure and will last. And so noticeably, chapter 13 begins by saying literally, let mutual love remain.

[4 : 45] That is, it's tying our practice of mutual love, of brotherly love literally, into a kingdom value. If it's the kingdom that we're receiving that will remain and everything else gets shaken and passes away.

Brotherly love is an essential ingredient of our own practice as we receive the kingdom that will remain. So the writer says, let brotherly love remain. That is, mutual love, brotherly love is a mark of the enduring kingdom of God.

And though at God's judgment, everything will be shaken, earth and heavens, the kingdom will remain and brotherly love will remain and must remain as a mark of that kingdom which we are receiving.

So mutual or brotherly love, the word is Philadelphia, like the United States city that was named after this word, brotherly love, is to remain, to be a mark, an essential ingredient of our practice and behaviour as Christian people.

As an expression of our thankfulness to God and as an expression that is acceptable worship before God, as the end of chapter 12 said. Now brotherly love is not a soppy emotion.

[5 : 56] It's not just sort of warm, fuzzy feelings in your tummy, that sort of idea. Brotherly love is compassionate action for the sake of other people. And it's noticeable that the expression is brotherly love, although in our translation it just says mutual love, to try to show that it's not just males, it's males and females.

But it loses that sense of siblingness, if I can say it like that. That is, this brotherly or mutual love is an expression that we belong together in the family of God.

It's not just mutual love between independent people. It's an expression that Christian people belong in the same family with Christ as our brother. Indeed, chapter 2, way back at the beginning of this letter said that Jesus Christ is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters.

So the family nature of belonging as a Christian is to the fore here. We belong together. We're not fundamentally individuals independent of each other if we're Christians.

Fundamentally, we're brothers and sisters together. In a family that will remain and endure because it's a kingdom family, not just an earthly family. So our expression of mutual love for each other is because we belong together in Christ.

[7 : 14] We're brothers and sisters together in Christ. It reminds us too that Christian faith and Christianity is not a private religion. It's not just about me in my relationship with God.

It is about us together in our relationship together and in our relationship with God as well. Which is why through this letter the writer has been urging his Christian readers not to neglect meeting together, coming together, to encourage each other and build each other up.

It reminds us that we do come together as Christians not only to worship privately to God, but to worship corporately and to encourage each other and build each other up.

Because we belong together and as we saw the last time a few weeks ago in chapter 12, as a foretaste of our heavenly community with God. Now the writer then gives two examples of mutual or brotherly love before he gives two examples of wrong love later in this passage.

In verse 2 is the first example of mutual or brotherly love. He says, Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

[8 : 32] The illusion about entertaining angels is back in the book of Genesis when Abraham and Sarah, his wife, entertained three strangers passing along the road and discovered in the end that they were in fact angels or messengers from God and were blessed as a result of their hospitality to those strangers.

So we are to exercise hospitality as an expression of mutual love, even to strangers. You see, our brotherly love is not just to the people we like.

That's easy. It's to the people that we don't like as well as the people we don't know. That's what sort of hospitality and mutual love is meant to be for Christian people.

Now hospitality was especially important in the ancient world. There were few hotels and those that were were not particularly safe. And so for travellers, traders, as well as missionaries walking the streets and roads, Christians had a particular obligation to be hospitable, even to strangers and not just to Christians either.

Well, hospitality is no less important for us as Christians as well. For us to be hospitable, there's all sorts of ways in which that ought to be practised by us. To be an hospitable church, on the lookout to welcome newcomers here for the first time, who maybe don't know their way around the building or around the services, may not even be Christians.

[9 : 53] So we're not to look out on Sundays just for our friends, but to look out for others and be welcoming and hospitable for them. Get them cups of tea and coffee after church and so on.

But also to be people who are hospitable with our homes, to invite people back for meals during the week for coffee, to be hospitable in providing transport for people who are without transport, driving them to church or whatever other needs they may have.

Be looking out for people who are lonely or perhaps housebound and being hospitable for those people. Providing casseroles for those who are ill, as some of you do already. But sadly we often struggle to find sufficient people to do some of those tasks.

They're not easy, they have a cost. It's a struggle to provide enough billets for the Melbourne University Christian group that's coming here next week or the Moore College group that will come back again next May.

But we ought to be hospitable, eager to spend the cost and partly because there is the motivation in verse 2 that we may well entertain angels without knowing it.

[11 : 00] That is, not worrying about what are angels and so on so much as we may receive blessing from God through our practice of hospitality. So let us be generous in expressing mutual love by way of being hospitable people.

A second example of mutual love comes in the next verse, verse 3. Remember those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them. Those who are being tortured as though you yourselves were being tortured.

Well here is another expression of mutual brotherly love. In particular the writer has in mind Christians who are in prison for their faith or being tortured and persecuted because of their faith.

We've already seen back in chapter 10 in particular that that was a live issue for the readers and perhaps in a way that's not so for us. But nonetheless there are some lessons here for us to practice from verse 3, this command about expressing mutual love by remembering those in prison.

We know that the readers here were in danger of drifting and losing their compassion and care for those in prison. Chapter 10 made it clear that in their early days they were zealous to remember those in prison and even suffer with them for the faith but now perhaps were easing back.

[12 : 21] For them in those days it would be a costly exercise to visit and care for Christians persecuted and in prison. Partly because they were identifying with Christians and therefore perhaps becoming themselves vulnerable to being persecuted or maybe even arrested themselves.

The danger of course is that out of sight is out of mind and so that as they might drift in their faith they might drift in their forgetfulness of their fellow brothers and sisters in prison.

But notice that it's not just remember those in prison. There is a stronger call here. Remember those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them.

That is you're putting yourself into the shoes of those who are suffering or being tortured, imprisoned or persecuted. But it's not just remember them but put yourself in their place.

Certainly I think the idea is that at least you're visiting them but not visiting them with a remoteness about your relationship with them. A real empathy and even more than that, a willingness to suffer is probably caught up in this command of verse 3.

[13 : 31] Mutual love is prepared to suffer with those who suffer. And that's because behind this command like verse 1 is the sense that we belong together.

So when part of the body of Christ is suffering, we ought to be suffering with them. When part of the body of Christ is in prison or being tortured for their faith, even Christians we don't know, we ought to be suffering along with them.

That's what real Christian compassion and mutual love is about, a costly thing indeed. And it strikes me how similar these first three verses are to words of Jesus himself.

He said, for example in Matthew's Gospel, Come you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

Not dissimilar to the end of chapter 12, receive the kingdom. And then he says, For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

[14 : 35] I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. All aspects of hospitality. And then he says, I was in prison and you visited me. Jesus is exhorting his followers to do that for other people.

But in doing so for others, we do it for him. So that our expression of mutual love is an expression of love of Jesus. And I think implicit in that statement of Jesus, as here in Hebrews, is that as we express mutual love, in hospitality, in remembering those in prison, and in other ways, we ought to expect blessing from Jesus himself, as we do so.

Well, these commands are not optional extras. It's not for us as Christians to say, ah, well, my role as a Christian is to do A, B or C. And there's another group of Christians who will remember those in prison and express mutual love and show hospitality.

This is for all Christians, without exception. This is not an optional extra. This is an obligation placed on each one of us as Christians, as we respond to the grace of God with thankfulness and as an acceptable worship of God.

Now, the general command is verse 1, let mutual love continue. Verses 2 and 3 give two specific examples, but mutual love is not restricted to those examples. Now, the writer goes on to give two examples of wrong love.

[16 : 05] Mutual love is the right love, but now two examples of wrong love, one in sexual relations and one with money. Verse 4 says, let marriage be held in honour by all and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled.

Now, that command is a command not only to married people, but it's a command to all Christians. Let marriage be honoured by all. So that we who are single are to honour marriage.

Those of you who are married are to honour marriage. Not only your own marriage, but other marriages as well. And for those of you who are married, the second part applies to you as well.

Make sure your marriage is pure. The marriage bed, it says here, literally your married relationships be kept pure or undefiled. So this is a command to all of us.

For those who are married, you have the obligation to ensure that your marriage is pure and undefiled, faithful to each other, not adulterous or promiscuous.

[17 : 09] But you keep your proper sexual relations for your marriage partner. But for all of us, we're to honour marriage and not seek to undermine it, not to seek to tempt people away from marriage, faithful marriage.

So whether we're single or married, we have an obligation to honour other marriages as well for Christian people. Now our society tells us that marriage is an outdated institution.

It's an ongoing debate. There have been articles about it in The Age in recent weeks. Society tells us that sleeping around is fine, so long as it's not with the football captain's wife. Society tells us that the Bible's view on sex is hopelessly outdated and irrelevant, old-fashioned, completely out of touch with modern times.

But God tells us that we are not to refuse his word, as we saw in chapter 12, verse 25.

And as we'll see next week, just in a few verses' time in verse 8, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. And at least at one level, that has a context of an ongoing, unchanging moral standard in the context of this chapter.

[18 : 29] So whose word do we heed? Do we heed the word of a changing society? Marriage is outdated, sleep around, it doesn't matter, have your bit of fun on the side.

Or do we heed the word of an unchanging God? So that even though it crosses and counters our culture's standards about sexual relations and marriage, nonetheless, we're prepared to be outdated, old-fashioned if that's the case, because God's word is unchanging.

And God's word, remember, carries with it a great warning, summarised at the end of verse 4 here, for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Whose word are we going to trust?

The word of a changing society? Or the word of an unchanging God? I know which, where my money is, on this. An unchanging God will judge fornicators and adulterers.

Make sure we don't refuse his word. Now these are not light matters. Scriptures often deal with sexual relations. They are important issues for Christians to practise right.

[19 : 47] They're important because sexual faithfulness goes to the heart of understanding God and his faithfulness to us. So the way we regard sexual matters reflects the way in the end that we regard God.

So we're to hold fast to the standards of God and unchanging God and his unchanging moral standards. We're also to fear the warning. God will judge fornicators and adulterers very clearly and this is by far not the only place in Scripture that testifies to that.

And especially as chapter 12 ended, our God is a consuming fire. The judgement of God is certainly something to fear and it ought to be provoking us to sexual faithfulness and the honouring of marriage.

So that's one wrong love, if you like. A bad practice of love in sexual adultery or promiscuity. A second wrong love comes in the next verse, verse 5.

Keep your lives free from the love of money. Well as we've seen in the last three weeks with the sermon series of some of Jesus' teaching in Luke's Gospel on money, money can easily become an idolatry.

[21 : 00] Not that money itself is wrong but that the love of money is idolatry. The worship of a false God and it is such an easy trap for us to fall into.

So we're to keep ourselves free from the love of money. Verse 5 begins. It's a wrong love. And then comes its positive counterpart, if you like.

Instead of loving money, we're to be content with what we have. Now on this score, again, the readers of this letter originally began well because under persecution they were prepared for all their goods to be plundered, we were told in verse 10.

But now it seems from later in verse 10 and chapter 10 and here that they are perhaps succumbing to the temptations of the world to love money. But as we know all so well, love of money and love of God are incompatible.

Love of money is incompatible with trusting the promises of God because love of money is a dissatisfaction with the provisions of God.

[22 : 06] We've seen that in the last three weeks as well. Now we know that this letter is written to Christians who are in danger of drifting from faith and one of the signs of drifting in faith is discontentment with the promises of God because when we drift in faith we're thinking that somehow we'll be more satisfied down a different path and so if we're drifting from faith it will mean that in some respects we're dissatisfied with what God delivers and the promises of God.

That somehow they're not enough and we want more and so very often we turn either to wrong sexual practice or we turn to the love of money.

When faith drifts discontentment starts. And discontentment leads to dissatisfaction with God. A grumpiness with God because we don't think He gives us enough.

And dissatisfaction leads to wrong loves and idolatry and the worship of another God in effect. It's a dangerous path to go down.

The path of discontentment. We're to practice being content. How do we do that? The end of verse 5 says be content with what you have because God has said I'll never leave you or forsake you.

[23 : 35] In effect that's a summary of the promises of God. We're to be content because God promises I'll never leave you or forsake you. It's one of the things that so impressed me in the book I mentioned a couple of weeks ago by our brother Yun the story called The Heavenly Man that through all the trials and tribulations and persecutions and sufferings and beatings and deprivations that he endured he was never discontent with the promises of God and he clung to them tenaciously all the time.

The writer here quotes one of God's common promises I will never leave you or forsake you promised back to Jacob in the book of Genesis promised to ancient Israel in the wilderness promised to Joshua as the people entered into the land indeed in effect promised by Jesus before his resurrection I'll be with you always even to the end of the age.

God says I'll never leave you or forsake you and in effect that's a summary of the argument of this letter as well because in many complex ways as we've seen during the year the writer has shown us that God will never leave us or forsake us because Jesus' death has provided us an open door to heaven and Jesus' resurrection and ascension to heaven is to anchor our souls in the heavenly throne room of God there for eternity so that God will never leave us or forsake us and the exhortation of this letter to the Hebrews is that we're to draw near with hearts full of faith come with confidence and enter the most holy place by means of the death of Jesus that is in effect God saying I'll never leave you or forsake you draw near always at any time access to God is totally available for us because of the blood of Jesus our great high priest and so in effect the writer is summarising the argument of this letter he's summarising the promise of the gospel he's summarising the promise of the Bible to us that God will never leave us or forsake us and that is guaranteed firm, sure and certain because of what

Jesus has done for us in dying and rising and ascending to heaven no one can take it away no one can stop God keeping that promise for us that wonderful promise for us and if we cling to that promise we'll never be discontent or dissatisfied the promise that God will never leave us or forsake us tied up and bound up to what Jesus has done for us already is all that we could ever need or want or desire we ought never to be discontent or dissatisfied with God because his promise is sure and he is faithful to the promises that he has made so if God promises I'll never leave you or forsake you our response like the writer of Psalm 118 as verse 6 says so we can say with confidence the Lord is my helper I'll not be afraid what can anyone do to me on that rhetorical question at the end is really emphatically saying no one can do anything to me to take away the promise of God no one can come between me and God no one can force

God to abandon me or forsake me so it's a statement of faith and confidence in the promises of God that's what breeds contentment trusting in the promises of God well I quite like reading crime novels and in crime novels whether it's Agatha Christie or Inspector Morse or whoever it is the detective the investigator is always looking for the motive the motivation for who has done the crime there must be a motive they say which precipitates person X doing crime whatever well note the motives in this passage we've looked at today in verse 2 our practice of hospitality is to be motivated by the promise of blessing for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it our practice of sexual faithfulness in marriage is to be motivated by the fear of judgment for God will judge fornicators and adulterers and the promise of or and our practice of contentment and freedom from the love of money is to be motivated by the promise of God

[28 : 04] I'll never leave you or forsake you in verse 5 that is the motivation for us to live lives that are right is the word of God the promise of judgment and the promise of a kingdom that will not be shaken the promise that God will never leave us or forsake us this whole letter is in fact a call to us not to drift in faith but to come back to and trust fully in the promises of God and heed the warnings of the word of God for this letter is telling us that God has spoken his word is final unarguable his word of warning we must heed his word of promise we are to trust his word is final expressed most fully in the work of Jesus Christ dying rising and ascending to heaven Jesus is the guarantor of all of God's words the guarantor of his promises as well as his warnings of judgment and God wants us to take his words seriously not lightly to fear the warnings and to trust the promises so we are to fix our eyes on Jesus the guarantor of God's word we're to run with perseverance the race set before us casting aside wrong loves and practicing brotherly love and saying with confidence as the psalmist said the Lord is my helper

I'll not be afraid what can anyone do to me because we're receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken by anyone or anything so then let us ensure that in our lives mutual love remains people to meet to people to see