

Keep on Loving

Hebrews 13:1-8 (NIV)

¹ Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. ² Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. ³ Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. ⁴ Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. ⁵ 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." ⁶ So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?" ⁷ Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Often at the end of these letters written to first century Christians, it feels like a bit of a hodge-podge of last words, and the letter to the Hebrew Christians is no exception. It's kind of like what you had to say to the kids before they headed out the door for their first day of school this week: Did you brush your teeth? Do you have your lunch? Did you remember your water bottle? Listen to your teacher. Make sure you follow the rules! If you have a problem or need help, ask your teacher. Even though these closing words of this letter feel like a hodge-podge of closing encouragements, there is a through line. These eight verses all deal with an aspect of loving God by loving people or things: love God by loving one another as brothers and sisters; by loving strangers; by remembering those being persecuted; by respecting his gift of marriage; by loving what God has given you; by imitating the spiritual leaders he has placed in your life. These are closing encouragements for God's people to work on. As we go through these, think about which one you want to work on.

The first: Love God by loving other people. "Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers.... Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering." (verses 1-3) For the original recipients of these encouragements, their love for their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ was still burning strong. However, because they were under persecution, because some of them had been arrested for what they believed, because some of them had faced insults and had their property unlawfully taken from them, they needed the encouragement. It was a temptation to ignore their brothers and sisters in Christ, to disassociate from them, to give up meeting together, because they knew that just by being seen with other Christians, they could have that same persecution rain down on them. So, don't talk to them. Don't open the door for strangers because they could be spies of the enemy. Leave those in prison forgotten in prison or you might end up there as well. Pay no attention to these people.

What about for you? Do you need to be encouraged to keep on loving your brothers and sisters in Christ? To love strangers? To remember those being persecuted, those in prison, those being mistreated? Do you fear persecution simply for being associated with other Christians? Maybe you need this encouragement because you often find yourself getting wrapped up in your own problems and in your own life. You have so many things going on that you don't have the time or the energy to invest yourself in others. You are overwhelmed with your difficulties and your problems and your life, and so you don't stick around to talk with others at church. You gotta get going, get working on the next thing. This affects your hospitality to strangers, that maybe you don't stop and greet the new person that you're seeing for the first time or simply don't even notice them because you are so fixated on what you gotta do. Is this an area of your Christian life that you need to work on?

How about loving God by respecting his institution of marriage? "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral." (verse 4) Let's not kid ourselves and say that our day and age is so much more sexually depraved than in past generations. Even back in the Old Testament, God laid down all sorts of laws regarding sexual morality – everything from affairs to incest to homosexuality to bestiality. He had to spell out all this sexual immorality to his people – God's people – to have them avoid it, to keep sex in its intended place: marriage, the union of one man and one woman till death do they part. This is where God blesses sexual relationships.

Sexual promiscuity seems so rampant today. Try it before you buy it. Live together to see if you are compatible. Who cares about a piece of paper to say you're married. Unhappy with your love life? What's so wrong about letting your eyes wander? While these thoughts are becoming seemingly more acceptable, they are also wrecking lives. When someone engages in the oneness reserved for marriage outside of that divinely established institution, they are taking away that unity from either a current marriage or a future one. They have given away a piece of themselves that can't be returned. When the marriage relationship is honored and respected as God established it as an exclusive relationship between a man and a woman, you show love not only to the person and

their marriage, but you also show love to the one who created marriage for us. Is this something that I need to work on? Is this something that I need to warn others about, to teach them to love God by respecting his gift of marriage?

Do you need to work on loving God by being happy with what he has given you? “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have.” (verse 5) As the Hebrew Christians were in danger of losing their property just because they were Christians, they were concerned about their financial security. They wondered how God would provide for them. They were tempted to trust in wealth over God, to love money more than God.

There’s nothing new under the sun. We struggle with the same temptation: to love money over God. We live in a consumer culture. We want things. And after we get those things, we want more things. It doesn’t matter how much money you have, you always want more. It’s a danger to look at what we have – whether it’s a lot or a little – and be discontent. Do I find myself always wanting more, never satisfied with what I have? Do I need encouragement to be content with what I have?

One more encouragement to love God is by imitating the spiritual leaders he gave you. “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.” (verse 7) Not only were they called to imitate the faith of believers who have long since passed away, but also the people God had put into their lives. Maybe these people were their pastors or elders. Maybe they were just other good Christian people who taught them the Word of God. Maybe they were the ones who had baptized them. Some may have passed away already. Some may have been imprisoned. Some may have left to serve others. No matter the case, the encouragement was to consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

Do you strive to imitate the faith of your spiritual leaders, of those who spoke the word of God to you? This could be a former pastor, a Sunday School teacher, a parent, a grandparent, a spouse, a child, a friend. Do you spend time thinking about them and the faith that they showed you? Do they serve as an encouragement for you to imitate their faith or do you resign yourself to never living the Christian faith like they do? Is imitating their faith an impossibility so that you don’t even try? Do you even think about them?

We all need these encouragements. So often in my Christian life, I fail to do these things, to love my brothers and sisters in Christ, to love God’s gift of marriage by respecting it and honoring, to be content with what God has given me, and to imitate my spiritual leaders. When I fail to do these things, I fail to love God. How can this be changed? How can I do better?

In the midst of all these encouragements, God says, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” He is the Immanuel, the God with us. He lived as one of us, keeping all of these encouragements perfectly, loving people no matter the persecution that he would receive, no matter the problems he faced; teaching people to honor marriage as God’s institution from creation; showing contentment with the little he had; showing his respect for the Bible teachers of his day when he sat in the synagogues and listened to the Word of God proclaimed through them and asked them questions in the Temple. Christ loved God for us. What he did will never change because “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” (verse 8) Since Christ loved God for us in all these ways, now we know that God is with us to help us live these encouragements.

When it comes to loving God by loving my brothers and sisters in Christ, by loving strangers, by remembering those who are being persecuted for their Christian faith, I will not be afraid of what people can do to me because I know that my God is with me, never to leave my side. No one is stronger than him. No one can overcome him. Therefore, I will not be afraid of all the things going on in my life to the point where I focus only on myself to the neglect of the believers around me. I will extend a hand and a conversation with one of my fellow churchgoers who I have not talked to in a while. I will work on showing hospitality to the newcomers at church, taking the extra 5 minutes to introduce myself and learn at least one thing about them. I will pray for those Christians who are being persecuted, those imprisoned or being mistreated, give my old Meditations books in the box on the information table so that my church can send them to WELS Prison Ministry.

Because he is with me and will never leave me or forsake me, I can love God by fighting the temptations of sexual immorality, to close that web browser, avoid that conversation with that person that I know I shouldn’t have, and instead give thanks to God for my relationship status – whether married or single – recognizing that both are gifts from God. Maybe I will love God and his gift of marriage by confronting someone I know who is not honoring marriage, who is not keeping the marriage bed pure. Maybe I will ask someone to help me to keep it pure. Maybe I will show my love for God and his institution of marriage by talking to my kids about keeping the marriage bed pure and honoring God by saving yourself for marriage.

Because the Lord is my helper and has already given me all that I need for my body and life, I will not live in fear even when my livelihood is threatened. Rob me of my house. Rob me of my freedom. Yet no one can rob me of the salvation that God has won for me, of the glorious riches that Christ earned for me. The Lord will see me through. I can love him by trusting him even when the situation looks so bleak.

I can love God by showing his love to the leaders he gave to me, the ones who spoke the word of God to me. I will pray for them, encourage them with my words, with how I live my life by attending church and Bible study, by actively serving others as they did. I will strive to be a model of Christian faith as they were because the word of God that they spoke is changeless, just like our God.

We can show our love to God in so many different ways. Which of these encouragements will you choose to work on? As you do, remember that God will never leave you or forsake you, that the God who promises to do this is the same yesterday, today, and forever. So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?" (verse 6) Amen.

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Pastor Jonathan Klein

pastorklein@lightofthevalley-wels.org