**Hebrews 13 Virtues**

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Hebrews 13:1-8,9-14

**13**Let mutual love continue. **2**Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. **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.[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews+13#fen-NRSV-30228a)] **4**Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. **5**Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” **6**So we can say with confidence,

“The Lord is my helper;  
    I will not be afraid.  
What can anyone do to me?”

**7**Remember your leaders, those 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. **9***Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings; for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food,[*[*b*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews+13#fen-NRSV-30234b)*] which have not benefited those who observe them.****10****We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent[*[*c*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews+13#fen-NRSV-30235c)*] have no right to eat.****11****For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp.****12****Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood.****13****Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured*.**14**For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.**15**Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. **16**Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

**17**Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing—for that would be harmful to you.

**18**Pray for us; we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. **19**I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you very soon.

This section of Hebrews is one of the chapters that are often entitled something like “final exhortations.” It’s a bit of a list of virtues, a bit of theology, a bit of leave-taking. But you know, I think these kinds of chapters are actually incredibly important. They show us and remind us how to live. But sometimes it is a bit hard to preach them. Although I’m sure that another person would do a really good job of exposition of this passage, what I hope for is that, as a result of our looking at this passage today, we’d be a little more likely to follow in the way of virtue. The trouble is, I think that virtue is usually more “caught” than “taught,” and it’s something we need to practice than just hear about.

By being more “caught” than “taught,” I mean we usually catch on to what virtue is by observing what other people do, and imitate them. And that’s going to be hard to do in the next 20 minutes, to say nothing of practicing! But perhaps, perhaps, we can tell stories about good people, and this will help us imagine with our mind’s eye what it would mean for us to imitate them in our own way. So, I have a few stories to tell. Maybe this will spark stories you have; I’d like to hear them. We’ll see how far we get!

The first thing the writer to the Hebrews writes is, “**Let mutual love continue**.” In older or less ungendered translations it says something like, “Let brotherly love continue.” In other words, the writer is urging us to keep on loving our sisters and brothers in the faith.

I have a story about that. The names and some details have been changed in this story and perhaps others for the sake of privacy.

I was once living in a Christian community. And there was guy, Murphy, who was a bit hard to get along with. Well, we’re all pretty hard to get along with, but Murphy had a history of drug abuse, and every once in a while every few years or so, the pain of life and his physical pain meant that Murphy would start using again. Another member of the community, Anne was kind of the care coordinator for Murphy. Basically, it was her job to figure out the best way for the community to deal with Murphy, especially when he was using. So, she would arrange drug treatment for him, or arrange medical care. What was hardest was when she basically had to let Murphy hit bottom again, so that he could accept the care provided for him. This meant, for example, getting him a room for a week or so, paying that, and then just leaving Murphy on his own. Murphy would get angry, especially at Ann, call her heartless and all kinds of things. And Ann made some really bad mistakes at times, for example, sending him cross country to this really terrible rehab unit that she thought was going to be great for him. Eventually, Murphy would come back to his right mind, start treatment, and eventually be integrated back into the life of the community. Ann showed really family love for Murphy, treating him as her own brother. But I think you could say that Murphy showed real family love for Ann and the community, because he knew that he wanted to be part of that family, and for the love of the family, he was willing to do what it took to be of it.

The second admonition is, “**Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it”.**

My second story is about Bess and me! As you probably know, one of the reasons that we bought this big house was so that we could offer hospitality to others. Pretty early on, there was this woman who came to church once, and I think Bess said that we had a room upstairs that people could use as a place to stay, and have a break or retreat if they chose. Later on, that woman said that, yes, she would like to spend some time sorting through some things, and she came and stayed. If I remember correctly, we didn’t spend a lot of time together; she really took that alone time seriously. But it was hospitality to a stranger.

And, do you know who that person was? It was our own dear CarolSue. I suppose I could say she is our dear angel, but I’m not going to. But we remember that “angel” means “messenger,” and we have been very grateful for the messages that CarolSue has brought to our congregation. Welcoming her was one of the best choices we’ve made in the last ten years or so!

I asked CarolSue if it were all right for me to share this story, and she texted me that she, too, took a risk in coming to stay with people she didn’t know very well. I think we can learn from this that sometimes we need to be the stranger that someone else shows hospitality to.

I guess I should also say that we’ve welcomed some very odd people, too, who were more entertaining than message-bringing. And we’ve tried to trust God on the one hand, and be discerning on the other, as to whom we’ve welcomed to stay. But meeting people like CarolSue is certainly a good encouragement to continue!

The third admonition is, **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.** I think the writer is particularly talking about brothers and sisters who have been imprisoned because of their witness.

My prison story is the story of Hans Brael, who was arrested in 1557 in Switzerland for being an Anabaptist. He was tried and tortured, put on the rack, and was so mistreated that even his accuser felt bad about it in the end. Eventually, they put him a “deep, dark, filthy tower,” in nearly complete darkness. Yes, there were rats that would eat his food unless he ate it quickly, and drown in his water jug until he figured out how to cover it. His fellow Anabaptists were finally able to get a message to him, and ask for some small token, even if it were just a straw, to assure them that he had remained faithful. He had almost literally nothing; even his clothes had rotted off his body; except for the collar of his shirt; and this is what he sent. You can imagine how the church felt! Brael was eventually able to escape, when, on the way to board a ship to become a slave, his captor got drunk, and Brael was able to walk away. After two years of such great hardship, he was restored to life, and the bonds of connection between him and his sisters and brothers remained strong. Imagine if they had not remembered him while he was in prison!