

13. Hebrews 13:1-25



Hebrews 13:1

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

He is alluding to the scene where Abraham and Sarah gave hospitality, only to discover that their guests were messengers from God (see Genesis 18:1-21).



Rublev

Hebrews 13:3

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.

They know from their own past experience what it means to show solidarity with those who are imprisoned or undergoing torture (see 10:32-34). Jesus chose to share to the full our human condition (2:14). As brothers and sisters in his household (3:6), we are to give ourselves for each other as he gave himself for us.

We recall Jesus' words: '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, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me' (Matthew 25:35-36).

Hebrews 13:4

Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.

In the context of love, it is not surprising that our author moves immediately to speak of sexuality, for where else do all the dimensions of being human meet more intimately and more mysteriously than in our identity as man or woman? It is traditional Jewish and Christian wisdom that sexual relationships are to be sacraments in which we encounter the divine at the heart of another person cherished in love. There are divinely mysterious depths in every person. Sexual experience invites us into this mystery in which two people enjoy, encourage, heal, forgive and create each other in loving trust.

There is a restlessness and a mysterious yearning at the heart of sexuality, for we know that we are not sufficient of ourselves. We need the other; we long to be in communion with the other. It is common human wisdom, born of experience, that when we give expression to our sexual desire we should do so in a way that recognises the sacredness and the dignity of our own person and of the other. Our author reminds us that we will be judged on how we express our sexual desires and needs. This is true of ‘fornicators’ whose sexual behaviour ignores all delicacy, bypasses love, and uses, even abuses, another person in a selfish attempt to assert one’s own power or gratify one’s own misdirected passion. It is especially true of ‘adulterers’ whose sexual behaviour ‘defiles’ the sacred bond that unites those who are committed to each other in the covenant of married love.

Hebrews 13:5

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' (Deuteronomy 31:6,8).

The link between sex and money is made also by Paul: 'Fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among saints ... Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God' (Ephesians 5:3,5; also Colossians 3:5-6).

Hebrews 13:6

So we can say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?’ (Psalm 118:6)

The Lord will see that we are given all the love and all the material possessions that we really need; that is, that we need to experience the intimacy of divine communion, to carry out the will of God, and to inherit the promise of eternal life. We are to place our trust in the Lord.

Hebrews 13:7-9

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings.

The focus of these verses is Jesus. Those who went before them spoke the word of God when they spoke to them of Jesus. It was in Jesus that they put their faith, and their heroic lives are a testimony to their faith. Jesus does not change. What these leaders taught them yesterday remains true today and will be true tomorrow. They must not allow themselves to be swept off course by the various strange teachings that are being aired among them.

Hebrews 13:9

It is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food, which have not benefited those who observe them.

Unlike Judaism, Christianity had no official protection under Roman law. It would seem that some among the Jewish Christians were suggesting a return to the practices of Judaism with its distinctive regulations governing food. Their only security, declares our author, is to be in Christ.

Paul made the same point when he wrote: ‘The kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit’ (Romans 14:17). ‘Food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do’ (1 Corinthians 8:8).

Paul also had to warn his readers against flirting with teaching that was not centred on Christ:

‘As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ’ (Colossians 2:6-8).

‘We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But living the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ’ (Ephesians 4:14-15).

‘They are not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith. But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk’ (1 Timothy 1:4-6).

Hebrews 13:10-11

We have a sacrificial altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat. 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.

Once again it is the sacrificial offering of blood on the day of atonement that provides our author with the imagery for what he wants to say about Jesus. The regulations covering the sacrifice forbade the priests to eat the bodies of the animals whose blood was taken into the sanctuary by the high priest: 'No sin offering shall be eaten from which any blood is brought into the tent of meeting for atonement in the holy place; it shall be burned with fire' (Leviticus 6:30).

The bodies of the animals had to be treated as impure, by being taken outside the encampment far from any sacred place and destroyed: 'The bull of the sin offering and the goat of the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the holy place, shall be taken outside the camp; their skin and their flesh and their dung shall be consumed in fire' (Leviticus 16:27).

Hebrews 13:12-13

Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured.

This is how they treated Jesus who offered himself, his own blood, to do what the sacrifice of the day of atonement was unable to do: gain for us ‘eternal redemption’ (9:12). He ‘removed sin by the sacrifice of himself’ (9:26). They cast him out of the city (Mark 15:20) to destroy him as something unclean. Rather than ‘seek ourselves’ in the promised security of observant Judaism, we must ‘take up our cross’ and follow Jesus (Mark 8:34). We must ‘go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured.’

Hebrews 13:14-16

For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect doing good and sharing [κοινωνία] what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

The way to ‘offer to God an acceptable worship’ (12:28) is to share in the life and worship of the new covenant community. Our city, our sanctuary, our sacrificial altar is where Jesus is, in heaven. Ours is a pilgrimage of faith. Our sacrifice is to be ‘a sacrifice of praise to God’ (Psalm 50:14). The ‘fruit of our lips’ (Hosea 14:2) is to be a life of self-giving in shared love [κοινωνία]. The psalmist, like those to whom this oration is addressed, was in great distress. He called out to God and was heard and in his joy he prayed: ‘in the midst of the congregation I will praise you’ (Psalm 22:22). Our author placed these words on the lips of Jesus earlier (see 2:12). He calls us to do the same.

Hebrews 13:17

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.

He referred earlier to the past leaders of the community who spoke the word of God to them and taught them to believe in Jesus (13:7). It is important that they ‘**obey**’ (πείθω, trust), that is to say, have the same trust in, their present leaders. In calling on them to **submit** (ὑπείκω) to these leaders, he does not use ὑποτάσσω. He is not focusing on observing the proper order, or keeping their proper place. Rather he is urging them to listen to the teaching of those who have won their trust, because they are ‘**keeping watch over your souls**’.

Hebrews 13:18-19

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

The author includes himself among them, asks for their prayers and assures them that he wants only what is best for them. He hopes to return to them soon.

Hebrews 13:20-21

Our author concludes his oration with a prayer:

Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Isaiah sings of the redemption of Israel by God acting through Moses 'the shepherd of his flock' (Isaiah 63:11). Jesus is the 'great shepherd' who, as he has said on numerous occasions, by his own blood brought us an eternal redemption and realised for us the new, 'eternal covenant'.

There are echoes here of the promise of God made through the prophet Zechariah: 'because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit' (Zechariah 9:11).

The author prays that God will give them all the grace they need to do God's will. The work of God has already been realised in Christ, but is yet to be realised in his disciples, and it is God who will make it possible for us to do what is pleasing in his sight. There are echoes here of Paul's words: 'Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen' (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Hebrews 13:22 Postscript

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly.

He would prefer to deliver the oration himself, but as he cannot be with them at this time, he has written what he wants to say and is sending it to them. As the verb ‘appeal’ (παρκαλεω), and the related noun ‘exhortation’ (παρκαλήσις) indicate, he is conscious of relaying to them the call (καλεω) of the risen Christ (see 3:13).

Hebrews 13:23-25

I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been set free; and if he comes in time, he will be with me when I see you. Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy send you greetings. Grace be with all of you.

He relays to them the good news that Timothy, who is obviously well-known to them, has been released. It would seem that he is on his way to join the community, and if Timothy reaches him in time, they will come together to see them.