
The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

Christian Behavior

Hebrews 13:1-3

Part 3 - Concern for the afflicted

1 Let love of the brethren continue. 2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it. 3 Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body.

Lord, give us the meaning and spirit of Your Word while it lies open before us;
Apply Your Word with power to our souls, threatening or promise, doctrine or precept,
whatever it may be; lead us with trembling and with joy into the soul and marrow of Your Word.
(adapted from C.H. Spurgeon)

Let me remind you of the reason why this letter to the Hebrews was originally written. It was given as a sermon to encourage a beleaguered little church made up primarily of Hebrews or Jews, many of whom had left Judaism, left the practice of Old Testament laws and rituals, to consider the claims of Christianity – to look at Jesus and the life He offers. Some of these Hebrews had fully embraced Christ by faith, while others were faltering, tempted to fall away from Him and the blessings of New Covenant which promised life and peace.

And, as you might well imagine, if a church has a number of people who are discouraged, if there are those who are falling away from the fellowship and even the faith – such things could cause tremendous difficulties – interpersonal relationships would be strained, even mocking and ridicule could become commonplace flowing both ways, from those who fell away as they mocked the faith of those remaining in the church as well as from those in the church who might scorn those who had left or were considering leaving.

And so, after giving this wonderful treatise on the *superiority of Jesus* over all things, but especially over the symbols and types as found in the Old Testament law, our author has turned his attention to a series of exhortations. These exhortations are almost proverb like, each verse containing a truth that must be considered and applied to one's own life. Contained here in Hebrews 13 is truly wisdom applied; wisdom for proper godly living. These exhortations are calls to keep pushing forward in faith. All of these exhortations are simply applications of faith by which we live holy lives unto the Lord – being holy even as the Lord our God is holy (1 Peter 1:16). In effect, these exhortations reflect what is to be our response to the superiority of Christ. These express how we are to live. And the first three of these exhortations, found in Hebrews 13:1-3, while carrying important independent thoughts and also marvelously linked together.

The first command given in verse 1, **“Let love of the brethren continue”** is really a summary of all that God would have us to do toward the brethren, which is to love and manifest a true care and concern for one another. This is a call to embrace one another as fellow-members of the body of Christ and to care for and love each other even as we love ourselves.

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The second command given is in verse 2, **“Do not neglect to show hospitality...”** which is a call to develop the brotherly love, that kind affection and closeness experienced the local church with strangers – with those we do not readily know well.

And this then brings us to the third command, which, as we will see, is not disjointed from the other two, but rather is simply a further application of brotherly love. We are called to **“Remember the prisoners [and to remember] those who are ill-treated.”** The idea here then is that we should not only love those who are near [which is brotherly love]; and not only should we love those come near to us from a distance, from the outside as it were [which is a love for strangers]; but we should also love those members of the body of Christ who are separated from us, whether they be nearby or far away, especially if they are being persecuted for their faith. The call here is to **“remember”** – literally “to be mindful or to constantly recall to the mind.” I might rephrase it this way, *“always allow your mind to recall those who are in prison and who are ill-treated.”*

Who are the prisoners and ill-treated?

But just who are these prisoners and who are these being ill-treated? While there are some good ministries that seek to minister to anyone in prison, especially unbelievers, that is not what the author has in mind here. To be sure, believers are called by God to love all men and to seek to minister to all men which would include those in prison. We have no right to hate or despise anyone, but should seek the best for all men by presenting them the gospel of Jesus Christ. Additionally, there are great numbers of people who are ill-treated around this world and believers ought to reach out to help anyone who suffers injustice from the hands of others. For the Lord Himself takes notice of every injustice, not only of those which are committed against His people, but also of those which are committed toward all people.

But what is in view here in Hebrews 13:3 are those who are imprisoned and ill-treated for the sake of the Gospel – the good news of the greatness of Jesus Christ – the very message the author of Hebrews had been communicating. And it is interesting to note that in the providence of God in history, the Lord has had at least two groups of people; those upon whom He has granted the joy of peace and freedom, and those upon whom He has granted to endure adversity. Not all of God’s people have been called to resist ungodliness to the point of shedding blood. But there are always some. Even today, in areas of Africa and Indonesia, believers – our brothers and sisters in Christ, are being persecuted, imprisoned, tortured, maimed and even killed, some for preaching the Gospel, others for simply being Christians – for simply desiring to confess and follow Christ.

The call then is to remember, to always recall to the mind, those who are imprisoned saints and those who are ill-treated for their faith. And while this surely speaks primarily of those who were imprisoned because of their faith in Christ, it certainly doesn’t exclude those who come to know Him while in prison, perhaps by the testimony of one of the incarcerated faithful.

A Call to Remember

So then, we must determine just what it means to “remember” and what is its application for us? The Puritan William Gouge says of this term something insightful:

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This word remember is here the more fitly used, in that remembrance of one's misery stirs up bowels of compassion, and puts men on to afford all manner of succour [help/relief].

In other words, if we are going to rightly apply this exhortation, it must begin with our developing a sympathetic compassion for those in distress; a great desire to do all that we can to help such a brother or sister in their affliction. To remember this prisoners and ill-treated then is to think about them, meditate on their condition, as though you were right there with them in that prison; right there in their bonds and difficulties. Oh beloved – some weekly, fleeting thought as we read a bulletin insert or some email is not the proper application of this verse. It is not enough to gasp at their condition and simply say, “That’s a shame; that’s too bad.” The text says here that we are to remember them how – **“as though in prison with them”** – that is as though we were literally suffering with them. So then, what are some things that a right compassion and remembrance will move us to do?

First, we ought to be in constant prayer. While we cannot feasibly pray for every believer who is in prison or who is ill-treated, might I ask you if you pray for even just one? I know that I can be guilty of getting so caught up in relatively meaningless and insignificant problems that I forget to remember to pray for a brother or sister in Christ who has lost everything and who may be in danger of losing his or her life at every moment. Do you ever get so caught up? And so, while we worry about whether or not we will be able to see that television program we like, or whether or our kids will win their game, or whether or not we can afford that vacation we would like to take, (not that there is no place for these); but while we concern ourselves with such, do we forget that there are brothers and sisters in Christ whose concern is where their next meal will come from, or whether or not they will be imprisoned, or whether they will remain alive or be killed, and all because they have made the good profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ?

Let us be mindful not to let our heart be small and our affection for the saints so weak. The old saying “out of sight, out of mind” ought not to be associated with the saints. In the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25, Jesus tells us in effect that the faithful are those who care for the sheep, who feed the one they find hungry, to give a drink to the one they find thirsty, to show hospitality to the stranger. Do you practice this concern? Do you remember the prisoners and ill-treated? What can you do? Begin with prayer. Pray in your closet, pray with your family, and pray with the saints for those who are afflicted.

Another way of remembering the afflicted is through both personal and corporate efforts to minister to others in need. By and large the church has left such activities to others, but let us be creatively intent on searching out ways in which to minister to our brothers and sisters who are in need, who are in prison, who are being ill-treated. It takes time, effort and resources, but it is the call of this exhortation – that we so remember them.

The idea of remembering these also would imply efforts to visit. Now obviously it would be difficult, if not impossible for most of us to help those who are suffering in foreign countries where Christians are persecuted. But the Lord does make it possible for some. Let us pray for these and be mindful not only of their ministry, but also long to hear reports of those to whom they are ministering. Ultimately the only question is whether or not we have the heart to do it. The Lord has given some of us that desire, which is why we support missionaries to various part of the world.

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But let us not make remembering these persons something that is so far out there. I believe that at the time this exhortation was given, the prisoners and ill-treated were not across the sea, but rather just across the way. And while we have few if any believers imprisoned for the sake of the gospel, and while few are ill-treated, the principle is to remember believers whose liberty is limited. And so, while they might not be hungry or thirsty or under clothed; they might well be hungering for the Word of God. They might be in great need of good instruction and fellowship. They might be grieving over what they have done to their families and friends. Certainly we should do what we can to help them.

The call of this verse is to do all we can to help relieve the suffering of a brother or sister in Christ. Again, let us remember what Jesus declared in Matthew 25, that on the day of judgment Jesus will acknowledge you as one who either has, or has not cared for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick and the imprisoned. Only those whose hearts had been moved to minister to such needs reveal themselves to be the true children of the kingdom and will inherit it. But those whose hearts are not moved to care and compassion are said to be accursed and damned with the wicked one and his angels (Matthew 25:31-46).

Beloved, the reason why we are to remember the prisoner and the ill-treated is because it is a God-like quality. When we so remember such as these in prayer and make both personal and corporate efforts to minister to them, we show ourselves to have the heart of God. For God Himself remembers us – how weak and helpless we really are. Hear the words of Psalm 78:38-39 which says,

But He, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity and did not destroy them; and often He restrained His anger and did not arouse all His wrath. Thus He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and does not return.

Have you not been blessed by the fact that God restrained His anger against you and remembered you as but flesh and a breath of the wind? In Psalm 103:13-14 we read:

Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. 14 For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust.

I say to you that true remembering of others incites the affections and moves the heart to compassion. God, out of His great love and mercy, sent forth Jesus Christ, the perfect, spotless lamb of God, who, by His horrific death on the cross would take away the sins of everyone who believes that He is the only sacrifice, His the only work that satisfies the wrath of God that we deserve.

And so, in a manner as best as we are able, we must remember, we must be mindful, we must be intentional in ministering to those whom the Lord gives us opportunity to express compassion and care and concern. May it start with prayer, purposely and specifically praying for those who are afflicted and then in your prayers pray that such prayers may have feet, that the Lord would give you actions you might participate in to see your prayers answered.

And finally then, let us note this last phrase of Hebrews 13:3 which gives us yet another reason to be mindful of the prisoners and ill-treated. We read there at the end of the verse, ***“since you yourselves also are in the body.”*** I see that this might refer to one of two

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things. First, let us remember such as these because we too live in this world and may be subject to the same kind of suffering some day. Many of the first readers of this letter had suffered and perhaps they might suffer again. Many of them might have know firsthand what it was like without the care and concern of other believers. How would they want to be treated? How would they want to be remembered? I can think of no greater means of disheartening the body of Christ than to continue in personal comfort and pleasure without ever a thought or prayer to those who are suffering for the cause of Christ. Let us pray for their testimony. Let us pray for their need and provisions. Let us pray for their release. Is this not what we refer to as the “Golden Rule” as we read from Matthew 7:12

In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Because we are in these bodies of flesh, we should have a sincere sympathy for those who are suffering, even if we cannot fully grasp the extent of it. In Proverbs 21:13, Solomon gave this bit of wisdom that we ought to heed:

He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be answered.

This is a spiritual principle that says, if we minister to the needs of the afflicted, then in the day of our affliction, the Lord will minister to us as well. That is stating it positively, for the principle is actually this – if you do not minister to the needs of the afflicted, the Lord will not minister to your needs in the day of your affliction.

There might be another way to understand this statement, “***since you yourselves also are in the body***” and that is it may be a reference to the body of Christ, the Church. We are to remember that the church is not simply a group a group of individuals – we are not 70 some persons who are to live for ourselves most of the time and then occasionally, at least once a week become a group. We are the church, connected to one another every bit as much on Monday as we are on Sunday and we are to be every bit as concerned for one another at any time. We are not an organization or inanimate cogs in the wheel. We are a living organism. Each one of us is a part of the larger whole. In 1 Corinthians 12:27 we read this:

Now you are Christ’s body and individually members of it.

We belong to one another, as the body. And just before verse 27, there in verse 26 we read this:

And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

Beloved, that is the body – those who remember the trials as well as the triumphs of one another. Beloved, let us grasp this passage and let it remind us that as believers, we must not only love those who are near, those in this room, those who are close to us. We must also love those believers who are not near and whose lives may be very much different than ours,

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suffering trials and persecutions. How might we help them? How might you help them? Let us remember them – let us pray, let us comfort, let us encourage, let us relief and let us, if the Lord allows, visit them in the mercy and grace of Christ.

Let us pray. Lord, grant us hearts of attention and compassion as we recall those who suffer for Christ. Lord, help us to realize that while we may not be able to help everyone, we most certainly can help someone. Help us to see that someone. Help us to learn about how we might more effectively reflect the love and concern of Christ by striving to encourage, comfort and bring relief to those who suffer.

Soli Deo Gloria

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