

“Final Exhortations”

Hebrews 12:28 – 13:8, 15-18a

12:28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, 29 for our “God is a consuming fire.” (quoting Deuteronomy 2:24)

13:1 Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. 2 Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. 3 Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, 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 man 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, today, and forever.

15 Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess His name. 16 And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. 18 Pray for us.

I’m sure most of you have heard the phrase, “Save the best for last.” Why do you think it is, that we leave the best for last? I leave the best for last because the best stuff is what I want to remember the most, the taste that I want to linger in my mouth, the words that I want to linger in my mind. Well, I believe the author of Hebrews left the best for last in this letter. I believe the author in effect is saying, “If I’m going to leave any lasting impression, if there is anything that I really want you to remember the most, this is it.”

There is a lot of speculation about who wrote the book of Hebrews. Because of the way Hebrews begins and ends it is most technically correct to call it a letter. Tradition assigns authorship to Paul, but many argue that there are a lot of things that make Hebrews very different from Paul’s other letters. I think it is not that much of a stretch to suppose that Paul is writing to different people, so he speaks differently. Some experts disagree and have proposed Apollos or Barnabas as the author. You know what, I don’t think it really matters all that much, as long as we

believe that the person holding the writing instrument, was inspired by God to write this letter. I am full convinced that this letter belongs in the New Testament and is the inspired Word of God. [NOTE 1] It was written to fellow Jews, so it stands to reason that the person writing was of Jewish descent. Three main points are emphasized in the book of Hebrews: 1) the superiority of Jesus Christ to the prophets, the angels, and to Moses, 2) the superiority of Christ's priesthood to the Levitical priesthood; and 3) the superiority of Christ's sacrifice, to the animal sacrifices offered on earth by the Levitical Jewish priests.

Now we come to chapter 13, the last chapter, which has the subtitle in the Pew Bible, "Concluding Exhortations." Can anybody tell me what an exhortation is? (go ahead, shout it out)... Webster defines it this way: "To urge earnestly by advice and/or warning." To encourage is a more general word whereas to exhort means to strongly encourage by advice and/or warning. Translated into today's vernacular, "Dude!" This is important!" The author of Hebrews talks about discipline in verses 7 and 12 of Chapter 12. "Endure hardship as a discipline ... No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." In other words, discipline is great for people who learn from it. If you learn from your hardships, you will grow and be blessed. [NOTE 2]

I included the last couple verses of chapter 12 in with the concluding chapter because they line up really well with verses 15 and 16 of this last chapter. The message version paraphrases the end of Chapter 12: "Do you see what we've got? An unshakeable kingdom! And do you see how thankful we must be? Not only thankful, but brimming with worship, deeply reverent before God. For God is not an indifferent bystander. He's actively cleaning house, torching all that needs to burn, and He won't quit until it's all cleansed. God Himself is Fire!" Then verses 15 and 16 of this final chapter (also in the Message version) reads: Make sure you don't take things for granted and go slack in working for the common good; share what you have with others. God takes particular pleasure in acts of worship—a different kind of "sacrifice"—that take place in kitchen and workplace and on the streets." This is good stuff! Are you getting the idea that worship is important? I hope so. If you'll just make the time to read your Bible you will see all the reasons that we have to be thankful and to praise God. And we are to worship and thank God more than just at church on Sunday. "...in the kitchen and workplace and on the streets." We are supposed to be brimming with worship and be deeply reverent. What does that look like? If I was brimming with worship and deeply reverent, what would I look like? What would I do, how would I act? [NOTE 3]

What is reverence? Oxford Languages defines it as deep respect, to regard with honor. Reverence is profound respect and love. When you have a reverent attitude toward God, you honor Him, express your gratitude to Him and obey His

commandments. Webster adds a profound adoring with awe. Now what that looks like is different for different people. When I was a kid, my parents taught me that being reverent meant being quiet and to many of us “baby boomers” loudness, laughter, and play don’t go with reverence. For many people, reverence equals hushed voices. For those that were never taught that, it doesn’t even occur to them that they should be hushed in church out of reverence for God. For many people as long as they have a healthy respect for the truth of the Word of God and try to live God’s way, they are being reverent. [NOTE 4]

I remember a guy who had no problem having his youth group play sanctuary whiffle ball. That almost got him fired when an older lady came that evening to practice the organ that night. When you think of the space where worship happens as “the sanctuary” and not “the auditorium” you tend to think of that space as sacred and that actions should be different in that space than any other space. The problem is, that many churches have one large space where all their events happen, with movable chairs, so they lose that idea of “sacred space” where you act reverently.

One of the ways that I want to act reverently is to follow verse one of Chapter 13. I’d love my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. To me, and to commentator Louis H. Evans Jr. it means radiating an engaging warmth. It means smiling at people, opening doors for them, complimenting them, being encouraging and generally helpful. I’m pretty sure it doesn’t include using creative hand and finger gestures at the guy who goes through a red light or pulls out in front of you only to promptly hit the brakes just to turn left across traffic on a busy road when you are in a hurry. To paraphrase a song, “People who enjoy people are the most refreshing people in the world.” I think the call to brotherly love means that we consider the fact that Jesus died for that person and I am called to love them despite our differences. Can you totally disagree with someone and still love them? Absolutely Yes!

When I think of brotherly love I remember an RCA General Synod that I attended as a Classis delegate. The two guys immediately in front of me, we were in parallel straight rows back then. They agreed on maybe one or two things all week. They disagreed on just about every issue that came up. One raised his hand the other didn’t. One said, “Aye,” the other said, “Nay.” Yet they kidded with one another, embraced one another, and laughed and prayed with one another at different times during that week. They had never met before the Synod.

I also think that the call to love one another as brothers and sisters refers to suffering for one another. Jesus was the prime example and He suffered for those who loved God as well as for those who hated God. Fellow Jesus-followers were first called Christians in Antioch where it was used as a putdown which meant “little Christs” and He was dead. If you look at the Greek verb it means that

brotherly love is to stand unmovable and un-eroded, it is to keep on keeping on. The source of this love is Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit working within you. [NOTE 5]

So these are the kinds of things that the author of Hebrews writing under the inspiration of the living God thought were the most important things to leave in the minds of his readers. Verse 2: I could take a week on this verse alone. We are not to let strangers go unnoticed or forgotten. The original language means to escape notice. To the people of the day it was a comment on the hospitality that travelers depended upon. In the ancient world to run an “inn” was to run a house of ill repute (a brothel). So families had to provide for one another. Today, for us, I think it means that we are NOT supposed to let ourselves get so busy that we don’t even notice the needy, the homeless, the strangers among us. And just so we don’t take that too generally or too narrowly and exclude prisoners or those who are suffering, the author points that out very clearly as well. We are supposed to walk a mile in our brother’s shoes. Visit the prisoners and the suffering and treat them as though you were incarcerated and suffering right along with them. [NOTE 6]

Then we come to verse 4. It basically says that marriage is to be highly valued, precious, and dear to us. We are supposed to love our wives, men, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her. It doesn’t say love your wives if, and when they deserve it. Women are to respect their husbands and love them as their own bodies, and it says nothing about only when they deserve it. We are called to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Therefore, we can depend on Him to give us the strength to love one another as He asks.

It has been proven over and over again down through history that society is much more healthy when marriages are healthy. History shows us that God meant for healthy marriages to provide blessing in the lives of those who love God. And then the author of Hebrews warns us that trying to experience the oneness of intercourse outside the bounds that God designed it to be within, is wrong and will not lead to blessing. “God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. The Message paraphrases it, “God draws a firm line against casual and illicit sex.” God meant for the sexual expression to be exclusively within the bounds of marriage. There is no unforgivable sin but there are no sins that are without consequences either. We must take steps to keep from polluting the holy estate of marriage. [NOTE 7]

The Message goes on to the next idea, paraphrasing, “Don’t be obsessed with getting more material things.” Verse 5 in the NIV reads, “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.” Let me ask you something. Is it enough in your life just to have God with you? Our society and advertising and

marketing experts all around us make their living trying to convince you that you need more. More, more, more. Is it enough that you have God? Can you be content with what you have?

Verse 16 says, “share with others,” share what you have. Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all this other stuff will be yours as well. Psalm 37 reads, “Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.” But you have to remember it doesn’t say when. It doesn’t say that IF you delight in the Lord for two days straight that you will get a raise at work. It doesn’t say that if you read your Bible every day for the next two years that you won’t have any debt. Think about it! If you are delighting in the Lord, what are your desires going to look like? Or let me ask you this, “If someone were to look at your desires would they be able to tell that you are someone who delights in the Lord? Whoa! That makes it a little more personal there doesn’t it. As I typed that last phrase, I have to confess, I had spent the previous few days thinking about how I might be able to afford this new amplifier head that I want. Wow! If someone were to look at my desires, would they be able to tell that I am someone who delights in the Lord? It’s a great question to ask of yourself.

Instead of being greedy and well-to-do we are called to give it all to God! We are to offer a sacrifice of praise to our God. By the power of God and by His grace let us continually, through all the circumstances of life, bring forward a sacrifice of praise and offer it up, upon the altar of our heart. Let us love the Lord God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and let us love our neighbor as ourselves.

Steve and Annie Chapman sing a song titled, “State of the Union” and in that song they repeat a line that goes, “The more you have given yourself to God, the more you have left for me.” That is so true. The more you grow in devout affection for God, the more you will grow in love for your spouse, your friends, your family, and your neighbors. It sounds so simple, but it isn’t necessarily easy. It is right here in the Bible, God is pleased when you go do what He says. [NOTE 8]

The beginning of verse 18 tells us where the power to do what we have been talking about comes from. It simply says, “Pray for us.” The author of Hebrews knows that without the power of prayer there will be no fulfillment, nothing but human failure. The key to leading and the key to living like little Christs is prayer. Pray, pray, and then pray! To please God we must praise Him, obey Him, Love Him, do good, share what we have, be content with what God has provided, do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. The only way to accomplish that is to pray and rely on the power of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. Let’s pray ... AMEN

Sermon Notes for “Final Exhortations”
Based on Hebrews 12:28 – 13:8, 15-18a
Given at Doster Community Church on May 7, 2023

- I. Three main points are emphasized in the book of Hebrews:
 - a. The superiority of Jesus Christ to the prophets, the angels, and Moses
 - b. The superiority of Jesus Christ’s priesthood to the Levitical priests.
 - c. The superiority of Christ’s sacrifice, to any of the Jewish sacrifices.
- II. A thankful attitude and continual praise are very important. We are supposed to be overflowing with worship and deeply reverent.
- III. To be reverent means to express gratitude, honor, and awe. Reverence is a deep and profound adoring with awe. What does that look like?
- IV. Among the final exhortations is to love each other as brothers and sisters. We are called to love one another despite our differences and radiate engaging warmth.
- V. We are to make hospitality a priority and do not let the lowly be forgotten.
- VI. We are to value marriage highly. It is a fact of history that when a majority of marriages are healthy, society is healthy. We are called to keep sexual expression within the bounds of marriage.
- VII. We are to keep our lives free from the love of money, be content with what we have! Ask yourself, “If someone were to look at your desires, would they be able to tell that you are someone who delights in the Lord?”
- VIII. The only way to live this way is with the power of the Holy Spirit. The only way to appropriate that is through prayer. The author simply asks, “Pray for us.” So what are you going to do about it? Please pray and seek God’s Holy Spirit’s strength to help you praise and worship God with an attitude of gratitude, obey God, love Jesus, be content with what the Lord has provided, do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God!