

ON THE PATH
Rev. Jason Santalucia

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in Brookfield, Connecticut
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Text: Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. 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. Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. 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." So, we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" 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.

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 to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Chapter thirteen is the last chapter of Hebrews, and before closing with some final blessings, the writer gives his audience a few exhortations—calls to love each other, to show hospitality, and to remember people in prison.

It's tempting to treat these exhortations like a checklist of things to do to be a good Christian. But if we take them that way, we miss the real power of this passage. These are not words we can cut-and-paste directly into our own lives. These are words meant for a specific community, and they have a specific purpose: to get people back on the path they'd been following for a long time but were now falling away from.

So, let's look at who these people were and what their situation was.

Most scholars agree that Hebrews was written to a group of second-generation Christians—people who'd been born and raised in the church. So, you might think their faith was rock solid, but they were actually having a crisis of faith, and there were two main reasons why.

For years they had expected Jesus to return at any moment. But as years turned into decades, and there was still no sign of Jesus, they started getting discouraged. And by the time Hebrews was written, thirty-some years after Jesus died, people were losing hope, and some of them were giving up altogether and going back to Judaism.

On top of that, they were facing some pretty serious repercussions because of their beliefs. They were being marginalized. They were getting

harassed and ridiculed. Some of them had had their property confiscated. Others had been thrown in jail.

No wonder they were having a crisis. Nothing had turned out the way they thought, and their lives were really difficult.

So, think of Hebrews as a pastoral intervention. The writer is grabbing this tired little band of believers by the shoulders and saying, Don't lose heart. Remember who you are and what you're about. That's how we should hear these exhortations.

The first one is: "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." What's important to notice here is the flow. The first thing to do is to keep loving your fellow church members. And the second thing to do is to not keep that love bottled up inside the church, but to extend it outward to people who aren't members—which, in the mid-first century, probably meant missionaries and traveling preachers, who depended on the hospitality of local Christian communities—communities that were often reluctant to open their doors to people they didn't know because they might turn out to be trouble-makers, false teachers, heretics. In fact, one of the earliest known church documents, called the Didache, contains specific instructions for testing strangers before letting them into the church.

But there's no mention of that in Hebrews. The writer is basically saying that being a Christian is not about playing it safe. It's about welcoming people into the community even though it makes us

vulnerable and exposes us to potential harm. And I think that's pretty amazing. Here's this group of people who are already dealing with so much, and are already struggling with their faith, and instead of telling them to close themselves off from the world, the writer is telling them to let the world in. It probably doesn't feel like the smart thing to do. But this is the path they're called to follow. They're called to put themselves out there in ways that are risky because this is the path that leads to connections and relationship and life.

That's what each of these exhortations, in one way or another, is trying to do: put these people back on the path they need to be on if they want to get past where they are and have a future. So, let's look at the next one: "Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were suffering."

What's important here is that the writer isn't talking about "thoughts and prayers" or just feeling sorry for someone. What the text literally says is: "Remember those who are in prison, as though you yourselves were in the body." So, this is about something much deeper than sympathy. It's about not keeping people who are suffering at a comfortable distance. It's about getting close to them—so close that their suffering feels like your own. And when it came to people in prison, that was a really dangerous thing to do.

Way back when, prisoners depended on their families to bring them everything they needed—food, clothing, blankets. If you didn't visit them, they went without. But if you were bringing a loaf of bread or a pair of shoes to your second cousin who was a Christian, you'd be identified as one too, and you might end up in there together.

You see how costly this love is? It's not sentimental. It's not easy. This is love that makes sacrifices, love that puts itself in vulnerable positions, love that opens itself up to hardship and suffering.

It makes me think about times when I've visited people in jail. I was never in any danger, but it was still unnerving—the sound of metal doors clanging shut behind me, the sense of being locked in. But when I'd sit down across from the person I was there to see, all that noise would fade away, and we'd just be two people talking.

Looking back, I realize that's the path the writer of Hebrews is pointing to—a path that's not about keeping love bottled up, but going where love leads

us, even if that means crossing boundaries of comfort and familiarity, safety and security.

For the people who first read this letter, going where love was leading them meant exposing themselves to ridicule, abuse, and persecution. For us, the dangers may be different, but the challenge is the same. And I'm humbled by that because I haven't always lived up to love's challenge in my own life. I haven't always had the trust or the faith or the courage to let love lead me beyond my comfort zones.

But that's okay because just like God didn't give up on the people this letter was written to, God doesn't give up on us. God keeps calling us and encouraging us until we're able to get back on the path and not fall away.

Let me leave you with a quick story a friend of mine told me once.

He was the pastor of a small congregation that partnered with a refugee family moving into their town. It was a big responsibility to take on, and a big stretch financially, but they put themselves out there. They got an apartment and furnished it, they stocked the fridge and the pantry, they even put stuffed animals on the children's beds.

When the family arrived, they had almost nothing—just a couple of suitcases—and when they saw the apartment, the mother immediately broke down and started crying. She said, "We left everything behind. We thought we'd arrive here as strangers. But today, we feel like we're home."

That's what the writer of Hebrews is talking about. A love that risks. A community that opens its doors. A path that's difficult but leads us into deeper relationship—with the people around us, with each other, and with the God. That's the path we're called to follow—the same path Jesus followed before us. May we never fall away from it, but always walk it with courage and joy.

Let's close with a prayer:

Gracious God, you did not keep your distance, but entered our suffering and made it your own. Give us courage to follow where Jesus leads—to welcome the stranger, to stand with the hurting, and to love even when it costs us something. Draw us deeper into relationship with you and with one another, so that in every risk we take for love, we may discover your presence among us. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.