

## **Do Not Neglect To Do Good — Rev. Denise Stone**

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BIG FLATS NY, 9-1-19**

If you were to list the qualities or actions of a Christian, what would you include? This is an actual group participation question – so throw out suggestions. If you were to list the qualities or actions of a Christian, what would you include? (*Repeating the suggestions made*).

In today's text the writer of Hebrews, who was writing to a congregation in this letter (so I'm going to call him "Pastor,") is reminding the congregation what a follower of Christ is expected to do. They had presumably already received those instructions, but in the face of persecution and trials encountered by much of the early church, this Pastor sought to encourage his congregation to persevere.

This encouragement came in a short series of statements. Think of this last chapter of Hebrews as the Pastor's attempt to sum up some of the essentials that the followers of Christ needed to remember. These essentials are things that apply to us today just as much as they did to the early church. Listen to the questions that I raise to consider how these essentials may encourage us to live our lives of faith.

We begin this text with the call to love one another. The word that is used here denotes brotherly love; the love of siblings, a particular love that was reserved for family. We don't think anything of this today; we often refer to people, even those outside of the church, as our brothers or sisters. However, it was a new idea to use this word for non-family friends when the early church described their relationships with this word.

The whole text for today is framed with this overarching idea of treating people within the church truly as family.

Verses 2 and 3 give us the first set of ethical instructions:

<sup>2</sup> Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. <sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>i</sup>

Hospitality was a very important concept in the ancient world. When we were in Israel in January we learned that hospitality is still a very important concept to the Palestinian people we met. Most of the people really had nothing and yet they shared what they did

have with those of us on the trip. It was really very humbling to experience.

The need for hospitality in the time of Jesus and the early church was particularly important. There were not motels and hotels or BnBs or AirBnb's everywhere you wanted to go. In fact, many of the Inns that were available weren't places you really wanted to stay.

The Pastor is reminding his congregation that as followers of Christ, they needed to extend hospitality to anyone – even strangers. His suggestion “for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” is reminiscent of some stories in the Old Testament, like Abraham in Genesis Chapter 18, where he shows hospitality to 3 men, who bring him the word from God that Sarah would have a child. How do we show hospitality? Do we extend hospitality to people we don't know? How would our lives be different if we took the call for hospitality seriously?

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In Verse 3, the Pastor tells his people to treat people in prison as if they were also in prison. Bear in mind, that prisons then were a bit different than today. Prisoners then were not given clothing and often not much food and were also beaten or mistreated regularly. Prisoners depending on family and friends to supply the things that they needed to survive.

The prisoners that the Pastor was probably referencing were other followers of Christ imprisoned for their faith. By suggesting that his congregation needed to care for those prisoners, there was also an implied risk that they might be arrested as well. The call to care for those in prison was still a part of their faith despite that risk.

What risks are we willing to take for our faith? What possible inconveniences are we willing to live with for our faith?

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It is interesting that the next pairing of admonitions from the Pastor pairs together marital fidelity and greed.

<sup>4</sup> Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. <sup>5</sup> 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."

<sup>6</sup> So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"

In his commentary on Hebrews, author Gareth Lee Cockerill noted regarding this passage, stating,

“Greed often accompanies sexual immorality. Many writers of antiquity associated the two. The conjunction of the seventh and eighth commandments made this connection common among Jewish authors.”<sup>ii</sup>

The Pastor was admonishing his congregation to live their lives differently from the world, where sexual immorality and greed were rampant. This sounds a bit familiar, don't you think? How are we living our lives differently from the world?

In the passage about Greed, the Pastor asserts that we can be content with what we have because we have God. Being content with what we have doesn't mean we stop fighting injustice on behalf of the poor or that we stop doing our best at work and possibly get promoted but it does mean that we don't strive to have more and more to the exclusion of God in our lives.

Verses 7 and 8 remind the congregation to look to their prior leaders, those who taught them about the faith.<sup>7</sup> Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way

of life, and imitate their faith. <sup>8</sup> Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

There is a good chance that those leaders the Pastor is referencing suffered or were killed for their faith. So some leaders stood for what they believed. They believed in Jesus Christ and their lives showed their faith. It is this type of life the Pastor wants for his congregation. It is this type of life for which we should all strive.

In the final two verses of our text for today the Pastor again encourages his congregation to honor God through their acts of worship and their relationships with one another. In Verse 16 in particular the Pastor tells his congregation, “<sup>16</sup> Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”

This whole passage is a word of encouragement on living life in a hostile world. Bryan J. Whitfield, in his article on Working Preacher began with the following question – “How do we go about living as Christians in a society where we find ourselves increasingly on the margins? Our need to answer that question places us close to the original congregation that received this pastoral word of encouragement that we call Hebrews, for that group of believers struggled to

hold on and hold out in the face of pressures from the broader society as well.”<sup>iii</sup>

I have probably mentioned how I think as Christians we have it easier in the US than in other countries to live and practice our faith. Yet, despite the apparent freedoms we have, we do still face a world that is increasingly skeptical of our faith, with many people seeing no need for organized religion of any kind. An article I read recently said that many young people see no relevance to faith or any reason to seek help from the church or from clergy. It is our responsibility to live and serve in ways that can make God and faith relevant to unbelievers.

All of the admonitions of today's text apply to us today. We are called as followers of Christ to treat each other like family. We are called to show hospitality, even to those we do not know. What are ways that we can do this beyond our current efforts?

As followers of Christ we are to care for those in prison, or those being tortured (around the world for their faith), we are to have fidelity in our marriages and to not succumb to greed. We are to find contentment in the blessings we have received from God and not envy what our neighbors have. We need to step beyond our comfort levels and live our lives differently from the world that surrounds us.

And just as the Pastor encouraged the congregation in Hebrews, we too are to learn from our leaders – those people who walked the road of faith before us. We are to imitate them in the ways they maintained their faithfulness to God. In recent days we have had memorial and funeral services for two of our long-time members, Barbara Gilbert and Dorothy Bartlett. The stories I have heard about these women told me that they were women of deep faith and commitment and they were REAL. People looked up to them and enjoyed them and learned from them. These two women are examples of the type of people that we need to learn from to help us live our lives in such a way that people will see Jesus in us.

Most importantly, we are to praise God in our Worship and we are to NOT neglect doing good and sharing what we have. “For such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”

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<sup>ii</sup> *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Cockerill - William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company – 2012, Pg. 684.

<sup>iii</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=658](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=658)