

“Philadelphia Finale”
Hebrews 13:18-25

November 22, 2015

SI: This fall we’ve looked in detail at one chapter of Bible—Hebrews 13
I pointed out in the very first sermon in this series
that some of you like sermons that lean more in the doctrinal direction,
but some of you like sermons that lean more in direction of specific application.
Some of you have told me that very thing over the years.
You’ve asked me to be more specific about what you are to do.

Well, you should like Hebrews 13. Because it’s almost all specific application.
The book of Hebrews itself is apparently a sermon, a written sermon.
It’s a heavily doctrinal sermon on the person and work of Christ—
then the preacher finishes with this chapter, in which tells listeners what to do

He say, Ok, since you believe in Jesus, this is how you ought to live—
you have to love each other like brothers.
Philadelphia, brotherly love, must be continually cultivated in your church.
Rather than leave it up to them to figure out how to do that,
he follows with a rapid fire list of specific instructions for them to follow.
We’ve been looking at those instructions over this fall.
This morning we’re finishing up.

Let’s read verse 18 to the end of the chapter.

Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way. I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon.

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Brothers, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written you only a short letter. I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you. Greet all your leaders and all God’s people. Those from Italy send you their greetings. Grace be with you all.

INTRO: When a young mom, a new mom, leaves her baby with a babysitter for the first time, she makes a list of all the things the babysitter should do. This is when you are to feed the baby, this is what you are to feed the baby. This is when you give him a bath, this is the soap you are to use, and the towel. These are his pajamas, this is his bedtime, this is his bedtime story book, these are the songs you are to sing.

Here's my cell phone number.

Here's my husband's cell phone number.

Here's the phone number of the restaurant where we are eating.

Here's the grandparents' number.

Here's our pediatrician's number.

And then, after the babysitter has arrived, and the young mother has gone over the list with her, as she and her husband are walking out the door, she thinks of other instructions and is calling them out to the babysitter. One more thing I forgot to mention, he's teething, you can put some ice on that. One more thing—Please take care of my baby! And finally her husband is able to pull her out the door.

That's how Hebrews ends. The preacher has these believers in mind. He has this list of instructions for them in Hebrews 13 about brotherly love. Do this and do this, and don't do that, don't do that either. Then he gives his last instruction. You think he's done. Then he gives a magnificent benediction. And he says Amen. And you really think he's done. That's what Amen means. We're done here.

But after he says Amen, he says, Oh yeah, just one more thing. He tells them, then he says, just one more thing, this is the last one, I promise. And he tells them. And then he's done. So here at the very end he crams together three instructions along with some personal information and greetings and a word of blessing. I had originally planned to take these last three instructions one by one. But we had two guest missionary speakers earlier in the fall, who took a Sunday each, so now I'm up against the calendar. Advent starts soon and I have a series of Advent sermons.

So, I'm going to finish up Hebrews 13 today
and take these last three instructions in one gulp.

What are the last three instructions?

You might not have picked up on them as we read the passage.

Here they are:

1. Pray for your pastor
2. Be tolerant of his sermons
3. Greet him, and one another, warmly

Hebrews is a book of profoundly deep theology,
it's a panoramic view of the priesthood of Jesus Christ
a dramatic sweep of redemptive history.

One preacher called it "the most intimidating book in the New Testament—
even more so than Revelation."

But here's how it ends, on a humble and simple and practical note:

Pray for your pastor.

Oh yeah, one more thing—be tolerant of his sermons.

Oh yeah, one more thing, I promise this is it—greet him and one another warmly.

Grace be with you all

So let's take those one by one

and see how they might help us promote and cultivate brotherly love in church.

MP#1 Pray for your pastor

Pray for us . . . I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon.

Pray. Let's focus on that before we get to the specific of praying for your pastor.

What is prayer? Let me read you the Shorter Catechism answer:

Prayer is an offering up of our requests unto God,

It's first and foremost communicating with God about the things that concern us, requesting that he provide for us the things we need and want.

for things agreeable to his will,

That's an important qualification.

We are to pray for things agreeable to God's will.

This doesn't mean God's secret will, his secret plan. It means his revealed will.

In other words, if the Bible says it's a good thing, then ask for it.

God's going to decide in his infinite wisdom when and how to grant your request.

But ask him for good things, agreeable with Scripture.

in the name of Christ,

That doesn't mean have to end every prayer with words: In Jesus' name. Amen.

It means that you pray acknowledging that it is through Christ alone you come to God. Only through Christ that he will hear and answer you.

with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.

Prayer to include honest, open, repentant heart and gratefulness to God.

Prayer is the essence of the Christian life.

Communication with God is why we were saved.

This is what we were made for and redeemed for.

We often forget just how amazing this is, that God invites us, urges us, wants us to talk to him any time and make know our requests through Christ, and confess our sins and thank him for his blessings.

And God actually uses our prayers to accomplish purposes. Writer of Hebrews:

I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon.

He believes that if they pray, he will get back to them quicker.

This raises the perennial question:

If God is all-knowing and all-powerful and sovereign over all events—why pray?

Does prayer do anything? Does it change things?

Yes. Absolutely.

Because God has ordained prayer as the means he uses to accomplish his will.

When you pray, get to be a part of the work his is doing in this world.

So pray. And then, specifically, pray for your pastor.

Nobody know who wrote Hebrews. There have been lots of theories.

Paul. Barnabas. Luke. Clement. Apollos. Philip.

But the facts are that Hebrews is anonymous

and there is no firm church tradition to tell us who wrote it.

Even the church father Origen who lived way back in the year 200 said that only God knows who wrote Hebrews.

But the writer obviously had a pastoral connection to this body of believers.

He writes to them as their pastor, with pastoral concerns.

Throughout the letter he urges them to continue in the faith, and to not give up meeting together, and here at the end to cultivate brotherly love in church.

We don't know why he was separated from them and for how long.

But he wants to be restored to them and hopes to come soon with Timothy.

So he asks them to pray for him. Pray for us, he says.

He's probably thinking of other church leaders, like Timothy.

But then says: I particularly urge you to pray I would be restored. Pray for me.

This sounds a lot like Paul.

Paul was never shy to ask people to pray for him in his letters. Many examples. Just one: Ephesians 6:19-20

Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel . . . Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Paul asks for boldness and clarity when he speaks. Every preacher needs that.

The default setting of our hearts is self-righteousness.

Natural tendency to preach and pastor using guilt, shame, or fear

But salvation is by God's grace alone, through faith alone, trust in Jesus alone.

So we need to be bold and clear.

Pray for your pastor. Pray that I'll have boldness and clarity.

Pray that I'll love the Lord, love people and operate out of a sense of God's grace, and not worldly wisdom and experience.

Pray for elders, deacons, youth director.

I know many of you do pray for me. Only explanation for 19 good years.

Pray for your pastor, and second . . .

MP#2 Be tolerant of his sermons

Brothers, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation,
for I have written you only a short letter.

Most scholars agree that Hebrew is a written sermon, or a transcribed sermon.

There are a number of textual and stylistic arguments that are quite convincing. The author calls the document a word of exhortation—which definitely has the connotation of a spoken message, and then he refers to it as a short writing or letter—possible transcription.

You might wonder why he would call it short.

It's one of the more lengthy letters in the New Testament.

But scholars have pointed out that if you read Hebrews aloud in Greek, (language in which it was written), it would take you about 45 minutes.

That doesn't seem like a short sermon to us, but back then, it probably was. Sermon length is an important topic.

Charles Spurgeon is acknowledged to be one of the greatest preachers in the English language. He preached in London from 1854-1891 to thousands. Listen to his advice to young pastors.

In order to maintain attention, avoid being too long. An old preacher [said] to a young man who preached an hour, 'My dear friend, I do not care what else you preach about, but I wish you would always preach about forty minutes.' We ought seldom to go much beyond that—forty minutes, or say, three-quarters of an hour. If a fellow cannot say all he has to say in that time, when will he say it? But somebody said he liked 'to do justice to his subject'. Well, [shouldn't he] do justice to his people, or, at least, have a little mercy upon them, and not keep them too long? . . . Brevity is a virtue within the reach of all of us; do not let us lose the opportunity of gaining the credit which it brings.

If you ask me how you may shorten your sermons, I should say, study them better. Spend more time in the study that you may need less in the pulpit. We are generally longest when have least to say. A man with a great deal of well-prepared matter will probably not exceed forty minutes; when he has less to say he will go on for fifty minutes, and when he has absolutely nothing he will need an hour to say it in. Attend to these minor things and they will help to retain attention.

We need to be faithful to the text. We need to say what the text says. We should not preach devotionals. We should not preach a sermonette each Sunday. We should preach careful, compelling, concise, and capacious sermons every week. If we work hard and prepare well, we can preach shorter sermons.

I agree. There are very few preachers gifted enough to preach 45 plus minutes. I've heard a few.

John Piper's sermons are about 50 minutes.

John McArthur's are about 60 minutes.

Tim Keller's sermons are about 35 minutes.

That's one reason I like to listen to him. He's gifted enough to preach for an hour, but he doesn't, he's going somewhere and he's very concise.

This might seem like an odd rabbit trail, but here's my point.

The writer of Hebrews says: Bear with my word of exhortation.

“Bear with” also translated endure, be patient with, give patient attention to. It's used in the New Testament other places when told to bear with persecution.

And to bear patiently with other believers—

presumably church members who are hard to get along with.

Bear with my preaching. Have a patient toleration of my sermons.

I think the writer of Hebrews is acknowledging that it is tough to sit week after week, month after month, year after year, sometimes decade after decade! under the preaching of a man.

It's not just that you know all his weaknesses as a preacher, his weaknesses in delivery, his verbal tics and bad habits, his tendency to repeat himself, and belabor a point, or to ramble or to go down rabbit trails or go too long.

It's that you know the man himself.

He's certainly not the most devout, spiritually minded person in the church.

He's not the person with the closest walk with Christ or most gentle spirit.

But in spite of his shortcomings both as a preacher and as a Christian—

he's declaring God's word and God's will for your life.

So bear with his sermons and make the most of them.

Pray that God will give you something in his sermon, some glimpse of grace, some encouragement in Christ, some correction or instruction you need.

And be tolerant of the man and his message.

I have an uncle who was almost 40 years at the same church.

I once asked him what he thought was the secret to a long pastorate.
Without missing a beat he said, A tolerant congregation.

He could have also said a loving congregation, a warm congregation.
And that leads us to the last instruction.

MP#3 Greet him, and one another, warmly

Greet all your leaders and all God's people.

I admit it doesn't say "warmly." I added that.

But that's clearly the spirit both here and throughout the Bible.

It's astonishing how often greetings are given in the New Testament.

Not only does Hebrews 13 command us to greet each other,

this command is repeated in Philippians 4—Greet all the saints in Christ Jesus.
And on top of that, six times the New Testament commands believers to greet
one another with a kiss.

Romans 16 Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings.

1 Corinthians 16 All the brothers here send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

2 Corinthians 13 Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints send their greetings.

1 Thessalonians 5 Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.

1 Peter 5 Greet one another with a kiss of love.

Add to that the beautiful scene in Christ's parable of the Prodigal Son.

When the son returned, all dirty and smelly and shameful his father ran to him
and embraced him and—kissed him.

And add to that the humbling scene of the sinful woman kissing Jesus' feet.

What's being communicated when believers greet their leaders, their pastor,
and one another warmly?

The love of God shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Spirit.

But there's something else immensely important.

Greeting one another warmly is a way of tangibly expressing our bond with one
another as brothers in Christ and our part in the family of God.

As most of you know, I'm working on another theology degree—
thanks to your generosity.

I've been reading some books recently about cultural setting of the New Testament.

Life in the first century in Roman Empire was very different from ours.

One of the big differences was that American society is individualistic, whereas Greco-Roman and Jewish society was collectivistic. In other words, your livelihood, your wellbeing, your identity, your life itself depended on your connection to the group—your family, clan, religious community, trade guild, that sort of thing. You were nobody apart from the group.

If a person was ever cut off from the larger group was destitute and shamed. He literally became an nobody. Often a homeless wanderer. We have a hard time getting our minds around that as Americans. Because we're individualists. We believe a person can cut all ties and go in a new direction, build a new life. That's what the pioneers did, left the east and headed out, ma and pa in wagon. But for the first century person, conformity, loyalty to the group paramount.

So what happened when people became Christians? They were cut off. Whether Jews or Gentiles, they became outcasts. It would have felt completely disorienting. And the pressure to return and conform to paganism or Judaism was intense. That's what prompted the book of Hebrews itself. Jewish believers in Christ tempted to return to the bosom of Judaism.

So a large part of the Apostles' early work was to try to build, through the churches, a new community, a new family and clan of community for believers. That's why this greeting and kissing was so important. It's way they tell Christians over and over to do it, reason they do it. Notice the writer of Hebrews himself says: Those in Italy send you greetings. We associate greetings with warmth and love and friendliness—certainly is that.

But for them it said first and foremost—You're my people! I honor you, I have regard for you, I'm connected to you and you to me. We're in this together. It was a confidence builder for believers as they went out into the hostile world.

Even though we're American individualists, with all the good and bad things that brings with it—we need this. We need to be reminded that no man is an island, and that we are bound to one

another by vows and by the work of Christ.

And in God's good providence, he has connected us to this particular congregation.

These people, here, at Christ Covenant, for this moment in our lives.

So there ought to be an intentionality to our greeting.

Let me challenge you, greet people you don't know well as well as friends.

If there is some tension you have with someone, make point of greeting.

If you can't be warm, at least be cordial. Obey God in this and he will honor.

When you allow the grace of God to equip you and empower you to pray for your pastor and leaders, and to be patiently attentive to the word of God preached, and to warmly greet the members of your church and communicate through that greeting that you're my people—

Then all this promotes and cultivates brotherly love.

It took less than 300 years for that brotherly love to permeate the Roman Empire, that same brotherly love could revive the souls of many in this country— we certainly need it.