

Exhortations for Jesus followers (Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16)

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Like much of Hebrews, the context immediately preceding chapter 13 emphasizes that we should not take for granted the new revelation in Christ. This new revelation raises the stakes of existing moral concerns based in earlier biblical teaching. The writer's exhortations set Christian ethics in context.

One form of ancient instruction was paraenesis, which lists various rules without a clear outline or progression of thought. In this week's reading, the writer offers various exhortations relevant to his hearers' relationships with one another. As the writer has already told them, their hardships from the world outside should strengthen their ties with one another (10:24-25).

Most fundamentally, believers must continue to love one another like members of the same family—most of the exhortations that follow fit under this rubric.

The exhortation for love to "continue" (the common Greek term *menô*) may recall the author's frequent use of this term for what continues permanently rather than what can be shaken away. Love language recurs several times here in Greek: *philadelphia* (the sibling kind of love; 13:1), *philoxenia* (hospitality to strangers; 13:2), and *aphilarguros* (not loving money; 13:5). Such love entails behavior such as welcoming and helping others, staying faithful to one's marriage, and doing good

and sharing.

Some of these exhortations require more comment. In antiquity, hospitality to strangers included feeding and housing trustworthy members of one's group (here, fellow believers) on their travels. Ancient Mediterranean culture as a whole valued this practice, and Jewish tradition especially honored the example of Abraham and Sarah, recalling how they welcomed those who turned out to be angels.

Those in prison and facing other mistreatment include those who have suffered for their faith. Treating them as fellow prisoners involves both loving one's neighbor as oneself and remembering that what affects our fellow believers for their faith also affects us. Those who do not love money are free to share, including with the church's workers who lead us.

Many philosophers urged contentment, but of course the church also learned this virtue from Jesus. Most of the writer's audience already had experience with not loving money; many experienced the confiscation of their property because of their loyalty to Christ.

Hebrews 13 offers multiple theological motivations for virtuous behavior:

- God knows our deeds (sometimes strangers even turn out to be angels)
- God will judge those unfaithful to their marriages
- God is with us and provides for our needs
- Jesus remains the same, so we can praise God through him
- Sacrifices of praise and sharing please God
- We live not for present reward or an earthly holy city or temple, but for the promised future one

In 13:16, the writer revisits and summarizes the point. Just as one should not "neglect" to show hospitality, believers should not "neglect" doing good (encompassing and expanding the previous exhortations) and sharing.

The term for sharing here is *koinônia*. While modern Christians sometimes envision such "fellowship" as light conversation over a soft drink, the term can include an economic dimension as well. (Ancient contracts sometimes use the term for business partnerships.)

In short, we must support one another economically in hardship—even across international borders.