

UNEDITED DRAFT

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends in Christ,

The message today is called, “Keep on loving each other.” Those are the words we find at the beginning of today’s reading in Hebrews 13. As you know, every week we face a daunting challenge: placing our text in its proper context. What we talk about each week comes in the context of what we’ve been talking about each week here at church, and throughout the course of the church year. And the specific verses we look at come in the context of the book in which they’re found. Apart from the proper context we can easily misunderstand what God is trying to tell us.

Today we’re going to talk about the practice of the Christian faith. That is, what does it look like to live out our faith in our daily lives. But what we must keep in mind is that position always precedes practice. First your position must be established: your position in God’s family. Only after that position is established can you practice in your life what it means to enjoy that position in God’s family.

And that’s exactly what the whole letter to the Hebrews explains. For 12 chapters in the book of Hebrews, the writer described in detail the new covenant God has made with us in Christ Jesus. Christ the perfect sacrifice shed his own blood to atone for the sins of the whole world. It is only through faith in Christ Jesus that you are established as a child and heir of God almighty. You are given that *position* by God’s grace through Christ’s work through the Holy Spirit’s working in you. Throughout the letter, Christ has been held up as superior and supreme. He is all you ever need for a right relationship with God. That has been presented over and over again.

So having been given this position as a gift through Christ, the letter concludes with what we who enjoy that position will do -- how we will live.

Hebrews 13:1-6 Keep on loving each other as brothers. So here is the basic, big-picture idea. Keep on loving each other as brothers. God has placed us into his family, and that makes us gathered here today family as well. As members of God’s family, God wants us to first and foremost love Him above all things. And after all that writer has already written in this book, he assumes we’ve gotten that message already. God is first and central in our hearts and lives.

So here he focuses and the second of two major commandments of God: love for our neighbor.

Now when it comes to loving our neighbor, we would have enough material for a hundred sermons, and certainly the writer to the Hebrews could have written volumes about it. But there is no need to. If we love each other and live out that love, we will automatically be keeping the law of God. ILLUSTRATION: For example, in our family we love each other. I’m not saying we’re perfect, but it is certainly true that we love each other. And because we love each other, we don’t need to write a lengthy Ewart family handbook that outlines what is and isn’t allowed. For example, we do not have a sign in our kitchen that says: “Thou shalt not hit your husband in the back of the head with a rolling pin.” Because my wife loves me, that rule is already followed without having to spell it out. Nor do we have rule posted in the living room, “Thou shalt not break your siblings toys.” Or “Thou shalt not punch your sibling in the nose.” Love already dictates that should not happen.

So also, God's desire that we love each other as brothers already covers it all. All we have to do is ask ourselves the question: Am I loving my brother or sister? Will these words be loving? Will this action be loving? Will this inaction be loving?

Having said all that, the writer does give some specific applications to his readers. It was probably specific things they were struggling with in their congregation at that time. And it turns out they are things we struggle with too. So let's listen to what it looks like to love each other, and things that often get in the way of us loving each other.

There are four main points in what follows. They seem somewhat scattered and unrelated, yet they are all related to the command to keep on loving each other as brothers. What I'd like to do is cover the first three fairly quickly, and talk a bit more at length on the fourth one, as it is the one that is also spoken of in our other readings. First one:

1) Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.

As soon as God tells us to keep on loving each other as brothers, the inner lawyer in us starts looking for loopholes and exceptions – and the writer anticipates that. “Love each other? Well, surely he means our good friends and the people we know and like the most!” Of course they're included, but the command to love applies even to people you don't know very well – or not at all. Be hospitable even to strangers.

Someone might push back: “Why would I be hospitable to someone I don't even know?” The reason is that we show love not because of who the person is. We show love because of who our God is. When we show love for others, it's ultimately to give honor and glory and praise to our God who loved us.

And we have a second reason. You may actually be entertaining an angel! There is a story in the Old Testament of a the Lord and two angels coming to Abraham in the form of men. But he did not know who they were. Has the same thing ever happened to us? We would never know!

So... first point. Loving each other includes loving those who are strangers to us. Be hospitable.

2) Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

So the second thing our inner lawyer would say is: “Surely loving each other must exclude some – like prisoners for example... or those who are mistreated.” They are probably guilty of something. They're not worthy of love. And surely they would not be able to return much love to me, so let's just exclude them. But Paul says to remember them and show them brother love as well.

Finally, our God loved us when we were imprisoned under Satan's power. There wasn't anything in us that was worthy of his love. But he loved us. And he calls us to love others, including prisoners.

[Our Synod's prison ministry has reached over 80,000 inmates!]

3) Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.

This one we won't talk much about because it was the focus of our service last week. Nowhere does a lack of love for each other hurt more than when it happens in marriage. God intended the deepest bond of love between the husband and wife. The bond is made by an unconditional promise they make to each other, a promise made before witnesses and a promise made before God. The most severe damage to this loving relationship is done when there is adultery.

To preserve that love, the writer here specifically talks about sexual purity. Sinning against one's spouse in that particular way does great damage. God designed sexual intimacy as an

incredible gift. It draws together, connects and unites two people like nothing else. In fact, researchers say that the chemicals released during intimacy are similar to the effects of some drugs and that euphoric feeling produced is addictive. In other words, God in his wisdom designed this gift so that a man and woman who pledged themselves to be faithful to each other until death, and then enjoy the intimacy God designed, actually become addicted to each other! Adultery, then, makes a bond with another.

Flee sexual immorality.

Now we come to the last command on the list.

4) 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.” So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”

Now this one seems a little random and at first hard to relate to the command to love each other. So listen carefully because we have to walk through the logic on this one. Jesus once said that you can't love two masters. If a person loves money, then they will no longer love God. Money becomes your master and all you do will be directed toward that master. And if you love money and it becomes your God, what necessarily happens is that your love for each other will decrease too. God's love filling our hearts empowers us to love each other. Love of money filling our hearts hinders us from loving others. Others are seen only as a way to make more money. We will see them as sales clients, or use them, or defraud them. But when we love money, we cannot any longer properly love God, and we cannot therefore properly love each other.

Then he warns us to be content with what we have. A lack of contentment quickly leads to a love of money.

Are you satisfied with what you have? We've talked about this before. But I am convinced that modern day America is THE most difficult culture in all of history to be content with what you have. Our capitalist, materialistic society is the perfect petri dish for growing a heart filled with discontent. The economic growth of our country depends on discontented, covetous people.

A covetous, discontented heart is just not something culture recognizes as sin, and therefore something the Christian struggles to recognize as sin. Now, this fall I have completed my 20th year in the ministry. In that time, I have seen many sins and heard many confessions. But in all of my years in the ministry, I have never had someone confess to me, or even express a bit of remorse to me, about the sin of covetousness or discontentment.

Yet the sin is real, and it is dangerous. There are Bible stories to remind us of that. We heard it in our Old Testament reading today. Gehazi, the servant of Elisha, decided he could get some easy money by chasing down Naaman who had wanted to give a gift for his healing, but Elisha refused it. Gehazi collected it... and was stricken with leprosy.

Do you remember Judas and his covetous heart and love of money? It led him to betray the Savior.

God warns us that about the same sin.

There is a story about John D. Rockefeller, the American business magnate. Early in career, someone asked him how much money he wanted. He said one million dollars. After he earned his first million, the same person asked him again. His answer: another million. Understand this: Covetousness is an appetite. Appetites are never satisfied... at least not for long. Hunger is an appetite, but even if you have a huge meal, you'll be hungry the next day. So also, covetousness. You could earn or win a large chunk of money, but that will not satisfy you. Once you have it, you will only want more. And as you keep wanting more, you will drive yourself further and further from God. And as you get further and further from God, your love for others will diminish more

and more. Some people's faith has been wrecked because of covetousness. This is a sin to take seriously! This sin can destroy you!

Coveting says, "I'm on my own – I want enough money to take care of me." God says, "Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you." We don't trust money. We trust God. He is powerful. He knows everything. He knows you and your situation. He also loves you more than you imagine. Trust him. He will take care of you. Colossians 3:2 reminds us: "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." Your true riches are spiritual and eternal and found only in Christ Jesus.

Dear friends, you know God's love for you. You know the sacrifice of his own Son, Jesus Christ. You know he forgave you all your sins. You know your eternal inheritance. You know God adores you. You know your position in Christ Jesus as child of God.

Now God encourages you to keep on loving each other as family. We're all in this together. Let's show the world just how great our God and his love are by making a concentrated, intentional effort to love each other just as God has love us. Show the world a redeemed life, and they will take a closer look at your Redeemer! Keep on loving each other as family.