

C. Final Exhortations (13:1-19)

Having led his readers through a vast and glorious consideration of Jesus' person and work and all that their God has accomplished in Him, the writer ended his epistle with a series of brief, practical exhortations. This underscores the pastoral intent of his letter; he intended his doctrinal instruction to nurture and strengthen their faith and provide resource to help them persevere and thrive in their lives as God's children in the Messiah.

1. The first exhortation pertains to the most fundamental aspect of the Christian life – the one that encompasses and gives definition and expression to all others. And that is the obligation of *love*. In Paul's words, love is the one debt that Christians are to carry, the one debt that is never paid off (Romans 13:8-10). Paul recognized love as being the very essence of Israel's Torah, such that the one who loves has "fulfilled the law." His logic was simple: The Law of Moses defined and prescribed Israel's sonship in relation to Yahweh as Father. If God is love, and a son shares the essential likeness of his father, then the people of Israel would fulfill their sonship – they would fulfill God's Torah – by living lives of love *as love is true of God Himself*. But this is a crucial caveat, for there is kind of love that all people recognize and express in their relationships with other human beings. But this is a love that, like everything else in human existence, is an expression of the fall. Love as people know it exists in the context of human *alienation* – alienation from God, from all others, and from themselves. This "love" is a perverse caricature of love as it is true in God Himself, and as He intends it to define His image-children. Human beings become capable of love when they are taken up in the life of the God who is love. Hence John's assertion: "*Whoever loves has been born of God*" (1 John 4:7).

Jesus expressed the same truth from a different angle in the Sermon on the Mount. That discourse was His "gospel (good news) of the kingdom," in which He challenged His Israelite audience to rethink their notion of God's kingdom and their relation to it. Jesus was indeed inaugurating Yahweh's kingdom, but it was a very different kingdom than they expected, even as He didn't at all fit their messianic expectation and hope. The kingdom Jesus had come to inaugurate is the kingdom of God's *new creation*, the final, everlasting kingdom that echoes the heavenly realm and sees heaven and earth converge (Matthew 6:10). Thus it is a kingdom characterized by love as God is love, not the natural love that vilifies perceived enemies and reserves itself for those who enjoy special favor or reciprocate in kind (Matthew 5:43-48). Such "love" is just one more manifestation of the alienation and self-enslavement that define human existence under the fall. In truth, this sort of love is no different from hatred, for both are expressions of the same self-centered existence: People "love" those whom they regard favorably, and they "hate" those whom they hold in disfavor.

But the love that defines God – the love that has been fully disclosed and expressed in Jesus – is the *self-sacrificing love* that seeks the true and highest good of the other, with no concern for one's own benefit. This is the love that Hosea's prophecy acclaims as it depicts Yahweh as a spurned and humiliated lover whose own unrelenting love leads Him to pursue His beloved with the goal of restoring her to Himself and showering her with His devotion and riches of His blessing (ref. chaps. 1-2).

This is the same love that motivated the incarnation (God's everlasting union with His human image-bearer), and that consummated that union at Calvary on behalf of the human race. This is a sacrificial love that withholds nothing and risks everything for the sake of the other's good; it doesn't do its work at a distance or with impersonal detachment, but by fully taking upon itself the burden it seeks to resolve (John 3:16-17, 13:1, 15:13; Romans 5:1-8, 8:1-39; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; 1 John 3:16-18).

- a. The writer's opening exhortation was succinct: "*Let the love of the brethren abide*" (13:1). He then went on to give two practical examples of abiding love among this community of believers. Both of his examples speak to intentional, active care for others – loving in deed, and not just in word (1 John 3:18). Moreover, they speak to the issue of loving those who are *distant* – in the first instance, distant *relationally* (13:2); in the second, distant *circumstantially* (13:3).

In terms of the exhortation itself, the writer was calling his readers to a perpetual commitment of love toward those within the community of faith; his concern was the love of the brethren. This doesn't imply that Christian love is reserved for fellow believers. Indeed, if God's children are characterized by love as He is, they will love all people (Romans 13:8-10; 1 Corinthians 16:14; Galatians 5:22). But there is a unique bond of love between Christians, for they are united to each other as fellow-sharers in Jesus' life – the life of God Himself. In this way they are members of one another, so that love for the brethren is love for God and oneself. Hence John's constant refrain (John 13:34-35, 15:1-17; 1 John 2:9-10, 3:10-23, 4:7-5:2; 2 John 5; 3 John 5-6; cf. Romans 12:10; Ephesians 4:11-16).

- b. Again, the writer followed his general exhortation with two examples, the first of which concerns love as *hospitable* (13:2). This example of love in action highlights love's eagerness to receive and provide for those outside of our familiar relationships: "*Do not neglect love for strangers.*" (The word in the text is a compound noun literally rendered *stranger-love*.) In contemporary American usage, the word *stranger* tends to carry the connotation of threat or danger, but the Greek terminology simply denotes a person who is unfamiliar. Here, the writer was referring to Christian brethren who were from outside the readers' immediate community, and he likely had in mind foreigners or travelers who found themselves in need of lodging and/or other provision. This sort of hospitality was common in the ancient world, for there weren't many lodging places and people counted on the kindness and provision of others. And yet people are naturally reluctant to welcome strangers into their homes without some sort of relational connection, reference, or commendation, and so it was with these Hebrews.

The writer's grammar underscores this failure in hospitality: ***Stop neglecting love for strangers.*** People tend to avoid involvement with strangers out of suspicion, fear, prejudice, or a simple lack of concern, and obviously this should not be the case among Christian brethren. But even where believers have a hospitable heart toward outsiders, they can still neglect the *practice* of hospitality – not because they don't care, but out of busyness, preoccupation, and other distractions.

Love for the other is the reason for Christian hospitality, but there is further motivation in the fact that its significance transcends the hospitality itself. One never knows the full impact of the simplest acts of love, or what fruit God will bring from them. Here, the author reminded his readers that some have actually received angels, when they thought they were being hospitable toward a human stranger. This was the case with Abraham (Genesis 18) and Lot (Genesis 19); in fact, one of the strangers that Abraham received interacted with him as Yahweh Himself. The writer wasn't suggesting that his readers should expect angelic visitations, but they should expect rich *blessing* from hosting brethren who share the same Father (cf. Romans 1:8-12). And they also needed the reminder that familiarity, appearances, or circumstances must not determine the occasions and objects of their hospitality. If Christians only embrace those to whom they are endeared, their "love" is no different from that of pagans (Matthew 5:46-47).

- c. The writer's first example speaks to the obligation of love for those who are relationally distant, while the second one concerns those who are distant *physically* and *circumstantially*. Once again he emphasized that love involves conscious, active concern, but here love's objects are brethren who are remote from one's daily life. Specifically, he mentioned those who are imprisoned for the faith or otherwise mistreated (13:3). And he also made explicit what is implied in the concept of love for the brethren, which is *solidarity* in the household of faith. Because Christians are members of Christ through His indwelling Spirit, they are also members of one another (1 Corinthians 12:12-14). Thus the writer encouraged his readers to be mindful of their imprisoned brethren and care for them as if they themselves were imprisoned alongside them. So also they were to view the ill-treatment suffered by their Christian brothers and sisters as if it were inflicted upon them. They, too, are "in the body," meaning they also inhabit a frail and mortal body subject to the suffering their brethren were enduring.

The writer's point was that his readers should regard the suffering and mistreatment of others as if it were their own. When the plight of others is "out of sight," it's very easy for it to be "out of mind," even when it involves other believers. It's an undeniable truth that personal concerns and the demands of daily life tend to crowd out conscious thought of others. And the more remote a particular experience is, the harder it is to relate to it in a real and personal way. One might sincerely sympathize with another's suffering, but that's not the same as regarding it as one's own. But this is what love does, and it isn't distracted or dulled by immediate concerns or remoteness. Rather, love reaches across any and every separation to be present and one with its object in his particular circumstance. In Paul's words, because believers are members of one another as members of Christ and His fullness, the experience of one is the experience of all: "*If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it*" (1 Corinthians 12:24-26; cf. also Romans 12:9-16). Such love is a discipline of mind and heart, but it is also grounded in the new creation in Jesus. And when Christians love one another in this way, the world has no choice but to take notice (John 13:34-35, 17:20-23).