

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS HEBREWS 13:1-6

SEPTEMBER 16, 2012

In his forward to John MacArthur's book, The Gospel According to Jesus, J. I. Packer offers a most important insight into the nature of justifying faith:

That man should not separate what God has joined is a truth about more than marriage. God has joined the three offices of prophet (teacher), priest and king in the mediatorial role of Jesus Christ, and directs us in the Bible to relate positively to them all. God has joined faith and repentance as the two facets of response to the Savior and made it clear that turning to Christ means turning from sin and letting ungodliness go. Biblical teaching on faith joins credence, commitment, and communion; it exhibits Christian believing as not only knowing facts about Christ, but also coming to Him in personal trust to worship, love, and serve Him. If we fail to keep together these things that God has joined together, our Christianity will be distorted.

To this affirmation, the writer of Hebrews would add his hearty "Amen!" Like Paul and the other writers of New Testament epistles, our author is very much aware that there are ethical implications of saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Simply put, genuine Christian faith cannot be divorced from basic Christian virtues. The former leads to the latter.

For that reason, our author urges upon his readers (including us) a number of these virtues that are to adorn our lives, marking us out as a genuine Christian community. How then do we display our faith in the once-for-all atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ? Within these verses there are five essential evidences:

1. Continuing In Brotherly Love (v.1). The word that is translated "brotherly love" is *philadelphia*. It denotes the display of kindness, sympathy and helpfulness which unites the members of the family of God. It is a concept that is emphasized frequently in the New Testament (Romans 12:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; 1 Peter 1:22; 2 Peter 1:7). In light of the present situation of these readers, this exhortation takes on added significance : continuance in the Christian faith and continuance in the Christian brotherhood go hand in glove.

2. Being Hospitable to Strangers (v. 2). In New Testament times, Christians travelling from one place to another would be especially receptive to the hospitality of their fellow Christians. Public accommodations were not always safe and were often places of doubtful reputation. Hence, the need to encourage hospitality among strangers (Cf. 3 John; where the entire epistle is devoted to this very thing!). As an underlying motivation, our author alludes to the Old Testament Scriptures; there were some who "entertained angels unawares." Examples would be Abraham (Gen. 18:1-3); Lot (19:1-2); Gideon (Judges 6:11-24), and the parents of Samson (Judges 13:6-20). What is in our author's mind? "He is not necessarily encouraging his readers to expect that those whom they entertain will turn out to be supernatural beings traveling incognito; he is assuring them that some of their visitors will prove to be true messengers of God to them, bringing a greater blessing than they receive." (F. F. Bruce, Hebrews)

3. Helping Those In Need (v. 3). Another example of true brotherly love is the capacity for putting ourselves in someone else's place and extending sympathy to those who are ill treated. In the Hebrews' case, it was the call to give whatever assistance they could to their persecuted and imprisoned brethren, something which they had done well in the past (10:32-34). But in our case, this is but a specific application of a general principle binding upon us all: "If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26).

4. Holding Marriage In High Esteem (v. 4). This exhortation can also be brought under the banner of brotherly love within the faithful bonds of a Christian marriage. The sin that defiles the sanctity of marriage before it is established is the one committed by "fornicators" (NASB), that which defiles marriage after it is established is committed by "adulterers." Our author agrees with the other New Testament writers that those who are guilty of either sin will incur the judgment of God (Cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Eph. 5:3-5 and Gal. 5:19-21 in particular.) All the more reason, therefore, for the communion of saints to be a *holy* communion, one which is committed to a *repentant* way of life.

5. Practicing Contentment (vv. 5-6). The person who is never content is the one who always wants more of what he has and is also afraid of losing what he has. He runs the real risk of becoming a "money-lover." In a parallel passage, Paul warns Timothy that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and have pierced themselves with many pangs" (1 Tim. 6:10). Therefore our author finds it necessary to remind all of us of the assurances of God's Word, "tried and true" through the centuries, that He will provide and care for us:

a. "I will never fail you or forsake you" (v. 5). This was the promise given to Joshua at a crucial hour in his life (Joshua 1:5), one which was in essence given to many other servants of the Lord (Cf. 1 Chronicles 28:20; Deut. 31:6; Gen. 28:5).

b. "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" (v. 6) This quotation is from the sixth verse of Psalm 118, which is a hymn expressing joy and confidence in Yahweh, one which was sung at the great festivals of the Jewish people. The same joy and confidence should be ours as well; while it is true that man "may deprive me of my belongings and even kill my body (Matt. 10:28) . . . he cannot so much as touch the eternal life and wealth that are mine in Christ Jesus my Lord: indeed all things are mine, and I am Christ's, and Christ is God's (1 Cor. 3:21ff)!" (Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, Hebrews).