

WHAT MORE CAN GOD SAY?

(Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews)

Study 19

Love through Hospitality and Care

(Hebrews 13:1-3; also Col 3:12-17)

The Passage

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

Philadelphia

Philadelphia, as we know, is the name of one of America's largest and oldest cities. The city actually has this verse ("Let brotherly love continue") as its motto. Philadelphia means "brotherly love." In chapter 13, the Writer moves from systematic teaching (with interspersed encouragement and warning that flow directly from it) to practical exhortations about Christian living. This is where the rubber meets the road.

Topping the list is the exhortation: "*Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters.*" As believers we ought to have love for everyone, including our enemies (Matt 5:43-48). In terms of its outworking, the love that God inspires in us will manifest itself most obviously towards our brothers and sisters. In his first letter, John makes it clear that we cannot claim to love God if we do not love our fellow-believers (1 John 4:19-21). "Blood is thicker than water." We share so much in common with our natural brothers and sisters and feel a special loyalty towards them. Similarly, deep relationships develop between fellow believers, especially as we bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2, 10). Here we are urged to let this family love continue and flourish. Such love should stop at nothing (2 Cor 8:1-4; 1 Thess 4:9-10; 1 John 3:16-18).

Two Instances of "Philadelphia"

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Hospitality

"Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it."

We sometimes confuse hospitality with lavish entertaining. The word (*philoxenias*) means "the love of strangers." It conveys the idea of putting yourself out for strangers and embraces everything from talking to newcomers at church and making them feel at ease, to inviting them for a meal, and putting up visitors. Usually this entails a measure of personal inconvenience. The rewards are often great in terms of friendships and enrichment, but the expectation of reciprocity can never be a legitimate motive for hospitality.

Leaders, in particular, are expected to be hospitable (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:8). *All* of us are urged to "love each other deeply because love covers a multitude of sins (and to) offer hospitality to one another without grumbling" (1 Pet 4:8-9).

"Offering hospitality to angels without knowing it" refers no doubt to Abraham (Gen 18) and possibly to Gideon and Manoah (Judges 6 and 13), and maybe even to Tobit (in the apocryphal book of Tobit 3:17; 5:4). The idea is not that angelic visitations are two-a-penny but that often visitors will prove to be true messengers of God to us.

"Hospitality" is defined not by expense incurred but by attitude adopted! You do it for the other person's benefit, not begrudgingly but willingly. It is an outflow of Christian love. Chances are that if it is limited to friends, it is not hospitality in the biblical sense!

Identification with those who are Mistreated

"Continue to remember those who are in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as though you yourselves were suffering."

The writer has already commended the Hebrew Christians for their solidarity with those who had been imprisoned or mistreated (on account of their faith). It sometimes happens that one Christian suffers (to the point of imprisonment or even martyrdom) while another has a relatively easy life. If, under such circumstances, we distanced ourselves from our unfortunate brothers and sisters to preserve our own security, we could hardly be said to love one another as brothers and sisters. We should do everything we possibly can to alleviate their position even if it involves personal risk. Of course, wisdom should dictate what action is appropriate (wisdom, not cowardice). If I were imprisoned, I would not want ten other

Christians imprisoned with me unnecessarily, but I would want to know that I am in their prayers and that they will do everything they sensibly can to alleviate my suffering. The point is that we should identify with their suffering *as though it was happening to us*.

Some Questions to Consider

1. Should you love your brother and sister in Christ more than your neighbour of your enemy? Think about this one.
2. Why is it scandalous if there is antipathy, distrust and resentment among brothers and sisters? Should we accept this as "the way things are in practice" despite our high ideals?
3. Try to identify the *essential* meaning of hospitality. Come up with some ideas of what hospitality looks like in our context.
4. What are the implications of verse 3 for us in Canada? Is there anything we can do to identify with persecuted and/or mistreated brothers and sisters?