

Do All the Good You Can

August 28, 2016

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Hebrews 13:1-16

Let mutual love continue.

2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

3 Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

4 Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. **5** Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

6 So we can say with confidence,
 "The Lord is my helper;
 I will not be afraid.
 What can anyone do to me?"

7 Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

9 Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings; for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food, which have not benefited those who observe them.

10 We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat. **11** For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the

sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp.

12 Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. **13** Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. **14** For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

15 Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. **16** Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

DO ALL THE GOOD YOU CAN

“Do all the good you can,
by all the means you can, in all the ways you can,
in all the places you can, at all the times you can,
to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.”

That’s not a bad sentiment.

In fact some consider this the unofficial motto of the United Methodist Church.

It’s framed and put on the wall in Methodist churches all over the country.

It is widely attributed to John Wesley.

And probably John would have agreed with that motto.

Certainly his devotion to social justice and a methodical approach to sanctification would lead you to believe that he said it.

But most scholars now agree that there is really no evidence that Wesley ever said it.

However, there can be no doubt that “doing good” is important in the Bible.

The last verse in our lesson from Hebrews is a case in point.

The preacher of Hebrews ends his long sermon by saying,

“Do not neglect to do good ...”

So, if doing good is important, what does it mean to do good?
 How do we define the “good” from a Christian perspective?
 This is, by the way, the basic question of Christian ethics.

MUTUAL LOVE

Our lesson for today spells it out.
 And verse 1 summarizes the whole passage very well,
 “Let mutual love continue.”

The “good” is defined by the quality of our relationships.
 How we treat each other is more important than what we say.
 Love is defined by our actions.

And “mutual love” defines the “good” in Christian ethics

The word translated love in this passage is the Greek word, “philadelphia.”
 Most of you know that Philadelphia is the city of brotherly love.
 And that’s what this word means.

It means that the Christian community is a community founded upon mutual concern.

We learn to cherish our brothers and sisters in the faith.
 We are part of the same family, so to speak.

I might not always agree with my family.
 I might not always get along with my family.
 But my family is always my family.

Come what may, I want the best for them.
 I’m always concerned about their welfare.
 That’s unconditional love.

And this is what it means to be a community of faith.
 We are connected by that kind of unconditional love.
 And our faith family is quite a bit larger than we might have imagined.

This past week I was listening to one of my favorite radio shows, Friends Talking Faith.

It’s a minister, an imam and a rabbi talking about faith issues.

And one of their guests had written a book about how we are all related ... literally.

He had determined that he was related to millions of people.

He even figured out that his wife was his seventh cousin!

(That one sort of freaked his wife out.

But, who knows?

Maybe that's why he was attracted to her in the first place.)

Last year he had a family reunion that included almost everyone because he found out that he was related to almost everyone!

Of course, he was pointing out what people of faith have been pointing out for a long time. There is one human family, and we are all a part of that family.

We are all connected.

HOSPITALITY

And so our job is *not* to exclude people.

Our job is to include people.

Why?

Because in God's kingdom we are all one family.

That becomes clear in the next verse.

In verse two we read,

"Don't neglect to show hospitality to strangers because sometimes the stranger is an angel in disguise."

The word translated "love" or "brotherly/sisterly love" in verse one is related to the word translated "hospitality" in verse two. In fact, the word translated "hospitality" is defined in my Greek dictionary as "showing love to strangers."

You see, doing good and loving are never abstract concepts in the Bible.

They are always defined by relationships, relationships with those who are close to us and relationships with those that we don't know, the stranger.

There is something godly about those who welcome strangers. And sometimes the presence of God, an angel, comes near in the guise of a stranger.

There are many examples of this in the Hebrew Bible. This is why hospitality is considered a sacred obligation in the Middle East to this day.

In the Old Testament, there was a theological reason to show hospitality toward strangers. God's people were commanded to welcome strangers or foreigners because they knew what it was like to be a stranger in a foreign land.

They themselves had been slaves in Egypt.

But, since God freed them from slavery and gave them a place to live in the Promised Land, now God's people were required to return the favor. They were required to roll out the welcome mat to those strangers who came to their land.

God didn't choose the Israelites for special privilege.
God chose them for special service.

They were to be a light to the nations.
They were to be an example of how God's way could change the world.

And now, according to the author of Hebrews, this would also be the mission of the church.
They would light the way for the world, and the grace of God would be reflected in their relationships.

LOVE WITHOUT LIMITS

They would not only show love toward those who were a part of the group.

They would show love to strangers, and they would even show love to those who were imprisoned. They would dare to identify with and suffer with those who were being tortured.

Our compassion has limits.
We say to those in prison, "You've made your bed now lie in it."

But, Jesus says, "Take up your bed and walk."

You see, the compassion of God does not have limits.

The grace of God brings a word of hope even to those who are in prison. The grace of God brings a word of hope to those who are literally at the end of their rope.

Remember Jesus' first sermon in Nazareth?
Quoting the prophet, Isaiah he said,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

In other words, when God's kingdom comes, there will be no limits on grace.

The grace of God will come to everyone, and especially to those who have lost all hope.

And we get to be a part of that process.
We get to see the kingdom come in our daily lives.

We get to welcome the stranger.
We get to visit those that everyone else has forgotten about.

We get to feed those who are hungry.
We get to worry about and care for those who suffer.

It's all about doing good, the good as God defines it.

EXAMPLES: MARRIAGE AND MONEY

The Christian definition of good impacts all aspects of our life.

And in our passage for today the author of Hebrews gives us a few examples. He begins with marriage.

When we make a sacred commitment to another person in marriage, we keep that commitment.

Why? Because what we believe about God, is reflected in that basic relationship.

We watch how we spend our money. Why?

Because what we believe about God is reflected in pocketbook issues.

When we say, in God we trust, we are not taking that motto printed on our money.

We are talking about God.

So, we do not put our ultimate trust in the money that we make.

We put our trust in God.

We believe that God will never leave us or forsake us.

And it is this faith in the goodness of God that allows us to do good in God's name.

FEAR AND FAITH

We all know that we should do good, that we should do the right thing. Our mothers taught us that when we were little children.

And I think that we all know generally what that means.

This sermon does not come as a great revelation to you.

We know that we should love one another, that we should welcome the stranger,

that we should honor our sacred commitment in marriage, that we shouldn't make money a god.

We know all this stuff.

But, we also know that we often fail to live up to that standard.

Knowing the good and doing the good are two different things.

Why is that?

Why can't we do what God has commanded?

The answer is fear.

We are afraid of what the stranger might do to us.
 We are afraid that if we love someone, they won't love us back.
 We are afraid that if we give our money away that we won't have enough or
 that someone might try to take our money from us.

And you know what?
 All those fears are realistic.
 Those fears could come true.

But, as Christians, we don't let those fears keep us from doing the right
 thing.

Your know why?
 We believe that the grace of God is stronger than the power of evil.
 This passage teaches us that in the long run the grace of God will prevail.

Jesus has told us that he will never leave or forsake us.

We can say with confidence the words of the Psalmist that is quoted in our
 passage for today,
 "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.
 What can anyone do to me?" (13:6)

Or to put it in the words of the apostle Paul,
 "If God is for us, who is against us?" (Romans 8:31)

STANDING ON THE PROMISES

Now you might say,
 "That sounds good, but when faced with the evil in the world, it's hard to
 believe.
 What evidence do we have that this is true?"

The author of Hebrews gives us two examples.
 First, he reminds them of the great cloud of witnesses.

He said,

"Remember your leaders, those who practiced what they preached.
 And then imitate their lives."

It is possible to live a life based upon faith instead of fear, and the proof of that is in lives of those faithful people that have gone before us.”

And remember one more thing our lesson tells us,

“The Spirit of Christ is still with us.
Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever.”

In other words the promises of God do not have an expiration date.

The grace of God is a word of hope for every generation.

SALVATION REIMAGINED

It's at this point that author refers to a problem in this particular Christian community, a “strange teaching.” It had to do with regulations about food.

We don't know exactly what he was talking about, but we can surmise it had something to do with the kosher food laws of the Jews and the sacrificial system in the Temple.

In the early church, Jewish Christians had a hard time making the transition from law to grace. One of the first church conferences discussed whether Gentiles had to first become Jews before they could follow Jesus.

And the people who first heard this sermon were apparently struggling with the same issue.

The author of Hebrews tells his congregation that they have to reimagine the process of salvation.

Salvation did not come by following certain rules or making animal sacrifices in the Temple. Salvation came once and for all through one sacrifice, and that sacrifice was not made in the Temple. That sacrifice was not even made in the city of Jerusalem.

That sacrifice was made outside the city at a place called Calvary.

On the cross Christ died for the sins of the world.

We are saved not by what we have done but by what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

We no longer look for salvation through the law.

We look for salvation through the power of God's grace.

We see a new day coming.

We are looking for a new city, a new Jerusalem, a new Promised Land.

SACRIFICE

How do we respond to this message of grace?

Two ways.

First, we bring the sacrifice of praise to God.

We worship and give thanks for God's salvation in Christ Jesus.

But, we do more than lay down our lips.

The second thing we do is lay down our lives.

We share what we have.

Out of gratitude for God's grace we do not neglect to do good, to share with others because that's the sacrifice that God wants more than anything else.

Doing the right thing is not done to earn salvation.

Doing the right thing is a way of worshipping God.

Along with our praise it is an expression of thanksgiving.

That's the difference between doing good and being a "do-gooder."

The "do-gooder" tries to justify himself or herself.

And this approach invariably leads to frustration and the self-righteousness regulation of others.

The one who does good shares with others as an act of worship.

Doing good is a praise offering to God.

The prophets of old knew this.

They said flat out that God didn't want or need the sacrifices of the Temple.

What God needed and what God wanted was for His people to do the right thing.

God needed them to “do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with their God.” (Micah 6:8)

That was the sacrifice that God wanted then.
And that is the sacrifice that God wants now.

Sacrifice means giving up something precious to us for the sake of God’s kingdom and the greater good.

Throughout the Bible God’s people are encouraged to sacrifice. In the church we count the sacrifice of Christ as the ultimate sacrifice.

And this sacrifice forms the basis for our life together. Jesus encourages us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him.

According to the Bible, in order for a sacrifice to be acceptable, it had to make a real difference in the lives of others.

It wasn’t just about ritual.

The purpose of sacrifice was to bring heaven to earth.
The sacrifice was a concrete expression of the Lord’s prayer, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done.”

To put it simply, we sacrifice in order to share with others the blessings that God has given us. Out of gratitude for God’s grace we count our blessings and share them.

JUSTICE

And our sacrifices have a purpose.
We sacrifice in order to do justice.

I read a very helpful article this week by a pastor in North Carolina. He rightly pointed out that the biblical definition of justice is different from how the world views that word.

When most people think of justice they think of the good people getting rewarded and the bad people being punished.

But, the biblical definition of justice has a different emphasis. It means showing compassion towards those who struggle.

Justice is caring for the needy, the vulnerable, and the immigrant.

Indeed, our lives and our society will be judged by this standard of justice. (See, for example Matthew 25.)

In an age of hateful rhetoric and angry actions, we are called to live in a different way.

We are called to love one another as God in Christ first loved us. We are called to do all the good we can for the sake of the kingdom.

I close this morning by repeating verse 16 again.
It's a good motto for Presbyterians as well as Methodists.

“Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”

That might make a good memory verse.
But, if you can't remember it all just remember this,

“Do all the good you can.”

Amen.