

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

(Romans 13:1-6)

A British playwright inserted the following line in one of his plays: “It’s not death, it’s life that defeats the Christian church. She’s always been equipped to deal with death.”

Think about that statement for a moment. Your Christian faith prepares you for death. Because of your faith in Jesus, and because of what the Bible teaches about eternal life and the reality of heaven, you can face your death or the death of a Christian family member or friend with hope and with a high degree of confidence. The Christian faith most certainly equips you to deal with death. There is no doubt about that.

The real question that we need to wrestle with is whether or not your Christian faith is helping you deal with the trials and difficulties of life. Your Christian faith should help you to live triumphantly, but is it? Is your faith in Jesus presently equipping you to face life well?

Most of the NT is made up of letters. Twenty-two of the 27 books of the NT are letters. They are written by various individuals to other individuals or to churches or to groups of churches. There is a common feature shared by many of these letters. The author begins the letter with the doctrinal matters. The first half of the letter at least, and often more, consists of theological lessons and teaching. Then, the letter turns to more practical matters related to living out the Christian life.

Paul follows that pattern in Ephesians, in Galatians, in Romans, and in other letters. For instance, in the Paul’s letter to the Romans, he spends the first 11 chapters dealing with weighty Christian doctrine. Then, in the last five chapters, he turns to living the Christian life in light of what he has already taught. The first verse of Romans 12:1 begins with these words: “I appeal to you, therefore, brother . . .” He is saying, “In light of what I have taught you, this is what you need to do.”

The same holds true for Hebrews. The author of Hebrews spends the first 10 chapters expounding deep, theological truth. The 11th chapter is somewhat of a transitional chapter because the author gives us numerous examples of those who are employing their faith and living life based on what they believe. The final two chapters address how we are to live the Christian life. The first verse of chapter 12 is “therefore.” Most of chapter 12 discuss our lives in terms of a race. We are instructed as to how to run that race well.

Today, we come to chapter 13. This is where the rubber meets the road. It is clear that the author has gone . . .

- from doctrine to duty,
- from belief to behavior,
- from creed to conduct,
- from exposition to exhortation,
- from vertical to horizontal.

Kent Hughes explained, “What we think about God has everything to do with our relationship to each other and with the world.”

The title of today's message is, "Practical Christianity." We are going to examine two things—how our Christian faith affects our choices and informs our ethics. Let read our text—Hebrews 12:1-6. Notice first:

Christianity Is Practical Because It Affects Our Choices

It has been said that the human soul is composed of a mind, emotions, and a will. With the mind we think. With the emotions we feel. With the will we choose. The Bible teaches that when we trust Christ, His Holy Spirit comes to indwell us. We become a new creation. The Spirit works on and through our mind, emotions, and will. He helps us to think Christianly. He changes how we feel about various things. We no longer love sin and cherish those things that dishonor God. And while the things of God use to turn us off, they are now precious to us. The Spirit of God also strengthens our will and enables us to choose to obey and serve God in a variety of ways.

The first three verses of Hebrews 13 present to us three things that we are to choose to do. These three practices are three expressions of our practical, Christian faith.

1. We Will Choose to Practice Love.

Look back at v. 1. Notice that word *let*. We are to *let* brotherly love happen. In other words, it will happen if we don't get in the way. We do get in the way when we choose selfishness, when we choose to act proudly and arrogantly.

Notice what kind of love is to be practiced in the church. It is *brotherly love*. Ten times in Hebrews the author uses the word *brother* or *brothers*. This is the only time he uses *brotherly*. This word functions as an adjective. It describes the kind of love we to have for one another. It is to be a brotherly love.

To be brothers and sisters that necessarily means that we have the same parent. In the case of Christian brothers and sisters, we have the same heavenly Father. We also have the same Elder Brother—Jesus. We are family.

I happen to know something about brothers and sisters. They are capable of fighting like cats and dogs. I have seen it in homes, and sadly, I have seen it in the church.

I know something else. I know that when someone outside the family picks a fight and tries to bully one member of the family, the brother and sisters often rally around the one being threatened. I've seen that, too.

If someone attempted to hurt Sarah or Gemma, they each have five brothers and sisters who will bow their back and flex their muscles. To borrow the words of Mr. T, "I pity the fool who tries to hurt one of them."

Fighting for our Christian brothers and sisters is only one expression of love. I think the author has in mind some other ways of expressing love for our Christian siblings. We need to remember that this Jewish congregation was beginning to experience persecution. They would have faced economic hardship. Workers would likely have lost their jobs as retaliation for becoming Christians. Business owners would have lost customers for the same reason.

The author of this letter is encouraging those believers to care for one another, to meet

real and pressing needs they faced.

We may not be facing persecution right now, but some within our family may be facing economic needs brought on by runaway inflation or physical needs brought on by ill health or aging. Some members of our church do not have family members close by; so, we are to be their family and do what we can express our love for them. Some just need a phone call or a visit or an encouraging card. They need to know they are remembered and valued.

The author wrote, "Let brotherly love continue." They got a good start. They had a worthwhile beginning. Now, they are being encouraged, "Don't become so preoccupied with your own problems and fears that you forget your spiritual family. Keep doing the right thing."

This is similar to what Paul wrote the church in Thessalonica. Listen to this passage:

Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that is indeed what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more . . .

In other words, there is always room for improvement. Let's grow in our ability to love one another.

Loving our brothers and sisters speaks a powerful message to two different audiences. One message is to us, the Church itself. We find this message in 1 John 3:14. The Apostle John is known as the Apostle of Love. Listen to what he wrote, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers." Loving the church is the prime evidence that you are truly a believer. If you don't love the people in the church, you may not be saved.

The second message is to the world. That same John recorded the words of Jesus in the gospel that bears his name. We read in John 13:35, "By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another." The watching world will know we are real if we love another. If, however, they witness us fuss and feud with one another they will dismiss us as fakes and charlatans. At best, they will simply ignore us and believe that we have nothing that they want. I believe that is happening all across this nation, and it is happening in Enid, Oklahoma.

Because Christianity is practical, it affects our choices. On the one hand, we choose to practice love.

2. We Will Choose to Practice Hospitality.

Look at v. 2. In the ancient world, traveling was a dangerous affair. Getting to where you wanted to go was difficult enough, but having a place to stay along the way or once you got there was also a great concern.

In today's world, motels and hotels are everywhere. If you didn't live in Enid and were simply travel either to Enid or through Enid, you wouldn't have any problem finding a place to stay, but this was not the case in the ancient world.

Kent Hughes wrote:

Inns were not congenial or healthy places for Christians. This, coupled with the fact that many Christians suffered ostracism by both society and family, necessitated Christian hospitality—which was happily provided by brothers and sisters who could do so.

The Greek text literally begins v. 2 with the words, “Of hospitality, be not forgetfully.” Again, the author is telling us, “Don’t be so preoccupied with your own concerns that you fail to notice those who need your assistance.”

The Greek word for brotherly love is Philadelphia. We have a city in Pennsylvania known as “the City of Brotherly Love.” Whether or not it lives up to its name can be debated. Let there be no denying that Liberty Southern is a church where brother love is found.

The key word in v. 2 sounds much like Philadelphia. It is *philozenia*. It literally means “love for strangers.”

As the author of this letter promotes the practice of hospitality, he adds an interesting inducement to do so. He says, “You know, as they helped people, some believers actually showed kindness to angels without realizing it.” Can you imagine refusing to help someone, and without knowing it, you were actually saying “No” to a messenger from God.

There are other verses in the NT that promote Christian hospitality. In the practical portion of Romans we read, “Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality” (Romans 12:13). Peter tells us in his first epistle, “Show hospitality to one another without grumbling” (4:9). Hospitality is so important in the church that it is listed as a qualification for becoming a pastor. You will find that in both 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. “If a man is unwilling to open up his home and show hospitality, don’t even think about calling that man to be your pastor,” is the idea.

Showing hospitality is not going to happen accidentally. That will only happen volitionally. We must choose to show hospitality, and we will do so when we embrace a practical, Christian faith.

There is a third choice we will make.

3. We Will Choose to Practice Empathy.

Look at v. 3. Empathy is what is called for in this verse. Empathy is feeling what someone else feels. It is an ability to put yourself in the shoes of that other person and develop a heart of concern for that person.

Jesus exhibited empathy. Mark tells us of Jesus’ reaction prior to the feeding the 5,000 in his gospel account. We read in Mark 6:34, “When He went ashore, He saw a great crowd, and He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” Jesus proceeded to shepherd that great multitude. First, He fed them spiritually. He taught them. Then, He fed them physically. He provided them with as much bread and fish as they could eat.

As far as we know, Jesus never turned away anyone who came to Him for healing. On one occasion, Jesus was so moved by what He saw that He acted without being asked. Jesus saw a funeral procession going by Him. A young man was in a coffin being taken to his place of burial. He was the only son of widow. Jesus stopped the funeral procession. He spoke to the grieving mother. He said, “Do not weep.” Then, he addressed the corpse. He commanded, “Young man, I say to you, ‘arise.’” And he did.

We may not be able to multiply loaves of bread and fish miraculously. Nor may we be able to raise corpses from their coffins. What we can do is empathize with the hurting, the hungry, the forgotten, and the mistreated and convey to them that we care and that God loves them.

I have not done so here in Enid, but when I lived in Stillwater, there was a time when I would go to the county jail every Tuesday night with a group of other men. We would go the various pods, and we would take turns preaching the gospel. It seemed that without fail, men would give their lives to Christ. They were always grateful that someone came to see them and speak to them.

Let’s show care and concern to the hurting among us.

We have been looking at how practical Christianity affects our choices. When we adhere to a Christianity that is practical, we will choose to practice love, choose to practice hospitality, and choose to practice empathy.

I want you to notice also . . .

Christianity Is Practical Because It Informs Our Ethics

It does do in two ways. Look at vv. 4-6. We are going to look at the two ways that practical Christianity informs our ethics. The word ethics refers to our moral principles, what we view as right and wrong. Let’s consider briefly where do ought not to get our ethics. We should not get our ethics from Hollywood. The Christian gets his ethics not by taking poll or a survey as to what the community thinks and simply going with the majority opinion. Don’t look for the opinion of the social scientists. God tells us in His word what is right and wrong. That is one reason the Christian faith is so practical.

1. It Informs Our Ethics Concerning Marriage/Sex.

The author begins this fourth verse that way he began the first verse. He begins it with the word *let*. I do note, however, a difference between the two verses. While v. 1 addressed the Christian community specifically, it seems that v. 4 is a call to all—to those within the church and to those outside of it. All of us everywhere are called to honor marriage.

Friends, I can assure you, that is not being done by all. These weekend, in our community, marriage was dishonored in very graphic and perverse ways.

To honor marriage, you have to affirm what marriage is. The Bible is quite clear about the matter. Marriage is a covenant relationship between one man and one woman, not one man and many women, not one woman and many men; it is not between two men or between two women. Anything other than one man and one woman is a perversion of

God's plan. God's perfect plan calls for one man and one woman to be in a committed relationship for life.

God's word does provide for the possibility of divorce, but that was not God's ultimate design. The religious leaders asked Jesus in Matthew 19 why Moses permitted divorce. Jesus answered, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery" (19:8-9).

Serial marriage in which a man or woman marries and divorce only to remarry and does that again and again is also a way in which marriage is dishonored.

In 1996 President Clinton signed into law "The Defense of Marriage Act" which declared that marriage is between a man and a woman, and it gave states the right to not recognize same-sex marriages that occurred in other states. This law was passed by a large majority in both houses, and it affirmed what was widely held in our nation from its inception. That law honored marriage.

In 2015 the Supreme Court invalidated that law claiming the Constitution gives same-sex couple the fundamental right to be married and that all states must perform and recognize same-sex marriages.

That court decision which still stands dishonors marriage.

We can decry what goes on in our nation, but it would be more helpful to take a look at our own church and our own lives. Do our relationships honor God's intention for marriage. For those of us who are married, do our marriages fulfill what God intends marriage to be. His goal is more than just one man and one woman for life. He wants husband to love their wives as Jesus loved the church. He wants wives to respect and honor their husbands.

The author of Hebrews expands the ethic of marriage by dealing with the subject of sexual relationships. Put simply, any and all sexual activity outside the marriage relationship is not condoned by God. In other words, sex belongs in marriage and nowhere else.

Just as fire belongs in the fireplace or the fire pit, sex belongs in the marriage relationship. When fire goes beyond the place where fire is supposed to be contained, damage and destruction results. So it is with sex. Lives are ruined and heartache follows when sex goes beyond where God meant for it to be enjoyed and celebrated.

God is not anti-sex. He is pro-sex. He is the one who invented it and gave it to us as a beautiful gift, but we have trashed that gift by treating it as a biological function not different from eating, drinking, or going to the bathroom.

We live in a world that is ruled by its glands, but we need to be a people who are ruled by the word of God.

Let's look at final way that practical Christianity informs our ethics.

2. It Informs Our Ethics Concerning Money.

Look at vv. 5-6. The Bible says much about money, but it never teaches that money is

bad, that money is evil. Just as God doesn't have a problem sex, He doesn't have a problem with money. The problems arise when those things occupy a place in our heart they ought not to hold.

The author commands, "Keep your life free from love of money." When money becomes an ultimate that's when our life goes off the rails. How do we keep from loving money? The answer to that question is to do what follows next in the verse, "Be content with what you have." We need to cultivate a sense of contentment with what we have.

We don't have to have the latest, the greatest, the newest, the most expensive. As one person said, "The greatest things in live are not things." A wise lady once remarked, "Don't hold in your heart what you can hold in your hand."

What should value? Look at the last part of v. 5. Value God's presence. And v. 6 teaches us to look to Him to be our helper. As we draw closer to God, fear dissipates and then disappears.

Our practices and ethics appear more than a little strange to the world around us. In fact, they may be viewed as incomprehensible. My caution to you is, don't let the world sway you or deter you from going all out for God because in the end, it will all be worth it.

Lee Eclov is a retired pastor. He recalled that his father died on a Sunday morning in 1986 just as he was getting ready for church. The Sunday before his father had been pressed into service to cover the "special music" in the little country church he attended. He sang, "It will be worth it all when we see Jesus." Part way through, he broke down in tears, which was something he never did. The pianist, Marge, finished singing the song for him. The very next Sunday morning at that very same hour, he was in the presence of Jesus.

The world may view what we do and what we believe as being impractical. The Bible teaches otherwise. If we practice what He has called us to do and if we adopt His ethics as ours, it will all be worth it when we see Jesus.