

Prayer

We praise You, great Lord and mighty God, because Your power far exceeds anything we can envisage here on earth. You have the ability not just to change things, move things or do the impossible, but also assist each one of us in those small adjustments of life that give us significant help in everyday life and the path of faith. Thank You Lord God; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Fire Services

Pray for those countries where substantial numbers of people live in areas at risk from severe fires. Pray for the fire services there, and for their adequate funding and support.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for God's protection for you and your family
- Pray for President Obama as he deals with issues in the Middle East
- Pray about population growth and the moral issues it raises

Meditation

If you see someone who is in tears and distress,
In the name of Jesus, give help!

If you listen to someone who has been misled,
In the name of Jesus, tell the truth!

If you talk with someone who boasts of what they know,
In the name of Jesus, don't believe them!

If you work alongside those who swear using God's name,
In the name of Jesus, object!

If you come across someone who is searching their soul,
In the name of Jesus, explain the faith!

If you give time to a friend who has lost their way,
In the name of Jesus, show them where to go!

Bible Study - Hebrews 13:1-6

¹ Now, let love for one another continue. ² Do not forget to show hospitality, for by doing this, some have unknowingly entertained angels. ³ Be mindful of those who are in prison as if you were in prison with them; and those who are being tortured as though you were physically with them. ⁴ Marriage should be held in high honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept pure, for God will judge adulterers and the sexually immoral. ⁵ Be content with what you have and remain free from the love of money, for God has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.' ⁶ So we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?'

Review

We have now come to the last chapter of Hebrews, and the writer encourages his readers to take full advantage of their privileged relationship with Christ, who has done everything

necessary for their salvation. This part of the letter reminds us of some of Paul's letters, which also draw to a close with advice about different aspects of Christian living, and here, the advice is about how faith may be expressed in hospitality, concern for others (in prison), dealing with sexual and marital matters, and financial affairs. We might ask why these? There is no straightforward answer, so we must assume that they were topical or relevant issues of the day, which serve us now as examples of how to approach similar practical and moral issues.

The first piece of advice contains a phrase that has turned into a well known saying; 'entertaining angels unawares'. Some use this expression to explain circumstances in which they feel that God has worked in some unexpected way (often inexplicably). A plain reading of the text reminds us that what is said here is more focussed. Our call is to be people who are hospitable, whatever our circumstances; and the addition about angels suggests that our motivation for being good hosts should be that we see God in other people. There are some Old Testament stories of Israel's forefathers in which they were visited by God's angels (e.g. Gen 18:1f. Ex. 23:20, Numbers 22:22 etc.) at critical times. Often, it is in the midst of difficult circumstances that we dispense with hospitality as if it was a mere luxury of life for when things go well. However, as with the opening words of the passage, 'Now, let your love for one another continue ...' (13:1), this advice is best heeded when life is tough, because keeping the doors of hospitality open does not only prevent us from being consumed by our woes, it helps us remember that God is present and willing to help in all situations. The letter to the Hebrews begins by telling us about the significance of angels (and the greater importance of the Son of God), and it concludes by hinting at the important role they play in God's work. They are part of how He operates in the world.

Hebrews then urges God's people to 'be mindful of those who are in prison.' It is good advice, and in our own day it raises all kinds of questions about how we care for those in prison, especially those whose profoundly troubled lives have rendered them socially dysfunctional. However good it is to pursue these issues, we must accept that this passage probably refers to a quite different scenario; that of those who were put into prisons because they were Christians. These people were in desperate need, and Hebrews recognises that people in such circumstances need to know that others have not forgotten them and still care for them. The conditions in which they were held in those days could be very bad unless relatives or others from the community attended to their needs, and saw to it that they received food, for example. Hebrews therefore urges Jesus' followers to remember Christians in prison or tortured 'as though you were physically with them.' In truth, any Christians of those days could find themselves imprisoned if a local governor turned against them. Today, we can use this general idea to teach the importance of a fellowship within the church that offers practical caring of all its members, whatever the circumstances, not least those in prison today.

Next, God's people are urged to keep themselves sexually pure, and it is crystal clear what is meant here, which is the sanctity of marriage. The command 'let the marriage bed be kept pure' is a graphic word picture which calls us today to make sure we are not affected by the sexual immorality we constantly see around us. Today, this is evident in films, television and entertainment, as well as in magazines, conversations and social gossip. When God comes to judge the 'adulterers and sexually immoral' (13:4), what will He make of the continual drip-feed of immorality into people's minds, which is a major characteristic of our world today? The church needs to be more bold in what it says about this today.

The last advice in this passage is also important for Christians of every generation. Contentment with what you have is essential to spiritual maturity and liberty; this is because if a person constantly desires more money, then their general trust in God's provision is

compromised. Each one of us needs money in order to live, and this passage does not tell us to live without it; but we are called to make our priorities clear, and the care and protection of our Lord is of more value to us than money. As Paul says in his letter to Timothy; 'the love of money is the root of all evil (1 Tim 6:10). The real test is the last phrase of our passage; 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?'

Those who can say this are most blessed, as are those who are able to sustain hospitality, be mindful of the deeper needs of others in the church and society, and who keep the sanctity of marriage. All of these are God's precious gifts.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Can you give examples of when you have 'entertained angels unawares'? How has God helped you or blessed you in such a way?
2. Can Christians demonstrate the Gospel through social concern such as prison visiting?
3. How can a church fellowship work to ensure that its members are able to live without significant financial worries? What are the pitfalls?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

When faced by a list such as this, it is hard to know where to start, because each challenge is powerful and significant. However, the Lord understands that we can only deal with one thing at a time. He will guide us to understand what He requires of us. It is my experience that being willing to have a go at dealing with one issue at a time does indeed 'get things done', when it comes to making life changes in line with the call to Christian discipleship. Trying to do too much can be utterly self defeating and immensely discouraging.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Have a good look at the issues in this text, and add to them some of the issue mentioned at the end of some other New Testament letters, such as Philippians or Ephesians or 1 Thessalonians. After prayer, decide which is God's priority for you.*
- *Pray for inspiration so that God's people might know what social issues are appropriate for them to pursue collectively.*

Final Prayer

Almighty God and Father, may nothing that has happened today so overwhelm me that I lose sight of Your guidance and grace, and may nothing prevent me from coming into Your presence and finding peace; through Jesus Christ my Lord, AMEN.