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In this section of Hebrews we encounter a series of admonitions about living day to day as a Christian. But it is important to note that this passage underscores daily living in the context of participation in a community of faith. The admonitions are directed collectively to the believers.

I. **Context**

The context for this passage is somewhat challenging, especially on the historical side. This, largely because the book of Hebrews provides us with very little information about whom it was written to, and the situation that prompted the writing of this document.

a. **Historical**

Although in some older English translations the title of the book is "The Letter of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews," this title was not a part of the original writing of the document. In reality, it was added several centuries after the writing of Hebrews in order to identify the document as it became a standard part of the New Testament documents. And it reflected a dominant viewpoint at that time. Yet, one should notice the location of Hebrews in the New Testament. The thirteen Pauline letters are listed in descending order of length beginning with the longest -- Romans -- down to the shortest -- Philemon. The exceptions to this are where two letters are written to the same church or individual. In those instances, the length of the first of these determined the position of both letters. The sevenfold General Letters section follows a similar pattern beginning with James and concluding with Jude. Hebrews is tucked between these two sections reflecting a partial association with Paul as his 'fourteenth' letter, but isn't positioned lengthwise after Romans, where it should be as a full member of the Pauline corpus of letters.

To a large extent in the early centuries of Christian interpretation, the authorship of Hebrews remained an open question. Since the time of the Protestant Reformation, the dominant view of NT scholars -- both Protestant and Roman Catholic -- is that Paul did not write it. Then who did? No one knows with certainty! As Werner Georg Kümmel says in his NT Introduction,

Since the author of Heb keeps his identity completely in the background—only the close connection with Timothy (13:23) points to the Pauline circle, if indeed the well-known companion of Paul is intended—the most diverse possibilities have been proposed, of which the following may be mentioned:

1. Paul. This proposal is represented nowadays even from the Catholic standpoint only very rarely⁶² and has proved to be untenable (§26.3).
2. Luke. Clement of Alexandria (see §26.2) on the basis of the kinship of style with Acts held that Luke was the translator of a letter written by Paul in Hebrew. But Heb is not a translation and varies so sharply in style and theological distinctiveness that the author of Acts as the author of Heb is not really to be considered.
3. Clement of Rome. The old hypothesis which was already known by Origen (see §26.2) founders on the impossibility of conceiving that Heb and I Clem are the work of the same man, as well as on the assumption of literary dependence of I Clem upon Heb.

4. Apollos. Considered by Luther and represented with vigor by Bleek, this hypothesis has found many adherents.⁶³ This Jewish-Christian biblical scholar from Alexandria, who was also instructed in Greek rhetoric (Acts 18:24 ff) and who carried on a mission alongside Paul but independently of him (1 Cor 1:12; 3:4 ff; 16:12), could be conceived of as the author of Heb. But we do not know whether Apollos was active as a writer, and it cannot be proved that he was the only one among the Christian διδασκαλοι of the apostolic times who could have written the letter to the Hebrews.

5. Barnabas. In accordance with the tradition attested by Tertullian, Barnabas has frequently been proposed as the author of Heb.⁶⁴ But could Barnabas, a Levite from Cyprus (Acts 4:36) who later took up residence in Jerusalem and was a highly regarded member of the community there (Acts 9:27; 11:22) have so completely abandoned the position of the primitive community with regard to the law and the cultus? Could he have been so rhetorically trained and so Hellenistically oriented as to become the author of Heb?

It is in reality no longer possible to determine the identity of the author. This conclusion was reached by Origen and has been adopted from the time of Eichhorn and De Wette down to and including most more recent scholars.

Because of the limited information available, only a few images of the author of Hebrews can be understood from inside the document itself. This is summarized well by Fred Craddock in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, "The author was a Christian who lived and thought within the apostolic tradition (Heb 2:3). Timothy had been a companion in ministry and might be again (Heb 13:23). The writer was temporarily distanced from the readers but expects to return to them soon (Heb 13:19, 23). Their situation is known in great detail, either through their leaders (Heb 13:7, 17, 24) or by direct association. The writer joined strong pastoral concern with the authority of either person or office. Both the instructions and the exhortations of the letter reveal a person well educated in Greek rhetoric as well as in Judaism, especially Hellenistic Judaism formed in part by the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament. The Greek translation and not the Hebrew text provides the major lines and the subtler nuances of the writer's argument and appeal."

When and to whom was this document written? The ancient title "To the Hebrews" reflects an early tradition that the first readers were Jewish Christians. But this is not entirely certain. The contents of the document somewhat suggest this but other ways of explaining the content can also be made with persuasion. The more common time frame for the writing of this document is toward the end of the first Christian century, although many NT scholars find indications inside the letter suggesting it was written closer to the middle of the first century. Again, Craddock summarizes the issue well by saying, "If we broadly identify the readers as Hellenistic Jewish Christians, perhaps the best guess for their location is Rome. When the writer says, "those from Italy send you greetings" (Heb 13:24 NRSV), it is not clear whether the expression locates the writer or the readers in Italy. Similarities to 1 Peter, a letter written from Rome (1 Pet 5:13), argue for a Roman origin. However, early knowledge of Hebrews by Clement of Rome indicates a Roman destination, and what we know of the house churches in Rome makes that city a likely candidate as the location of the addressees."

Our passage doesn't provide any real insight into the historical situation, because writing of this nature is generalized and mostly not based in specific issues present in one particular community of faith.

b. Literary

The issues relating to literary form arise at two levels. Although the document is labeled a letter, the only part of the entire document that follows an ancient letter format -- unlike all the letters of Paul -- is the last part, the Conclusio in 13:18-25. And it is very traditional in this. Interestingly, 13:22 calls the document a παράκλησις (paraklesis), that is, a sermon, as is reflected in the NRSV translation, "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, bear with my word of *exhortation*, for I have written to you briefly." Most NT scholars will call Hebrews an ancient sermon or homily, written somewhat along the lines of an ancient Greek epideictic oratory used to confirm certain values and/or to praise significant individuals.

Our passage more specifically falls into the paraenesis category. This term refers to ancient moral admonition or exhortation. Certain aspects of the ancient world issued calls for patterns of behavior that challenged individuals to live by higher standards. As is discussed in [our newsletter](#) beginning in Oct. 2003, the moral levels were very low in the ancient Greco-Roman world. Judaism and Christianity were among the very few ancient religious and philosophical traditions that advocated standards of conduct as a part of religious commitment. Chapter 13, verses one through six follow a general pattern of moral admonitions addressed to a group of people. As such, goals or standards are advocated by which the

community of faith is to live, as a testimony of serious commitment to Jesus Christ.

The larger literary context of 13:1-6 is [13:1-18/19](#), which collectively comprise a series of somewhat detached admonitions to the readers. These verses precede the formal closing of the document with the typical ancient letter Conclusio ([13:19-25](#)). Craddock in the *New Interpreters' Bible* commentary outlines these verses as follows:

13:1-6, Mutual Duties

13:7-8, Examples to Follow

13:9-16, Christ's Sacrifice Revisited

13:17-19, Concerning Your Leaders

II. Message

When one carefully examines the internal pattern of thought arrangement of 13:1-6, a basic threefold structure emerges. Verses 1-3 emphasize brotherly love and hospitality for one another; verse 4 focuses on Christian marriage; and verses 5-6 on love of money.

a. Brotherly love, vv. 1-3

The Greek New Testament:

1 Ἡ φιλαδελφία μενέτω. 2 τῆς φιλοξενίας μὴ ἐπιλανθάνεσθε, διὰ ταύτης γὰρ ἔλαθόν τινες ξενίσαντες ἄγγέλους. 3 μιμνήσκεσθε τῶν δεσμίων ὡς συνδεδεμένοι, τῶν κακουχομένων ὡς καὶ αὐτοὶ ὄντες ἐν σώματι.

NRSV

1 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.^{F92}

Footnotes:

F92: *Gk [were in the body]*

NLT

1 Continue to love each other with true Christian love.^{F59} 2 Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it! 3 Don't forget about those in prison. Suffer with them as though you were there yourself. Share the sorrow of those being mistreated, as though you feel their pain in your own bodies.

Footnotes:

F59: *Greek with brotherly love.*

Comments:

In these verses, the first admonition in v. 1a serves as a header: "Let mutual love continue." The Greek term φιλαδελφία (philadelphia) is often translated "brotherly love," although the idea here is a profound commitment to one another in the context of Christian community. The question is then: How do we show this love for one another? Verses 1b-3 answer that question with some specific examples. First, we are to show hospitality to 'strangers' (v. 2). In first century Christian experience when Christians were often persecuted, traveling away from your home could involve serious risks and dangers. Most roadside inns in that day were little more than brothels. Thus Christian hospitality to fellow Christians took on a special importance. This was particularly true of the traveling preachers like Paul. This is a theme in other parts of the NT as well: [Matt. 25:35](#); [Rom. 12:13](#); [1 Tim. 3:2](#); [1 Pet. 4:9](#); [3 Jhn. 9-10](#). This encouragement is reinforced with a reminder that "for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Most likely this is an allusion to [Gen. 18:1-21](#) where Abraham and Sarah entertained three angelic messengers from God unawares.

Secondly, we continue brotherly love by remembering to visit those in prison and under torture (v. 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." Fred Craddock summarizes well: "To be remembered are those of their number in prison¹⁵² and those being mistreated. This imperative is not satisfied by a moment of silence in the assembly, or solely by intercessory prayer, although that would certainly be expected. Rather, remembering involves full solidarity with those imprisoned and those suffering at the hands of others. The author had

spoken with appreciation earlier of the readers' partnership with those suffering public abuse (10:33) and compassion for the imprisoned (10:34). Here the language of solidarity is even stronger: Behave as though you yourselves were in prison with them, as though you yourselves were being mistreated." What is called for here involved personal danger and risk in that first century world.

What can we learn from these verses? Fundamentally, we are to love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. That involves a profound commitment to each other. Then, this love is to be expressed in very concrete ways. Love is more than a good feeling; it is concrete action, action that can involve personal sacrifice on our part.

b. Christian marriage, v. 4

The Greek New Testament:

4 Τίμιος ὁ γάμος ἐν πᾶσιν
καὶ ἡ κοίτη ἀμίαντος, πόρνους
γὰρ καὶ μοιχοὺς κρινεῖ ὁ θεός.

NRSV

4 Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.

NLT

4 Give honor to marriage, and remain faithful to one another in marriage. God will surely judge people who are immoral and those who commit adultery.

Comments:

Just as the community of faith becomes a spiritual family where love is to prevail, so also the Christian home is to be a place of love and respect. Verse four contains two parallel admonitions that are reinforced with a warning. From the New Interpreters' Bible comes a helpful summation:

The Christian community continued Judaism's high regard for marriage and its strong prohibition against adultery, the violation of the marriage vow (Exod 20:14). The Roman governor Pliny, investigating the Christian community in Bithynia early in the second century, reported to Emperor Trajan that Christians bound themselves with an oath that included, among other things, abstaining from adultery.¹⁵³ In this virtue the Jews and Christians had the support of Greek moralists.

In saying that the marriage relationship should be "undefiled" the writer reverts to the cultic language so pervasive in Hebrews. By so doing, the author brings marriage into the circle of sanctification essential to worship that is acceptable to God (12:28). This directive about marriage is given support by a reminder that God judges fornicators (a general reference to sexual immorality) as well as adulterers (a specific reference to a breach of marriage vows). Fornication seems to have been a widespread concern in the early church, perhaps because of a lack of clear instructions about sex among the unmarried (Acts 15:28-29; 1 Cor 5:9-11; Eph 5:3, 5; 1 Thess 4:3-7; 1 Tim 1:10; Rev 21:8; 22:15).

The two admonitions move from the general ("Let marriage be held in honor by all") to the more specific ("let the marriage bed be kept undefiled"). In a world where wives were anywhere from ten to twenty years younger than their husbands, the male could easily treat his wife with contempt and disregard. In the Greco-Roman culture, sexual activity outside of marriage by the male was considered to be normal and entirely appropriate. Jewish culture frowned on it, but mostly if it were with a married woman other than one's own wife. This, despite the OT code that strictly forbids such activity.

These admonitions are buttressed by the warning of divine judgment on those who violate their marriage commitment with extramarital activity.

The message to us from this verse is clear. In a day where 'sleeping around' is quite 'in style' in many circles of American culture, Christians need to make a strong statement about the sacredness of a commitment to one's spouse.

c. Love of money, vv. 5-6

The Greek New Testament:

5 Ἀφιλάργυρος ὁ τρόπος,
ἀρκούμενοι τοῖς παροῦσιν.
αὐτὸς γὰρ εἶρηκεν, Οὐ μὴ σε
ἀνω οὐδ' οὐ μὴ σε ἐγκαταλίπω,
ὅστε θαρροῦντας ἡμᾶς

NRSV

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

NLT

5 Stay away from the love of money; be satisfied with what you have. For God has said, "I will never fail you. I will never forsake you."^{F60} 6 That is why we can say

helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"

with confidence, "The Lord is my helper, so I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"^{F61}

Footnotes:

F60: Deut 31:6, 8.

F61: Ps 118:6.

Comments:

This third set of admonitions centers on our attitude toward the material world around us. Believers are encouraged to stay away from the "love of money." Once more Fredd Craddock in the *New Interpreter's Bible* commentary sums up these verses well:

The accents fall on two terms: "without love of money" (the negative form of the word used in 1 Tim 6:10, "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" [NRSV]) and "be content." Contentment with what one had was a commonplace in Greek morality and was embraced by early Christians (Luke 3:14; Phil 4:11; 1 Tim 6:8). These exhortations fall within the general instructions to Christians concerning material possessions, instructions traced back to Jesus himself (Matt 6:19-21, 24-34; Luke 10:22-34) and echoed in many warnings to the churches about greed (Eph 5:3, 5; 1 Cor 5:10 among many). The writer's addressing the problems of sexual misconduct and greed together is probably due not so much to the frequent companionship between these two vices in society but to the prohibitions against them in the seventh and eighth of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:14-15), setting the pattern for subsequent treatments of the subjects.

The twin injunctions against greed are supported by two Scripture citations that combine to say that the believer's trust in God makes trust in money not only misplaced but a contradiction of faith as well (recall Matt 6:24-34). The first citation is very likely from Deut 31:6, although similar expressions are found in Gen 28:15; Deut 31:8; Josh 1:5; and 1 Chr 28:20. Hebrews 13:5 does not conform exactly to the LXX in any of these passages. That the same form of the citation is in Philo¹⁵⁴ may indicate a standardizing of the divine promise for synagogue worship. As is typical of the writer of Hebrews, words of Scripture are taken as God's direct word to the readers. The second citation, a quotation of Ps 118:6 (v. 6), appears as the believer's response to God's promise in v. 5. God's promise never to abandon the people gives boldness or confidence (cf. 3:6; 4:16; 10:19, 35) to burst into an affirmation of God-given fearlessness. The words of the psalmist, reciting occasions of God's help in times of great distress, become the church's words, dwelling in its own context of imprisonment and persecution. Thus v. 6 speaks not solely to the issue of dependence on money but to the larger condition of the church's life as described particularly in 10:32-36. In fact, 10:32-36 was also followed immediately with an encouraging quotation of Scripture (10:37-38).

Our society is plagued with both greed and sexual misconduct. The American dream of success is all too often based upon material wealth. We slave after things only to discover that we are enslaved to them and they make a terrible master. Our lives then become shallow and empty in spite of enormous wealth, as is illustrated repeatedly by many movie stars and professional athletes.

In summary, Heb. 13:1-6 touches on relationships at three levels: (1) our community of faith; (2) our spouse; and (3) the material world around us. We are to demonstrate profound love in the spiritual family; respect and faithfulness in our marriage; and avoidance of entrapment by material accumulation. These three areas can indeed define the meaning of life for us with clear purpose and direction.