

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

LET LOVE CONTINUE

Hebrews 13:1-3

By

Steven J. Cole

February 6, 2005

© Steven J. Cole, 2005

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation

February 6, 2005
Hebrews Lesson 51

Let Love Continue Hebrews 13:1-3

I enjoy the humorous and often profound insights into human nature in the "Peanuts" cartoon strip. Linus shouts, "I love mankind; it's *people* that I can't stand!"

I resemble that remark, and so do you. When we hear messages about "love," we all tend to think, "Amen, preach it, brother! My *wife* needs to hear this one! My *kids* need to hear it, too! Lord, help them to pay attention! But, *me?* Well, I'm a basically loving person. It's just part of my nature!"

We all over-rate ourselves in the area of love. We love "mankind." But, do you love your wife and kids? Do you love difficult family members? Do you love those in this church? If so, how did you show it in your words and behavior last week? If they irritated you, did you respond with patience and kindness? "Love is patient, love is kind" (1 Cor. 13:4). Did you get angry? "Love ... is not provoked" (1 Cor. 13:5). Go through the list in 1 Corinthians 13 and other biblical passages about love (there are at least 55 New Testament commands to love one another!) and you will see that you have room to grow in loving *people* (not "mankind"!).

Hebrews 13 contains many practical commands. We need to remember that it rests on the first 12 chapters, which are largely doctrinal in nature. That's the usual pattern in the New Testament epistles: first, doctrine; then application. If you focus on the doctrine without application, it leads to spiritual pride. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Cor. 8:1, literal translation). Some of the most difficult Christians that I have been around know theology and Greek. They can argue circles around the average believer. But they have not applied their knowledge personally, and so they are proud and unloving. On the other hand, if you skip the doctrine and focus on application alone, you will lack the biblical foundation for godly living. Rather than springing from God's love and grace, your obedience will be a matter of duty. You will lack the joy of knowing Christ's love. Often such hollow duty will fail in times of trial.

The original text of Scripture did not have chapter breaks. So the Hebrews would have read (12:28-13:1), "Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire. Let love of the brethren continue." In effect, these are the two great commandments: Love God; love others. The first is the foundation for the second. If you have experienced God's love in sacrificing His Son for your sins (Heb. 1-12), then show it by loving others.

In Hebrews 13:1-3, the main command is, "Let love of the brethren continue." In 13:2, 3, he shows two specific applications of biblical love that were especially appropriate to a church under persecution: Show hospitality to strangers; and, remember the prisoners and those who are ill-treated. We can sum it up:

We must focus on loving fellow believers, being hospitable, and helping those who suffer because of their faith.

1. We must focus on loving fellow believers (13:1).

The Greek word, *philadelphia*, focuses on the natural love that exists between brothers and sisters in a family. There is not a great difference between it and the more commonly used *agape*. Next to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, biblical love is the supreme mark of the Christian. It is mandatory for every Christian to grow in love! Note four things:

- A. Biblical love requires attention and effort.

The Hebrew church had been practicing this virtue admirably. In 6:10, the author commended them: "For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints." In 10:32-34, he reminds them of how, in a former time of suffering, they became "sharers with those who were so treated," and how they "showed sympathy to the prisoners...." So they had been doing well at loving one another, but now he exhorts them to make sure that it continues.

John Calvin wisely observed (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], p. 339), "But this precept is generally very needful, for nothing flows away so easily as love; when everyone thinks of himself more than he ought, he will allow to others less than he ought; and then many

offences happen daily which cause separations." "Nothing flows away so easily as love!" That's why there are 55 New Testament commands to do it. In 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10, Paul wrote in a way similar to our text, "Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more."

Sometimes we think that love should be spontaneous and effortless. But biblical love is not automatic! If you don't focus on it and work at it, it easily flows away. Did you give any thought last week as to how to love your mate and children? Did you pray that God would increase your love for that difficult person in your family or at church or at work (see Phil. 1:9)? I recommend that you put 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 on a card and read it over so often that it guides all of your relationships. Don't let love flow away!

B. Biblical love is founded on God's great love for us in the gospel.

Brethren implies that God has caused us to be born spiritually into His family. To be a Christian means that God has performed a supernatural work of grace in your heart that the Bible describes as the new birth. John 1:12-13 states, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."

Being born of God means that God is your heavenly Father, and all others who have been born of God are your spiritual brothers and sisters. When my children were young, I was pleased when they would show love for one another. Our heavenly Father is pleased when His children love each other. On the night before He went to the cross, Jesus told His disciples (John 13:34-35), "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." The foundation for biblical love is the incomparable love of Christ!

C. Biblical love will not continue unless we fight against the common hindrances to love in our own hearts.

The Hebrews had been doing well in this area, but now the author exhorts them to continue in it. Otherwise, it will easily flow away. There are many hindrances to love, but note these five:

(1) We must fight against self-love and selfishness.

Biblical love may be defined as “a self-sacrificing, caring commitment, which shows itself in seeking the highest good of the one loved.” That is a description of Christ’s love for us on the cross: He sacrificed Himself because He cared for us and was committed to redeem us and bring us to glory. His commitment to us was so strong that He was willing to bear the wrath of the Father in our stead on the cross!

Contrary to the nonsense of “Christian” psychobabble, you do *not* need to learn to love yourself in order to love God and others! There is no command to love yourself. The *two* commands are: Love God; love your neighbor. Loving yourself is assumed, because we all love ourselves quite well! If we ever love our neighbor as much as we inherently care about ourselves, we will be obeying the second great commandment.

Almost all relational conflicts can be traced back to some degree of selfishness (James 4:1-3). I didn’t get my way, and I want my way! We’re like three-year-olds fighting over a toy! So if you want to let love continue, you’ve got to fight your own love of self that manifests itself in selfishness.

(2) We must fight against pride.

Pride is closely joined to self-love, and is at the root of all other sins. Pride makes me think, “I know better than God does what’s good for me, so I’m going to disregard His Word and do what I think is best!” Pride makes me think, “That person is such a jerk! I would never behave as he is!” But, I don’t know all of the factors that led that person to behave as he is. The fact is, I am just as much a sinner as he is, and if it were not for God’s grace, I’d be caught in some sin. Pride makes me a Pharisee, who sets up my own standards and then judges everyone who doesn’t keep those standards. So if you want to practice biblical love, you must constantly judge your pride.

(3) We must fight against impatience and intolerance of others’ imperfections.

“Love is patient, love is kind...” (1 Cor. 13:4). It is not by accident that Paul put those two qualities first, because they are usually enough to stop me in my tracks when I am acting in unloving ways. Husbands, are you patient and kind towards your wife? Dads, are you patient and kind towards your children? When we grow impatient and intolerant of others’ imperfections, we are judging them by our standards, which stems from our pride. When I get irritated and snap at my wife or kids, I’m being unloving.

(4) We must fight against the love of the world.

“Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15). That verse leaves no room to dodge its implications: If I love the world or the things in the world, God’s love is not in me! And if God’s love is not in me, it will not flow through me to others.

The love of the world includes the love of the world’s praise and acclaim. If I love such acclaim, I am loving myself, and consequently, I am not loving God or others. If I love the world’s things, I will be stingy and unwilling to give up those things for the sake of others. So to love God and others, I must constantly fight the lure that the world dangles in front of me.

(5) We must fight against a sectarian spirit.

For some reason, God determined to save people who do not agree with me on every point of doctrine! If He had checked with me first, I would have told Him to save only those who agree with me! Follow me carefully: Since biblical love means seeking the other person’s highest good, and since holding to sound doctrine is essential for the other person’s highest good, it is right to seek to help my fellow believers grow in adherence to sound doctrine. But, if in my attempt to help the other person understand and embrace sound doctrine, I insensitively alienate him, I have failed to love him biblically. There is a far greater chance that he will come to embrace the truth that I love if he knows that I love him.

I have held to the doctrines that are labeled “Calvinism” since my college days, long before I ever read a page of Calvin’s writings. I came to believe in God’s sovereign election by wrestling with Romans 9 until it pinned me to the mat. I couldn’t escape!

When I was in seminary, there was a group of zealots whom I labeled, "The John Calvin Club." These guys would surround a victim in the student union and try to convince him of the doctrine of election. I would frequently walk by them and shake my head, thinking, "That's *not* the way to bring that guy to the knowledge of the truth." They were trying to win an argument, but the doctrine of God's free and sovereign grace is not something that you come to believe because you lost an argument. You believe it when God opens your eyes to see it in Scripture, and you submit your heart to the greatness of God. With Paul, you realize, "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36).

The great evangelist, George Whitefield, was a committed Calvinist. His friend from his college days, John Wesley, was a committed Arminian. Wesley tried to argue with Whitefield on these issues. Whitefield wrote to Wesley (cited without reference by Kent Hughes, *Hebrews* [Crossway], 2:207),

My honored friend and brother ... hearken to a child who is willing to wash your feet. I beseech you, by the mercies of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, if you would have my love confirmed toward you.... Why should we dispute, when there is no possibility of convincing? Will it not, in the end, destroy brotherly love, and insensibly take from us that cordial union and sweetness of soul, which I pray God may always subsist between us? How glad would the enemies of our Lord be to see us divided.... Honored sir, let us offer salvation freely to all by the blood of Jesus, and whatever light God has communicated to us, let us freely communicate to others.

A sectarian spirit stems from pride and causes division. Biblical love seeks to help others know God as He has revealed Himself in His Word, but it does not divide over non-essential doctrines.

Thus, biblical love requires attention and focus. It is founded on God's great love for us and that fact that we are brothers and sisters in His family. Biblical love will not continue unless we remove the common hindrances to it. Finally,

D. Biblical love must be developed.

The entire Bible can be summed up in the two commands, to love God and love others. Read and study it to further those goals. But let me mention three things:

(1) Grow to be like Jesus.

Jesus Christ is our example of what God's love looks like in human life. If you think that love is always syrupy sweet, read the gospels again! Jesus always acted in love, but He often said some tough things. Jesus loved Peter when He said to him, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's" (Mark 8:33). Jesus loved the scribes and Pharisees when He called them a brood of vipers and warned them about hell (Matt. 23:33). I'm not suggesting that you go around calling people a brood of vipers and then claim to be loving! I am only pointing out that Jesus' love was not wimpy, and that by studying His life, you get a complete portrait of biblical love.

(2) Seek to serve, not to be served.

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). This is a basic mindset that you have to develop. Get your focus off of yourself and onto the needs of others. Servants sacrifice their own desires and time to please their masters. Are you a servant in your family, to your wife and kids? Do you come to church to have your needs met or to meet the needs of others?

(3) Develop a genuine interest in others.

Practice the golden rule (Matt. 7:12): "In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets." Do you see someone who is new or alone at church? How would you feel if you were in that situation? How would you want to be treated? Treat them like that! Simple, isn't it? And yet our selfishness blocks us from practicing it.

So the first and main thing is, focus on loving fellow believers. But there are two further extensions of that:

2. We must focus on being hospitable (13:2).

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it." This command stemmed from the fact that in the first century, inns were notori-

ously dangerous and immoral. They were targets for thieves and prostitutes. So Christians would welcome traveling believers, especially those laboring in the gospel (3 John 5-8), into their homes, even if they had never met them before.

To practice this made Christians vulnerable to being taken advantage of. By the second century, the satirist Lucian poked fun at Christians who subsidized the lavish lifestyle of professional hucksters. This became so common that the early Christian handbook, *The Didache* (*The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. by Kirsopp Lake [Harvard University Press], 1:327), stated (11:4-6):

Let every Apostle who comes to you be received as the Lord, but let him not stay more than one day, or if need be a second as well; but if he stay three days, he is a false prophet. And when an Apostle goes forth let him accept nothing but bread till he reach his night's lodging; but if he ask for money, he is a false prophet.

That is not inspired Scripture, of course! But it does show that the command to hospitality must be blended with some common sense about fallen human nature. We should be generous and ready to share, but we should not foster someone's irresponsible habits!

The author adds that by showing hospitality to strangers, "some have entertained angels without knowing it." He is referring to the stories of Abraham and Lot (Gen. 18 & 19). These men welcomed strangers and treated them as family, not knowing (at first) that they were two angels and Jesus Christ in preincarnate form. The author's point is not that we should be hospitable to strangers in the hopes of meeting an angel. Rather, he is saying that we often do not "know how important or far-reaching a simple act of helpfulness may be" (John MacArthur, *Hebrews* [Moody Press], p. 426). And, as Jesus said, when we minister to the needy, we are actually ministering to Christ Himself (Matt. 25:35-40).

3. We must focus on helping those who suffer because of their faith in Christ (13:3).

By "the prisoners" and the "ill-treated," the author means those who are suffering because of their faith in Christ. He is not referring to criminals, although we should go to prisons and share the gospel with them. Remembering Christians who suffer perse-

cution requires thinking about their situation and applying the golden rule: How would you want to be treated if it had happened to you? That is the point of, "since you yourselves are in the body." He means, "It could happen to you, so treat those who are victims of persecution as you would want to be treated." In that day, prisoners depended on family or friends bringing them food and clothing. The author is saying, "Don't let out of sight be out of mind. Think about them and meet their needs."

At the present time we do not suffer much persecution in our country, although it could soon come to that. We can apply verse 3 to the need to help those who are suffering for any reason. But around the world, there are thousands of believers suffering for their faith. Groups like Voice of the Martyrs and Gospel for Asia publish many stories of persecuted believers. At the least, we can read such stories and pray for our brothers and sisters who are suffering for the name of Christ. God may put it on your heart to help support those who can assist these saints and their families.

Conclusion

The late Ray Stedman (*What More Can God Say?* [G/L Regal], p. 233), tells of his shock when he visited the home of a Christian woman, who told him of an incident that had happened the night before. Her neighbor had come to her in great distress and asked for help in some temporary crisis in her life. The Christian woman told Pastor Stedman, "I don't know what I'm going to do. I moved here to get away from this kind of people, and if this woman keeps coming over to my house, I'll just have to find another home." Stedman's heart sank as he thought, "How totally unchristian!"

Unfortunately, that woman's attitude is not uncommon among professing Christians! She missed a great opportunity to bear witness for Christ. We often dodge opportunities to show Christ's love to others in the family of God. Instead, we must focus on loving fellow believers, on being hospitable, and on helping those who suffer, especially those who suffer for their faith.

Discussion Questions

1. Someone may think, "If I have to work at it, it is not heartfelt love." How would you refute this thinking?
2. How can we know which truths are worth dividing over, and which truths we should not break fellowship over?
3. How can an impatient person learn to be patient?
4. Where is the balance between being hospitable to strangers and being taken advantage of by moochers?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2005, All Rights Reserved.