

A reading from the Book of Hebrews, the 13th chapter, beginning in verse one.

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to show strangers, for by so doing, some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated, as if you yourself were suffering.

Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure. For God will judge the adulter and all the sexually immoral. Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, never will I leave you, never will I forsake you. So we say with confidence, the Lord is my helper. I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me? Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday and today and forever, the Lord of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please stand for the reading of the Gospel, a reading from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 14, verse one, verses seven through 14. One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched.

When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable when someone invites you to a wedding feast, don't take the place of honor. For a person more distinguished than you are, you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you give the person your seat. Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he'll say to you friend, move up to a better place. Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Then Jesus said to his host when you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives or your rich neighbors. If you do, they may invite you back, and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. The gospel of our Lord.

Well, thank you Hillary Gases, for that reading. Really wonderful. Well, kids, it is time for you to go to kids alive. So I would love to say a prayer for you. Father, we're really grateful for our young people. We're thankful for their presence among us. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ. They are growing in you. They are knowing you and loving you, and we ask that you would continue to bless them as they seek to grow and know you better. In Jesus name, amen. All right. God bless you as you go to kids alive. I love that. Running with that boot on. You can't beat that. Now, let's pray for us. Father, we ask that Your Word, which is living inactive and sharper than a doubleedged sword, would penetrate our very souls. That as the Word is proclaimed, as it's preached with my imperfect words, the perfection of Your Word would seize us and take hold and shape us and form us so that more and more our lives collectively and individually resemble the life of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It's in his name we pray. Amen. Come on in. All right.

We're in Hebrews Chapter 13. And as I was reading through that, I got the sense that it's very easy to look at a passage like this as loose ends. How many of you like tying up loose ends when you're getting ready to go for a trip or you've got something important that has to be done? When you think of the word loose ends, you tend to think of that email that needs to be sent, that phone call that needs to be made, the conversation that needs to be had, the instructions that need to be given, the situation that needs to be dealt with, the logistics that have to be put in place. And although they're loose ends and they're loose ends for a reason, we've kind of put them off for some time. They have a certain amount of importance, don't they? I've been listening to a podcast for quite a while now on the history of Rome, and it is just filled with all these generals who go to war over and over and over again. Those guys, it seemed like they did nothing else but go to war. But it's interesting to listen and discover.

The generals who tended to be successful were the generals that paid attention to tying up loose

ends. As the author of the podcast likes to say, amateurs focus on tactics, experts focus on logistics. They focus on the loose ends. There was one general who felt like one of the most important things he could do was feed his troops on the morning of battle. And so he would make sure that they had an excellent meal before battle. In fact, he'd wake them up early to feed them early so that they would attack before the enemy would have a chance to eat breakfast. Didn't seem to make that much of a difference early on in the day, but later on in the day that nourishment made all the difference. That's the way it is with logistics. That's the way it is with tying up loose ends. Well, as we read the scriptures, in particular the Epistles, the letters to the churches, those letters deal with pretty weighty stuff, oftentimes theological things. They deal with the nature and the character of God. They deal with what it means to be a believer and to have faith. And then you get to the end of the letter and they take care of loose ends.

Oh, by the way, right. And so oftentimes we feel like we can just sort of skate past those, but like the Roman generals, we do so at our own peril. The Book of Hebrews is very similar in this regard. Hebrews has some of the weightiest and most beautiful theology in all of the Bible. It paints a picture of Jesus almost like no other. I love the Book of Hebrews. And so as we delve into Hebrews, it's really tempting to get to the end, into a chapter like this and think, okay, these are the loose ends, but they're so important. So I want to delve into the loose ends and see what it looks like when we tie up these loose ends in our own life as individuals and as a church. I want to give you a little bit of background first, because that's a loose end that I haven't tied up yet. As we've been going through the Book of Hebrews, some of the other books, it's very clear who the author is. It's very clear who the audience is. It's very clear what it's written for and when it was written and all those.

But not so with the Book of Hebrews. We don't know, or rather who the author of the Book of Hebrews is. We've got some hints. There's some pretty high theology on it in it. Theology that reminds me of the Apostle Paul. However, the language that's used is pretty different than the typical language that Paul used. And so a lot of the early church fathers very quickly came to believe that it was probably written by a contemporary of Paul, maybe Luke or Barnabas Timothy or somebody that Paul was maybe relating some truths to that then sent them on. But origin a church father who lived around 254 Ad. When he was asked who wrote the Book of Hebrews, he said only God knows. God knows. But we may ask who the audience was. And for that we have a little bit more certainty. Again, Endeavor says we call it the Book of Hebrews, but it never says to the Hebrews, never says to the Hebrews in Galatia or wherever. But we've got some internal hints. There's some mention of Italy and those who are from Italy. And so it's caused many commentators to believe that the audience lives somewhere in Italy, possibly in Rome.

There's lots of Old Testament quotes in the book of Hebrews and Old Testament themes. And there's great pains that the writer takes to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophets and everything that the Old Testament was pointing towards. And so we believe that the Book of Hebrews was written to a bunch of Jewish Christians. And this is not hard to believe because a number of the early churches began in the synagogues. They began when the Gospel was preached in the synagogues and Jews became believers in Jesus. And so they began to meet together, meeting in the synagogue until they were thrown out of the synagogue. So we believe that the audience is Jewish Christians, and it says in verse one of chapter one, that in the past God spoke to our fathers, which again is a hint that it's written to the Jewish people, the Jewish believers in Jesus. When was it written? Well, again, we have a hint because Timothy is mentioned at the end and it says that he's been released from prison. And we know that Timothy's ministry took place in the 60s Ad. And this probably happened before the temple was destroyed in 70 Ad.

Because the temple is mentioned many times in the Book of Hebrews. But there's no mention of the destruction of the temple, which just wouldn't have made sense and would have naturally been written into the Book of Hebrews. It's probably written during the time of Nero. Nero ran from 58 Ad. To 64 Ad. And he began to persecute Christians. The great persecution was probably still yet to come, for in the Book of Hebrews it says, many of you have not resisted yet to the point of shedding your blood. That had been the case for a few, but later on it would become the case for many, as Nero would blame the burning of Rome on the Christians and would burn Christians in his garden parties. He was pretty awful. So why was the Book of Hebrews written? Well, at this point, Jews were

recognized as an official religion in the Roman Empire, but Christians were not. So Christians were assigned the lowest wrong. Persecution was amping up. People believed that Jesus was going to return soon and he wasn't back yet. And so Jews in particular were tempted to go back to the old rituals, to go back to the old practices, to choose something that was a little more accepted in the Roman Empire.

So the writer of Hebrews says, don't do it. All of those things were pointing to Jesus. He is far superior to the sacrificial temple. He is superior to all the angels. He is the fulfillment of all the words of the prophets. He is the greater prophet, the greater Moses, the greater David. Turn to him, you will not regret it. He shed his blood for you. And even if you shed your blood for Him, you will in no means lose your reward. So that's why it was written. And so as you hear those great themes, you can see that the Hebrews probably much like us, would have been tempted to say, that's what the Book of Hebrews is all about the superiority of Christ, his greatness, his power, his majesty. That's what makes it worth it. To suffer for the name of Jesus, but oh, and by the way, let me tie up a few loose ends with you before I end the Book of Hebrews. So that's what we're looking at today, these loose ends. If you turn to Hebrews chapter 13, let's take a look at them and see if they really make a difference.

13. One keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. If we were reading the Epistles of John, that would be the theme all the way throughout. Little children love one another, for love is from God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. God is love. If we were reading the 15th chapter of the Gospel of John, we would see that Jesus, on the night before he dies. This new command I give you love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his brothers and his sisters. By this, all people will know that you are my disciples, that you love one another. What a loose end. A loose end that we must keep on doing. Why must we keep on doing it? Because we so readily forget to do it right? When I first became a Christian, I don't know if you had this experience, and I don't know when you became a Christian, but when I first became a Christian, I fell in love with all Christians. I just thought that all Christians were as excited about Jesus as I was.

You're a Christian? Oh, my gosh, I love you. You're my brother. You're my sister. That's the way I felt. So it was a shock and a surprise to find that not all Christians felt that way. And some of them looked at me kind of a scan when I just assumed that they were as excited about Christ as I was. And as I've grown as a Christian, I've come to see that sometimes Christians don't like each other because of the songs that that group sings, because of the way that group practices their theology, because of the expression in that group, because of the formality in that other group, or simply because they're down the street. And we want to attract people here, not there, right? And they're bigger than us. Who knows? It's heartbreaking to the heart of God when we don't keep loving one another. I mean, the greatest thing that could happen in this church is for the Wileys here to know beyond a shadow of doubt that the Kilpatrick over there love them, right? And that the Nickels love Javier, who just got here today for the first time. And Javier can feel that love and sense that love.

And that Elaine knows that love for her and for her grandkids. That every single one of us, when we come to our life groups, we feel we're coming to a group that knows us and loves us. So that's the question. Is that a loose end you're tying up? Is it a loose end you're keeping on with? Are you encouraging it in yourself and in your spirit and in the people around you to know and to love one another, to know the children and the teens and to reach out to them and encourage them, it's a loose end worth tying up. And it's the one that ultimately won over the whole Roman Empire. As they got exhausted of their wars, they saw the Christians and how they loved one another, how they gave themselves for one another during plagues and famines and sickness, how they gave themselves to others. And this is where we go in verse two. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing, some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Now, the word for hospitality in the Greek is *philosophenia*. It's related to another word that you may be more familiar with *xeno*.

Phobia, right? You all know what *xenophobia* is. That is the fear of strangers or the fear of the other. A fear which the scriptures tell us we're not supposed to have as believers. We are not to fear the other. Regardless of their political persuasion, regardless of the country that they come from, regardless of their religious beliefs, we are not to fear the other. *Xenophobia* is a product of the world and of

tribalism and of nationalism and of every other kind of ism you can think of. But *Philosophia* is commended to all kinds. Christians, fellow *Zenia* means the love of the other. That's what the word hospitality is, philosophy, the love of others. That's where the *Philadelphia* comes from as well. The city of brotherly love. Travel in the ancient world was tough. It was a hard thing. Inns were not safe. And so when people showed hospitality, it was literally life giving to people. When they said, you're a stranger, but come and spend the night in my house, eat my food, and made a difference. And so the writer of Hebrew said, this is a loose end that we must continually tie up in our churches.

Are we not only showing love within the church, are we extending it out into the communities beyond us? Do people find us welcoming, engaging? Do people know that we listen to them, to their stories? That we have love for them? That we have an ethos of embracing, an ethos of blessing? You've heard me say before that we're encouraging the acronym Bless. We're doing this in our pastoral council, in our parish council, and eventually we wanted to filter through the whole church. This acronym, Blesses, begin with prayer, listen to others, eat with them, serve them, or be served by them and share Christ with them. Bless. Do we have that ethos of blessing? It comes when the Spirit gets deep inside our hearts and causes us to view the world as the Lord does not in fear, but in love. I urge you to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so, some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. I mean, you know all those old stories, right, where somebody is kind of a beggar and it turns out that that beggar is a king in disguise and the king rewards them? That's what the Lord is saying here, that as we reach out to others and love what you do for them, you're doing for me, and you may be even doing for my angels in heaven.

We see an instance of this in Genesis, chapter 18, where Abraham welcomes with hospitality the three strangers who turn out to be angels of God, who confirm the blessing of God that you and I enjoy today because of Abraham's faith. So it's a loose end worth tying up love for one another, love for the stranger. And then in verse three, it says, continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison. We find out at the end of this letter that Timothy has been in prison and he's just been released. And those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering, that a number of the leaders in the early church suffered greatly for the extension of the gospel. I know that's the case. I mean, in many ways, planting a church, I feel, is something of a suffering as we reach out and want people to come in and want the church to grow and be formed and everything. Can you imagine, though, being imprisoned for your faith, shedding your blood for your faith? And so, undoubtedly, as they're writing, they're saying, don't forget those who've been imprisoned for your benefit.

But there's a principle here that ends up working its way into the church throughout the course of the ages. And it's not that every church should have a prison ministry. Tree of life will have arrived when we've got our own prison ministry, right? Maybe we will one day, and I think that would be a fantastic thing. But the principle is simply this that the love we show is not just to be love within the circle and not just love to strangers. But love to those who are cut off. To those who are weak. To those who are broken. To the elderly who are homebound or in home care facilities. To the unborn children. To the mothers of those unborn who face dire circumstances. To anybody in this world homeless. Weak. Vulnerable. Poor. Sick and in need. Are you tying up that loose end in your life? Is there room in your life for that loose end? Is there room in our lives? Now, ultimately, as a church, by God's grace, we've been able to help some with some of the floods and natural disasters and things that have happened. We're a small church. We don't yet have an outreach ministry.

By God's grace that will develop among us. And more and more as we see the needs God will show us who were to reach out to who's feeling cut off and use this church and us as individuals to do that. Those are loose ends worth tying up and all of them are facets of love, aren't they? So ask yourself is your love complete or is your love growing in fullness in these ways? Verse four turns our attention really not away from love to a more specific kind of love to marriage. It says this marriage should be honored by all and the marriage bed kept pure for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. Marriage should be honored by all. What you need to hear in that is the marriage is not just for the benefit of the married. Marriage is for the benefit of all and that's why it should be honored by all. Have you known good marriages in your life as you were growing up? Could you look over at this family or that family and just sense intuitively that their marriage was good and that it was strong,

that their family was healthy?

Were you drawn to them? I know I was. I know that when I saw it, particularly when our family was not healthy when I was a kid, that we went through some really hard times. I know that those families that were healthy and those marriages that were good were lifeblood to me. I thank God for his preservation of my parents marriage and how good it is now. But how a good marriage impacts the world around us. And that's why it's to be honored by all. Scriptures are very clear about marriage. In Genesis, which Jesus quotes, he said that God brought the woman to the man and gave her to him. And that what God has put together. Let no one put a sunder. He said those for reasons right. Undoubtedly there are bad marriages and oftentimes people turn to divorce. But Jesus heart is that those marriages would be healed and those marriages would be strengthened and those marriages would become a blessing. We can be really tempted to look at these verses and to start look out at the world which right now is just all over the map in terms of what marriage is, what marriage should be, in terms of what constitutes a family and all those sort of things.

And it could be that we could look out of the world with a very judgmental attitude and say that's not what God designed. But that's not our job. Our job is not to forbid what happens out in the world. Our job is not to fight against it. But our job is to honor marriage as God designed it within the church, to encourage it, to strengthen it, to cause it to grow because the world needs it, right? The world needs it. And so he says, God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral, all the sexuality that spills out over the boundaries that God has created for marriage. He says, God will bring judgment, and indeed does. Because here's what happens when the boundaries are broken, lives are ruined. And the further out from the boundaries that our culture spills and that those within the church spill outside of those boundaries. Greater pain, greater confusion, greater consequences, more and more complications in life, less and less solidity in the soul. So God says these things because too often within the church we allow it. We turn the other way. And we don't realize this is a loose end that you cannot leave untied.

Marriages should be honored by all. It's for the health of the world, really, but for the church, for sure. So then he goes on less. We think that all we're called to is sexual purity. He says, Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have. Because God has said, never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you. So we say with confidence, the Lord is my helper. I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do? To me, what the writer wants here is for within the church, there to be deep, deep contentment. And nothing takes away deep contentment quicker than the love of money. Again, nothing hurts people more than the love of money. People step over people and on people for the love of money. People disregard people and don't listen to people for the love of money. And churches fall into this trap. We fall into the love of money. Now hear this. When we're called to be content, it doesn't mean we're called to be complacent. In the culture of the day, it was immensely more difficult for a person's financial status to be elevated, immensely more difficult than it is for us.

And so oftentimes people turned to cheating and to stealing and to lying because, after all, how is a person supposed to get ahead in the world? So when they call for contentment, as John the Baptist did with the soldiers, be content with your pay. Don't extort money, right? That was actually a sign that God is present in your community, that your heart is given to God. But for us, we live in a day and age when we can keep acquiring more and more. So this becomes an even more confusing word because we're not to be complacent. I believe that the writers of the New Testament would say if you could earn more to elevate your family or whatever, yeah, you know, they want to see the poor come out of poverty and all those things. But beware because of the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. So here's the question. Here's a diagnostic, I think, that you can apply to yourself from time to time because it's a loose end, right? And loose ends are with us all the time. Am I content? Just ask yourself that at some point this week, at some point later on in the month, am I content?

And you'll be able to answer it, I believe, yes, I feel great contentment in the Lord. No, I'm realizing I'm grasping for more. I'm feeling the need for more as I'm pursuing more. It's not from a place of contentment, it's a place from grasping. Just ask, am I content? And the Lord will reveal. He will reveal whether you're chasing after things or whether you're moving in the way of the Lord. There's another interesting picture of this right in The Christmas Carol by Dickens. There's two characters, ebonyzer

Scrooge and Bob Cratchet. One is a picture of contentment, although he has almost nothing. Cratchett loves his family. He loves Tiny Tim. He even kind of loves Mr. Scrooge. It's strange, but he's glad to be alive. Whereas Scrooge, who has everything, all the money he could possibly want, he just wants more and he's discontent. There's a lot of true theology in that tale. Am I content? It's loose end worth tying up. And then finally he writes in verse seven and eight remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

What's that? Loose end? Remember your leaders and the outcome of their way of life. The leaders who taught the word of God to you. What he's saying is you are a learning community, a community of disciples. Don't forget that. As you think about all the great theology and all the great things that you could possibly know about Christ, remember this you are to be a people that put it into practice. Look at your leaders who lived it out before you. Look at Paul. Look at Timothy. Look at Peter and James and John. And look at the early founders of the church. Look at those who have gone before and imitate their way of life because what were they doing? They were imitating Christ even as they taught Christ to you. When I came to this verse, I realized that's the application, it's not about saying to you, hey, imitate me. I'm your leader here and I'm bringing you the word of God. My hope is that by the end of my life, the church and people that have known me will look and say, he fought the good fight. He finished the race. He taught us the way of Jesus and the outcome of his life was good.

And that's worth imitating. But for now, I know we can point to those who've gone before, who are faithful, as the writer of Hebrews does in chapter eleven, say, that's what we want in our lives. So it's really important when you come to worship to know that what we do here. When the word of God is being preached is super important. How you listen, how you take the word of God in and then how you put it into practice during the week. That's what this writer is saying. Be a community of learners, of disciples, of practitioners, because those loose ends will always be with you and they must always be tied up. If you're going to read a book like this and see the big themes and the great theology and the beautiful picture of Jesus, if that's going to mean anything, it's going to show up in how you tie up these loose ends because man, are they important. They are more important than giving your soldiers breakfast on the day of battle. Would you pray with me? Lord, we pray that we would be ready on the day of battle in this life that we live.

That we would carry it out faithfully, Lord, that we would be a church that loves one another deeply, loves the stranger, loves the cutoff. That would be a church that honors marriage and keeps the marriage bed pure, that is free from the love of money and is content because you are the God who provides, oh Lord, that we would know what it is to follow those who've gone before imitating Christ all the way. So Lord, we love you, we give ourselves to you. We pray these things now as we've continue to worship in Jesus name. Amen.