

Presence and Perseverance
Hebrews 13:1–6
July 14, 2024

Has this ever happened to you? 20 yards away you see a group of people talking, laughing, seemingly having the most interesting conversation of their lives. Naturally, you're intrigued. You like conversation. You like to laugh. So, you walk up to the group with eager anticipation, only to be met by a swift conversational decrescendo followed by an awkward, feet-shuffling, silence. Has that ever happened to you? John Ames, a pastor¹ in Iowa, once wrote this: "That's the strangest thing about this life, about being in the ministry. People change the subject when they see you coming. And then sometimes those very same people come into your study and tell you the most remarkable things."²

Presence can do that. And not *just* with pastors. Teenagers might change their verbiage when mom or dad walk up. Children might do it when a teenager walks up. Further, they might change not *only* what they say, but what they're doing. A person's presence can affect how you speak as well as how you live.

But presence does more than curb speech or deed. Presence can be a gift. It's a common mistake to place undue weight on what you'll *say* during a challenging moment for someone else. That person often ends up saying too much. Often what comforts in those moments is *not* the sentence you came up with; it's that you are *there*.

A person's presence can alter behavior. A person's presence can comfort. And, third of a thousand effects we might list, a person's presence can embolden. Not too long ago I was hiking in the Smokies with our friend and former elder, Dan Meadows. At one point, when I'm sure we were enthusiastically talking about theology, we met someone going the opposite way on the trail. As Dan and I were talking, a man interrupted us and said, "Hey, there's a bear in a tree right up there." We were headed toward it. Owen was behind me. Dan beside me. Dan told the guy, "Thanks for the heads up." You know what happened next? We went right back into the conversation we were having. And we kept walking. Not a word was *ever* said about any bear. I'm not saying I wasn't *thinking* about it, but I was with Dan, a guy that has black bears on his back porch with regularity.

The presence of a person can affect conduct, can comfort, and it can give courage.

1. How Presence Affects Humanity (vv. 1–3)

Verse 1 begins: **Let love of the brethren continue.** Of course, that's *not* where Hebrews begins. So, though this passage is command after command, these instructions should *not* be taken out of the context of the book.

To be reminded of the context, we *could* go all the way back to chapter 1 and walk through the argument. We *could* do that. However, the end of chapter 12 summarizes much of it. We've *not* come to Mount Sinai, a place where God could *not* be approached. Instead, we *have* come to Mount Zion—to the city of God, where the living God dwells with His people. We *have* come to Him, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. We've been granted access. We're *with* Him.

For those who've believed, Hebrews makes plain that this cannot change. We've received a kingdom that cannot be shaken. So, because of those realities, what are we to do? Chapter 12 ends: **let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe** (12:28).

¹ Fictional, of course.

² Marilyn Robinson, *Gilead*, 6.

In other words, in light of what God has done in Christ—giving us access to God, so that we might be *with* Him—there’s a way we ought to live. Yes, indicatives come *before* imperatives. It’s vital we get that order right. However, it’s a truncated gospel that says what Christ has done makes little to no difference in our lives.³ Our access to Him—His ongoing *presence* in our lives—absolutely affects us.

First, it affects how we relate to one another. With the argument of Hebrews in mind, we read the imperative in verse 1 again: **Let love of the brethren continue.** I’d bet more than a few of you could guess what the word for “brotherly love” is here. There’s a city in Pennsylvania named after it. I point it out because there’s a play on words later. As you might know, “love” is *phileō*. “Brotherly” is *adelphos*. Therefore, we get, “Philadelphia.”

The command is to let this “brotherly love”, or **love of the brethren** continue. We’ve mentioned this more than once, but the Ancient Near East did *not* use the term “brother” as flippantly as evangelicals do in our day. Nor did their sibling relationships function in the same way ours do. I say all *that* to say that it’s important we do not *import* today’s understanding of sibling relationships *into* our reading of these ancient books. In that culture, the bond between siblings was unrivaled.⁴ In general, there were no “brothers” and “sisters” *outside* one’s immediate family.⁵ That blood relationship was marked by loyalty.

With *those* connotations in mind, with *that* context in mind, the New Testament nonetheless repeatedly describes the church with sibling terminology.⁶ The church is the family of God. And it’s a family commanded to love one another with *that* kind of loyalty.

It’s clear that, to some degree, these believers had done so. Chapter 10 talked about them sharing in tribulations with other believers (10:33). It’s *also* clear that, to some degree, these believers had struggled to love one another. Chapter 10 also admonished them *not* to forsake assembling, as was the habit of some (10:25). My guess is that both things are true of *every* church that’s ever existed. They’ve loved one another; *and* they’ve struggled to love one another. So, Hebrews 13:1 instructs this first-century church, and every church since: **let love of the brethren continue.** In that culture, others weren’t talking like this. This brotherly love is distinctly Christian.⁷ We could hear Jesus’s words in John 13 to know this kind of love actually *distinguishes* Christians (John 13:35).

Further, this kind of love within the Christian community is a manifestation of the unshakable kingdom we’ve received.⁸ We have come to the church **of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.** Their names are written *there*. If we’re in Christ, so are ours. Consider that. *That* truth ought to define how we live amongst one another. No matter the circumstance, no matter the age, shared interest, whether our personalities meld, or whatever other metric defines relationships in our world, love of the brethren is to go on, keep on, press on. It’s to continue.

Verse 2 pushes us in that direction even further: **Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.** Here is the wordplay I mentioned earlier. There is the word for brotherly love—*philadelphia*—and then here’s the word for hospitality—*philoxenia*—meaning, “love for strangers.” In fact, we might translate the first two verses: “Love of brother let it continue; love of stranger do not forget.”⁹

³ See James 2 on faith and works.

⁴ See Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family*.

⁵ Harold Attridge, *Hebrews*, 385.

⁶ If we’re talking about definitions, the church is *not* a family made up of families. That’s to misunderstand the new birth, as well as the New Covenant. The church is a *new* family.

⁷ Tom Schreiner, *Hebrews*, EBTC, 411.

⁸ Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 402; Attridge, 386.

⁹ Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT, 680.

As with “brotherly love,” we ought to be careful *importing* our understanding of hospitality. To be clear, I love the hospitality of the South, maybe a little more than I should.¹⁰ But we should let the Bible define the concept. Thankfully, it’s something the Scriptures talk about with regularity. For example, you can find instruction on the *necessity* of hospitality in Romans 12. You can find instruction on the *how* of hospitality in 1 Peter 4. We could look elsewhere. It’s one of the qualifications of the church’s leaders. But two sections in the Gospels might be the most instructive for this context. The first one is in Luke 14, on that occasion when Jesus saw the Pharisees jockeying for position at a meal. To those people, He said this, **When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors.**

Does this mean the next time you plan a birthday party for little Johnny, you just send *pictures* of that gathering to his grandparents, uncles, etc. And if they ask why *they* weren’t invited, you just text them this Scripture reference? We should continue reading. Maybe there’s something else going on here. Why were the Pharisees inviting *these* people, according to Jesus? Is it purely because they loved their company? Jesus goes on, **otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment** (Luke 14:12). It seems that that Pharisees often viewed hospitality as something of a quid pro quo. Though this might sound alien to all of *our* motivations, they astonishingly thought, “Maybe if I invite them to my party, they’ll invite me to theirs.”

So, when we consider biblical hospitality, that’s one passage to consider. A second one is related, but in this case, Jesus fast forwarded to the end of the age, when a host of people ask their King, **When did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You? And their King answered, Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me** (Mt. 25:40).¹¹

Biblical hospitality changes our guest lists. We don’t give so that we might gain. We’re to serve those in need. Secondly, biblical hospitality is motivated primarily by love for Christ. As we serve, we’re not *only* serving the stranger. Something we do not perceive is also going on. We don’t *only* know that from Matthew 25. We also know it from verse 2: **Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.**

Some would say this is a reference to Abraham in Genesis 18. That’s certainly possible. But, in the context, we’re to be reminded that there is *always* more going on than what we see. As we’ve noted, there’s a good bit of heaven and earth interacting in Hebrews. The nature of faith is to have conviction concerning things *unseen*. I trust you’ve noticed that’s a consciousness pervading the Sermon on the Mount as well. That is, we’re *not* to do things—fasting, giving, praying—in order to be seen or rewarded by men in the here and now. Instead, we’re to live and serve with the knowledge that those things done in quote “secret” are far from secret to the only One that matters.

It’s not overly spiritual—nor is it unorthodox—to affirm what Hebrews 13:2 affirms. As we serve those in need, we might be entertaining angels. That’s not mystical; it’s biblical.

The applications of hospitality are endless, in part because it’s *not* a momentary gesture, it’s an ongoing posture toward strangers. Wednesday night I heard examples of how we might be hospitable to children or families we don’t know in the children’s ministry. Here we try *not* to call new people “visitors”; instead, they’re “guests.” That’s a stark difference. We welcome as we’ve been welcomed (Rom. 15). As another application, and I know you might find this awkward, but the easiest hospitable act today might just be talking to someone in the body you *don’t* know well. It doesn’t end there, but it can *begin* there. A welcoming posture affects the way you speak to your

¹⁰ By the way, this ought to be freeing. Being hospitable does not mean your living room could qualify for the front cover of *Better Homes*, nor that Waco is going to send a film crew to chronicle your dazzling display of dishes.

¹¹ By the way, that passage seems to refer *primarily* to serving believers.

neighbors when you grab the mail. The gospel means that you can—and you should—be different than all the isolated people you meet in your cove, at your cubicle, or when you grab coffee. I could mention quite a few other applications, but I'll just mention one more. In the New Testament, to be hospitable included putting up traveling believers and caring for their needs.¹² I mention that because that's some of what you've *already* done for the Accardo family. And it's some of our aim even this week.

The argument of Hebrews—our access to His presence—changes the way we interact with humanity, in particular our brothers and sisters in Christ. It *also* changes the way we love the stranger among us. Verse 3 goes on to make clear that gospel realities change the way we love those suffering: **Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them.**

Most likely the prisoners referenced here would've been Christians put in prison for their faith.¹³ As you might guess, conditions in prisons were horrific—cramped, dark, damp, and filthy.¹⁴ Prisoners depended heavily—almost entirely—on family and friends to provide basic needs.¹⁵ Maybe you can imagine the risk of showing up and giving food or a blanket to someone crossways with the State. Maybe you can imagine a Roman armed guard saying to you, “Are *you* with him, or her?”

They'd done this already, according to Hebrews 10. They **showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of their property** (Heb. 10:34). They're being reminded here not to forget them.

Verse 3 goes on to give *another* group we're to remember: **and those who are ill-treated.** This ill-treatment might include torture;¹⁶ it certainly includes persecution.¹⁷ They were to remember those suffering for the faith. “Out of sight, out of mind,” has little to no place in the body of Christ.

Verse 13 goes on to give a rationale: **since you yourselves also are in the body.** Some would say this is a reference to the body of Christ. That's possible. It seems more likely to be pointing out that we're able to identify with those suffering *bodily* harm because we ourselves know what it's like to have a body. We can imagine hunger. We can imagine wounds, open ones. We can imagine sleeping in filth.

So, remember those suffering. You see how the gospel transforms our relationships? We love His people with the most ardent and loyal love known in that era, that of sibling love. Further, we're not isolationists—us four and no more—shutting ourselves off from those in need that the Lord's put around us. We're lovers of strangers. And those who suffer among our number, around the world, are not to be forgotten by us.

2. How Presence Affects Holiness and the Home (v. 4)

Speaking of being different than those around us, verse 4: **Marriage is to be held in honor among all.** Of course, when the author of Hebrews refers to marriage, he means that which was instituted in Genesis 2—one man and one woman for one lifetime.

This institution of God—pre-fall, by the way—isn't to be maligned. It isn't to be endured. It's to be **held in honor.** That word for “honor” was commonly translated as “precious” in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians, it refers to the gold, silver, and *precious* stones (1 Cor. 3:12). In 1 Peter 1 it refers to the *precious* blood of Christ (1 Pet. 1:19). In 2 Peter it refers to *precious* and very great

¹² Schreiner, 411.

¹³ Schreiner, 412.

¹⁴ Cockerill, 681.

¹⁵ Harris, 403.

¹⁶ Cockerill, 681.

¹⁷ Schreiner, 412.

promises of God (2 Pet. 1:14). So, when Hebrews says, **Marriage is to be held in honor**, we should hear the ring of preciousness.¹⁸

That means the perversions of marriage in our day should be grieved. By that, I mean the lie shouted from our books, films, pundits, and influencers that you can love *whomever* you'd like to love, however you'd like to love them, for as *long* as you'd *like* to love them. We grieve the relational and generational destruction of that lie. That lie can manifest itself in more than one way, of course. One might be same-sex relationships; another might be your church-attending valedictorian nephew cohabiting.

To make sure none of us escape the implications of this text, we might consider what's going on be within our *own* hearts as we ponder our own marriage. Is it held in honor? Or are we just enduring it? What about how we view healthy marriages around us? We throw huge parties for all kinds of things. What about the man or woman who dies, having loved Christ, their brothers and sisters in the body, and for forty or fifty years being faithful to their spouse?

This is precious to the Lord. It's to be honored. Of course, that's not to demean singleness. The Scriptures have *much* to say about the place of single believers in the purposes of God for gospel advance. But that which God tells us to honor we ought to honor. In fact, it says that marriage is to be held in honor **among all**. No one is exempt. Honored by all, and in every way.¹⁹ So, children and teenagers, you should honor marriage.

The author of Hebrews goes on in verse 4: **and the marriage bed is to be undefiled**. The term "marriage bed" means exactly what you think it means. In that era, the term often had negative connotations. But *not* here.²⁰ Undefiled means the marriage bed *can* be, and *ought* to be, holy. In fact, the word for undefiled is the same adjective used to describe Christ's priesthood back in Hebrews 7:26. It doesn't have to be sinful. It can be holy. It's a gift.

Not unlike the command to be hospitality included a rationale, **by this some have entertained angels** (v. 2) and remembering the ill-treated included a rationale, **since you yourselves also are in the body**, so does the command to honor marriage include a rationale. Verse 4b: **for fornicators and adulterers God will judge**.

You might recall this from your study of Matthew's Gospel, but these two terms include *both* the sexual sin of an unmarried person and the sexual sin of someone who is married. Everyone is one or the other. Therefore, holiness is demanded of *all* of us. I think it's worth considering this verse in the context of the entire letter's aim. The author's warned them repeatedly against falling away. Along the way, he's done so with examples of those who have squandered their eternal inheritance—including Esau. What's the connection? Recall the language back in verse 16, the church was to see to it **that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau**. That's the same language used here for sexual immorality.

The point is this: one way to fall away from the faith is to give oneself over to this area of sin.²¹ There's a biblical connection—even precedent—between immorality and apostasy.²² And maybe you've noticed this anecdotally. It doesn't happen *every* time, but *often* the person that says they're abandoning the faith is *also* the person seeking to live in a way the Scriptures do not permit. They announce they've left the church. Then they announce they're divorcing. Or they announce they've identified as this or that.

Sin is dangerous.

¹⁸ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/let-marriage-be-held-in-honor-among-all>

¹⁹ Harris, 404.

²⁰ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC, 697; Harris, 404.

²¹ Schreiner, 413.

²² Harris, 404.

But not *just* in that arena.

3. How Presence Affects the Heart (vv. 5–6)

Verse 5: **Make sure that your character is free from the love of money.**

Note again that the author is concerned with our affections, with what we “love.” Recall verses 1 and 2. There are things—or, better said, people—you *should* love. And then there are things—or, better said, *things*—you should *not* love. It’s not unlike Jesus being concerned with what we treasure (Matt. 6). Money *itself* isn’t the issue; it’s the *love* of it. Do you *have* possessions? Or do *they* have you? That’s the issue.

It’s so easy to preach. It’s *not* so easy to live. In fact, it’s a challenge for us whether we have a lot of money or not. I have 12-dollar books people borrowed from me a decade ago that they’ve forgotten they’ve borrowed. I have *not* forgotten, even though I’d like to. I had a 15-dollar Grizzlies t-shirt stolen at a pool in Nashville. That happened years ago. Here I am talking about it in public. There’s not a dollar amount at which you become susceptible to the love of money or possessions. You think *all* these persecuted Jewish Christians, who’d had their possessions seized, were wealthy? Not all of them. Yet, Hebrews 13 instructs them.

Verse 4 warned against the dangers of sexual immorality. Verse 5 warns against the danger of greed. These two sins were frequently listed *together* in ancient literature, whether that’s Greco-Roman, Jewish, or Christian literature.²³ With the latter, we can see this pairing in 1 Corinthians 5–6, Ephesians 5, Colossians 3, and 1 Thessalonians 4. Why are they so commonly linked? Not only because both sins are dangerous, but *also* because they share a common root of not trusting God to provide, and consequently looking *outside* His boundaries for satisfaction.²⁴

Speaking of, like the others, this command includes a rationale too. You’ll hear it as we keep reading verse 5: **Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have.** Jeremiah Burroughs was right when he titled the book, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, wasn’t he? Do you realize that just as pornography wars against the soul, so *might* Pinterest? That doesn’t mean we’re against beauty, design, or getting ideas from others. But we also might ask what it does to your soul when you longingly stare at things for hours you cannot afford, and might *never* be able to afford? Can you look at that stuff and then walk in your living room content? Or does it stir something else? The same thing might happen when you’re watching the lives of others via show, reel, or story. Does that person you’re watching live their curated days make you discontent concerning your days, your life, your spouse, your stuff?

Or does it make you forget what Hebrews says you have most truly? Here’s the rationale of all rationales: **for He Himself has said, “I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.”** Maybe you recall the final line to the hymn *How Firm a Foundation*, “The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose I will not, I will not desert to his foes; that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, I’ll never, no never, no never forsake.”²⁵ That line actually captures the essence of this verse, in particular by using five negations—never, no never, no never—forsake. I say that because in the original there are five words for “no.”²⁶ Wouldn’t one “no” have been enough? Spurgeon once preached a sermon entitled, “Never! Never! Never! Never! Never!” in which he said this: “Two negatives nullify each other in our language; but here, in the Greek, they intensify the meaning following one after another.” A number of years later he returned to this text and said this, “. . . The

²³ Schreiner, 413.

²⁴ Harris, 406.

²⁵ John Rippon, #364 in *Hymns of Grace*.

²⁶ See Benjamin Merkle, *Exegetical Gems from Biblical Greek*, 82–83.

heaping up, as it were, of these denials on God's part of all thought of ever forsaking His people ought to be sufficient to satisfy even the most doubtful among us. If God has said, 'I will not, not, NOT, no never forsake My people,' we must believe Him."²⁷

Spurgeon said that. What has Paul said? **For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord** (Rom. 8:38–39). Paul said that. What has Jesus said? **All that the Father gives me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out** (Jn. 6:37). What else has He said? **My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand** (Jn. 10:28).

Hebrews 13 tells us this in the most emphatic language possible.²⁸ He Himself has said it (v.5). And those words are still in effect.²⁹ Never, no never, no never, forsake. He's *not* like everyone else, the list of people who abandoned you when things got hard, when you sinned against them, or when they found someone new to spend time with.

He *never* leaves. And that truth—His presence—comforts. It also emboldens. When Christ sent out the disciples for their mission, how did He close His comments? By saying, **I am with you always, even to the end of the age** (Mt. 28:20).

The author of Hebrews calls for our response in verse 6: **So that we confidently say, "The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What will man do to me?"** Do you hear the corporate nature of this confession? *We* confidently say this. We say it *together*. On the other hand, do you hear how personal this confession is? The Lord is *my* helper.

Therefore, I will not be afraid. What will man do to me?

Conclusion

The instruction in chapter 13 is hard. Loving men and women like brothers and sisters. Loving strangers. Remembering prisoners as *though* you're in prison as well. Fleeing immorality. Guarding the heart and character from the love of money. *Not* being fearful. Those are *not* things *others* in the world are doing. It's not *always* what your heart desires to do. To do it, you need Hebrews 1 to 12. Or, better said, to do what chapter 13 instructs you need the work of Christ described in Hebrews 1–12.

So that you might be content with what you have. And what is it that you have? Access to God forever. That means not *only* that we can draw near to Him, it means He's always with us.

That reality—seen rightly—affects what we do, it comforts us in all our affliction, and it gives us courage in the face of opposition.

He's here. He helps.

²⁷ "Never, No Never, No Never," no. 3150, delivered on Sunday evening, March 16, 1873, at the Metropolitan Tabernacle.

²⁸ For the nerds out there, the negation of the subjunctive is the strongest way to negate in Greek. See Merkle, 82.

²⁹ Cockerill, 686.