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Discipleship 101 Hebrews 13:1-8

*13 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.^[a] ⁴ Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the **marriage** bed be kept undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterers. ⁵ Keep your lives free from the **love of money**, and be content with what you have, for he himself has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” ⁶ So we can say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?” ⁷ Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ⁸ **Jesus Christ is the same** yesterday and today and forever.*

In her commentary on this passage, former *Presbyterian Outlook* Editor Jill Duffield says that this passage is “**Discipleship 101**”.

This is where the *rubber meets the road for Christianity*.

If we are followers of Jesus, these are things we are called to do—to put our faith into action—

mutual love, hospitality, remembering prisoners and persecuted, faithfulness, contentment and honoring mentors.

And all of it starts with that first phrase.

Let mutual love continue.

What is mutual love?

*The Greek word there is **philadelphia**—the love between brothers and sisters.*

In other words, it’s a love that treats all people as our brothers and sisters in humanity.

Love is what holds everything together for us, as followers of Jesus,

Because Love is what Jesus gives us.

Jesus himself, said that he was giving us a New Commandment
at the Last Supper—

it was to ***love one another, as he loves us.***

And HOW does He love us?

He loves us enough to give his life for us!

***We see the love of Jesus in the way that he loved people—
generously and extravagantly.***

He loved ***everyone***—but surprisingly, and shockingly—

he loved even those considered ***unlovable***:

the outcasts, children, women, the unclean, sinners, prostitutes,
the sick and the lonely.

***All throughout the book of Hebrews we see the example of Jesus,
Being lifted up, as our example for life.***

We are to live as He lived.

And here—Duffield says—the rubber meets the road in our walk of faith.

But is Hebrews 13 just a random list of things to do?

It might seem that way at first.

It might like just a religious ‘to-do’ list.

But what if there is something beneath it all?

What if the ***mutual love*** of all these actions has something in common?

In 2016 the GA Moderator of the PCUSA was Rev. Jan Edmiston.

In 2018, I had the joy of working with her on a retreat

for the Council of Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery,

and she led us in thinking about the mission of our Presbytery.

She asked us this question:

What is BREAKING God’s heart right now?

And what is our RESPONSE to that?

What are we DOING about that?

I wonder what would happen if WE were to ask that same question?

Have you ever asked ***yourself*** that?

How often do we *as a church* ask ourselves this question?
And how do we find the *answer*?

I think we start with Jesus.

A lot of things broke Jesus' heart—people who were sick, poor, hurting, lost, persecuted, those who were left out by society.

The question is: do those same things BREAK OUR HEARTS today?
And what are we doing about it?

There's a very strange movement in some corners of Christianity today
that makes no sense to me,
but makes sense to some believers.

The movement is ANTI-EMPATHY.

The idea is that liberal believers have used empathy to condone evil,
and we should move away from empathy,
and just hold right beliefs and right actions.

And in theory a list like this one in Hebrews would be welcome,
because a list of right actions makes perfect sense in that worldview.
You hear what you are supposed to do as a follower of Jesus, and just do it.

But....do you remember who Jesus reserved JUDGMENT for?

He had severe judgment for the religious leaders of the day,
who upheld the *letter* of the law, without the *spirit* of it.
These leaders said that no one should be healed on the Sabbath, because that was
considered 'working' on a holy day.
They said that everyone who eats without washing hands was sinning,
as if they were hurting someone.
They said that a woman caught in adultery (not the man but the woman)
should be stoned to death, according to the letter of the law.

So are we supposed to embrace the LETTER of God's law,
or is there MORE to our calling?

One thing that we Presbyterians believe is that we follow the *person of Jesus*, not
just the words of the Bible, or a list of dos and don'ts.
We believe that even God's law needs interpretation, context, history,
and the full witness of Scripture.

In other words, we embrace the Spirit of the law and not just the letter of it.

Especially in light of the Holy Spirit –

who helps us understand Scripture and the person of Jesus Christ.

So, this idea that we need to JUST DO what the Bible says, is kind of foreign.

We would say we need to do *what JESUS did*.

We need to do what the ***SPIRIT is leading*** us to do.

And we need to ***LISTEN to God's guidance***.

And one of the hallmarks of Jesus' life was EMPATHY.

What IS empathy?

A dictionary definition says:

*Empathy is the ability to emotionally understand what other people feel, see things from **their point of view**, and imagine yourself **in their place**.*

*Essentially, it is **putting yourself in someone else's position**, and feeling what they are feeling.*

Empathy is different from SYMPATHY or PITY.

Sympathy or pity is sorrow or concern caused by the suffering of others—as we look in from the outside.

I think we all understand how empathy is more powerful.

If we have sympathy or pity, we feel concern and sorrow.

We say, that's horrible.

That's so sad.

But we are looking in from the outside.

But if we have empathy—we take it a step FURTHER.

We wonder, ***how would I feel*** if I was imprisoned? Or persecuted?

And that's exactly what Hebrews 13 is talking about—EMPATHY, not pity.

The writer says: *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*

Empathy is behind hospitality, too.

If you think of yourself as traveling with nowhere to stay,

or nowhere to eat, or no one to welcome you....
then you are more inclined to show hospitality, aren't you?

Even faithfulness in marriage—we want to be faithful,
because we feel for the other person in our relationship.

And contentment—we want to be content, because Jesus himself was content.

And learning from our mentors—we can do this so much better, by stepping
inside the shoes of those who have mentored us.

Unfortunately, empathy is NOT a comfortable exercise.

We much prefer pity and sympathy.

Because that's looking in, from the outside.

Empathy is harder, because it demands a lot from us emotionally and spiritually.

But, as believers, empathy can lead us to real action.

And compel us to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

And empathy is behind Edmiston's question:

What is breaking God's heart?

Nonetheless, there is a bestselling book out right now,
by a Moscow, Idaho, Professor at New St. Andrews College in that town—
by a Pastor named Joe Rigney.

The book is called ***The Sin of Empathy: Compassion and Its Counterfeits.***

Here's some excerpts from his book, used on Amazon's website:

The so-called virtue of empathy is the greatest rhetorical tool of manipulation in the 21st century.

Because love is a real virtue,

empathy's power is in posing as selfless care for victims.

A sad polar bear paces as David Attenborough informs you that the family suburban is melting the ice caps.

"Jesus was an asylum seeker!" the sign reads...

He writes: When you reject the sin of empathy, you reject the manipulation of the media, ... of family and friends, and most importantly, the manipulation of your own heart.

Wow.

Here's an excerpt of an interview with Rigney by Sam Hailes of *Premier Christianity* magazine in the UK.

Why do you believe empathy is a sin?

Because like all good things, the emotional response that we have to people in suffering ([whether you call it] empathy, compassion, pity, sympathy) - when it's good, it's good. And when it goes wrong, it goes really wrong.

Virtues typically go wrong in one of two directions, either deficiency or an excess. A deficiency of courage is cowardice, but an excess of courage is recklessness. ...there is such a thing as an excess of compassion.

You say, "How could you be too compassionate?"

Well, if you're overwhelmed by your feelings and you lose touch with what is true and what is good, if you lose touch with Christ, you have an excess of that emotion that sweeps you off your feet and can be very destructive.

<https://www.premierchristianity.com/interviews/this-church-leader-thinks-empathy-can-be-a-sin-we-asked-him-to-explain-himself/19196.article>

Rigney's argument is that empathy has been weaponized---

And our emotional response to people in suffering can be wrong.

Any virtue can go wrong.

And an excess of compassion is one example.

I would argue that an excess of compassion is not compassion.

Just like self-sacrificing love can turn into ***self-serving love***—

Like, when someone gives up their own desires for someone else...so that they can be praised and loved.

That's not self-sacrificing.

That's self-serving.

Something altogether different.

He also puts empathy, sympathy, pity and compassion into ONE bucket.

But they are NOT the same.

Empathy is stepping into the shoes of another,
sympathy and pity are looking from the outside.

I'm not sure how stepping into the shoes of another to understand their suffering is a bad thing.

And I firmly believe that Jesus did this---All the time.

He wept at the death of Lazarus because he felt for and with his family.

I feel that Rigney's thesis is that some Christians have too much empathy, and they should stick with following God's law.

But, is that how we are supposed to follow Jesus?

As a law? And a to-do list?

How much are we supposed to pay attention to the pain of others?

Well, what does the rest of scripture say?

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12

that when one member of the body of Christ suffers, all suffer with it, and when one part rejoices, all rejoice with it.

Empathy.

In Matthew 25 Jesus says that whatever you have done for the least of these—whether giving a cup of cold water, food, clothing, welcome, or a visit—you have done for Jesus himself.

But he didn't stop there—

he said that we will be judged on these actions.

They are all based in empathy.

I wonder if DEFAULTING to empathy might help us follow Jesus?

Is it easy to do?

No.

We need the power of the Holy Spirit to do it.

Is it comfortable?

No.

Does it lead us closer to Christ?

I think the answer is definitely, yes.

Friends, what does break God's heart right now?

And what are we doing about it?

Are we showing mutual love? Hospitality? Kindness? Faithfulness? Contentment?

How can we step into the shoes of those who are suffering, and work to alleviate their pain, just as Jesus would do?

May the one who gives us the power to walk in the shoes of another, Help us walk in the footsteps of Jesus.

And for the gift of love, all God's people can say together, Amen.