
The Motivating Power of God's Presence

Hebrews 13:1-6³⁵

We have mentioned before how the book of Hebrews has a mountain and valley landscape of powerful exhortations and God-ward motivations resting in Christ-centered truths. We are moving such a landscape once again. Chapter 12 closes with the amazing motivations of not coming to all the threatening of the Law, but to all the privileges of grace and glory. We have been given an unshakable kingdom that will forever remain. In the light of these great truths we had better listen to God and worship God with deep reverence and great awe.

And we do so because God is a consuming fire. Now is this meant to frighten or to reassure us? In reflecting recently over my own sins and weights and God designed discipline, I am certain that this is meant as an assuring and confidence building awareness.

God is the consuming fire for my refining. The furnace may roar with white heat, but the master craftsman is refining and purifying with the greatest of skill. He is like the silver smith who keeps putting the lump he is hammering back into the flame over and over again. And then he looks closely at it. Why? Because the silver needs refining until he can see his face reflected back in it.

God is the consuming fire of my soul's enemies. We take comfort in the fact that there will come a day when the shaking of heaven and earth will one day send Satan and evil men and women to their just punishment. We know that God will vindicate Himself. Till then, mercy marks God's ways while His wrath is carefully stoked up and stored up.

So I meet God who is to me an assuring deliverance and not an impending destruction.

So now we come to these great exhortations that close this book. The issue here is not a dutiful obedience. It is a disciplined response in *how we act* when we learn and understand that *God is acting for us*. We come to this in the same way the people to whom it is written came to it. There is a great danger looming over our suffering and hardship. We learn that Jesus Christ is magnified as sufficient and supreme and that God is pleased when we believe in an obeying way. God is glorified through faith that rests in promises even through death. And since all of this is true in all that God is for us in Christ and all that God is doing in His design for us, then we are stirred with holy delight and awe struck love towards sacrificial deeds of brotherly love.

²⁸ Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.

This movement of our whole lives toward sacrificial deeds of brotherly love is what this text is all about. This is the essence of acceptable worship. This is holding God in reverence and awe. Praising God pleases God as it promotes God. But worshipping God is walking with God and God's people holy fear of Him and humble love for His people.

Let us then study how to worship in our walk with God.

³⁵ Unless otherwise designated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Our Practical Exhortations

(v.1-5a)

I want to reflect on the first set of practical exhortations and consider some strategies for implementing them.

¹ Let brotherly love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels [messengers] unawares. ³ Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. ⁴ Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. ⁵ Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

To Sacrificial Love

(v.1-3)

The first paragraph is an exhortation to keep on loving as Christian brothers. It is meant to cause Christians to not falter or fail in Biblically and sacrificially loving one another in deeds. That this is so is borne out by the two examples of brotherly love.

Keeping an Open Home

(v.2)

In Bible days when inns were dangerous and Holiday Inn was not yet available, hospitality to traveling Christians became a mark of sacrificial love. We find commended Christians all through the New Testament had homes open to people. Listen to the encouragement and extent our hospitality may carry us to: we may have entertained angels without even knowing it. There is plenty of Biblical evidence for this. Many Old Testament saints entertained angels.

Now I must offer a word of explanation. Not every bum who comes to our doors needing food or shelter is to be entertained in the hopes that he will, out of sight, sprout wings. What our author is suggesting is that those whose homes are open, even in the midst of hardship and suffering and poverty, may be trusted even with the care of heavenly messengers.

Is your home open? Do you enjoy having people in your home? Are you so image conscious that someone dropping by who might see a bit of a mess is simply made to see how uncomfortable you are? Have we become so used to using hotels that their sterile environment has become even a welcome substitute for Christian hospitality?

Cultivate an open home that gladly entertains others for the sake of Christ. Develop skill and commit yourself to sacrifice and sharing in a home, whether humble or palatial, as a place of refreshing welcome.

Having an Open Heart

(v.3)

Keeping an open home comes from having an open heart. Our hearts are to resonate with two particular groups:

Those imprisoned for the faith

What the Author wants is that we strive to keep those who are in prison for Christ in mind. We do not forget them. In our setting, we must make serious efforts to find out about them. Most Christians imprisoned today are those in countries and cultures openly opposed to the gospel. Many missions magazines keep us abreast of men and

women in prisons or held hostage in South America, China and in Moslem countries. Let us remember them in prayer just as though we were in bonds like them.

Those mistreated for the faith

This would be a much larger group. It may be Christians far away or it maybe someone sitting next to you whose boss hates righteousness and integrity or whose friends or family cut deep wounds with the knife of sarcasm and criticism.

The point here is that we must never let hardship and suffering cause us to turn inward and self-ward. We must resist at all costs a victim mentality. We must bend ourselves with all our grace to keep on loving even when it means sacrificially serving those whose faith has brought them mistreatment and imprisonment.

And we ought to do so because we are one – one in the Body of Christ. Once again we are forcibly confronted with a very different view of the church than is common today. We are a community locally as a church with responsibility to know one another well enough to be able to stir up love and holiness. We are a body universally with responsibility to be interested, inquiring, informed and interceding over the advance of the gospel through both outward demonstrations of the grace of God, whether in times and places of strength in times and places of weakness. Whether in persecution or in prison, when one part of the body hurts, the whole body suffers. How much better it is when the suffering part has the attention of rest.

To Sexual Purity

(v.4)

The second exhortation speaks to us powerfully in our culture. Like the Hebrews who lived in a Greek and Roman culture besotted with sensuality, we also are surrounded by pagan hedonism. We are being bombarded on all sides to adopt a sensual and immoral frame of reference for life. I mean, when sex sells toothpaste and kitty litter then we are utterly besotted. The culture's attack on marriage comes from all quarters.

In the midst of this, Christians must think Biblically about marriage.

Marriage is to be Honored

God has ordained marriage. It provides the context for companionship. Its covenant union, sacrificial love and loving submission all model the relationship between Christ and the church. Even those to whom God has given the gift of singleness, marriage is not to be demeaned as though it were only a necessary, but Biblical concession. Marriage is to be honored. Whatever tends to erode it is to be avoided. Whatever openly attacks it is to be opposed. Christians must clearly and publicly affirm that marriage, that is, the covenant and physical union of one man and one woman is the Biblical standard. All else is evil.

Let me be plain. Christian marriage is not for homosexuals or lesbians. The world may create other institutions which are pale imitations of the Biblical reality, but the Bible is unmistakable in its condemnation of homosexuality and lesbianism. Romans 1 is clear that a culture and its people are at the end of the cycle of depravity when those sins are generally approved of even by those who do not practice them.

The grace of God is able to deliver any sinner from the bondage of his or her sin. Praise God for His delivering grace. May we be instruments of that grace through the gospel as we offer hope and help to men and women in bondage to sexual perversions. Marriage is

honored when we call for public and private repentance from approving and participating in marriage destroying, God displeasing sin. And God is honored when his people move in love and mercy with the gospel to reconcile all sinners of all kinds to God.

Sex is to be Holy

The phrase here “the marriage bed kept pure” is a euphemism. It means that sexual relations are only within marriage. Immorality and adultery pollute and defile marriage. A Christian view of sex sees it only within marriage and certainly within marriage.

But, further, there is the possibility of defiling marriage intimacy by bringing into it patterns of thought and behavior that are sinful. Marriage intimacy may be polluted by the thought and lust life of spouses. Pornography, visual or verbal, can so control one’s mind that intimacy with a spouse is filled with thoughts of lust directed *at some other individual*. This clearly is wicked and defiles our intimacy.

We must constantly be on the guard against the subtle pressures to think wrongly about marriage and sex. And some of the temptations are not subtle at all. When we as Christians are together, we ought to be talking in such a way that honors marriage and places before our children a Biblical and wholesome approach to sex.

Why is this important? Because God will judge the adulterer and the immoral. Is that enough said? Illicit sex exposes us to grave health dangers now days. But a fully Christian motivation not only weighs immediate consequences, but eternal condemnation. In other words, all of you who not now married, keep yourselves pure and holy because of God, because God will respond to you. If you do not keep yourself pure and reserve sex for your marriage, then God will deal with you. Yes, purity may protect you from disease. But more importantly, purity may protect you from damnation.

I want to remind you of a connection here that is vital for a Biblical view of marital intimacy. It is an act of worship. It is an act of giving, of treasuring, of marriage joy. When shared within marriage as an expression of love in a sweet relationship, it pleases God. What a glorious thing that what we can delight in as a gracious gift from His design can also please and glorify Him. This is why when we profane and pollute our marriages and intimacy, God responds with judging wrath and severe consequence.

Brothers and sisters, honor marriage and keep your intimacy undefiled.

To Satisfied Contentment

(v.5a)

This next exhortation speaks to our materialism. But it does it in a startling way.

Our High Responsibility

Listen to how this is phrased. “Keep your life free from love of money.” That command is so plain and clear yet is so often repeated in the Bible. Is your lifestyle marked by not loving money? Do people look at the way you live and have no questions about whether you are serving God and money?

Money-love is a deep root of many evils. It requires vigilance and diligence. You have to work at keeping your soul from going hard after money. It requires aggressive disciplines over your life. Don’t think that since you have no money that you do not love money. Brothers and sisters, having money only enables gratification of the craving; it does not create the craving. You can long for the next, the newest, the nicer, the neatest... as things

on TV, in catalogues, on show room floors, in the malls, in shop windows, in your neighbor's driveway or home.

Loving money sometimes shows itself in cravings that are satisfied by *spending*. We love to buy and own and collect. And sometimes it shows itself in cravings that are satisfied by *saving*. We pinch and scrimp and count our accounts, pile up our savings, set it aside. I am not saying that either spending or saving in and of themselves are sins; but the love of money that motivates much of it is.

Money love can kill ministry – we see personal accumulation as the aim of working. Thus we function exactly the same as a thief. The solution to coveting hearts that drive thieving actions is repentance. It is a change of heart and life from a philosophy of *work to get* to a theology of *work to give* (Ephesians 4:28).

Our Humble Remedy

What is the remedy? Satisfied contentment. A Biblical Christian is marked by a deep contentment with God's provision for Him. He is grateful for it. He keeps laying up treasure in heaven so that his heart will not long for earthly riches. Whether in much or in need, Paul had learned the secret of contentment.

So then, do we go out and sell our houses and cars and stereos and give away our bank accounts? Only if you make choices to serve them and want them and provide for more and better of them rather than serving and wanting and sacrificing for Christ. Beloved, it is much easier for most to hear strong words of exhortation about purity than about money. But in both we must be pleasing to God. In both we must walk-worship acceptably with fear and awe. Do you?

Our Powerful Motivations

(v.5b-6)

How are we motivated to keep our hearts free from the love of money, to honor marriage and keep our hearts and homes open to Christians who are in need? We are motivated by the power of a promise.

⁵ Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." ⁶ So we can confidently say,

"The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"

God's Sure Promise

(v.5b)

We have God's sure promise. This is stated in the most emphatic way possible. "I will not ever for sure never leave you and will not and cannot forsake you ever."

I know that the sinfulness of my own heart is exposed when this really does not motivate me. This promise is supposed to stir up hearts to the hard work of sacrificial love, hospitality to strangers, keeping our marriage vows and not loving money. But does it? Frankly, are you ready now to go out to the task because God is there with you and will never leave you?

Why is this? Is it because we simply do not value and prize the presence of God with us? Does this promise excite you for love and hospitality and purity and so on? Here it is once again. Loved ones, hungering and desiring God ought to so burn in our hearts that we will be satisfied with no less. And that hunger and desire will leap up with an affirming "Yes!" when promises of the abiding presence of God are heard.

Our Spoken Purpose**(v.6)**

That is what verse 6 is all about. The presence of God motivates godly living when we respond with thought out and committed confidence. We say to ourselves and others that God's promises mean that God will help us. And because He will help us, we will not fear the threats or pressure or persecution of man. What can man do? The worst is to cause pain and bring death. But they cannot do even that if God does not allow it.

Do you respond to God's sure promises with inward spoken purposes? God says He will be with us whether we are in prison or in the home of a Christian friend. He was with us when we covenanted our marriage. He will be with us when we are tempted to sin. He will be with us when we choose to treasure heaven more than we value earth.

And we will not fear what man can do to us when we care for one another. We will not tremble when we publicly stand with persecuted Christians all over the world. We will not fear the scorn of others when we stand for purity. We will not be afraid to hold up the Biblical standard for marriage against the prevailing wickedness of our culture – that is, marriage is the lifelong covenant union of a man and a woman. We will not fear for future security and safety. We will not be anxious over the stock market or our 401K's or the size of our paychecks. We will not fear for the devourer for we have God's Divine presence.

So do you fear what man can do to you? And is this fear, anxiety, worry a gauge to measure your lack of contentment with God, with all that He is and promises?

Reflect and Respond

Beware of substitute standards for spirituality. We are too often focused on substitute motivations and detailed techniques. The product is not stronger, but weaker Christians who do not think through texts for themselves and are not motivated to spiritually struggle by Biblical categories. In other words, are you more interested in hearing about Christian steps to keep clean houses than how the promises of God spur us on to godly living?

I want to challenge you to all church involvement in our Flocks. I am convinced that flock groups are how we are going to strategize for godliness, for growth and for spiritual gain. We need to have a Flock in every community. We aim to have elders to shepherd them and qualified leaders to serve them. We should be using them to stir one another up to love and godliness. In them we should cultivate faith-building relationships, bonds of prayer and share our triumphs and tragedies with people who we know love us.

Let us rise up with strength and confidence because of God's promises to keep on loving one another, to have open homes and hearts, to honor marriage and keep sexually pure and to free our lives from the love of money.

Let us do so by faith, by believing God's promises in an obeying way – all of them.