

“I Will Never Leave You nor Forsake You”

Hebrews 13:1-17

As we hear these words from the letter to the Hebrews, we immediately tune in to words we know represent aspects of what God considers to be appropriate Christian behavior. Do not be sexually immoral. Be free from the love of money. Be content with what you have. Covetousness and greed are idolatry.

We know this and we preach this. But when you read the greater context of these words, we hear the author of the letter to the Hebrews giving us more than just a list of what we should not do. The nature of God’s Law is not simply a set of rules saying “don’t do this; don’t do that.” Our Epistle reading begins with what we should do: show mercy and forgiveness to others through actions, not just words. It is what we do with our time, our bodies, and our money that most clearly demonstrates the health of our relationship to God.

Since biblical times, the people of God have promoted the good practice of giving thanks to God by tithing our money – giving 10%. In addition to that, I am also a strong advocate of tithing your time. If you can spend an hour watching your favorite TV show or clicking around on the

Internet, you can spend 6 minutes, that is 10% of that time, reading Scripture or having a devotion with your children, picking up the phone and calling someone who is sick or homebound.

I will be honest, having a regular prayer and devotion time with my own children (other than bedtime prayers) has been a struggle, especially in recent years. When they were younger, reading Scripture or singing hymns was a regular, daily happening. When they got schedules and our lives got busier, having regular time became more of a challenge.

No matter how hard we try, as we look at our lives in the light of Holy Scripture, we are continually reminded that deep down we are totally corrupt and would have no hope without Christ's death and resurrection. No matter how we try, we don't show kindness to everyone as we should; we don't keep our bodies pure as we should; we don't realize how selfish we really are; maybe we spend far more money on our own toys and pleasures than we return to the Lord.

We all have our vices through which we grieve the Lord on a daily basis. God's love and forgiveness is truly amazing as we look at our lives and know that even through all our selfish desires and actions, we are still told by our Father in heaven: "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

God's love and compassion is most clearly demonstrated in sending His Son to suffer and die in our place so that we will never have to stand

before the Judgment Seat of God and be charged with each transgression – each careless word we have spoken, let alone all the things we did.

However, in our daily life, God shows His love and compassion to us, His dear children, in a very different way than the world interprets love and compassion.

God says that showing love, compassion, and forgiveness is visiting a criminal in jail. Love, compassion, and forgiveness is not shown by releasing a criminal from jail before he has served his due time.

Our society has attempted to excuse immoral behavior in the name of love and forgiveness. Anyone who dares to point out sin or labels immoral behavior as being sinful is called an unforgiving or unloving person.

Showing love is, as our epistle lesson says, visiting and comforting the person in prison, not justifying the behavior that landed them in prison.

Showing love is not an easy thing to do. If loving were easy, raising children would be easy. You love them. You discipline them, not in spite of loving them, but because you love them.

We have learned this from how our Father in heaven deals with us. We read in our epistle lesson last week, also from the letter to the Hebrews, “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son”

This is written to a community of believers who were enduring hardship and persecution at the hands of the Romans and the Jews. They were suffering in ways that we thankfully have never had to experience.

The letter continues, "...what son is not disciplined by his father? ... Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

We are God's true children. We are His legitimate heirs. He rebukes us and disciplines us when we sin. He sends us trials and difficulties to keep us humble and reliant upon Him for all things. And, as Luther states in his catechism "all this He does out of Fatherly divine goodness and mercy."

Rebuking us shows His love. Sending trials and difficulties shows His mercy. The world around us does not understand this and is offended by the very notion that discipline, sacrifice, and even hardship are positive influences in our lives.

But our Lord tells us, you will suffer difficulties and your mortal bodies will even one day die on account of your sin, but "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?" Amen.