

A Word of Exhortation

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[0:00] Good morning, church. Good to see you all. All these are over. There are so many TV shows, radio shows, podcasts that offer practical advice.

! More often than not, they're lifestyle shows. Cooking, Better Homes and Gardens, Home Makeovers, even popular breakfast shows, Sunrise. Then you've got Dr. Phil and even Oprah, who I thought of retired, but no, she's actually touring. She's here in December, if you're interested. I enjoy Grand Designs, Fixer Upper and Love It or List It.

They are renovation shows that generally take something that's a little woeful and sad and turn it around and the results can be fabulous. Sometimes not so.

Anyway, these shows may have quick fix ideas and nice renovations, but there's nothing of lasting value. There's no eternal advice.

[1:01] The best practical advice for living now and preparing us from the future comes from the God's Word, the Bible. And at the conclusion of this letter to the Hebrews, we receive practical advice that may involve some personal change and internal renovations.

This talk is titled in the app, A Word of Encouragement, so you can follow along, and it's a word of advice. Just before we arrive at chapter 13, we read at the end of chapter 12 this.

In one sense, this is the end of the book.

It's the climax. And if the writer concluded here, the piece would work. Certainly, the writer has finished with their clear analysis of Jesus, his ministry and role, that he is superior to the high priest who's gone before us to heaven, speaking to God on our behalf.

It's a superior message to the old covenant, and Jesus the author and perfecter of our souls. And so we're reminded at the end of chapter 12, be thankful.

[2:22] We receive an inheritance, God's eternal kingdom, which cannot be shaken. This whole material universe will one day be shaken to pieces. Homes that have been renovated will turn to dust.

The backyard that has been blitzed will turn to dust. Cars and money will corrode and rust. The kitchen makeover and renovations will vanish. This world will be shaken.

And will be no more. But the new creation in Jesus Christ, by God's grace, the eternal dwelling will not be shaken. It's permanent. And it's lasting.

And so let us be thankful. In our thankfulness, we're told to worship God with our whole life. For God will one day judge us for everything we do and say. The word worship here, proskaneo, simply translated means serve.

And so we must serve God acceptably with reverence and awe, putting God first in our lives, in every part of our lives. The chapters and verses, remember, were added years later to make it easiest to find our way around the scriptures.

[3:32] So if we take chapters and verses out, the end of chapter 12 flows straight into chapter 13. Having detailed all that Jesus has done for us so that we may be thankful to God, the writer to Hebrews wants us to add a series of practical guidelines on how we might serve God acceptably with reverence and awe.

How can we serve God acceptably? All too often, Christians think that serving God or worshipping God has something to do with living in a special way on a special day, at a special time, in a special place.

And that muddled thinking limits serving God to Sundays. And that's just not right. Worship means serve. Normally there are people serving on Sundays, but the majority come to church so that we can hear the word of God and we do it so that we can go back to our families and back to our

workplaces and back to where we've come from to serve God there.

We really leave church to worship, that is to serve God. We serve God in a far more valuable and potentially effective way in our daily life. As we listen to God's word, this will become clearer as we move through Hebrews 13.

The writer to Hebrews wants us to understand how a thankful life should be lived from a Christian perspective. And it's not about keeping a gratitude diary. This is to be day-to-day service.

[5:06] Our faith cannot be shallow. It must not be Sunday only. It's to be all day, every day, faith in action. Chapter 13 is largely about worshipping God, serving God acceptably.

And the first piece of advice, how this service looks practically, involves love. It's kind of the key to everything, really. Verse 1, keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters.

Serving God acceptably involves loving one another. If we're to be serving God with reverence and awe, we must ask, am I loving my fellow Christian?

We can't do this practically sitting there looking at the back of someone's head. There aren't many opportunities to show love for one another within this meeting, but there is outside the meeting as we leave, in conversations over morning tea, as the week unfolds, there is opportunity to love and care for one another, to take the trouble to get to know one another.

What is said in here in chapter 13, keep that up. It's a feature of being a Christian, the realisation that through Jesus, we are one, that we are brothers and sisters.

[6:22] There is a bond between us, loved by God, children of God, so keep on loving each other. We're a church that seeks to glorify God as we treasure Jesus together for the joy of all people.

Everyone here must have a friend in Christ. Is it the same friend you've had for years? Is there room for someone else in your group? But I need to note here, loving isn't just to be exclusive to other Christians, like we're in some kind of club, which I'll talk about in a moment.

We need to be marked by love for all. Verse 2, the next thing is to show hospitality. I did talk about angels last week. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by doing so, sorry, entertain strangers, for by doing so, some people have entertained angels without knowing it.

We're not to be content with an easy kind of love. This active, serving love is not content with a small and safe circle of friends. It reaches out to strangers and shows hospitality to strangers.

It's a good test of our love for one another if it's bigger and greater than the love we show just to our friends. We reach out to strangers. I don't know if you know this, but I was involved with the Surf Life Saving Club for about 10 years.

[7:43] I did beach patrols in Wollongong and Shoalhaven Heads on the South Coast. And it's a voluntary non-Christian organisation. And I cared. And the people in my patrol group, we all cared for each other.

And there was opportunity to talk and share my faith. But what unified us was the goal of serving the community. And did you know that the Surf Life Saving motto is actually vigilance and service. Let's be vigilant, keep an eye on the ocean, and serve, vigilance and service. I'm hoping church isn't just a members-only club. I just don't get the feeling at St. Paul's that's the case.

I've spoken to people who say that they're too bad or they've done too many wrong things to go to church. So they don't feel safe coming on site because of their history, their own personal lives.

Thing is, I've done some messed up stuff too. And so stepping through that door, everyone needs to step through that door. We're all sinners and we all need Jesus.

[8:51] St. Paul's isn't to be a club for good people or locals. It's a meeting of sinners who want to be encouraged from God's word and to encourage others to know God's love and the hope we have in forgiveness from sins through faith in Jesus.

And then to go out and thankfully serve God. Are we doing all we can to entertain strangers? Do we welcome strangers and newcomers? Again, I think we do this pretty well.

But we need to keep on working on church being a warm and welcoming place. We need to be seeking the lost. We need to be open to new people entering our immediate circle of friends.

And it's imperative it must be that St. Paul's is a place where the love of Christ is seen in action. The manner in which we welcome people to our church is an expression of love in action.

They could be people just visiting. They could be seekers. They could be fellow believers. They could be angels. It happens. The question to ask, did we welcome them in such a way that they will return?

[9:57] I haven't got this in the notes, but I do need to digress slightly. When I came to Sydney from ministry on the south coast, we went church hopping and church hunting.

And it was surprising how many churches, I'm not going to name and shame them, but they're not far from here, that everyone just stood at morning tea with each other. And we were like, we could have been total searchers, seeking out, looking, and not Christians at all.

And we were like, oh. And just not welcomed at all. They were little closed bubbles. I don't get that vibe here, which is great. Good welcoming, though, does not simply happen.

While a specific welcoming ministry and having a welcoming team with gifted and trained people is important, it is the ministry of every member of the congregation to demonstrate Christ's love to visitors by making them feel valued and welcomed.

If we don't all share this common vision and practice, then we aren't welcoming people or glorifying God as we treasure Jesus together for the joy of all people. Verse 3.

[11:05] The next point is this. And this is something that's really it's not something that we think about too much because it's not something we experience. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

Love and hospitality have now been pushed a little further. Gospel love of Jesus active in your life will not only care for one another or strangers who may tend to be a blessing to us, but also ought to extend to those who are in prison and who are mistreated.

In other words, not just to those who may have something to give back to us, but to those in need of what we're able to give to them. That is how God has loved you and how God has loved me.

The motivation as you were their fellow, as if you were their fellow prisoners. You've got to put yourself in their shoes suffering than them. Let's draw into the suffering of others. If we look back at chapter 10, verses 32 to 34, some of the intended audience actually, the writer of Hebrews is writing, they've been in prison and suffering for the good news of Jesus.

This was a real occurrence they were confronted with because of their faith. We're to remember in our brotherly and sisterly love those who are in prison and being mistreated as if we ourselves were suffering with them.

[12:34] and if we can't practically go into a prison, there's organisations such as Open Doors who are doing just that and we can support them as they seek to strengthen and equip Christians around the world who are suffering and being persecuted.

In verse 4, if you're single, does this apply to you? Yeah. Because everything you do now prepares you for what's coming, potentially.

Marriage should be honoured by all and the marriage bed kept pure for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. It seems like it's just aimed at married people but you still need to keep yourself pure.

So love is still in the background here. Honouring marriage is to do with brotherly and sisterly love. But even more basic than that, we're still exploring the subject of worshipping God and serving God.

We're being told here that serving God with reverence and awe involves honouring marriage. It involves sexual morality. All people should honour and value marriage.

[13:42] I must honour my marriage and so must you if you're married. We must value other people's marriages and if you're not married, you're to honour your potential future marriage or other people's marriages.

marriage and purity have hit hard times in our society. They're certainly not what the world advocates. If you go by the media, there are very few who value monogamy, abstinence, waiting till you're married or that cherish pure values.

There are even those who are actively working against marriage, redefining marriage and rubbishing the exclusivity of marriage. Adultery, sexual immorality, open marriages are so accepted in the Western world as to barely raise a yawn, much less an outcry.

The marriage bed must be kept pure. It's a great way of saying it's just for the two people, no one else. That is honouring, valuing marriage and serving God acceptably.

Defiling the marriage bed is not just immoral, it's an assault on marriage and because God values marriage so highly, God will judge you. In our age, we still need to hear this word.

[14:59] Honour, value marriage, keep the marriage bed pure and abstain from sexual immorality. That is, any sexual activity outside of marriage. Christians have to make a stand in this adulterous

and sinful generation to keep the marriage bed pure, trumpets and proclaims God's way.

It's a stark contrast from self-centeredness, destructive and immoral life patterns. A Christian's life should remind the world that God created the wonder and fireworks of sex long before glossy magazines, the internet or romantic films and novels.

It's God's full intention for the physical joining together of a man and woman to be one in marriage. Sex is powerful and it's designed by God for marriage. Anything outside of this is not pure and it's abusing God's gift.

Good marriage and good sex do not just happen. Both require a selfless willingness to live God's way and this takes effort. Meeting the other person's needs before your own over a long, committed and faithful period of time till death do us part.

Honouring the marriage bed also means there is no place for deliberate and sustained withholding affection and physical touch. That would be dishonouring the covenantal vow you made before God to have and to hold to death do us part.

[16:30] Our attitudes to marriage and morality will reflect how we serve God with reverence and awe and serve our partners. Verse 5. Be content with your financial status.

Keep your lives free from 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 man do to me? So we're in a society bent on cheapening and destroying marriage and at the same time determined to establish the love of money as the basic principle of life.

In some circles the love of money is seen as a virtue rather than a vice. Everywhere we look invest save for a rainy day grow your super tear down barns and build bigger ones.

Clear instruction here. Keep your lives free from the love of money. If we're not free from the love of money then contentment is impossible. Don't long for more or be dissatisfied with what you have.

[17:40] Be content with what you have. God has said never will I leave you never will I forsake you. Don't be anxious or worry God is in control and God wants us to be fully dependent on his provision.

Another thing that's not in my notes that just made me think of it do you ever see the show Malcolm in the Middle? Anyway it was an old TV sitcom and the guy who played Malcolm I remember him being interviewed and he said I really want to make a million dollars and now that I've made a million I want to make a hundred and it just it wasn't enough he wasn't content.

Luke 12 verse 30 says your father knows what you need but seek his kingdom and these things will be given to you as well for where your treasure is there your heart will be also.

It's according to Jesus it's the pagan world that runs after such things. As soon as you decide more who is your master? Is God ruler of your life including your finances or are you a slave to your mortgage and debt and school fees consumerist retail therapy expensive holidays do you really actually love money?

The secret of being content is trusting God. If we trust God we can say with confidence the Lord is my helper not the bank I need not be afraid.

[19:08] So what we've seen in these first six verses are a sketch of practical service in reverence and awe of God. Those flow one into another and in short space summarise what our whole life attitude in service to God should look like.

Worshipping serving God out of thankfulness for all the work that Jesus has done for us. It'll involve brotherly and sisterly love showing hospitality remembering prisoners and caring for the mistreated honouring marriage and remaining sexually pure.

You won't be filled with the love of money but learn contentment. But we're not going to achieve this on our own. Verse seven Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you.

Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Eugene Peterson has commented this There is little to admire and less to imitate in the people who are prominent in our culture.

We have celebrities but not saints. Famous entertainers amuse a nation of bored insomniacs.

People are aimless and bored amusing themselves with trivia and trash.

[20:23] Neither the adventure of goodness nor the pursuit of righteousness gets headlines. God in his kindness realising our weakness provides us with models in the Christians who have gone before us.

It's right to remember those who have brought the word of God to you. We're not to put them on a pedestal and think they have no flaws or they're without sin.

Nevertheless it is still right to see those who have gone before us not as perfect models but certainly as examples we can imitate. And as we look to an example to imitate there's none greater than Jesus.

In verse 8 it was the same yesterday today and forever. Ultimately look to Jesus' example as Jesus has sympathised with what we've been through tempted in every way but without sin yet suffered out of deep love for us.

This is the supreme example for us to follow and that's outlined in verses 11 to 14. And then in verses 15 and 16 through Jesus and because of what he's done for us we're to continually to offer our whole life as service true service never forgetting to do good and remembering to share with others.

[21:41] As a church we refer to these as the seven rhythms of grace. In this we're called to obey and submit to the authority of leaders and in a democratic society no one wants to talk about submission in leadership yet this instruction is clear in verse 17.

They keep watch over you obey them why? So that their work will be a joy not a burden for that would be of no advantage to you.

Pastor Steve doesn't want to be burdened he does this out of joy and love for you guys. The ministry of a leader emotionally stressed by those who are burdened or groaning about their leadership cannot be a joy for either party it's of no advantage to the leader or congregation it becomes a lose-lose situation and there's certainly a lot of pressure on leaders and we're reading James that not many of you should presume to be teachers my brothers because you know that those who teach will be judged more strictly.

So obey your leaders and submit to their authority so that there'll be a joy and verse 18 pray for them keep on praying for your leaders as they desire in service to God to live honourably in every way.

We can't do any of this without God's help. Verses 20 to 21 may the God of peace who through the blood of Jesus equip you with everything good for doing his will may he work in us what is pleasing to him.

[23:17] And there's a bit of a PS postscript at the end greetings and I hope to see you soon. Grace be with you all. There's a lot packed into this final chapter.

What we really need to hear is the word of God speaking into our hearts today. Details have been spelled out to us what it means to be thankful and to serve God acceptably. If at any point an error has been touched on in your life where you've thought I've got to do something active here now I've got to change that is really what the Christian life is all about.

Take your next step today. The Christian life because of the work that Jesus has done is about receiving forgiveness forgiveness forgiveness when we muck things up and changing so that as thankful people we get about our daily life of serving God acceptably with reverence and awe.

Amen. Amen. Amen.