

The Fourth Sunday of Easter/
The Second Sunday of Stewardship
Hebrews 13:20-21, 1-6
April 17, 2005

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Love Proclaims Peace through Jesus

1. God works love in our hearts
2. God works love in our lives

*^{NIV} **Hebrews 13:20** May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep,²¹ equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

*^{NIV} **Hebrews 13:1** Keep on loving each other as brothers.² Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.³ Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.⁴ Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.⁵ Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."⁶ So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"*

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Love is the best and purest motive for proclaiming peace through Jesus. That's how the apostle Paul described the motive for his ministry of proclaiming peace with God through Jesus Christ. He said, "**Christ's love compels us.**" (2 Cor. 5:14)

But love is not the only possible motive sharing the gospel. In another of his letters, Paul acknowledged that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, motivated by little more than selfish ambition. It would be possible, wouldn't it, for a pastor to continue preaching Christ because it's the only way he knows to make a living. And it can happen, too, that a congregation's push to do evangelism is propelled not so much by a loving concern for lost sinners as it is by a desire to balance the budget or stem a decline in church attendance. But unless our

motivation for trying to reach the lost—as pastors or as a congregation—is a genuine love for souls, I believe our efforts will always limp along.

This is not something that I enjoy thinking about: that I may not have enough love for the lost to speak with them about their soul's salvation; that I may not have enough love for the lost to sacrifice my own resources to help them come to know the world's only hope for salvation, Jesus Christ. Yet I have to admit that it may at times be the case. So how do we change that? Where can we go for an increase in love, so that love will lead us to proclaim peace through Jesus? The answer is to turn to the God of love. The God who so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son works love in our hearts and he works love in our lives.

1. God works love in our hearts

This morning I want to take you back to that beautiful passage we read last week at the end of the book of Hebrews. Today we're going to look at another facet of this passage. These verses are really a prayer that the God of peace would equip us to do his will and that he would, it says here, "*work in us what is pleasing to him.*" To work something in us is to create it by labor or exertion. It's the language of blacksmithing, where the blacksmith works with his forge and his hammer to fashion some useful object from a piece of metal.

To pray that God would work in us what is pleasing to him is to confess that we can't do what's pleasing to God as we are by nature. What stands in the way is our selfish, sinful nature. The default position of the old self is to be opposed to God's ways. We're rebellious by nature.

So what does God do? The other day I walked past a place where a fellow was preparing to build a cement block wall. He was just beginning to build the forms into which he was going to pour concrete to serve as a foundation for the wall. Just as I was walking past, he picked up a 2x4 and held it out in front of him and looked carefully down the length of it. I think he wanted to see if it was straight or crooked. If it was too crooked, I'm guessing, he might have tossed it aside and taken another, straighter piece. But this is where God is different. Rather than rejecting us as unsuitable objects of his labor because of our sinfulness, God in mercy takes the warped and crooked timber that is humanity and works with us. He works in us.

God does his work in us through his Holy Spirit. The Bible says that God has poured his love into our hearts through his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit uses the gospel message of peace through Jesus as the conduit through which God's love fills our hearts. As the love of God warms our hearts, it leads us to imitate God's love. **"We love,"** St. John writes, **"because he first loved us."** When our hearts have been transformed by God's love, then we're capable of—and actually want to—live in love for other people. And, of course, the greatest act of love is to proclaim to the lost the peace we have in Jesus.

We're right in the middle of our annual stewardship emphasis now. What result should we be praying to see from this stewardship program? Should we pray that God will lead more people to offer a more generous percentage of their income for the Lord's work? Should we pray that God will move more of our membership to offer their time and abilities in service to the Lord and his people? We could certainly pray for those things. But I also believe that it's possible to get people to "perform" when it comes to offering their money, their time and their abilities by begging them, or browbeating them, or manipulating them or finessing them. That's why my prayer is not just that we have an outward increase in things like member involvement and offerings, but that our stewardship emphasis would result in our having more of our members in God's Word more often: Hearing the Word in worship. Studying the Word with fellow Christians or studying it as families or as individuals in our homes. Participating regularly in the Sacrament of the Altar. I say this because I truly believe that the Spirit pours God's love into our hearts through our hearing of the Word and our use of the Sacraments. And as God's love fills our hearts in increasing measure, I'm confident that generous offerings of our time, our ability and our money will follow.

2. God works love in our lives

This idea that God's love, when it's poured into our hearts, doesn't stay inert and undetectable, but makes its presence felt in our lives, is reinforced in the opening verses of Hebrews 13. It says, *"Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."* He's not mentioned here by name, but Abraham was one person who entertained angels without knowing it. Abraham was just relaxing at the entrance to his tent one hot Middle Eastern day when he looked up and saw three men standing nearby. Quickly Abraham offered them water to wash their feet and he and his wife, Sarah, set to work to prepare a meal for these strangers. Only later did Abraham realize

that it was the LORD and two of his angels that had been guests in his tent.

We may not have strangers stopping by our home very often—and we may have legitimate concerns these days about whether it's wise or safe to invite them into our homes—but we do have many strangers who stop by here at our church home. It seems that a natural application of this call to show hospitality would be to warmly welcome those who come to worship with us, in fact to consider it a privilege to have them join us. Just a few words of welcome or a small gesture of hospitality can speak volumes about the love of God that resides in our hearts.

When the encouragement is given here to *"remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners,"* the reference is probably not to the general prison population of wrongdoers, but rather a call to remember those who are imprisoned on account of their Christian faith. Perhaps it was a fear that visiting such prisoners of faith could lead to their own arrest that caused some Christians to all but forget about those in prison. Whatever the reason, it all too easily could become a case of "out of sight, out of mind."

We don't have fellow Christians imprisoned for their faith here in Modesto, but we do have fellow Christians who can't join us here on Sundays because of poor health. All too easily, they, too, can become forgotten members of the congregation. But a card or a phone call or a visit can be a great boost for someone who is "imprisoned" by illness.

The author goes on to say, *"Marriage should be honored by all, and marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral."* Marriage, which was established by God in the Garden of Eden, is to be honored by all—both the married and the unmarried. Though our world is awash in sexual sins and disrespect for marriage, the world still expects that a Christian whose faith is genuine will live a life of decency and purity in respect to marriage and sexuality. Of course, the world is gleeful when prominent Christians fall victim to sexual sins, and Satan is gleeful when any Christian indulges the sinful nature in such a way. But it's also true that by our respect for marriage and by our respect for God's will about the use of our bodies, we can set the stage to proclaim the peace we have in Jesus. Teens and others who believe that "true love waits" will often find that their commitment to doing God's will opens the door for conversations about Jesus and the peace we have in him. A Christian

marriage characterized by love and honor for each other can do the same thing.

Now at the end of this section comes an encouragement that fits especially well with our stewardship emphasis. It says, *"Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'"* Money can do some wonderful things. Having money enables you to have food to eat. You can buy clothing and pay the rent or the mortgage. You can educate your children and provide them with a doctor's care. Money can do wonderful things outside your family. It can provide shelter for a battered woman or a meal for someone who's down and out. Money can rebuild homes and businesses battered by a hurricane or swept away in a tsunami. Money can be used to operate high schools and a college and a seminary to educate future pastors and teachers. But money, when it becomes the object of our desires, can become a false god that leads us away from the one true God. The Bible says, **"Whoever loves money never has money enough."** (Eccl. 5:10)

It's God's promise that frees us from the grip of materialism. What he promised to the Israelites as they stood on the borders of the Promised Land he promises to us, too. *"Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you."* Confident that our heavenly Father knows our needs and unfailing provides for us, we can be both content with what we have and generous in sharing our surplus.

May your love abound more and more as God works his love in our hearts and in our lives! And may that abundance of love lead us to proclaim peace through Jesus. Amen.