

**“Running on Empty”**  
**Hebrews 13:1-6**  
**October 24, 2021**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

The previous chapter compared the Christian life to a race, a race in which the recipients of this book were flagging and needed strength to endure. The three commands in today’s text are connected to their struggles to persevere in the race. They were running on empty, their faith burning low. Whenever faith runs low, love begins to ebb. The wind of trusting God that once filled their spiritual sails has died, resulting in a loss of motivation to perform even the most basic of Christian duties. The commands in these verses aren’t just random pieces of advice. There is an edge of rebuke to them. For example, the verb tense of verse 2 yields the sense of, “Do not go on being unmindful” of hospitality, because that is precisely what they were doing.

Can you identify with this in your own life? When your walk with the Lord grows cold, don’t you find yourself losing motivation to perform even the most basic duties of the Christian life? You may find reasons to avoid meeting with other Christians, attending the public worship gatherings of the church, and serving the Lord with the gifts he has given to you. That was the condition of the readers of this book, and the author addresses it by reminding them of their duties in three basic areas: loving others, sexual purity, and contentment. But he does more than command these duties. He also gives them motivation in each case by connecting that duty back to the Lord. We will see this work out as we look at each command.

**I. Don’t Run Out of Love – v. 1-3**

The author tells them to **“Let brotherly love continue”** because their love was flagging. He had earlier commended them for their love in the past, including having “compassion on those in prison” (10:34). But now they need encouragement to do precisely that because that practice had fallen into neglect. It is always the case that the faltering of love follows the faltering of faith. Where faith is weak, love is weak. And where love is weak, the church is weak in its ministry. Didn’t Jesus say that our love for one another would be the way the world would know that we are his disciples (John 13:35)? Christians sometimes like to display signs of their faith. Some wear a cross around the neck, while others have tattooed part of their body with some Christian symbol. Bumper stickers with the *ixthus* fish on display are also seen occasionally. But the best symbol of our faith according to the Bible is our love for one another, the kind of love that is seen in families. The text says that we are to let *brotherly* love continue. The central feature of family-type love is its

unconditional nature. Uncle Harry may be a little quirky, but we stick with him anyway. When Jesus takes us into his family, he grants us this family relationship with other Christians.

The author then proceeds to name three specific ways they are to love one another: hospitality and remembering prisoners and the mistreated. He doesn't stop with a general encouragement to love for the simple reason that love always expresses itself in specific acts. Charles Dickens' novel *Bleak House* includes a woman named Mrs. Jellyby. She is constantly fixated on helping people in Africa while neglecting her own children. Love often requires us to help people who are not local, but love is never less than local. It is easy to read some news account of neediness and maybe even give some money to a "Go Fund Me" account to address that need, all the while ignoring the local needs in our families, churches, and local communities. So the author names three specific local acts of love they are to pursue.

They are to make sure they **"do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers"** (v. 2). Christian missionaries and pastors would often need to travel throughout the Roman world in pursuit of the ministries to which they were called. Inns, if they existed at all in a particular location, were not generally reputable places to stay. So it was expected that local Christians would extend hospitality to them. Showing hospitality in such cases would be costly and inconvenient. As a result, it would be easy to neglect hospitality by simply "letting someone else do it." How does this apply to us? The stranger is the person without the resources and connections of the non-stranger. He is the outsider. Hospitality in our day is often simply a heart that notices the person who feels left out and reaches out to meet that need. It might be an international student, someone who is lonely, a family that has recently moved to our city, someone who is new to the church, a widow or widower, or simply someone who needs a little kindness.

There is a wonderful promise tied to this. We are to show hospitality, **"for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."** This is a clear reference to the story in Genesis 18 when Abraham received three visitors. He welcomed them and immediately took steps to prepare a meal for them. As they were visiting with Abraham, it became clear to him that these were no mere men. Two of them went to Sodom, where Abraham's nephew Lot was living. The third one stayed with Abraham, and he turned out to be God himself in preincarnate human form. You can see that by the fact that Abraham petitions him as one would petition God. The point of this clause about entertaining angels unawares is the good that comes to Abraham and that is promised to any who extend such a welcome to others. Hospitality yields surprising results for the one who extends the hospitality, not only with Abraham but with almost all the biblical examples of hospitality. Lot shows hospitality to the angelic visitors and is delivered by them from the judgment that comes on Sodom. Rahab extends hospitality to the spies and she and her family are delivered. What's more,

Rahab comes to be in the line of the Messiah. The widow of Zarephath extended hospitality to the prophet Elijah during a time of famine, thinking that she was giving her last store of food to him, after which they would all die of starvation. But it was actually Elijah, by God's power, who supplied her with food for the duration of the famine (1 Kings 17-18). Something similar happens to the next prophet in Israel, Elisha. A barren woman and her husband provide a special room for him, and in return her womb is opened and she has the son she had always longed for. The lesson in all of these cases, and the one being taught in our text, is that hospitality brings God near, and when God comes near he brings his good gifts with him.

I can give a personal example of this. Wendy has a wonderful gift of hospitality, and though it's been curtailed recently with the presence of our mothers in our house over the past five years, many have come through our house over the years. As it turns out, this was very impactful in the lives of our own children, who now all have homes that are repeatedly open to others. All three are blessed with generous hearts, and that is God's grace at work in their lives. Let me ask you a quick question before we move off this point. How many people outside your family know what the inside of your house looks like?

The second and third practical expressions of love he mentions are to remember those in prison and those mistreated. A heart of empathy is emphasized in both cases. Prisoners are to be remembered **"as though in prison with them,"** and the mistreated are to be remembered **"since you also are in the body."** That last phrase is not about the body of Christ but rather the physical body. He is saying that we all know what it is like to have an injured body, with the result that we can empathize with those whose bodies have been injured unjustly by others.

I notice something about love in all three of these cases that needs to be pointed out. The direction of love is from those with some degree of power toward those lacking power. The non-stranger helps the stranger; the non-prisoner helps the prisoner, and the one not mistreated helps the mistreated. There is a great deal of criticism today of Critical Race Theory, and rightly so. Critical theory in general teaches that those in power should be removed from power and replaced with those outside of power. I believe this text suggests something beyond mere talk that we can do to counter the errors of critical theory. We can use any power and influence we have been given, no matter how insignificant it may seem to you, to serve those without power. That's what love is and does.

## **II. Don't Run Out of Sexual Purity – v. 4**

The second area where these readers needed some correction was in the area of sexual purity. He says it like this: **"Let marriage be held in honor**

**among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled”** (v. 4). It is possible that he is addressing an overly ascetic view of marriage that views it as inferior to the single life. This attitude was present in the world of this day, as evidenced by Paul’s correction of it in 1 Timothy 4:3. But it is more likely that he is referring to the opposite problem of sexual impurity, because he mentions two sins of sexual impurity. The term “sexually immoral” refers to an unmarried person having sexual relations outside of marriage, and the adulterer is a married person having sexual relations with someone other than his or her spouse. The Bible is quite clear on the place of sexual intimacy. It belongs only in a covenant marriage between a man and a woman. The single person is to be chaste. Homosexual behavior, premarital sex, and adultery all bring dishonor to the institution of marriage.

The reason given for sexual purity is that doing so honors the institution of marriage. The biblical case for sexual purity isn’t merely that such purity is good for us, but that it honors something God honors—the institution of marriage. Marriage is in decline in our nation today. In 1995, 58% of American adults were married. Today, only 53% are married. In 1995, 3% of American adults were sexually cohabiting, while that number today has more than doubled to 7%. The Bible portrays human sexuality not just as a matter of biology, but rather as a deeply theological issue. The Bible often links sexual promiscuity and idolatry, and that is what is being taught in this passage as well. Sexual immorality dishonors marriage, and in doing so the sexually immoral are dishonoring something God honors. Jesus honored marriage when at his first miracle he turned water into wine at a wedding ceremony. Marriage was the very first institution God established. Jesus said, **“What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate”** (Matt. 19:6). And the Bible teaches that marriage is a picture of the love of Jesus for his church.

It is this truth of marriage as a picture of Jesus’ love for his bride, the Church, that leads to the statement about God’s judgment of the sexually immoral and adulterous. In the Old Testament, God judged severely any violation of the Old Testament laws regarding the offering of sacrifices. The reason is that all these sacrifices pointed to Jesus’ ultimate sacrifice for our sins. God’s judgment upon those who dishonor marriage through sexual immorality is for the same reason: such sin muddles the precious truth of Jesus’ love for his people. I should point out that this judgment is upon the unrepentant and not those who have committed sexual sin and repented of it. There is always forgiveness for those who repent.

### **III. Don’t Run Out of Contentment – v. 5-6**

His final challenge concerns the sin of covetousness. **“Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have.”** Paul had taught that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10). It is a

root that produces a bitter and poisonous fruit. The author doesn't just tell them what they are supposed to do, but he also tells them how they can keep their lives free from the love of money. Like sexual sin, he makes it a theological issue. We often think that the solution to loving money is to have more of it. "If I just had more of it, then I would not have to think about it and long for it so much." But God's solution here is just the opposite. Our need, he says, lies not in longing for more money but in being content with the present money we have. And this is a theological matter, grounded in believing God's promise to us. **"I will never leave you nor forsake you"** (v. 5). To say this differently, contentment is what trusting God looks like in the area of money.

The result of trusting God is to be able to say with confidence these words the author quotes from Psalm 118. **"The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"** (v. 6). Do you believe you would be happier with an extra \$20,000 a year? Such an attitude reveals a covetous heart. Or are you able to say, "I have a Father in heaven who has promised to care for me always." The poor child of God is like the ten-year old at the county fair given a \$5 bill by his rich father. The child may only have \$5 in his pocket, but he's got something far more valuable in a father with deep pockets who loves him. Our contentment is based not on how much money we have in our bank account, but in having God's promised help and his love.

This promise about the Lord being our helper has been a precious thing to me this month. Our church is in the midst of budget season, and it seems that the pandemic has taken something of a toll on our church finances. We had already planned to take money from our reserves to close a gap we knew we would have this year, and we now find ourselves below our lowered income projections for the year. I realized this week that my battle to trust the Lord and be content is not so much in my personal finances as it is in our church's finances. It has brought me no small measure of comfort to be reminded of his promise to be our helper. Sometimes God helps by increasing your income, and sometimes he helps by lowering your expenses. In every case, his biggest help comes in making you satisfied in him and his promise.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Do you feel yourself running on empty? I note in our passage how the author helps those running on empty in two ways. He tells us both the steps to take—to love, to be sexually pure and to be content—and then reminds us how each of these steps will connect us to God. Those who love will find that in doing so they grow close to God. Those who honor marriage find that they grow to appreciate the sacrificial love of Christ for his bride. And those who distance themselves from the love of money find a joyful contentment in God. May your tank be filled to overflowing as you walk with God and draw near to him through following these commands!

**Small Group Discussion Questions**  
**Hebrews 13:1-6**

1. Have you ever run out of gas in your car? What did that feel like?
2. What is it like to run out of gas in your Christian life?
3. It is clear that the recipients of this letter had run out of gas spiritually. The author advises them to take some steps forward, and the first one is to continue showing brotherly love. The first area where they are to do that is in the area of showing hospitality. What does it feel like to be a stranger somewhere? Describe a time when you felt yourself to be a stranger?
4. Extending hospitality brings blessing, as demonstrated by the example of Abraham entertaining angels unawares (see Genesis 18). In doing so, he ended up being with God himself, though he only gradually became aware of that fact. The lesson is that extending hospitality brings us closer to God. Have you ever experienced that? What blessings have you experienced as a result of showing hospitality?
5. The other two commands other the bigger command to let brotherly love continue is to remember those in prison and those who are mistreated. The standard given for both commands is that of empathy. How does empathy help us love others?
6. Sexual purity is the second command, spoken of in terms of honoring marriage. People are marrying later in life today and many are choosing to cohabit prior to marriage. What would you tell someone who is following reluctant to get married because of a fear of commitment?
7. What would you tell someone who chooses cohabitation in place of marriage?
8. The final command is to be content with what you have and not to love money. How have you seen God care for you in this area of providing for your financial needs?