

A Generous Faith

By Faith: Pt. 9

Now as you know, we've been looking at Hebrews 11 all summer. Our subject has been this question: How can you live a life of power so that circumstances and events and troubles don't master *you*, but rather you master *them*? Everybody wants to live that kind of life. The Bible, however, calls that a life of *faith*. And we've been looking at the principles of this life of faith in this one chapter. And we're almost done. More accurately, I should say "we're almost about to quit." Because the reality is we are far from done with these fascinating character studies that are contained in Hebrews chapter 11.

We're going to come back next week and talk about one more – Moses – but that would still leave us with dozens more names – and this is our 9th week of the series already. But I don't feel too bad; even the writer of the book himself – or *herself*, we don't actually know who wrote Hebrews – but even they took shortcuts. Look at **Hebrews 11:32**, "*And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets,*" Don't have time? Where you got to *be*, my mystery friend?

But I think the point is that the life of faith really is too encompassing for any one chapter or even series to fully embrace. But it's important to delve into those principles again and again. And so today, I actually want to jump ahead a couple of chapters – to chapter 13 - where the author begins to apply those principles to very, *very* specific and concrete lifestyle issues.

In other words, the question we come to in our text this morning is: If we have this big life like Abraham had - we've been looking at him for the last three weeks, and I've placed this passage here because it makes reference to a chapter of the Abraham story - but if we have this greatness of life, this mastery of life, this life of faith, how will it show itself in the most specific and particular daily lifestyle details? That's what the writer gives us. Let me read you these verses that show us the *lifestyle* of a person of faith.

Hebrews 13:1–6

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?"

Now when we look at these few verses, we see three forms of what I would call generosity – a generosity of faith. If circumstances and events and troubles no longer have the mastery over us, if we instead master them, what kind of people will we be in the way we live? We will be characterized by a lifestyle of openness and generosity. And there are three kinds of openness and generosity that are mentioned here. Three areas where they can be most readily applied: our living spaces, our social situations and our financial resources. Let's look at them.

First, our Living Spaces. And I'm talking mainly about hospitality. Boy, we don't know what this word means. The word "hospitality" makes you think of tea and crumpets, I know. It says, (v.2) "*Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.*" The word for "entertain strangers" is the Greek word for hospitality. In fact, I generally use the 1984

edition of the NIV – just for personal preference – but the updated translation which many of you will have actually says "show hospitality to strangers". It's an interesting Greek word. Many of us nowadays have heard the Greek word "xenophobic". What does it mean to be xenophobic? It means to fear those who are different, to fear those *outside* of our family, outside of our circle, outside of our race or nationality.

The word the Hebrews writer uses here, the word that is translated "entertain strangers" is a Greek word *philoxenia*, which is the *exact* opposite of xenophobia. You've heard Philadelphia means "City of Brotherly Love". Well, *philoxenia* means the *love* of strangers. And literally, the writer is saying to the Christians, "If you live lives of faith, you will *practice* love of strangers."

Now the word means you will open your home and your life to those who are different. You won't lead - like a typical modern suburbanite - little privatized lives. Everything is streamed and delivered to our cozy corners of isolation. Somebody told me this week that their kid's middle school had to ban students from using UBER Eats to deliver lunch to school because it was overwhelming the staff. Middle School! I don't know if that really even goes with my point, but I needed to rant about it like an old fogey.

Instead, as a person who's not *afraid* of life anymore, a person who's living a life of faith, a person who's not pushed around by circumstances, you are open with your living space. And it does involve the tangible use of your physical space. But the more important principle here is a person of hospitality, with a love of strangers, is a person who welcomes new people heartily.

You let them *in*...into your living space. Which means you open your schedule. It means you open your pocketbook. It means you take them out to eat. But most importantly, it's with your spirit. It's with your face. You show you're willing to let them in. You're clearly interested in them. They can *sense* you're accessible. You're not always giving people busy signals. "I'm too troubled. I'm too self-absorbed. I'm too suspicious to deal with you unless somebody I really know introduces me to you."

It's about how you approach The Mixer here at church, honestly. Do you seek out new faces? I love when a new visitor will tell me they feel welcomed at the church – that we are friendly. After a proper presentation of the gospel, I think that's probably the most important thing a church can be.

I'm preparing a course I'm going to teach later this year on early Pentecostal Movements in American history and I'm reading a book about the early revivalist and national celebrity, Aimee Semple McPherson. This is in the 1920's and before she made it big she would travel from town to town, with her young children in tow, to preach at special meetings and there would always be someone to take her into their home.

Here's an excerpt: "Pentecostals often devalued the nuclear family in favor of cultivating familial ties among themselves. It made no difference if newcomers were known or unknown; once they had arrived at the local Pentecostal mission, they were virtually assured of food, lodging, and a chance to testify or preach. Itinerant preachers could usually count on freewill offerings too. This subculture had a tough, rugged, down-to-earth texture that gave it durability." (Blumhoefer, 141)

That's what the writer of Hebrews is talking about when he says "Don't forget to entertain strangers." The reality is modern Christians in Austin have *way* more physical resources than 1920's Pentecostals *or* 1st Century Palestinian followers of Christ. But are we more hospitable? You open your living space. That's the first mark of this kind of lifestyle.

Secondly, our Social situations. And the second point is even more profound. Not only is there supposed to be an openness and a generosity with your living space and your schedule, and just your demeanor to new people – outsiders - but there has to be an openness and a generosity with regard to your *social associations*. The next verse, **v. 3** says, “*Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.*” Again, we have to look at this pretty carefully. There’s both an *application* of a principle and a principle here.

We’ll get to the principle in a second, but the application comes first, “*Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners...*” Now if you read the entire book of Hebrews, one of the problems was this church the author was writing to was beginning to fall under persecution. And almost for sure, the people this author is thinking about when he uses the word “prisoners” are Christians who have been thrown into prison by authorities who were trying to stamp out Christianity.

Now if *you* are not well-known as a Christian, so you haven’t been arrested...If you’re not well-known as a Christian and, therefore, you haven’t been persecuted, you’re in a safe position, what the author is saying is; Come *out* of that safe position. Go see the person in

prison. Bring them food. Bring them clothing. Bring them companionship. In other words, *identify* yourself with the person who has been marginalized so you, too, will participate. You will identify. You will come out of your safety zone to be in solidarity with that person. Now that’s just the application in this one instance. But then right after that, the principle is laid down, and it comes to us all.

He says, “...and those who are *mistreated* as if you yourselves were suffering.” Now this is a weird translation point. The part about you “suffering” actually reads in Greek, “as you yourselves have a body.” This is not talking about “the body of Christ” or the church. This means, you have a body, you suffer, so you should remember others who suffer – or specifically “those who are mistreated” – who’s that?

Whereas the first part of the sentence seems to indicate fellow Christians who are in prison, this is a more general term, “mistreated”. It’s the same word that is used back in chapter 11 in the Moses story – which we will look at next week – that says that, rather than identify with the people in the palace where he was raised, Moses chose to identify with the “mistreated” – which we know in the Exodus context were slaves. And I don’t care what society you find yourself in, when it comes to the social ladder, slaves are at the bottom.

Now, this is America and we don't like to talk about class distinctions here. We like to deceive ourselves about *a lot* of things, it's just easier that way. But the Bible always rubs our face in the truth of the situation. So of course we have social classes in America. Let me just give you a crassly simplistic economic breakdown – these are just my definitions, I get that there are nuances, but this is a sermon, not an economics lecture.

So you have the upper class – these folks, their money works for them. If you're paying attention to the stock market, you're not upper class. If you employ people to pay attention to the stock market *for* you, you're upper class. Then there's the middle class. They are working *for* the money in varying degrees – varying degrees of comfort and luxury and security and advancement. Then there are the lower class. They are working to support the people above them on the ladder – usually with the hope of advancing their family up the ladder through education and other opportunities. And then there are the working poor. They are working to survive – just to keep the lights on and food on the table. And then there are the destitute – unable to work for any number of reasons – they really can't take care of themselves.

Now, whatever you want to argue about those categorizations, they are real. And we all know that they get treated differently in life. In fact the lower classes – like the slaves of old – are often *mistreated*. But no matter their class, they have one thing in common...they have a body. They are human beings. And the Christian faith teaches that they are bodies made in the image of God. And therefore the Christian ethic says it matters how you treat them, especially if they've been *mistreated*.

And the New Testament repeatedly says that a Christian - somebody who is no longer mastered by circumstances but now lives a life of mastery - is not afraid to identify with the marginalized and the oppressed, the people down ladder, the people who have less power and less resources than you have. Now how do we apply that here? Let me give you one application. Look at yourselves. Do you know who you are?

We're a church on the west side in one of the most educated and wealthiest cities in America. Did you give *away* backpacks this month, or did you receive them? The truth is, we are in an elite place. Now, I'm not saying you don't have problems. And there's always somebody with *more* than you, but if you can't recognize your own blessings, you're not really paying attention.

For example, I have been complaining this year that my property taxes are killing me – since I moved into my home a decade ago, they have doubled. But I recognize what a first world problem it is that my biggest complaint is that “my property taxes are *killing* me”. That means, I *own* property. There are plenty of places in this world where daily events could *actually* kill you.

Our church is filled with people who are on the leadership track – that’s why you live *here* and not in...insert insulting small town name here which I *won't* do, because somebody’s grandmother lives there and you would get offended at me...although you sure as heck wouldn’t move back there *yourself!* Many of you are cultural leaders – in business, in education, in the tech world...all kinds of areas. What kind of cultural leaders will you be? If you take this passage seriously, you will be utterly different than what America sees now.

I’ll tell you what America sees now. There are two ways of looking at the the *hoi polloi*, the masses, the mistreated – and I am painting with a broad brush – but there’s kind of a “red” way and a “blue” way. And we have both cultural markers involved in our church. There’s a “conservative” mindset that looks at these people and despises their *lifestyle*. But then there’s a “liberal” mindset that – while they give lip service to the masses - they actually despise their *values*.

Who am I talking about? You know the neighborhoods – although there are fewer and fewer of them around here. Urban or rural. You see a whole lot of poor and working poor people, especially at the extremes of the age gap, both very young and very old. They’re trapped in a cycle of bad schools, of bad job prospects, of deteriorating families, of deteriorating homes, of criminal records, of health crises.

What is the attitude of the cultural leaders to them? The conservative types tend to say, “They’re irresponsible. We can’t do much for them. Not my responsibility. Let them rot.” And the liberal types *say*, “We’re for them,” but they *despise* them. Do you know why? Because these people are religious people. The poor say, “Praise the Lord.” We know this statistically. The poor are for the Ten Commandments. The poor seek God. And the liberal cultural elite really despise that.

In other words, when the liberal cultural elite see the poor people raise their hands and saying, “Praise the Lord,” they say, “It’s a shame you didn’t have as much education as I had. If you’d only gone to my college you would know nobody knows about these things. Nobody can be sure there’s meaning in life. You have to decide for yourself what’s right and wrong. I know you’re very traditional in your values, but you can’t help it. You’re the poor, oppressed proletariat.”

In other words, all the cultural leaders in this country – whatever their political leaning - by and large, despise those folks. If you're Christians, you're going to be different. Do you know how you're going to be different? On the one hand, you're going to come out of your safety zones and be willing to work and move among them, and not be afraid to go into their neighborhoods.

But on the *other* hand, you will worship with them as brothers and sisters. You won't just pity them. You'll admire the fact they pray better than you do. You'll look up to their faith. You'll be brothers and sisters with them, and you'll even learn from them even as you're helping them. They'll help you as you're helping them. You will have an utterly different approach to them because you'll be open in your social relationships. Identify with those who are oppressed. *Identify* with those who are marginalized as if you were yourself.

How can you do this? Because you're a sinner, and you know they're sinners. You don't look down your nose, "They're not educated; they're not sophisticated like me," like the liberal elite. Nor do you look down your nose, "They're not hard-working like me," like the conservative elite. Instead you'll say, "They're sinners saved by grace like me." You'll be *utterly* different.

I hope SWFF will always be the kind of church that mirrors the New Testament church – with people from *all* the classes, *all* the races, *all* the political camps, coming together to worship God and declare Jesus Christ as the true leader of *every* walk of life. That's generous faith. There's an openness of living space, there's an openness of social situation.

But third, finally, there's an openness with Our Financial Resources. In **verses 4 and 5** it says, and it's so fascinating, "*Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure...*" Then it says, "*Keep your lives free from the love of money...*" What a combination! But how perfectly Christian. You see, what the early Christians had, in *complete* opposition to the pagan culture, was they juxtaposed the place of sex and money.

See when it says the marriage bed must be "kept pure" it's a word that means "undefiled" or "unprofaned" – and it's a word usually reserved for religious offerings – even pagan ones - at an altar. And of course what happens in the "marriage bed" is a euphemism for sexual intimacy. So it's saying that you should treat sex as a sacred thing. On the other hand, it says you must *not* treat money as sacred. You mustn't worship it. You mustn't love it. So you see the parallel? Sex...sacred. Money...common

See, the pagan culture of ancient times - *and* of our modern Austin culture today - put those two things in opposition. For us today, sex is just a means to an end. It's not a holy, sacred thing. You share it with whomever. What's the song? "If you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with." But *money* is very, very sacred, so you don't share it with anybody. But you see, Christians are the opposite because in Christianity, sex is seen as a holy thing in *itself*, something you don't share with anybody but your spouse. But money is not that big a deal; you share it with whomever. Christians are promiscuous with their money, and stingy with their bodies. They've changed everything.

This tells us a life of faith changes your attitude toward money...vigorously. You use it, but you don't *love* it. Which hopefully is the exact opposite of how you treat your spouse! Now how do you know if you love money? *Either* you love to spend it on yourself *or* you're always worried about it so you're *never* spending it. To either be a miser or to be a shopaholic shows you love money. Somebody says, "How do I know if I actually have this life of faith and I've changed my attitude toward my money?" It's fairly simple. The one thing, clearly, is generosity.

In the Old Testament, we know the Old Testament believers were required to give away 10 percent of their annual income to God's work, to the poor, and so on. But everything we know from both pagan and Christian historical texts, is that the early Christians went way *beyond* the tithe. They went way beyond 10 percent. And as a result, the pagans had never seen anybody this *promiscuous* with their money. They'd never seen people give their money away in such proportion. Worse than that, they'd never seen people give it away with *joy*.

And here's the reason why. Christians don't worship money. Do you know how you worship money? When money makes you feel important or money makes you feel desirable because you spend it on yourself in a certain way. Or money makes you feel safe and in control of your life. Christians know, "Only *in Christ* am I in control. Only when I lose control to him am I free. Only in Christ am I attractive. Only in Christ do I have power." And so money becomes not that big a deal. It loses its *holiness*. It loses its sacredness. And the way you can tell it has is the second part of **v. 5** where it says, "...*be content with what you have...*"

I once heard a very well-off Christian businessman speak at a leadership conference. He was sharing that he and his wife give away - to God's work and to people in need, to the church and the poor - 70 percent of their income annually. When he says that, everybody's jaws drop. Then he says, "You have to understand. If a person making \$30,000 a year gives away 10 percent, that's a sacrifice of lifestyle. But we're making out very well. My wife and I give away 70 percent, and that's not a sacrifice. All that does is keep us from *escalating* our lifestyle."

That's the mark. The way you can tell you're satisfied with the basics, and the lavish and the luxurious no longer have that control over you - you're not getting your sense of importance, safety, or desirability any more out of money - is that as your income grows over the years, your lifestyle pretty much stays the same. Be content with what you have.

This is a discipline. Meaning you have to work at it. And we *all* have to work at it. I especially have to work at it when it comes to books! You wouldn't tell it by looking at my library, but then again, you don't know what I *haven't* bought! Speaking of, let me address something quickly; in a couple of weeks, you are going to see me driving a new Tesla around here. Now it shouldn't matter, but because I am the spiritual leader of the flock, it *is* important that I maintain integrity and transparency - it's important *to me* if nothing else. I'm just more visible as a representation of the church.

And there are a lot of people looking to criticize church excesses - as rightfully they should. We *should* practice what we preach. Hypocrisy is a stumbling block to the gospel. A few of you sent me a news article from last month of a pastor in Brooklyn who was robbed of more than \$1 million dollars in jewelry in the pulpit *while preaching!* Social media had a field day with that. Look, I don't believe pastors should live in caves like monks either, but please, somebody come up here and rob me of my FIRST GENERATION AppleWatch so I can get a waterproof one!

Ok, so before somebody says, "Pastor said to be content with what you have and then he showed up driving a Tesla..." I have a second kid about to be in college and I needed to control some expenses for the next few years. By my calculations, an electric car with a warranty will save me about \$5,000 a year over the next five years. And so between the sale of my current vehicle and some money that we took out of refinancing our house before interest rates went up - see, that's the flip side of my moaning about property taxes, I'm a home owner in Austin! - we are paying cash for a base model Tesla - not a single upgrade. Because it's not about lifestyle, it's about financial stewardship.

And God has blessed us to be able to make a decision that we think is wise...without going into any debt...without affecting our giving - we tithe the full 10% of our income and still give over and above offerings - and it's not an impulse purchase...because I had to wait 8 months to *get* the darn thing! But I just wanted you to know that it's not about contentment. I would be plenty content to continue to drive my Jeep until the wheels fall off. In fact, she's for sale and I'm going to miss her very much. So just a side, personal note. Because I would never ask you to do what I'm not willing to do.

Now lastly, think about this. There's the lifestyle, but where does it come from? All along I've been saying it's a life of faith. But you know, the Hebrews writer reminds us, he says at the end of **verse 5**, you will be able to live like this "...because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'" Do you understand that verse? Do you understand that promise? Here's what that means. If you say, "I could *never* be that open with my living space. I could never be that open with my social associations. I could never be that open with my wallet. It's just too hard", you haven't taken this one promise into the center of your heart. It hasn't taken root there.

Do you know what it is? "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." Do you know what that means? There's a negative and a positive side. Do you know what the negative side is? Everything else will leave you and forsake you. Everything! That's the negative side of this. If you understand it...*Everything* else will leave you and forsake you. You put your money into your clothes; they wear out. You put your money into homes; they fall apart. People in this housing market act like 2008 never happened!

What can you put your money into that has foundations? Do you remember Abraham? He realized *nothing* here had a foundation. Nothing here was secure. Now if you understand that everything will desert you, anything you put yourself into...Even a good *family*, they grow up and they leave you. Even friends, they go on. Even best friends, they die. What can you put your money into that will last, that has foundations, that will never go away? Only this...*People* in the image of God and the *truth* of God and the *work* of God.

Can you imagine going to somebody's house and the house is a hovel *except* for the foyer? The first four feet when you walk in the door, the place where you kick the mud off your shoes, is gold-plated and diamond-studded. It's incredible.

But the rest of the house is a rat infested death trap. They didn't put any money into anything else, just the foyer. You would say, "What's the matter with you? You're not living in the foyer." That's what happens to you when you put your money into your clothes, your home, or your lifestyle. You're going to live for billions of years – this first 60 or 70 or 90 is just the foyer. Don't you want to do with your money something that has foundations?

Then lastly, what's the positive side? "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." Where do you see Jesus saying that to us? On the cross. On the cross, he *stayed*. Even though the Father forsook him, Jesus stayed. Now, are you afraid, "If I give a lot away I won't be secure"? Look at Jesus saying, "I will never, never, never, never, never leave you." Do you really think someone who loves you like that, if you give in obedience to what he says, is going to let you down?

Do you really think, as Paul says in **Romans 8:32**, "*He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*" Are you afraid? Or are any of you just selfish and that's the reason you like to spend your money? How can you be selfish when you look at the generosity of Jesus on the cross – spending himself on *you*. Identifying with *you*.

"I will never forsake you. Look what I'm doing for you. Look at how I spend myself on you"?

Do you want to live a life of greatness? God says, "Look what happened to my Son when he opened his hands and let go of his life. Look at the difference he's made in the world. Look what I can do through him. Will you open your hand and let go of your living space? Will you let go of your social associations? Will you let go of your privacy? Will you let go of your money? Will you let go of your time? Wait until you see what I can do! I won't forsake you. *Test me. Trust me. Be generous.*" Will you?

Let's pray....