

WIDENING HOME PLATE; SAMENESS Heb. 13:1-8 9-21-25

1. Continue to show brotherly love.

2 Do not fail to show love to strangers; by doing this some have welcomed angels without realizing it.

3 Remember those in prison, as if you were fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated, as if you yourselves were also suffering bodily.

4 Marriage is to be held in honor by all, and the marriage bed is to be kept undefiled, for God will judge sexually immoral people and adulterers.

5 Keep your life free from the love of money, and be content with what you have. For God has said: I will never leave you, and I will never forsake you.

6 So then we say with confidence: The Lord is my helper, and I will not be afraid. What will man do to me?

7 Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Carefully consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

The Hall-of-Fame baseball coach shuffled on-stage to a standing ovation—wearing a thick string around his neck from which home plate hung — a full-sized, white home plate.

After speaking for 20 minutes, not once mentioning the prop hanging around his neck, he finally talked about home plate. “You’re probably all wondering why I’m wearing home plate. Maybe you think I escaped from the mental hospital,” he said, smiling. “No, I may be old, but I’m not crazy—yet. The reason I’m here today is to share with you baseball people what I’ve learned in my life, what I’ve learned about home plate.”

Coach Scolinos asked the group, “Do you know how wide home plate is in Little League?” After a pause, someone offered, “Seventeen inches”. “That’s right,” he said. “How about in Babe Ruth? “Seventeen inches?” came a guess from another coach.

“That’s right,” said Scolinos. “How wide is home plate in high school ball?” “Seventeen inches,” they said.

“You’re right!” Scolinos barked. “And how wide is home plate in college?” “Seventeen inches!” they said, in unison. “RIGHT! And in the Major Leagues, how wide?” “Seventeen inches!”

“SEVEN-TEEN INCHES!” he confirmed, his voice bellowing. “And what do they do with a Big-League pitcher who can’t throw the ball over seventeen inches of white rubber?” He paused. “They send him to me!” he hollered.

“What they don’t do is this: they don’t say, ‘Oh, that’s okay, Jimmy. You can’t find a seventeen-inch target? We’ll make it eighteen inches, maybe nineteen inches. Twenty inches—but no more.’”

“What do we do when our best player skips practice? Or if he gets caught drinking? Do we hold him accountable? Or do we change the rules to fit him, do we—in effect—widen home plate?!”

The chuckles faded. Scolinos turned the plate toward himself and, using a Sharpie, began to draw. When he turned it toward the crowd, point up, a house was revealed,

complete with a freshly drawn door and two windows. “This is the problem in our homes today—with our marriages; with the way we parent our kids; with our discipline.; with our own morality! We don’t teach accountability to our kids, and there’s no consequence for failing to meet standards. We look for excuses or scape-goats. We widen the plate!”

Then he drew a Cross at the top. “And this is the problem in the Church, where people in positions of authority have soft-soaped God’s 10 Commandments and watered down God’s teaching of sin and grace. Our churches are widening home plate!”

From an old man with home plate strung around his neck, we can learn something about life, about yourself, about your own weaknesses and about our responsibilities as leaders. We have to hold ourselves and others accountable to that which is right, lest our families, our faith, and our society continue down the path to you know where.

“If I’m lucky,” Coach Scolinos concluded, “you’ll remember one thing from this old coach. It is this: if we fail to hold ourselves to a higher standard, a standard of what we know to be right; if we fail to hold our spouses and our children to the same standards, if we are unwilling or unable to provide a consequence when they (and we) do not meet the standard; and if our schools and churches and our government fail to hold themselves accountable to those they serve, there is but one thing to look forward to ...” With that, he held home plate in front of his chest, turned it around, and revealed its dark black backside. “... dark days ahead.”

His message was clear: “Keep your players, your own children, and most of all, keep yourself at the seventeen inches of God’s will. That’s what Heb. 13 says today also.

Our passage for today has something important to say about how we understand Christ, why it matters for our faith and how it influences how we live.

In the Letters Paul writes, he follows this structure: First Paul describes our situation, the trap of sin we are caught in. Then he announces what Christ has done for us, how Christ has set us free. Finally, Paul declares the great “therefore.” **Therefore**, live your lives this way. Hebrews has repeated a certain pattern throughout the book. He has marshaled every argument to try to keep his readers from drifting away from the faith. That’s completed, so he closes with a series of admonitions about what a Christian life should look like.

Verse 8 stands out. Sort of out of nowhere, v. 8 announces a deep statement of theology. In this case, **it announces something important about who Christ is. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”**

It’s quite an assertion this passage makes, that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. We rejoice in what that statement affirms. We need a sense of stability in our lives. We Christians need something to unify us. **We need something we can count on. The world seems like it changes overnight.** Technology, world events, AI and a host of other things all seem to want to pull the rug out from under us.

A riddle asks the question: **what always stays the same but always changes? The answer is ‘a river. In a way, it could also be ‘Jesus’.**

In the midst of all that change, **Christ gives us an anchor**, something to keep us from being tossed about by all of the changes. No matter how modern we become, or how sophisticated, we still look back to a man who lived 2,000 years ago as the pioneer of our faith. Jesus the Christ never drove a car; never used a land line, much less a cell

phone; never turned on a computer; or sent a text message. Yet this man communicates to us who we are, teaches us about God, and reconnects us to God.

When we worship, we draw on traditions that go back centuries. We recite prayers from ancient times that still speak to our hearts as we unite ourselves with Christians through the ages. The Lord's Prayer came from Jesus' lips. Taking the bread and cup goes back to The upper room. The Apostles' Creed goes back to the second century. All of these things give us roots and stability in a changing world. We can look back and see how the risen Christ has guided the church over the centuries. We see the mistakes and the obstacles the church has overcome, the sins Jesus paid for. Other Christians have shared our experiences; they have been through what we have been through. The risen Christ has been there for them. **Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Carefully consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.** That assures us that Christ is here for us. Christ is our motivation; Bible followers inspire us with their examples of faith and living. They encourage us NOT to widen Home Plate, that is to change or disregard God's 10 Commandments and word.

Most of you have some familiarity with the story of **Robinson Crusoe**. Robinson Crusoe was shipwrecked and stranded on an island for 28 years where he encountered cannibals and captives before being rescued. You probably remember Crusoe for his man "Friday." Friday escaped from the cannibals and was befriended by Crusoe who named him after the day of the week he appeared. Crusoe then teaches Friday English and converts him to Christianity.

What you may not remember was that Crusoe himself **was not particularly religious until being shipwrecked with hardly anything to read except a Bible** which washed up with him. Crusoe wrote in his autobiography, "One morning, being very sad, I opened the Bible to these words, 'I will never, never leave thee, nor forsake thee.' Immediately it occurred that these words were written to me; why else should they be directed in such a way, just at the moment when I was mourning over my condition, as one forsaken of God and man?"

"Well then,' said I, 'if God does not forsake me . . . what matters it, though the world should all forsake me . . . ?' From this moment I concluded in my mind that it was possible for me to be more happy in this forsaken, solitary condition than it was probable that I should ever have been in anywhere else in the world; and with this thought I was going to give thanks to God for bringing me to this place."

This is the kind of peace of mind and direction in living that the writer of Hebrews is writing about. Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, he writes, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you. **You and I can lose everything else, as long as we can believe that God is with us. We can cope and we can conquer.** Nothing else in this world can provide that kind of security.

We would all do well to remember these words from **Psalm 90:12, Lord, teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.**

Now for the practical application. Can you see the 3 hot-button issues mentioned? Not caring about the down-and-out; Free love; and Greed. Boy, it's good we don't have to worry about those in our world today—Not.

There were needy people in Jesus' day. Jesus never owned much more than the clothes on his back. Peter and John were asked for alms by the Temple beggar. St. Paul and his associates were imprisoned several times—and guess what happened to any valuables you may have gotten up to that point! The jailer considered them his Christmas bonus.

Remember when Jesus was crucified? How many of his best friends of three years were assembled beneath the cross to offer Christ moral support? One. Mom was there, and a couple of the ladies but he was abandoned. When he suffered the pangs of hell, Jesus even cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me!?"

We struggle, don't we, with how to respond to homelessness, injustice and loneliness? WE can't end hunger, but we can continue to leave food in our library box. We can help by providing for at Thanksgiving or serving meals to the homeless. We can give our unneeded clothes to those boxes you see on corners. Use your sanctified judgement to help where and when you can. You can be part of the military support group or write to prisoners thru our committee set up by our church body. You can be a friend to a lonely widow/widower or bring them a meal sometime. You can provide a meal to new parents or someone recovering from illness. Look for opportunities

Life situation #2 has to do with morality, specifically the 6th commandment. With all the temptations around, is it any wonder this is an issue? Lust breeds quicker than mosquitos in a swamp after a gentle rain. If you think Christians are immune, consider this: of the last 10 weddings I performed, 5 couples have lived together first. Most of them were active Christians. "Well, you know how it is Pastor." They say. No, I don't. It's called living in sin for a reason. Faithfulness to God and to your spouse are expected by God. It's not an option. It pains me to see the rate of divorce among believers being nearly equal to that of non-believers.

And the third issue is the love of stuff. Seeking Gain at the cost of God is not an even trade. When people are absent from worship—other than illness or a job commitment—something has supplanted God in people's hearts. What is the 1st Commandment again? And the other Bible verse, Love the Lord your God with all your...

We don't have to Grab the Golden Ring, Go for the Gusto or Gripe about what we don't have. Why? Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you! Jesus promises. Do you recall the poem/picture called 'Footsteps'. The writer notes how he and God walk together along the sand. Then he comments how, in the most difficult times in his life, there was only one set of footprints. God then says, It was at those times when I carried you!

Faith allows us to live securely in a world that would beat us down. It allows us to love with great passion. It allows us to live according to our best values. And when all is said and done, we discover this is living at its best. How do we know that's true? **Some of us are fortunate enough to see it lived out in those who were role models for**

us. Our parents, leaders in our community, Sunday School teachers, perhaps even employers who lived blessedly because they followed these principles. The writer closes this passage with these words, Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Remember the promise: Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you. Such an approach to life is a winner every time.

EXTRA MATERIALS

In an old *Peanuts* comic strip. Lucy is walking along the road with Charlie Brown. Charlie Brown asks her: “Lucy, are you going to make any New Year’s resolutions?”

Lucy hollers back at him, knocking him off his feet: “What? What for? What’s wrong with me now? I like myself the way I am! Why should I change? What in the world is the matter with you, Charlie Brown? I’m all right the way I am! I don’t have to improve. How could I improve? How, I ask you? How?”

Well, I’ve known a few Lucys in my time, but most of us are aware that we need to make some improvements in our lives. Our reading today talks about that. **It reminds us that Jesus is the same, but that we need to change to be more like him, to exercise our Christian values in the way we conduct our lives.** When we come to church, we usually do not come primarily to learn about doctrine.

Hebrews names Jesus Christ as the great high priest in the order of Melchizedek. This is a complex idea in Hebrews, but at its essence, the presentation of Jesus in this book asserts that Jesus as the great high priest was without sin and made himself the sacrifice for our sins. **Melchizedek** was an obscure figure in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110. He was a priest, but was not from the right family to be a priest. Psalm 110 calls the king of Israel a high priest in the order of Melchizedek. If Jesus is prophet, priest, and king, then he, too, is a priest in the order of Melchizedek. Why might the author of Hebrews go through all of this explanation for his readers? Perhaps they missed something about the old priesthood. Perhaps they felt a sense of assurance about the daily sacrifice of the priests or the Day of Atonement every year. The regularity of that may have provided them a sense of assurance. Perhaps, they found a sense of security in Judaism, which provided more authenticity. Whatever the reasons, the author of Hebrews explains Jesus to his readers in a way that meets their needs, that helps them understand their lives. If the priesthood is important to you, then Jesus is the great high priest. He is sinless and has atoned once and for all for your sins. Hebrews interprets Jesus in ways the congregation can understand.

This is why doctrine matters. **We need to understand Christ rightly.** Hebrews teaches us of a Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. We rejoice in that stability. Jesus still reveals God to us, still takes away our sins. Hebrews also teaches us of a Christ who speaks to us in ways we can hear. Let us receive Christ as He speaks to us now. In what ways do we need to grow? Hebrews teaches of a Christ who is always the same, but who will meet us where we need to be met.

He then lives in us so we live for him. Living for Christ is unique. You cannot live a Godly life without the two principles, **“Keep on loving”** and **“Continue to strive to live according to God’s law”** mentioned earlier in this chapter. And the reason we are able to fulfill these two demanding challenges is that we trust God.

It’s not easy to love people who do not love us. It’s not easy to always try to do the right thing. There are all kinds of influences that will try to take us off course. But as long as we know deep in our hearts that God is with us, we can make it.

In 1988 a tragic event took place. **A photographer who was a skydiver** jumped from a plane along with a group of other skydivers in order to film the group as they fell. But the photographer had absent-mindedly jumped out of the plane without his parachute. It wasn’t until he reached for the absent ripcord that he realized he was freefalling without any means of slowing his descent. Thankfully, he landed in ‘soft’ trees and suffered only minor injuries.