

“Open Door Policy”
Hebrews 13:1-3, 7-8, 17
June 29, 2025

The Woodside Church

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This is God’s word.

Concluding Exhortations

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

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.

Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.

Hebrews 13:1-3, 7-8, 17

The word of the Lord

In the fall of 2014, I was talking with Kai and he shared a story with me.

He said, “I’d been struggling for some time and a few months ago I found myself getting back on my feet. I had a job and was staying sober. I wasn’t making much, but I was paying my bills. For a couple of months, I was saving money on a cash card. I wanted to treat myself to a nice breakfast some Saturday when I wasn’t working. That day arrived and I got up, got myself ready...and couldn’t find the card. I tore my room apart but never found it. I was crushed.”

He went on.

“Later that morning I got a call from a friend who invited me to come with him to a recovery event. I almost said no, but I reluctantly agreed. It was an outdoor worship service with an amazing worship leader, a great message, and what I didn’t realize until I got there was they were also having an awesome BBQ with burgers, dogs, ribs, and all kind of food.”

He then said, “That was your event in June, with Dave Pettigrew – in your backyard.”

I had no idea our hospitality was such a blessing to him that day.”

Today we are finishing the “Unlimited Access” sermon series we began on Easter Sunday. The theme has revolved around Hope. Hope is a person, a perspective, a promise, a pass, a place, and path. Hope brings peace, but it comes at a price. Today, we’re going to see how Hope Helps People.

Chapter 13 is the final chapter in the book of Hebrews and is strongly encouraging the reader (us) to take certain steps along the path which has been laid out for us. In fact, the title of the chapter is Concluding Exhortations. There is a variety of guidance and advice given in the chapter. But there are multiple verses urging us to take care of other people, including the first verse. “Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Hebrews 13:1.

The last time I shared a message here; we performed an exercise to meet somebody new in the congregation. I hope most of you made it more than a “one and done” activity and have done your best to meet new people each week. And not just here at Woodside but also extended it to your neighborhoods and other parts of your life. But as Christians, it is important to know it begins with other Christians. Most of us, if not all of us, in this room have accepted Jesus as our Lord and Savior. In God’s eyes, we are brothers and sisters whom he loves. And if the Father, Son and Holy Spirit love us, shouldn’t we do our best to love each other? And yet, far too often congregations split because the church family can’t get along. Two big reasons the church has split over the years can be due to differences in church culture or doctrine.

Some examples of different church cultures might be: Should we have communion once per month, or every Sunday. Should baptism be a full submersion, or is a sprinkling on the head enough? Classic hymns, or contemporary music? Pews or chairs?

Differences in church doctrines are usually more associated with the various Christian denominations – Presbyterian, Methodist, Anglican, Catholic, etc. The trinity, the nature of Jesus, the sacraments – each of these may be viewed and taught differently.

Whether you have cultural or doctrinal differences with others, are they reasons to not have love for each other? What is more important is the things we do agree upon. I hope you are all familiar with the following passage from the book of Matthew:

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’^[b] 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Matthew 22:36-40

Doctrine and culture are probably more relevant to the denomination, or particular church, you choose. But in today’s environment there is probably a more insidious factor which contributes to factions within the church. I’m referring to political and social differences. At this time in our country, there is a 50-50 split on many of the issues we deal with. This means wherever you go, even within the walls of Woodside, you have a very good chance of disagreeing with whomever you are speaking with. And the powers to be want you to look at the differences and be confrontational about them. There are families who refuse to speak together, friendships which collapse, and congregations who bicker amongst themselves. It isn’t always a bad idea to have a discussion with somebody about differing points of view. But don’t have them on Facebook or other social media. If it is important, then the conversation should be face to face. In September of 2020, a year to remember for several reasons, a Woodside friend and I decided to meet and

talk about the reasons we were voting for opposite candidates. He came over and we shared drinks on my patio while we discussed our rational for whom we were supporting. I don't think I changed his mind, and I know he didn't change mine. But we understood each other a little better and when he went home, we were still friends.

Let me ask you this: If you had a friend and subsequently found out they had a different religious belief, whether Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, or something else, would you refuse to speak with them anymore? It doesn't matter if you are Democrat or Republican, Presbyterian or Catholic, Eagles fan or Cowboys fan – we are called to love each other.

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Hebrews 13:2

This is a verse which makes some people very nervous, primarily because it can be misunderstood. Showing hospitality to strangers does not necessarily mean you have to invite strangers into your home, although it could. Last Saturday we had our annual Patio Worship Service and BBQ in our backyard. Some of you might have been there. There were 61 attendees including close friends, new acquaintances, and complete strangers – although they aren't strangers anymore. We enjoy doing this because we have seen and heard how others are blessed by it. And we also realize every year it is a blessing to us as well.

However, hospitality isn't limited to a single act. I found a September 2023 blog by a company called 360 Training which wrote the following:

What Does Hospitality Mean?

Hospitality includes more than just services or accommodations. At its core, extraordinary hospitality focuses on making others feel welcome, comfortable, and valued. It involves extending warmth, kindness, and generosity towards guests, visitors, or even strangers, creating an environment that fosters genuine human connection and a sense of belonging. True hospitality extends beyond the confines of professional settings like hotels or restaurants.

How simple an act - making others feel welcome, comfortable, and valued. Most of us already do so with family and friends. Why not strangers as well. Is there a neighbor you haven't gotten know yet? Don't just wave at them as you take a walk in the neighborhood. Walk up the driveway and introduce yourself. And don't be embarrassed if you think you've known them for too long. I remember a time several years ago when I was walking Sheldon through the neighborhood and saw a neighbor walking her dog, Scout. I said hi, she replied back - but then I stopped. I said, "Excuse me. We've been passing each other on walks for I don't know how many years, and I just realized I only know you as, 'Scout's mom'." She laughed, and said 'My name is Amy.'" It now feels so much better to call her by her name.

Another simple act could be done right here at Woodside. If you see a person sitting alone in the Vineyard/Sanctuary, ask if you can sit with them. Somebody standing alone in the lobby? Introduce yourself to them. This might be their first time here.

Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. Hebrews 13:3

I've been participating in prison ministry for almost 18 years. And while I am not as active in it as I once was, I have been blessed through the ministry in so many ways. For those who may not know the story, a group of us from Woodside were invited into Curran-Fromhold Correctional

Facility (CFCF) in 2007 by members of a ministry now named the Conquering Life Prison and Recovery Ministries, Inc. or CLPRM. CLPRM goes into CFCF on a weekly basis and leads a worship service. Over the years we have had anywhere from 5 to 125 men show up for services. We have worshipped together, prayed together, learned together. I've come to know men who were in the early stages of their Christian walk, while others I worshipped with have been following Christ for years and know the bible way much more than I do. There have been times when we had to ask guys to leave the service due to disruption, and there was one brother who asked me to baptize him, which I did. There have been times where ministry members were struggling and the men at the chapel stepped up and asked to pray for us. And after our son died in 2016, around 60 of them got together and signed a prayerful sympathy card for Michelle and me.

It is easy to look down on people in prison, or homeless. It is easy to justify your scorn for people struggling with addiction or being mistreated by those more powerful. It is easy to feel that way – when you are isolated from the problem. But when you are there with them, knowing them by name, hearing their pain, seeing them struggle – how can we not love them? And the best way to love them is to share your love of Jesus with them.

Hebrews 13:2-3 reminds me of The Sheep and Goats parable in Matthew 25 when Jesus says,

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

⁴⁰ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’ Matthew 25:31-40

It is a simple extension of what we read earlier - “Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Hebrews 13:1. We are all brothers and sisters in God’s eyes. His desire is to see us helping one another, no matter what our race, religion, socioeconomic status, or political belief.

Let’s go back to the title of today’s chapter - **Concluding Exhortations** – Here are some ways we can do our best to answer the call in Hebrews. We’ll go in reverse order of today’s passages.

Hebrews 13:3 - Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

This is actually simpler than it seems. The writer isn’t telling us to go to prison, or to suffer along with those who are mistreated. He is telling us to remember those people, to think about them as if you were with them. When we do, it becomes easier to care about them. At this point your

heart will open up to them and you may look for ways to help. You could ask Tom Spacek or me about opportunities to serve in a prison. You can check in with John and Helen Hughes about serving in Kensington for Cast Your Cares. Or you can speak with Jim Stevens or Al Vesce about the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen (TASK) or the Lunch Mission in Trenton. I'm sure any of them would be happy to have you join them. Or, you can just pull out this insert in today's bulletin, check off the ministry which interests you, and place it in the offering basket during the closing song. Somebody will reach out to you.

Do your best to make sure your heart has an open-door policy.

Hebrews 13:2 - Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

Take it as a challenge to make others feel welcome, comfortable, and valued in your daily lives. One simple opportunity can be found right here at Woodside. Tell Rita Belmont you would like to join the greeting team. Choose your worship service time, and once a month you greet people as they walk in, hand out bulletins, or help with the offering collection. You can still spend most of the service with your family, but you get the pleasure of welcoming new attendees and perhaps making new friends. The insert includes the Greeting Team as well.

Hebrews 13:1 - Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters.

Ahh, the simplest commands can sometimes be the most difficult to follow. Especially as we realize our brothers and sisters is a very big family in God's eyes. Starting small is always a good way to go. Help somebody in the store who can't reach the top shelf. Offer to return somebody's shopping cart for them. Maybe a young mother with a baby, but it could be anyone. Smile and give a greeting to somebody you don't know. They might need just one friendly act today. And watch your tongue around friends or family. The humorous comment (to you) might feel like a sharp knife to somebody at the wrong time.

Many of you remember Tom Harsha. He was a Woodside member, and I was blessed to know him from services, growth groups, and Dominican Republic Mission trips. He contracted cancer and passed away in January of 2018. I am not positive about the timeline, but I think sometime after Tom received his diagnosis he stopped coming to services for a while. I don't remember if it was his first visit back to Woodside, but I saw him and struck up a conversation with him. Just basic "good to see you. How is everything going?", stuff. The next time I saw him he pulled me aside and thanked me for not being a smart alec and ribbing him for not attending church for a while, and just being a friend, because he was going through some things. It wasn't until later I found out about his medical issues. For me, this was an important lesson, since I WAS the kind of guy who might have made a joke about his absence. However, on this day, the Lord was covering me. Sometimes the things we don't say are more important at the moment than the things we do say.

Please pray with me.

1. Share a time when somebody performed a random act of kindness for you. How did you feel?
2. Do you find it easy, or difficult, to speak with strangers?

3. What ministry or mission project has had the most effect on you, and why?