



**To Labor for the Lord**  
**Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16**  
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I tend to spend very little time in the midst of worship focusing on national holidays that originated from the greater American society. Whether it be Memorial Day, Independence Day, Indigenous People's Day, or President's Day – I tend to not shift the focus of our worship of God on Sundays around these cultural celebrations. These holidays have very little to do with our call to be focused on the Kingdom of God, and they are not intended to encourage our giving thanks to God in the presence of worship. They may be the reason we enjoy Mondays off, or the reason we host cookouts on Sunday afternoons, but they aren't the reason we come to worship on Sunday mornings.

However, in a very rare exception, I want to look briefly today at this weekend's societal celebration of Labor Day.

The first nationally celebrated Labor Day came in 1894, just a couple months after it was signed into law by President Grover Cleveland. This weekend we celebrate the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Labor Day being celebrated as a national holiday. But President Cleveland was not the brain child behind Labor Day. There is still a lot of debate about exactly whose idea it was to create a Labor Day, but history shows the first Labor Day celebration took place some 12 years earlier.

By the late 1800s, the average American worked 12-hour days, and worked 7 days a week. Even with some restrictions in place, factories and mines across the country employed workers as young as 5 and 6 years old. The industrial facilities that were being packed with machinery and laborers offered unsanitary and unsafe conditions, and in some cases, less than adequate access to fresh air.

As manufacturing became more and more prominent, supplanting agriculture as the wellspring of the American workforce and economy, labor unions began to better advocate on behalf of the workers for better working conditions, better hours, and better pay. It was the rise to power of labor unions that, though not always pretty, led to the origination of Labor Day.

On September 5, 1882, the Central Labor Union in New York City led 10,000 workers to take unpaid leave to march from City Hall to Union Square, holding what is deemed as the first Labor Day parade in the country. The Central Labor Union led another event the very next year, again on September 5, establishing an annual event of the march. It would take another 11 years for the holiday to be signed in to law, perhaps being spurred on by the employee strike at the Pullman Palace Car Company in Chicago in May of 1894. That strike led to a national boycott of Pullman railway cars, crippling the national railroad system. To end the strike, the federal

government sent troops to Chicago, which resulted in rioting and a dozen laborers being killed. In response, President Cleveland signed the holiday into law just a month later.

Reflecting back on the history behind Labor Day, I have to say I feel a bit betrayed. Over the past month and a half, we've been highlighting some of the places our English language and the Biblical editors betray the parables of Jesus. I've talked about how we have to go back to the parables as they were told to the first listeners to better understand what Jesus was trying to say in these cryptic and challenging stories. Given the history of Labor Day, I too feel betrayed by the over-simplified explanation of the holiday that we are fed about its creation. I don't think I had ever heard this story of the origination of Labor Day before.

In fact, to see if I had just misheard the rationale for Labor Day growing up, I did a google search asking the question, "Why do we celebrate Labor Day?" One of the first results is from the website, history.com. You would think that from this url, one that says, *we know history*, you should be able to trust the website in providing you an accurate understanding of history. Right? ... To answer this question, "Why do we celebrate Labor Day?", history.com responds, "Labor Day pays tribute to the contributions and achievements of American workers."

In some ways, I'm not surprised by this answer, because it mimics what I've always thought Labor Day was all about. I *thought* Labor Day was about celebrating the work of American workers. ... BUT, that's not what seems to be the case from the history behind the origination of the holiday. It seems, having gone back to read about the history of Labor Day, that the holiday started as a way to call attention to how poorly our workers were being treated. It seems the march in New York City started to draw attention to the unfair hours and unfair pay being received by our workers. It seems President Cleveland signed the holiday into law to calm the actions of a labor union that was speaking out against the mistreatment of our workforce and shutting down our railway industry ... it seems that the holiday began to draw attention to the mistreatment of our labor force, not to celebrate its great achievements.

If my read on the history of Labor Day is correct, this weekend is not a celebration of how great our workforce is, regardless how great it may be. No, instead, this holiday is but a reminder that we are called to be something greater than we have been before. Today is not just a celebration of what *is*, it's bringing attention to what *should be*.

In that mindset, I want to turn to our text in Hebrews 13, which I think is not dissimilar for us as a people of faith. Hebrews 13 is like our Labor Day reminder. It is not a celebration for us as a people of faith of what *is*. This text is the author's way of calling our attention as people of faith to what *should be*.

As we hear from the letter to the Hebrews, let me offer just a brief note as to the context of the passage: This writing comes at the end of the Epistle to the Hebrews. This letter, on the whole, offers a very Christological study of Christ. It is, in perhaps a too over-simplified way of explaining, an argument for the Christology of Christ for early Jews who had believed in Jesus as the Christ, but had also doubted Jesus's Messiahship. It's effectively a long sermon to the

Jewish converts as to Jesus's true identity as the Son of God – the Lord – the Messiah – the Christ.

Chapter 13, as the concluding chapter, offers a final wrap up on the sermon that has been laid out. In his commentary on the text, Dr. Thomas Long of Candler School of Theology says Chapter 13 is almost like the church announcements that come at the end of the service. After the sermon, Paul is inviting the community to consider how they might respond to the message by being involved in the work. Only, like most preachers who give announcements at the end of service, the announcements are filled with additional theological commentary on the sermon.

These announcements are essentially instructions (and an invitation) on how we are to labor as a people of faith who have the knowledge of what the author has just finished laying out in the first 12 chapters: that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the Messiah, in whom we should put our full trust and faith. Only, in true Pauline fashion, the letter is written from the position of critique. Like the creation of Labor Day, it seems that what's being offered is a critique of how they *have* been living, and in the process, an invitation through named example of how they *should* be living as people of faith in Christ as Lord. With that context in mind, let's take a look at how we are told we *should* be living as people of faith.

Verse one offers the thesis statement: let mutual love continue. The Greek word here for mutual love is one you might know well; the word is *philadelphia*. This is the word that gives the title to the city, "The City of Brotherly Love." Throughout the Biblical text, this love is defined as one that is *not* based on sentiment – this is not a Hallmark type of love filled with poetic verse ... it is a love that is built on action. "It involves a complex set of dispositions and practices."<sup>1</sup> For example, Romans 12:10 says, "love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor." There is action required with the call to *philadelphia* – to mutual love.

Another example is in 1 Thessalonians 4. Beginning in verse 9, the text reads, "But concerning love of the brothers and sisters," that is, concerning *philadelphia*, "you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, to do so more and more ... to work with your hands as we directed you, so that you may behave properly towards outsiders and be dependent on no one."

*Philadelphia* is an actionable love that requires concrete expressions. From this thesis, we turn to example. Verse 2 offers, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Don't just set a table for those who are already part of the family, set a table for even strangers who may wander in. Be willing to inconvenience yourself and your *known guests*, so that strangers may have a place to be welcomed.

Let's be clear about this – offering hospitality to strangers is something that's not going well for us as a nation. Showing hospitality is not just about setting an extra seat at your personal table,

it's about how we think and speak about people who look different, who speak in other languages, and who come from other countries. And if the concern is that we are missing the opportunity to entertain angels by not showing hospitality to the stranger, it certainly makes me wonder who we've locked up on the southern border, or turned away at our ports of entry.

The call for mutual love continues with two instructions connected by prose. Verse 3 reads, "Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; *and* remember those being tortured, as though you yourself were being tortured." Interesting, the instructions don't ask us to consider the crime when considering the prisoner. "The church is not to engage in condescending charity but to provide a ministry of empathy, 'as though you yourselves were in prison with them ...'"<sup>ii</sup> Like Moses, who had the privilege of the Pharaoh's court, we are called to turn from our privilege and share in the hardships of those who are enslaved, rather than "enjoy the temporary advantage given by sin – that is, by associating with the privileges of the oppressors."<sup>iii</sup> I don't think it a stretch to admit the truth of a for-profit prison system; it's not much different than Pharaoh's "employment" of the Jews. It has been, and is, utilized to subvert and marginalize subsets of the American population – subsets that Paul says we should be treating as though we too were subverted and marginalized, imprisoned and tortured.

Verses 4 and 5 continue Paul's definition of mutual and actionable love. "Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled. ... Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have." The focus of these two verses is not to define what marriage is or is not. The focus is on gluttony and contentment. New Testament Theologian, Luke Timothy Johnson, offers, "Ancient moralists grasped the moral connection between sexual incontinence and greed. Both pointed to disordered or excessive desires. Both led to reckless human behavior destructive of proper human relationships."<sup>iv</sup>

Such greed and excessive desire is not only something the Bible makes clear is detrimental to our relationships with God and one another, it's something we see in society. You don't need the Biblical text to prove this truth. It is this very toxic belief that says, "we are not good enough without more" that leads to many affairs, a lot of credit debt, and lot of broken relationships.

These verses describe for us an invitation to Labor for the Lord. To share mutual love with others – to welcome the stranger – to be empathetic to the prisoner – to be content with our finances – and to be faithful to our relationships. But the text doesn't stop with the instruction, it also offers the guarantee. Verse 5 and 6 conclude, "The Lord has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.' So, we can say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?'"

We can be content with what we have; we can turn from sexual impropriety; we can set the extra seat for the stranger; we can be empathetic even to criminals; we can do all these things because of the confidence we have in Christ to be with us through these things. "It is trust in the Lord's help that enables believers to be generous and faithful in their lives with each other."<sup>v</sup> When did we stop trusting the Lord to provide? Is not the earth bountiful enough for us all to have shelter, to have food and drink, and to be part of the beloved community?

I could be wrong here, but it seems to me that one of the primary reasons our nation is facing the crises its facing today is because we feel like our share of the wealth and power is being threatened. Instead of sharing love, we're hoarding love. Instead of welcoming the stranger, we're locking up the stranger. Instead of empathizing with the prisoner, we're profiting off the prisoner. Instead of honoring marital unions, we're seeing a rise in public figures who brag about their sexual promiscuity. Instead of being content with money, we're seeing practices and policies that make the wealthy wealthier, and the poor poorer.

I think it's time we reflect on what it means to labor for the Lord – not because we have reached an actionable love that epitomizes and lives up to our call as a people of faith, but because we can acknowledge that we are not yet there and that have work to do. Labor Day is not about claiming, *we have arrived*, it's about acknowledging *we know we have work to do*. So let us labor for the Lord, offering a praise to God that God will provide, and in this confidence, doing good and sharing what we have, for such work is pleasing to God. For the Glory of the Lord, let us labor in love.

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<sup>i</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson. *New Testament Library: Hebrews*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas G. Long. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Hebrews*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

<sup>iii</sup> Johnson.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.