

Pentecost 15C
September 5, 2010
Hymns: 223 - 524 - 397 - 329

HEBREWS 13:1-8
LIVE A WINNING LIFE!
***Keep On Loving One Another.**
***Keep On Living By God's Moral Laws.**
***Keep On Trusting God**

Dear Brothers and Sisters through faith in Christ,

If you could win an Olympic medal, which would you prefer--the silver or the bronze? The answer appears obvious, doesn't it? The silver is for second place; the bronze is for third. Or is it as simple as it sounds? Here is something a surprising study of Olympic medal winners found. You would assume that the silver medal winners would be happier than the bronze medalists since they received a higher honor, but that isn't always the case. The bronze medalists, who came in third place, were actually found to be happier with their performance than the silver medalists, who finished in second place. The former Olympians explained why they felt this way. The third-place winners were thrilled just to have won a medal. The silver medalists, on the other hand, felt like losers because they didn't come in first. This just goes to show that what happens to you isn't nearly as important as how you perceive what happens to you.

What would be your response if I could give you the formula today by which you could be guaranteed a winning life? Our lesson for today from Hebrews 13 gives us such a formula. It is a simple formula, but it simply cannot fail. Follow it and not only will you be successful as a follower of Jesus, but you will be successful as a parent, as a spouse, as a member of the church, as a member of the community. In other words, you will be successful as a human being. I'm making an extravagant claim, I know, but I have seen this formula work time and time again.

Slide 1 Here is the formula: **Live A Winning Life Of (Christian) Love.** Now you may ask, love whom? And the answer is, of course, everybody. Love people you go to church with, people you live with, people you work with. But also love people you don't even know. More than that, love people you normally wouldn't even associate with. The writer of Hebrews says in this passage: **Slide 2** ***"Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering."***

You've heard the expression, "Charity begins at home." I don't think the author of Hebrews would argue with that. When he says, "Love each other as brothers..." he is asking his readers to practice the kind of love and concern that goes beyond those who have shared the same womb. He is saying - much more is that kindness and helpfulness that is to be shown among those born of the same Spirit! Jesus Himself said as much to His disciples on Maundy Thursday night: *A new commandment I give you: Love one another! (John 13:34).*

Do we need the reminder? What do we see as we look around at fellow believers? What do we see when we look at ourselves and our attitudes and actions toward fellow believers? Is it love for him or her as a brother or sister in Christ? Is there brotherly concern for the other person's needs....or calloused seeking of our own good or desires in the congregation of believers? Do we accept his talents and assist and encourage him in developing them or do we criticize what he says and does? Is it easy to do the right thing? Not really. Brotherly love such as our writer asks of us requires constant practice and concentrated power that can come only from the cross of our Elder Brother Jesus! See how Jesus has loved each one of us? See how He forgives our sins and overlooks our shortcomings? Can we imitate His love in our attitude and dealings with one another! God grant it for Jesus' sake!

Such love shows not only toward those known and near, but also to the strangers who make up our family of believers - at West, our Synod brothers and sisters worldwide, the converts in our world missions, those of sister synods in America and around the globe. Yes, our Christian love is to extend even to those beyond our fellowship - to whom we seek to reach out with the beautiful truths we ourselves have found in God's Word. "Entertain strangers," the writer says. In the ancient world where inns weren't that plentiful nor their reputation that pure, hospitality was a prized virtue. In New Testament times, Christians who were forced to flee from their towns because of persecution or who went traveling on a preaching mission were particularly in need of hospitality.

We will probably never entertain angels when we help Christian strangers or non-Christians. Let us grant that

it is becoming increasingly difficult to help strangers. But let's not forget the value our Lord Himself places on such Christian hospitality. What a surprise it will be to hear from Him on the Last Day, *Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did for Me (Matthew 25:40)*. As fellow believers move and travel more, let us here at Brooklyn Lutheran make sure our church is warm with hospitality. Let us welcome strangers to our Services and new members to our midst warmly instead of watching them with side glances from a distance! This is the first part of living a winning life: Keep on loving one another!

Slide 3 The second is, **Keep on living by God's Moral Laws.** The writer continues, "*Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.*" How many lives have been shattered by failure to follow this one simple rule? Several years ago a man wrote a newspaper advice columnist. "I am having an affair with two women," he wrote. "I can't marry them both. What should I do? And don't give me any of that morality stuff." The columnist answered, "What distinguishes us from animals is morality. Please write a veterinarian for advice."

Ted Koppel, host of ABC's Nightline, has shown some liberal leanings. So all the more he shocked many people a few years ago when he stated his feelings about the moral slide in our society: "We have actually convinced ourselves that slogans will save us," he said. "'Shoot up if you must, but use a clean needle,' or, 'Enjoy sex whenever and with whomever you wish, but protect yourself.' No!" he continued, "The answer is no! Not because it isn't cool or smart or because you might wind up in jail or dying in the AIDS ward, but because it's wrong!"

Do you personally relate to his words? As Christians, you and I have a spiritual spin that needs to supplement what Koppel said: The heathen world needs to be told that marriage was God's institution – given, governed, and guarded by Him. It is not something that evolved into being as monkeys turned into humans. God created two real human beings named Adam and Eve and blessed them with holy marriage. But sin has stained marriage and sullied the marriage bed. "Honored by all," the author urges, but what God gave as a precious gift is downgraded, disgraced, and discarded. The gift of sex brings blessing only in the marriage bed.

Those who would defile it outside of marriage will be judged. Human courts may allow and human eyes may not see, but God will certainly see and relentlessly judge every violation. In Ephesians 5, Paul writes that the relationship of Christ and His Church is like that of a groom and his bride. All the more then, let Christ's church bravely proclaim God's holy will in this vital area even when most of the world doesn't want to hear it. Let the believer find power to swim against the present tide of immorality and be blessed by God. Take the high road, fellow Christian! It is the way to a winning life – when we love as God wants! And in love call sinners to repentance – neither being harsh on the one hand nor ignoring situations we know need correcting and repentance if there is going to be forgiveness and escaping possible damnation.

Finally this rings true in all areas of morality – of right and wrong. A mother defended her son's cheating in school. "It's very competitive out there," she contended, "and, if he doesn't cheat, he won't get in to good schools; everybody else does it." Now picture that mom being wheeled into surgery. With a frightened look on her face, she asks the doctor, "You're very confident about the procedure you're performing, aren't you?" And the doctor responds, "I don't know, lady. I cheated my way through medical school."

Lord, how we need more people to live moral lives! Would you really want to live in a society of cheaters? Would you want to live in a society where you can't trust your doctor, or the contractor who built the bridge that you cross on the way to work, or the electrician who wired your house, or your spouse, or your parents or your children? Living on the straight and narrow really is a big deal! Keep on loving, keep on living according to God's moral laws, and one thing more.....

Slide 4 Keep on trusting God. Listen as the writer continues, "*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.'* So we say with confidence, *'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid . . .'*" Successful living is a package and you cannot pick and choose among the core principles. You cannot live a successful life without these first two principles, "Keep on loving" and "Keep on living according to God's moral laws." 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. This is the kind of peace of mind 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.

Faith in Jesus Christ allows us to live triumphantly 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, whether or not our way of living finds favor with our peers. 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--people we know who lived successfully because they followed these Biblical principles. The writer closes this passage with the 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."*

Many of those who led us into faith and led us in faith are gone, or will be eventually. But what they taught and believed remains eternally the same. Jesus Christ died for sinners! Their Savior is our Savior and will be our children's Savior. He is always the believer's contemporary. What He did for believers in the past, he will do for us. What He does for us, He will do for those who follow us and our good role modeling in the faith. *"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."* Keep on loving one another – fellow Christians! Keep on living by God's moral laws! And remember in every circumstance, God says to you, *"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."* Such an approach to life is a winner every time! Amen.

CHILDREN'S SERMON - Object: a large, stainless steel spoon (or any spoon that's reflective)

Good morning, boys and girls:

Have you ever looked at your reflection in a spoon? It looks kind of funny, doesn't it? You look different depending on whether you look at your reflection in the bowl part of the spoon, or whether you look at yourself in the back of the spoon. When I look at myself in the bowl part of the spoon, I am upside down and backwards. And my nose looks big. But when I look at myself in the back part of the spoon, I am right side up and not backwards. And my nose still looks big. How do you look in the spoon? (If the group is small enough, let a few kids check their reflection in the front and back of the spoon). If you look at your reflection in one side of the spoon, it looks completely the opposite than if you look at it in the other side of the spoon. It all depends on how you look at it.

You know, sometimes we see life in a completely opposite way than God sees life. Sometimes, we think that the most important thing in life is to be good-looking, or rich, or athletic, or popular. That's how we see life. But God sees life just the opposite of the way we see it. God values people who are loving toward other people. And God values people who always try to do the right thing. And God values people who put their trust in Him. That's not the way the world looks at life, but that's what's important to God. Let's pray that we can learn to see the world the way that God sees it, so we can value the things that He values.