

Rev. Kenneth J. Rodrigue
St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
28 September 2025

Sermon on Hebrews 13:1-6

Worship Theme:

FOCUS ON WHAT TRULY HELPS IN ETERNITY

While money makes life easier in some ways, it cannot bring true happiness or fulfillment. Money fails to deliver in death. Hearts filled with love for money and void of love for God receive the only eternity money can buy: one void of God and filled with pain. We might be fooled into thinking money helps in life, but it will certainly fail us in death. Conversely, what seems to offer little help in life never fails us death—the gospel. Those who hear and heed the Scriptures appear to receive little benefit in life. Living by God's Word doesn't make life easier. Faithfully following Christ often means a challenging life. Wealth gains admiration and respect from the world. Being true to Scripture is more likely to gain us scorn and ridicule. Those who find help in God rather than in money will never be disappointed. In death we receive a reward greater than anything money can buy.

Sermon Theme: “What Truly Helps”

1. Some Things Are Good in Life!
2. Only One Is Still Good in Death

If today were your last day on earth and these were your final hours, how confident would you be that your eternal destination is the right one? Do you know for sure that you will be in heaven? If you're not sure, do you know where to look? That's what Jesus asks us today: when you take your last breath, **which things will truly help** you? As we look at all the blessings God has given to us, we gratefully admit **some things are very good in life!** But when our final breath and last moment come, **only one is still good in death.**

The writer to the Hebrews had an eternally important message to share. He strongly encouraged all his listeners to not give up their faith in Jesus. Only Jesus had the power to save them and only Jesus was worthy of their love and worship. If they returned to the Jewish faith, a faith that refused to acknowledge that Jesus was the long-awaited promised Savior of the world, they would lose everything.

Here at the end of his letter in chapter 13, he gives final exhortations and encouragements, things to remember and do: *Keep loving one another as brothers and sisters. Show hospitality to strangers. Remember those in prison and those who are mistreated. Marriage should be honored by all.* Each of those things is united under the theme of love, “love for a specific time and place.”

These things are all good and important and we wouldn't expect anyone to argue against them. The problem is, we put too much value and importance on how well we do them. We think as long as we love the people we like, we should be okay. As long as we don't cheat on our spouses, are nice to strangers, invite people to our home now and then, and smile at the people we see at church, then our lives should be fine.

But there's already a problem here – we don't follow any of that, certainly not perfectly! These things are supposed to be good, things we should want to do. Yet so often we fail. People rarely see the difference between a Christian marriage and a non-Christian marriage because many Christian husbands and wives treat each other just as badly or worse than many non-Christian husbands and wives do. We may not see it out in the open, but it's there. And how often do we visit people in prison, eager to share the message of Jesus with them? The souls of everyone in prison are just as eternally important to God as all the souls that aren't in prison. Even if we can't visit them, we could remember to pray for them. But we likely don't, at least not very often. Maybe we rarely think about those people at all. And yes, God says we should show hospitality to strangers, but what if they aren't very nice, or what if they're different from me? Do I really have to do that for every stranger that I meet? Who knows what they might do to me if I do?! And keep loving each other? The other members of my church? I don't even know all of them! I like some of them fine and we get along great! But others... let's not go there. I don't agree with or like basically anything they say or do, and, honestly, it's probably easier if we just ignore each other. We'll all be members here, but I don't want to have to love ALL of them. That's so much work!

Clearly we already struggle with all these things, and then the writer adds another one by pointing to our relationship with stuff. He says, *"Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have."* This sounds like the opposite of what our culture embraces. The American dream is more like, "the sky is the limit, so dream big, work hard, and life will only get better!" Even if that were true, we still wouldn't be content. There will always another "next big thing." We're thankful and grateful for what we have, but we also wouldn't complain if we had more money, a bigger house, a nicer car, more in the retirement account. It's never enough. Of course, there's nothing objectively wrong with having nice things – in his parable in Luke 16, Jesus did not reprimand the rich man simply for being rich. The problem wasn't having things; it was loving them more than God.

What's the point so far? *Loving one another as brothers and sisters; Showing hospitality; Remembering those in prison and those who are mistreated; Honoring marriage; Being content with whatever we have* – all **these things are good in life** and can have wonderful results for us! But which of them will help in death? Which of them is able to prevent death, or take away our fear of death, or make death something we can even find peace in? There's a clear answer to that: none of them. None of them help in death.

And death isn't naturally a very easy thing to deal with, regardless of when it comes. Death often comes unexpectedly. Even if we are advanced in years or declining in health, we still have no idea when death will come – it catches all of us off guard, and nothing we can do – none of these **good things in life** – will truly completely prepare us for the moment it happens. And the reality is, sooner or later, it WILL happen.

So if none of the good things we do in life helps us in death, what does?

In the moment of death, **Only One Thing Still Helps**. Only one has the power and ability to help us both in life AND in death: our relationship with God. As Christians, we know God helps us throughout our entire lives. And yet, being a follower of Jesus doesn't help us win the lottery or land a super high-paying job or keep us from being made fun of or prevent us from getting sick or injured. Being a follower of Jesus does not make our earthly lives easier or take away problems that we face. More often the opposite happens and life becomes more challenging!

But what God has done for us is so much more than comfort for this life. Yes, God watches over and cares for and provides for us during our life on earth, but if that's all we think he does or if that's all we want from him, we have missed the point entirely. Jesus didn't come to give us comfortable, pain-free, problem-free lives here; he came to earth to give us another life, a life after death, an eternal life that is so good it cannot be fully comprehended or explained. Even if it may not seem to help much in life, being a follower of Jesus NEVER fails in death.

All throughout our lives and at the moment of our final breath here, these are the words of the **One Who Truly Helps**: *God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."* The Greek words used here are the strongest form of negation the Greek language has. God is saying this will absolutely never ever happen. He WILL NOT leave us or forsake us.

Do you see how astonishing that is? We don't deserve this, but we have it. On our own, we would never even know what love is, so God shows us. King David confessed in Psalm 51, *"Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."* We know what that's like and we could say those same words too! And then we open the pages of Holy Scripture, holding in our hands the words of the Holy God himself in a language we can read and understand, and in those words we find everything God did to help us forever. He took our sin-filled lives and he bled and died on the cross to take those sins away. He took our cursed-by-death bodies and redeemed them for eternal life. He blesses us infinitely beyond what we deserve. He gives us Christian brothers and sisters in a congregation we call our own, he gives us new people to meet and share his love with, he gives us opportunities to serve others putting their needs ahead of our own, he gives us families and homes, and he even gives us material wealth and goods to provide for our needs here on earth. And still all those things pale in comparison to his love which stands behind this promise: "No matter what happens in your life, on your very best day and your very worst day, I will always be with you. Nothing will take me away from you. I love you, I'm here, and I want to be with you forever."

In Jesus, God forgives every sin we've ever done and blesses us with many **Good Things for Life**. We can love the people around us, but that will not help us in our moment of death. We can enjoy the money and possessions the Lord has generously given us in this world, but they will not help us in our moment of death. **Only One Thing Still Helps in Death**: God himself. God who came to this world in human flesh to save human beings and to do everything necessary for us to have a perfect eternal home with him where there will never again be any sickness, sadness, crying, mourning, or pain. An eternity where there is no more death.

That's the amazing power and love of our God **Who Truly Helps**, a love which he graciously, generously, freely gives to you. Because we know God never leaves us or forsakes us, with the writer to the Hebrews we say with confidence, *"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"* We have many good things in life as a gift from God, but none of them last forever. We may fear the day when we have to leave them all behind, but none of them help us in death anyway. Therefore, we place our confidence and trust in God alone, who alone is able to be our Perfect Help both in life AND in death.

So back to where we began today: If today were our last day on earth and these were our final hours, can we be confident that our eternal destination is the right one? Do we know for sure that we will be in heaven? In Jesus our answer is always, yes!! Our confidence does not come from us or anything we have or do; our confidence rests entirely in the nail-pierced hands of Jesus. Whether we have much or little, good days or bad days, thanks to Jesus we already always have **What Truly Helps in Life AND Death**: *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."*

Let's pray:

Thank you, Jesus, for the confidence and peace which can only come from you. Keep us from trusting too much in the things of this world. Instead, remind us that you alone are the One who truly helps us, both in life and in death, for you have forgiven all our sins and promised us eternal paradise in heaven. We praise you for all your generous gifts and eagerly look forward to the day when we will join you in glory forever. In your holy name we pray, Amen.

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.