

September 15, 2019

A CALL TO PURSUE PEACE AND HOLINESS

Hebrews 12:14-17

(25 of 30 in a series through Hebrews)

Now there's a way you could respond to the last three sermons in Hebrews that would be taking a step in the wrong direction. Let me show you how this can happen. Let's say you listened to the models and examples of faith from Hebrews 11, and you said, "By God's grace, I'm going to imitate the faith of these men and women. I'm going to obey in faith even in times of doubt, or difficulty, or even persecution. By faith, I'm pressing on in obedience." Then you listened to 12:1-3, and you thought, "I'm going to keep my eyes on Jesus, remembering that he will complete the work of salvation in me and that he himself endured all kinds of hostility as the God-man, just like I'm facing. So, by God's grace, I'm not going to grow weary and shrink back but keep pressing forward in enduring, obedient faith." Then you listened to the 12:4-13, and you thought, "Yes, the Lord is my loving, heavenly Father who graciously brings difficulties into my life through which he forms me so that I'm going to grow in holiness and enduring obedience to him. So, the next time trials come, I'm not going to dismiss them lightly nor be crushed under them and run from God. Rather, I'm going to keep pressing on in obedient faith to my Father, allowing him to do his forming and shaping work in my life." Each of these responses would be great. But the way you could take a step in the wrong direction is if in each of these responses you only thought of yourself, your personal holiness, and your own need for persevering obedience.

Let me show you what I mean through an illustration. Last week I had a few people come up to me after the sermon and say that speaking about formative discipline from Hebrews 12:4-13 made them think of a coach for a sports team. And this indeed is a great comparison. A coach isn't telling you to run—no matter how unpleasant it may be—because he's punishing you (necessarily); he's doing it because he wants to get you into better shape so that you can compete at a higher level on game day. Well, my basketball coach in eighth grade was an excellent example of this. He wanted us to be the best conditioned middle school basketball team, and so he ran us like crazy. And—true to Hebrews 12:11—it seemed painful rather than pleasant. But there was also something else he would do. After all kinds of running and one-on-one competitions throughout practice, he would line us up to run, and he would say, "Now, we can stop practice once all of you complete this running drill in (so many) seconds." In other words, if every member of the team could do the running drill and complete it in the allotted time, we could walk out the door and get on with our day. But if even one person didn't finish in the required time, then the whole team would have to run that drill again, and so it would continue until we all got across the finish line in time. So, of course, we would identify some of the guys on the team for whom this might be a little more difficult and encourage them or tell them to run alongside of you or what not.

Now, here's the question. Why would our coach always end practice with this? I mean, if some kid wasn't completing the drill in time, wasn't that on him? Why drag me into his struggles? The

answer, of course, is that he wanted to teach us to think as a team. He knew that if we won, we were only going to win by pulling together, working together, and helping make sure that each of us did our best. I mean, one of us could focus on making sure we had a good game ourselves, but if the others failed, then we would lose. Who cares if the center scores fifty points and pulls down twenty rebounds if he's the only one who scores and we give us sixty points? Our coach always wanted us thinking about the team.

And this is how we could take a misstep coming off the last three weeks—by thinking we're in this endurance race by ourselves. Yes, our personal walk with the Lord is crucial and absolutely necessary. But the Lord doesn't call us to himself in order that we might live the Christian life alone without regard to others. No, he calls us to himself in order to unite us with a group of other believers who make up the church so that we might walk through this life with them, investing in them and having them invest in us, exhorting them while they also exhort us. And that's what this next section is about as we turn our attention to Hebrews 12:14-17.

You'll notice that the section we're looking at this morning broadens our focus to include others. It's as if the author of Hebrews is saying that what he's told them is crucial, but they're only going to make it if they begin to take ownership not only of themselves but also of one another. And so he exhorts the church to walk well together. He gives two main exhortations—with a few components in each—that I want to hold up for us this morning as well. The first is that we're to strive for peace and holiness in the church.

Strive for peace and holiness in the church

The author begins in verse 14, writing, "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." Let me begin with a clarifying note before we dive in. The first is that I've explicitly said that we're to strive for peace and holiness *in the church*. But someone could say, "This verse doesn't command us simply to strive for peace with everyone in the church but for 'everyone.'" And that's fair that that is what that verse says. Also, there are indeed other texts that tell us that we need to strive for peace with everyone, meaning, everyone. For example, Paul wrote in Romans 12:18, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." And I think this means that we're to try to live peaceably with all people without exception. So, yes, do that. And this text isn't telling us *not* to do that. But I think it is focusing on the church. And the reason I think it's focusing on the church is because of how the rest of the verses read. When you look at verses 15-16, for example, the author is going to urge us to make sure that "no one fails to obtain the grace of God" and that "no one is sexually immoral or unholy." Now, I don't think it's reasonable to assume he means here that our task is to eliminate sexual immorality from the world. That simply isn't going to happen this side of the resurrection. I think he means in the church. In other words, he's saying that our aim is to see to it that no one is walking in sexual immorality *in the church*. Similarly, I think the focus on peace is focused on the church as well (though, again, we also should try to live peaceably with all people without exception).

Therefore, the first exhortation of this text is for us as believers to strive for peace with one another. And you might think that this happens easily and naturally, but it doesn't. Even though we're redeemed, we still sin, live after Genesis 3 but before the resurrection. Consequently, we give others all kinds of reasons not to walk in peace with us, and they give us the same. But the Bible commands it. Just as sure as the Bible commands us not to murder, it commands us to strive for peace with our brothers and sisters in the church. We're to walk in unity. It is in the context of believers walking together in peace, love, and unity that Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:30 not to grieve the Holy Spirit of God. The Spirit grieves when there is strife and disunity in the church. And this is something that I believe Satan is always working toward. Don't be deceived, the enemy is like a roaring lion, walking around this pack of believers who make up Cornerstone Community Church, seeking whom he may devour. And one of the key ways he seeks to devour is by creating disunity and strife.

What then does striving for peace look like? Well, it means that we are quick to repent when we wrong one another, quick to forgive, and we're charitable toward one another. We take what others say in the best light possible, believe the best about others, and trust them. We show them grace when they practice matters of wisdom a bit differently than us, remembering, as Luke tells us, that wisdom has many children (Luke 7:35). We don't keep a record of how others have wronged us and seek to be only edifying in our speech. And we actively pray for peaceful unity and against the devil's schemes. Remember that it was Jesus who referred to the church as a family. And so, like a family, we strive for peace and unity.

But, the author of Hebrews doesn't mean "strive for peace" at all costs. He adds that we are to strive for peace *and* "the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." The reason he says that no one will see the Lord without holiness isn't because he's teaching that we're justified by works. Rather, he's reminding us of the consistent teaching of Scripture that justifying faith produces holiness. And because this is so important our pursuit of peace must be combined with a pursuit of holiness.

There can be a strong temptation in our relationships with other believers not to address obvious sin because we don't want to disrupt peace. But peace built around unholiness is no real peace and will ultimately unravel. This is why we've said many times that what is worse than a professing believer walking in adultery is a church which says nothing to that brother about his sin. We must strive for holiness. We must strive for *corporate* holiness. Therefore, when you see your brother walking in sin and refuse to love him enough to address that sin in the name of "peace," you are saying that you do not really care about your brother's soul. So, what we're aiming for is peace and holiness.

Now, right in that same thread, let me add the second exhortation here: Watch over your brothers and sisters to help them finish well.

Watch over your brothers and sister to help them finish well

When I say “finish well” I’m picking up on the imagery of running the race that the author pictured in the early verses of chapter 12. I simply want to expand the image of running a race focused on oneself to running a race as a team. And this means that you and I are not only concerned that we finish this race well, but that our brothers and sisters do as well.

The author says in verse 15, “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God.” The phrase “see to it” is the idea of watching over or taking care to keep watch on the well-being of others. But what does he mean by someone failing to obtain the grace of God? It’s simply the idea of not persevering in the faith, of not being that seed that spring up with life only to wilt and wither away because of the cares of this world. Earlier the author of Hebrews spoke of eternity in terms of “rest” and exhorted the readers, “let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.” Failing to reach the rest is the same idea as failing to obtain the grace of God. In other words, the idea is that we’re traveling on this journey together, aiming at getting to the celestial city (to use Bunyan’s imagery), and making sure that no one is left behind.

Let me make a brief application at this point in light of this exhortation. Brothers and sisters, I really want to encourage you to join a local church, if you’re here today and aren’t a member somewhere. I’d love for you to join this one. But whether you join this church or some other Bible-believing church, you need to join a church so that you’re formally asking others to watch over your well-being and to run after you if necessary. As pastors, we gather on Monday mornings to walk through the name of every member—noting if they’ve been with us, if there are any concerns or struggles they’re facing, and so on. And the reason we do this is because according to Hebrews 13:17, we’re going to give an account to the Lord Jesus Christ for how we have watched over those whom he has placed under our care. And we believe that this group whom we’re overseeing are those who have formally put themselves under our care, and at Cornerstone we do that through membership. But it’s not only the pastors. I know that members are regularly encouraging one another, exhorting one another, caring for one another, and on and on. In other words, our members are owning the responsibility to “see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God,” even running after straying members when those members have stopped caring if anyone runs after them or not. We picture the magnitude of this responsibility and our commitment to it when we ask members to come, gather around, and lay hands on those whom we receive into membership. We’re saying, “We’re one body, and we’re going to commit to making sure this body is as healthy as possible and that we all cross the finish line.” I need that. You need that. But more importantly, this is the Lord’s design. So I want to urge you this morning to join yourself to a local church. And if you say, “But I could be let down, or disappointed, or loved very imperfectly,” then my response is that, “I actually promise you that will be true. I tell everyone in the new members’ class that you’ll be prayed for, loved, and cared for, and that you won’t be loved and cared for perfectly.” But doesn’t the Bible anticipate us messing up as we try to love one another? Isn’t this what our own text pictures—imperfect love for one another? That’s why we have commands like “strive for peace with everyone,” because it doesn’t come easily and requires striving. And I think that the one of the foundational ways you put yourself in a place where others can help see to it that you obtain the grace of God is by yoking yourself to other believers in a local church. Let them know that you’re linking arms

with them, that you'll help pick them up in the race, and that you'll need them to go get you when you wander off the track and pick you up as well. That's the command of verse 15.

But the author continues by showing us some practical things this means. In other words, if we were to ask, "How do I make sure no one fails to maintain the grace of God," then a big part of the answer is in the next two components he lays out as he continues writing. And one of those is that we need to make sure that no root of bitterness springs up. He writes, "See to it . . . that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled" (v. 15).

Now, I think the temptation here is to read this literally, thinking that we're to be on guard against actually bitterness taking root in our hearts. And certainly we should be on guard against that—see, for example, the command we began with to strive for peace with everyone. However, I don't think this reference to a "root of bitterness" is to be a reference literally to bitterness alone. The reason I say that is because the author is drawing this from Deuteronomy 29:18, and when you look back at that text it's clear that the reference is to something broader than bitterness alone. In Deuteronomy 29, Moses is recounting to the people how the Lord brought the people out of Egypt and through the many nations through which they've past. And he notes that as they passed through these nations, they saw all kinds of detestable idolatry around them. Then he writes, "Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the LORD our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart'" (Deut. 29:18-19). You see, the idea of this root of bitterness is a root that produces any kind of poisonous or "bitter" fruit—disobedience to the Lord.

So when we come back to Hebrews 12, the exhortation is that we're to watch over each other, making sure no sense of drifting or turning from the Lord after what he has forbidden takes root in anyone's heart. And one reason is because this will not only affect the one, but cause trouble so that "many become defiled."

Several years ago, I was in a conversation with a brother, confronting him about sexual immorality that he was practicing with his girlfriend. And in the midst of talking with him, he said, "Listen, I know you think this is wrong and the Bible condemns it, but I know many other couples who have done these same things, and they went on to get married, and they're fine now." And, I responded to him in that moment by telling him that God is not mocked, sin is never justified, and he will stand before God on his own. But I will say to us as a congregation that what that man said to me that day is the danger of our sin. Our sins do not affect only us. Brother and sister, this morning, your continuing in sin may well be leading one of your dear brothers or sisters to excuse their sin, and the Lord does not take lightly to us causing another of his children to stumble.

And as if zeroing in on this issue, the author ends by exhorting us to see to it, specifically, that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau. Esau, as we know, simply chased after what his flesh

wanted in the moment, at great cost to himself. He came in and was hungry, and his brother, Jacob, had fixed some lentil stew, and he wanted it. He wanted it so badly that when Jacob said the payment was to sacrifice the blessing of his birthright, he did it. He sold off this great blessing simply for what his flesh craved in the moment. And later, when he came to his senses, he wanted that blessing from his father, but it was too late. Repentance was impossible; the blessing had already been given and was no longer attainable, no matter how many tears he shed.

That is what sexual immorality represents. It's what our flesh craves, but don't be deceived, it's trying to pull you into hell. And if you go down that road and give yourself over to it, then on the day of judgment, I'm certain you'll shed tears, but it'll be too late. Now why single out sexual immorality though? Well, the reality is that this is a consistent practice in the Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 6:9, as Paul is noting that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God, the first sin he mentions in the list of sins he goes on to provide is sexual immorality. In Galatians 5:19, when Paul describes what the works of the flesh are, the first thing he mentions is sexual immorality. And in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, when he's telling them what sanctification looks like, the first thing he mentions is abstaining from sexual immorality.

Our cultural moment is no exception. Sexual immorality has always been prevalent and the temptation for believers to let it have a hold in their lives has always been great. But we must not give way to it. So, let me plead with us this morning to avoid sexual immorality. Do not watch lustful images, stay away from pornography, give yourself to your spouse alone, and don't be drawn in to seeing sexual immorality as normal and acceptable, no matter how much our culture pushes this. It always has. But the Bible is clear—the sexually immoral will not inherit the kingdom of God. Let us turn from it this morning.

Brothers and sisters, the Christian race is not a race we run alone. The Lord has called us to himself and to one another. He lived and died for you and for your brothers and sisters. Therefore, let us this morning lift our eyes beyond ourselves. Strive for peace with everyone and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. Watch over others, and let's commit to make it our aim that no one fails to obtain the grace of God, that no unrepentant sin and rebellion takes root, and that sexual immorality is never seen as acceptable among us. And as we labor in these things together, may we glory in the fact that the Lord has not only saved us but made us part of a glorious people—a family—who will resound to his glory. Let us give him thanks for that now as we come to the table. Amen.