

The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 45 June 12, 2022

Strive for Holiness and Peace

Hebrews 12:12-17

Introduction

Verses 12-13 actually summarize what we've been reading in Hebrews 12 so far, especially keying off of *"Let us run the race that is set before us with endurance."* The A.H. is telling his readers to take comfort and strength from God who has been disciplining His children as they have run that race, but their endurance is weakened by the onslaught and potential of persecution they now face and have run "through." Though *"their struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood..."* (Heb. 12:4) [as Jesus did] is implied.

They needed, therefore, to be encouraged despite their circumstances. It is not time to waver or wobble in our path to be with Christ. Even if there is present pain, the author has described for them the purpose behind it and the long-term gain coming as a result of their obedience and "subjection" to *"the Father of spirits"* so they may live (Heb. 9b). The disciplinary measures God is taking should be embraced as proof of God's love. We are prone to apostasy when deep discouragement sets in – so we must get strength back in our arms and bolster our weak knees to stay on the proper path. *"It is God working in you to will and to do His good pleasure."* (Phil. 2:13).

Walk a Straight Path

vv. 12-13

Psalm 119 is a storehouse of very important advice for the believer. In its 176 verses, many well-known bromides are presented, all based on the veracity and efficacy of God's Word. Some of these passages apply to the type of walk believers are to take on the narrow path God has set us on: Ps. 119:9-11, 33-37, 67-72, 73-77, 105-112, 156, 169-176. Psalm 119 is not cited in this Hebrews passage, but certainly the tenor of its theme is present here for the author's congregation.

While the author does not appeal to any particular verse in Psalm 119, he does allude to Isaiah 35:3-8. In Isaiah, these words are associated with Israel's discouragement and wounded spirit. The entire chapter is one of promise and encouragement (let's read the whole chapter). The days of their exile will end, and v. 10 is the crescendo.

It is, of course, not an exact parallel, but the sense of great encouragement the A.H. is giving to his readers is for them to look to Jesus (12:2) as they run with endurance, because what awaits them is the promised final blessings of the kingdom as expressed in the New Covenant (Hebrew 8). The race is far from over, and there will be pitfalls, for which they will need strength and endurance to overcome, but at the end – great joy is set before them – and a city built by God's hands – cf. Heb. 11:16,39,40.

Verse 13 now alludes to Proverbs 4:26-27. Jesus taught about a broad way and a narrow way (Matt. 7:13-14), and here, the A.H. adds to what he said in v. 12 – once you are strengthened, stay on the right path - head in the right direction, as Isaiah 35:8 says, *“even if they are fools, they shall not go astray.”* This path is one of righteousness and holiness and it is grounded by trust in God and His Word – because we must continually feed on Him for our strength and healing. Isaiah 35:6 also seems to be alluded to here – re: the lame. Hebrews seems to be picking up on the figurative meaning of this verse – “Those who are spiritually lame will find healing if they continue to follow Jesus.”¹ Paul’s similar instruction reads like this, *“Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.”* (Eph. 5:15-16).

Strive for Holiness

v. 14

As you can well imagine, and your Bible reading bears out – our holiness is a huge topic in both the OT and the NT! Referring to Hebrews 12:14, Art Azurdia comments; “Strive for ...the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). Holiness, then, is not a matter of secondary importance; something for intermittent consideration. Rather, it is the *sine qua non* of authentic Christian spirituality – the one thing without which nothing else matters.

Let us be more definitive at this point. God does not desire a moral people; He desires a holy people. You ask: ‘Is there really a difference between the two?’ There is most certainly. It is the difference between the Pharisees – the most zealous of the parties of ancient Judaism during the late Second Temple period – and the Lord Jesus Christ. They were moral; He was holy. Morality is the negative concept, in that it defines itself in terms of what one refrains from doing. Its preoccupation is almost exclusively with externals. Holiness, by contrast, is the positive and holistic concept. While encompassing externals, its reach is far more penetrating and comprehensive. One may describe the difference as follows: the moral person abstains from wrong actions...the holy person hates the very thought of wrongdoing. The moral person is preoccupied by what people perceive him to be...the holy person is consumed with what God wants him to be. The moral person mindlessly adheres to a cold list of dos and don’ts...the holy person ponders what brings pleasure to his heavenly Father. The moral person keeps a meticulous record of his good deeds, expecting by them to win the favor of God...the holy person grieves that nothing he ever does, even for God, is altogether free of sinful and selfish motive. Thus he recognizes every blessing from God is an expression of pure grace. The moral person lives by a self-determined definition of right and wrong and delights to impose it upon other people...the holy person yields to the Word of God as the final authority, which, in turn, compels him to guard the silences of the Bible, and, therefore, honor the freedoms these allow among those who serve the same Savior.”²

And William Arnot commenting from Proverbs, regarding this verse in Hebrews 12:14;

“Its theme throughout is righteousness, the fruit of faith. We who live under the Christian dispensation should beware of a fatal mistake in our conception of its continuing characteristic.

¹ T. Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 388

² Art Azurdia III, Connected Christianity, Christian Focus, 2009, pp. 34-35

The gospel is not a method of bringing men to heaven without righteousness, or with less of it than was demanded in ancient times. The actual holiness of his creatures is the end of the Lord in all his dispensations, as certain as fruit is the object of the husbandman when he plants, and waters, and grafts his trees. The death of Christ for sin is the divine plan, not for dispensing with obedience from men, but for effectually obtaining it. Reconciliation is the road to righteousness. God proclaims pardon and bestows peace, that the rebels may submit and serve him. They who feel more at ease in their alienation because they have heard that Christ gave himself for sinners, are trampling underfoot the blood of the covenant. Alas! Even God's dear Son is made the stumbling-block over which men fall blindfolded. A vague impression comes in and possesses a corrupt heart, that personal holiness is in some way less needful under the reign of grace. God is my witness, I have not...taught that men should try *their* own obedience, instead of trusting in the savior for the free pardon of sin; but I have taught often, and once more tenderly repeat the lesson here. That those who do not like the obligation to obedience, have no part yet in forgiving grace.

The whole world consists of two classes, different in many things from each other but alike in this, that both are obliged to labour all their days: they are those who serve sin, and those who fight against it. Both experience pain and weariness; sin is a hard master, and a formidable foe. If you do its bidding, you are a miserable drudge; if you war against it, you will receive many wounds in the conflict. It would be hard to tell whether of the two is the more wearied – the carnal who obeys the flesh, or the spiritual who crucifies it. Both are compelled to labour. Both are weary: the one is weary by sinning, and the other weary of sin. One of these strifes will soon be over: the other will never cease. If sin be your antagonist, there will soon be peace; for sin cannot be taken wholly away from you, you will ere long be taken away from sin. But if sin be, and till death abide, your master, there is no deliverance from the yoke.”³

“Holiness is in essence obeying God, living to and for God, imitating God, keeping his law, taking his side against sin, doing righteousness, performing good works, following Christ's teaching and example, worshipping God in Spirit, loving and serving God and men out of reverence for Christ.”⁴

As we run the race, we are now bidden to pursue 2 specific goals, to strive - 1) *“for peace with everyone”*, and 2) *“for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”* So, our relationship with other people and our own relationship with God and His law are noted here.

This verse, at first blush, is quite scary, because it appears to teach that these are conditions applying to our salvation. This verse, is, on its own merits, a mini-warning passage that brings us to attention after the precious words of encouragement. The author will explain it in vv. 15-17 to show us how it can be missed or even rejected, but here is where our theology and Bible study help us to realize that, though we are

³ William Arnot, cited by Mark Dever, *Twelve Challenges Churches Face*, Crossway, 2008, pp. 62-63

⁴ JI Packer, cited in Christopher Morgan & Justin McClendon; *Biblical Spirituality*, Crossway, 2019, pg. 41

commanded to strive for peace and holiness, or risk not seeing the Lord, God will empower us to achieve our goal.

The thing we must keep in mind to rightly interpret a verse like this one is that “our justification does not rest on our good works, it results in our good works!”⁵ Like all the warning passages in Hebrews (4 are completed, and there is yet one to come – in Heb. 12:25-29), we must consider that they are for believers and express the stern warning not to stray from the path God has placed us on. If we do stray, we risk it all – we expose our lack of true justification if we commit apostasy.

Think of all the verses that express danger if we do not complete our race of endurance⁶ in the NT: Matt. 6:15; 7:22-23; MK 13:13; JN 5:28-29; Rom. 2:7; 8:13; I Cor. 15:1-2; Gal. 6:8-9; Heb. 3:6,14; 10:39; Jas. 1:12; 2:17; I JN 1:7; 2:4; 3:14 and Revelation 2:10.

John Piper comments again;

“What these texts teach is that there is a holiness – a real, childlike, Christ-dependent, God-glorifying, joyful way of life that leads to eternal life without which we would perish. Or, to put it another way, saving faith is of such a nature that it is authenticated by a life of holiness, NOT perfection. But a real change of heart and attitude, and action that shows Christ has become the Lord and Savior and treasure of one’s life.”⁷

Piper adds;

“This necessity for holiness does not undermine our assurance or our eternal security, because God has committed Himself to hold fast all those who are His.”⁸ Note these passages; Jer. 32:40; JN 10:27-30; Rom. 8:30; I Cor. 1:8-9; 15:10; Phil. 1:6; 3:12; Col. 1:29; Heb. 7:25; 13:20-21; I Pet. 1:5; I JN 2:19; Jude 24-25.

God has promised to keep those He has saved – right to the end, right to our glorification and then throughout eternity. II Peter 1:10 says “*be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election,*” after 5 verses of explaining how to be diligent. Verse 10 is not telling us that our action of confirmation is our diligence itself is the decisive fact in preserving us for heaven. It is God’s action of preservation of His elect that is decisive, as our last group of verses consistently point out. Our perseverance in faith, and our striving for peace and holiness is God’s preservation at work in us.

The first exhortation of v. 14 is to “*strive for peace with everyone.*” Those who seek the Lord will be at peace with others, and we are enjoined in both the OT and NT to try to be at peace with others. Note Ps. 34:14 and Rom. 12:18 as 2 good examples. Another one in Jesus’ words is found in the Sermon on the Mount – Matt. 5:9. Peace is also associated with being merciful in Matt. 18:21-35 & 5:7. So, based on these passages

⁵ John Piper, Expository Exultation, Crossway, p. 250

⁶ Piper, Expository, p. 243-245

⁷ Piper, p. 245

⁸ IBID, p. 245

and others, what should the demeanour of a Christian be in relation to other believers? Non-believers?

The second exhortation of Heb. 12:14 is to *“strive for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”* We have already discussed this aspect of the verse over the last couple of pages of notes, but it is such a critical point that it bears more scrutiny. Piper has had some good comments, as does Christopher W. Morgan (I have not quoted from him here), but J.C. Ryle, in his late 19th century classic, “Holiness”, has some great advice for believers, especially on this verse, make use of his advice consisting of 12 points and two quotes, where he explains the nature of true, practical holiness;

- a.) “ Holiness is the habit of being of one mind with God, according as we find His mind described in Scripture.
- b.) A holy man will endeavor to shun every known sin, and to keep every commandment,
- c.) A holy man will strive to be like our Lord Jesus Christ.
- d.) A holy man will follow after meekness, longsuffering, gentleness, patience, kind tempers, government of his tongue. He will bear much, forbear much, overlook much and be slow to talk of standing on his rights.
- e.) A holy man will follow after temperance and self-denial.
- f.) A holy man will follow after charity and brotherly kindness.
- g.) A holy man will follow after a spirit of mercy and benevolence towards others.
- h.) A holy man will follow after purity of heart. He will dread all filthiness and uncleanness of spirit, and seek to avoid all things that might draw him into it. He knows that his own heart is like tinder, and will diligently keep clear of the sparks of temptation.
- i.) A holy man will follow after the fear of God.
- j.) A holy man will follow after humility. He will desire, in lowliness of mind, to esteem others better than himself.
- k.) A holy man will follow after faithfulness in all the duties and relations in life.
- l.) Last but not least, a holy man will follow after spiritual-mindedness. He will endeavor to set his affections entirely on things above, and to hold things of earth with a loose hand.”⁹

“I do not say for a moment that holiness shuts out the presence of indwelling sin. No, far from it. It is the greatest misery of a holy man that he carries about with him a ‘body of death’; that often ‘when he would do good, evil is present with him’; that the old man is clogging all his movements and, as it were, trying to draw him back at every step he takes (Rom. 7:21). But it is the excellence of a holy man that that he is not at peace with indwelling sin, as others are. He hates it, mourns over it and longs to be free from its company. The work of sanctification within him is like the wall of Jerusalem – the building goes forward, ‘even in troubled times’ (Dan. 9:25).”¹⁰

⁹ JC Ryle, *Holiness, Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties and Roots*, Evangelical Press, 1879, 2001, PP. 34-37

¹⁰ Ryle, p. 37

“I do not understand how a man can be a true believer unto whom sin is not the greatest burden, sorrow and trouble.”¹¹

I realize this is already an extensive quote from Ryle, but I must indulge in one more array of 8 points, which helps us understand the importance of holiness.

- a.) “For one thing, we must be holy, because the voice of God in Scripture plainly commands it.
- b.) We must be holy, because this is the one grand end purpose for which Christ came into the world.
- c.) We must be holy, because this is the only sound evidence that we have a saving faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.
- d.) We must be holy, because this is the only proof that we love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.
- e.) We must be holy, because this is the only sound evidence that we are true children of God.
- f.) We must be holy, because this is the most likely way to do good to others.
- g.) We must be holy, because our present comfort depends much upon it.
- h.) Lastly, we must be holy, because without holiness on earth we shall never be prepared to enjoy heaven.” – cf. Rev. 21:27.”¹²

These words by David Wells are very helpful:

“The real question is how deep - or how shallow - is our desire to know God? We need to begin by asking what is at stake? What might we be in danger of losing amid the noise and the frenzy of our modernized societies here in the West? We are in danger of being squeezed into the mold of the modernized world with its low horizons of knowing, its relativism, and its superficiality. This threatens our identity as knowers of God, those for whom He is the center, for whom His holy-love defines what moral reality is, and before whom we stand. It threatens how we see life and how we live in the world. It threatens all of that.

Recognizing this danger, we need to carve out space for ourselves in which we can daily attend to God’s Word, to study it, mark it, learn it and inwardly digest its truth. This truth must shape our whole understanding of life as we recognize from whom this truth comes and why God has thus given it to us. This must take precedence even at the cost of phones, the Internet, emails, texts, TV, Facebook, music and all other ways that our technology wires us into a major competitor for our time and attention. Innocent though these things may be, they stand in the way of our knowing God if they steal from us the time we need for that pursuit...(Re: Ps. 119:11). That is what we need to do and where we need to be every day. This will happen only if we are deliberate about it and are willing to give up whatever stands in our way to this end.”¹³

¹¹ Ryle, p. 38

¹² Ryle, p. 39-42

¹³ David Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, Eerdmans, 1994; Pg. 185-186

As you can probably tell, I believe it is impossible to over-emphasize the importance of this verse. So much of the OT and NT instruction to believers is captured in it. But having said all this, we must move on to vv. 15-17.

Do Not Imitate Esau!

vv. 15-17

This verse (v. 15) alludes to Deut. 29:18-19. The context in Deuteronomy has to do with those who abandon the true God and worship idols. Obviously, the A.H. is concerned that his readers are in danger of falling into that same type of temptation. He is telling them that, should they abandon Christ, they will expose themselves to God's judgment. If they leave Christ, they will become defiled. The word "defiled", when used in the OT, is often translated "unclean" – sometimes ceremonially, and sometimes morally. Here in Hebrews, as the illustration that follows this verse confirms, it is moral. This 'root of bitterness' is not a matter of taste, but of spiritual death – a deadly poison.

The author illustrates this from the OT in the person of Esau, Jacob's brother, and though we might ask, "Why Esau?", the author's strongly chastises what he did, using it as a warning/example of those who exercise what vv. 14-15 tell us. There is an in-house evangelical debate regarding the phrase "*sexually immoral or unholy like Esau*." The complaint from some good theologians regards the "*sexually immoral*" aspect of the phrase. Where, they argue, was Esau ever reported to be sexually immoral? Due to the bigger stories within Esau's life, especially the last part of his life, especially the last part of v. 16 (Gen. 25:29-34), "who sold his birthright for a single meal.", what is overlooked is Gen. 28:6-9 (cf. 27:46) and Gen. 26:34.

Here in genesis 28, Esau, contrary to the wishes of his mother and father, and in direct contradiction to Isaac's blessing to Esau – not recorded in the blessing text of Gen. 37:39-40), is the place where a form of sexual immorality took place.

Thomas Schreiner comments:

"But how was Esau sexually immoral? Perhaps in his decision to marry Hittite women (Gen. 26:34). His lack of concern for holy things is evident in his disdain for his birthright. It was so trivial to him that he sold it for one meal (Gen. 25:29-34), and hence, he "despised his birthright" (Gen. 25:34). God did not take Esau's blessing from him; Esau traded it away. And God let him bear the consequences of his action." Schreiner now cites H. Koester, "Esau gave up the promise in order to ease his physical discomfort. Listeners might consider giving up the promise in order to erase their social discomfort."¹⁴

So, the A.H., having provided an illustration, is imploring his listeners not to commit the same sinful errors as Esau. Esau's sin was the result of a bitter root of jealousy and anger at his father for allowing himself to be duped by Jacob. We must not

¹⁴ Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 392

forsake the promise of the gospel for some temporary ease in our own culture and situation. If we do, we have chosen to take a profane attitude about life, pursuing carnal cravings of all sorts, sexual and otherwise – a mere glance at the world we live in will reveal that our culture has built on the foundations of worldliness and sin – the sensual and the godless. John warns us in I JN 2:15-17.

The consequences (v. 17) of despising his birthright are now explained by the author. Later, after trading his birthright for a bowl of Jacob's stew, as Isaac was near death and wanted to dole out his blessings to his two sons (blessings are different from birthrights), Esau's blessing was lost due to the deception of Jacob and his mother (Gen. 27, especially vv.32-41). As a result, as God had prophesied to Rebekah (Gen. 25:23) – Jacob the younger brother, would be master of the elder, Esau.

The most troubling and important part of verse 17 here is the last half of the verse; *“afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.”* This should not be considered in the abstract, as if Esau was a victim of some unfortunate providence, because it does not appear that he ever recognized his own culpability for his actions, or the depth of his guilt – Gen. 27:36,41. What he really wanted was to reclaim his forfeited blessing as firstborn.

Although Scripture clearly states that just as faith is a gift of God, so is repentance (cf. Acts 11:18; 5:31; II Tim. 2:25; Rom. 8:7-8,24 and Ezek. 36:27). Yet, men are called on – no, better – commanded to repent, and are considered guilty when they fail to do so. So, this verse is not blaming God for condemning an Esau who truly wanted to repent from his self-centered wickedness.

Schreiner is again helpful here regarding Esau's desire to repent; *“It is unclear what Esau sought. The pronoun “it” could refer to either repentance or the blessing since both are feminine nouns. The HCSB could be read as if he sought for repentance since it is the nearest antecedent to the pronoun “it.” It is more likely, however, that he sought the blessing. The NIV is probably on target, “Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.” (cf. also NET, NRSV). “It was his loss, not his profanity that he mourned. Even if the reference is to repentance rather than to blessing, the meaning doesn't change greatly since repentance was the means to obtain the blessing. Esau wanted the blessing, but the time had passed. The author isn't saying that God doesn't allow people to repent even if they wish to. His point is that the time passed when Esau could repent, and he doesn't want the same to happen to the readers.”*

Schreiner again cites Helmut Koester,

“This passage is designed to awaken people to the danger, not to make them give up hope. Warning is the counterpart to promise: both pertain to the future. Warnings disturb people, while promises encourage them, but together they serve the same end, which is encouraging people to persevere in faith.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Schreiner, p. 393

Esau's contempt for his birthright alongside his disobedience to his parents regarding taking foreign wives, had consequences for him spiritually which could not be reversed. He lost, irretrievably, his blessings as the firstborn in an earthly setting. Those whom the A.H. is addressing with this reminder of Esau were in danger of forfeiting their place in "the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven." (Heb. 12:23).¹⁶

His was not a "godly grief, which produces repentance leading to salvation, but worldly grief which produces death." (I Cor. 7:10). It was his loss, not his profanity, that he mourned after. He continues to be a prime example of the impossibility of restoring again to repentance those who have rebelliously sinned against the light."¹⁷

¹⁶ Philip E. Hughes, Hebrews, p. 541

¹⁷ IBID, p. 541