

Duties and Dangers

Hebrews 12:14-17

Introduction

The chapter began with an illustration; our Christian walk is like a contest, like a race that we run (vv.1-4). We run the spiritual race that God has marked out for us; we fix our eyes on Jesus; he is the starting line, he is the finish line. Jesus endured the opposition of sinners, died on the cross; and did it for the joy that was set before Him, and is now seated on the right hand of God. Next the writer spoke of chastening—discipline and the need to accept God’s discipline in our lives; to prove we are children and to prove His love. Discipline produces righteousness and peace (v.11).

Now the author of Hebrews presents a series of challenges. We are to pursue peace (v.14a) and we are to seek to live a clean and holy life (v.14b). We are to be on guard against bitterness and unbelief (v.15). The sad and tragic story of Esau is given as an example of what not to do. Esau was immoral (v.16a) and godless (v.16b) and despised his birthright (v.16c-17). Later in the chapter the writer will present a contrast between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion (vv.18-24); and another word of caution about the terrible consequences of unbelief (vv.25-27).

What is the writer of Hebrews trying to tell his reader? God’s discipline leads to holy living and this in turn leads to harmony in our world.

Our Great Duties As Believers (v.14)

Hebrews 12:14 (NKJV) 14 Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord:

The followers of Jesus pursue peace. We are to be peace-makers; not peace-fakers or peace breakers or trouble-makers. The context includes the idea of peace in the midst of persecution. With all people. Even the people who are trying to hurt you? The Hebrew Christians were under enormous pressure to defect from faith in Christ and return to Judaism.

When you are hurt or afraid or in pain you are vulnerable and at risk to abandon peace and reject holiness. Living in peace does not mean surrendering truth or abandoning Biblical convictions.

Matthew Henry: “Peace is such a precious jewel that I would give anything for it but truth.”

The word translated ‘pursue’ or follow (diokete) means to run after; follow hard, chase after, and pursue. In law enforcement in an effort to capture a criminal we use the term ‘hot pursuit’. We rarely think about the acquisition of peace and holiness as an aggressive pursuit.

We sometimes sing about it—“to know and follow hard after you—to grow as your disciples in the truth; this world is empty pale and cold compared to knowing you my Lord”.

The Pursuit Of Peace

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We pursue peace. We want to be civil and kind courteous and respectful. We recognize and comply with legitimate cultural customs; we do not pick fights. Christians are not given special permissions to be rude or unkind. Jesus was gracious patient and kind—thoughtful and tactful.

Paul wrote to the Romans (5:1) “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

We enjoy peace with God and the peace of God. Billy Graham called this ‘lasting peace. . . peace with God—peace among men and nations—and peace within our hearts.’”

The Pursuit Of Holiness

We live in harmony and we live in holiness.

In broad terms there are two kinds of holiness; one positional the other practical.

All who are in Christ Jesus are *holy—set apart*.

The writer of Hebrews have already described true believers as “holy brethren” (3:1). Positional sanctification refers to our position in Christ—we are set apart by God to Christ. This is why the New Testament calls us “saints” (see 1 Cor. 1:2; Col. 1:2).

John Phillips writes; “But our daily conduct may not be in keeping with our divine calling, so we are to “follow after,” that is , actively pursue sanctification. By deliberate choice, we are to seek cleansing from daily defilement. We are to deliberately choose those things that make for godliness. Pursuing practical sanctification is the proof that we possess positional sanctification” (p. 181).

Jerry Bridges wrote a whole book about the pursuit of holiness. “To be holy is to be morally blameless. It is to be separated from sin and, therefore, consecrated to God. The word signifies “separation to God, and the conduct befitting those so separated.”

That’s exactly right.

F.F. Bruce; “Christian holiness is not a matter of painstaking conformity to the individual precepts of an external law code; it is rather a question of the Holy Spirit’s producing His fruit in the life, reproducing those graces which were seen in perfection in the life of Christ.”

Our Great Dangers As Believers (vv.15-17)

15looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled;

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The writer of Hebrews uses the expression ‘looking carefully’ or the KJV; ‘looking diligently’ (episkopountes)—watch; take oversight—to see something—a warning—the emphasis is on the critical nature or the dangers associated with neglecting or ignoring what you are seeing. **There are dangers when we neglect peace and holiness.**

The writer of Hebrews reminds us of God’s grace. He will visit the subject again in verse 28 as the writer contrasts the Moses and Christ; Sinai and Mount Zion; the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. In brief—when the Law was given at Sinai it was given in fear and terror; the mountain was covered in smoke and fire. When God spoke—people trembled. But we have an experience in the Lord Jesus Christ—who is our life—our peace—our holiness—our priest—our home—our fellowship.

What is the grace of God? Remember—it is the kindness of God; the favor of God. But God’s kindness and favor is different from ordinary kindness and favor—and is given absent merit; undeserved. God does what is unheard of—imparts grace in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace—involves giving to people who do not deserve the gift.

What does grace do? It gives us the opportunity to be saved; from sin, from the condemnation and punishment we deserve because of our sin.

How do we fall short of the grace of God? We neglect, we ignore, we despise the opportunity for salvation! The Lord God does not compel—or force His love on anyone! **Does God force people to be saved?** The answer seems to be no! Sinful human beings are allowed the opportunity by their own free will and choice to embrace God’s gracious offer of salvation or reject that offer.

And what is the danger? The danger might be that people accept the invitation to join a church, or be baptized or profess Christ or become religious or attempt to change their ways—but fail—fail to lay hold of grace of God in Christ—fail to experience a true change of heart and mind and soul.

Paul writes (Rom.3:24) “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”.

“In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7)

“By God who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, (5) even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)”(Eph.2:4-5).

What is the danger?

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What is the danger of falling from grace? In the context of the passage—this is not a person who runs the risk of losing salvation but rather a but a believer who refuses to avail himself or herself of the means of grace.

The believer who neglects or ignores the means of grace through neglecting the word—and fellowship and relationship—does not lose their salvation but their reward.

The unbeliever—the make believer—the bitter apostate—does not avail himself or herself of the grace—

We fall short of salvation by neglecting or rejecting God's gracious invitation to be saved. We instead cultivate ". . .*any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble*"

The key is any root—any cause—of bitterness towards Christ and the Gospel.

Bitterness can be caused by any thing or any person who has failed us or brought disappointment or trouble our way!

“Apostasy is a root of bitterness” (MacDonald; p.2205).

Instead of of peace or holiness some people pursue (with passion) bitterness.

Are you bitter towards Christ or the gospel? Are you disappointed in a person or a church? Do you feel slighted, neglected, overlooked? Has accident or disease or mistreatment or loss soured you—embittered you darkened your world?

People who are bitter are often sharp, critical, resentful, cynical, cold, harsh, stressful, intense, relentless, unpleasant.

The bitter person is reluctant to keep their bitterness to themselves.

In the book of Acts we read about a confrontation that Peter has with a man called Simon the Sorcerer or Simon Magus. According to the book of Acts (chapter 8:12) Simon believed Philip's preaching and was baptized—and watched in amazement the manifestation of signs and miracles. There was prayer to receive the Holy Spirit and when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostle's hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money (v.18) and saying “Give me this power also that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit”.

Peter told him “your money perish with you, because you thought the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God”. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity” (vv.21-23).

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What does the Lord desire? The Lord desires that we be filled with love, joy, peace, holiness not bitterness.

16lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright.

The word fornicator is a broad terms which describes anyone who is sexually immoral.

This means any sexual expression outside of marriage.

The point—apostasy—immorality—and bitterness are closely connected.

“A professing Christian may fall into gross moral sin. Instead of acknowledging his guilt, he blames the Lord and falls away. Apostasy and sexual sin are connected in 2 Peter 2:10,14,18 and Jude 8, 16, 18” (MacDonald p. 2205).

What does it mean to be a profane person?

We are kind of familiar with the word ‘profanity’.

The word (bebelos) means the opposite of holy—unhallowed—absent holiness—sensual—neglectful of spiritual things. It came to mean coarse or rude. But in its essence it means to neglect spiritual things and embrace sensual things.

The Example Of Esau

What is the point of Esau’s example?

Esau had no real appreciation of his birthright!

He was willing to let it go for a momentary satisfaction.

In that culture the eldest son was given a double portion. Remember Esau and Jacob were twins. Isaac could not reverse the blessing. Esau had no real regard for the spiritual values embraced by Abraham and Isaac.

The story of Esau is found in Genesis 27:1-46. Most of us know the story. Isaac was 137 and believed he was close to death (he would live to be 180!). His impatience to impart the blessing to Esau suggests that Isaac was following his own plans rather than God’s plans. Do you remember the prophecy; (Gen.25:23) “Two nations are in your womb, Two peoples shall be separated from your your body; one people shall be stronger than the other, And the older shall serve the younger”.

Rebekah had been told by God that Jacob would receive God’s blessing; but schemed and plotted to make sure that Esau was left out. Instead of going to God in prayer as she had years before; she depended on her own plans. She would pay for that sin. She would never see Jacob alive

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again after the incident. Esau deliberately acted to hurt her—and her bad example would cost Jacob 20 years of trial.

There was a time in Isaac's life he was willing to pick up a stack of wood and allow himself to be offered on the altar of God; there was a time when Isaac was willing to die for the Lord. Both Rebecca and Jacob knew God's promise for Jacob's life but was not willing to allow God to work his plans his way.

Esau was tricked. He sought the blessing with tears—but there was no real place for repentance for his sins. Remorse—yes—repentance no. He was sorry for his loss—not for what he had done. In the account in Genesis 27:33 Isaac trembled when he realized that God had overruled Isaac's plans to impart the blessing to the elder instead of the younger. Esau's tears could not change Isaac's mind or God's plans. Esau—retaliated by plotting to murder his brother, and deliberately hurt his parents by his marriage to heathen wives.

“The grace of God did not fail, but Esau failed the grace of God. Sin in the home always brings heartache and misunderstanding. Had Isaac and Rebekah not “taken sides” with their two boys; had they continued to pray about matters in their early married life; had they allowed God to have His way; then affairs would have been different. As it was, all of them suffered because of their unbelief and disobedience. We never get too old to be tempted—or to fail” (see Wiersbe's Outlines on the Old Testament; pp. 61-62).

“So it is with the apostate. He has no real regard for spiritual values. He willingly renounces Christ in order to escape reproach, suffering, or martyrdom. He cannot be renewed to repentance. There may be remorse but no godly repentance” (MacDonald p. 2205).

Our Birthright In Christ

We are “in” Christ.

17For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.

The key to understanding the verse is in the word “it”. “. . . though he sought it” there are two possibilities—did Esau seek “repentance” and was denied repentance or did Esau seek the blessing and was denied the blessing?

Esau wanted to inherit the blessing. Not so much the blessing—of being the priest in his family. He cared little about being the instrument of God to bring Christ into this world. **Esau wanted the property. But he did not want the promise of the Messiah.**

The principle remains; the believer who throws away spiritual opportunities to indulge carnal desire will pay—a dear price in the end. Believers pursue peace and holiness. The

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unbeliever and the make believer will be content with carnality—apostasy—bitterness—unbelief.

Someone once said that the world does not so much need a definition of religion as much as a demonstration.

A religion that costs nothing does nothing. Your true religion is the life you live, not simply the creed or belief you profess.

Do you love Jesus? Do you follow Jesus? Do you pursue peace and holiness? Do you see Jesus as the bread of life or a cake for special occasions?

Conclusion

The Hebrews would have been familiar with Moses' command (Deuteronomy 29:18);

“so that there may not be among you man or woman or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the Lord our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations, and that there may not be among you a root bearing bitterness or wormwood;”

19 “and so it may not happen, when he hears the words of this curse, that he blesses himself in his heart, saying, ‘I shall have peace, even though I follow the dictates of my heart—as though the drunkard could be included with the sober’ !

Will you trade spiritual things for earthly things?

How long will you substitute regret or remorse for repentance? Remember repentance always involves a change of mind and a change of heart and a change of life.