

Hebrews

Hebrews 12:15-17 – Guard Against the Enemies of Holiness March 14, 2010

I. The Christian's Wise Response to God's Discipline

- A. **Hebrews 12:15-17** . . . See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; [16] that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. [17] For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.
- B. Last week we talked about the wisdom of doing our part in cooperating with God's training process so as to make it easier on ourselves. And we talked about how (1) pursuing peace with all men and (2) diligently pursuing the process of sanctification affects our whole life by nurturing holiness in almost every other area of our lives.
- C. This week, God makes it clear how important it is to guard against the enemies of holiness so that we continue to move forward instead of falling backward.
- D. Prayer

II. Guard Against The Enemies of Holiness

- A. See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God
 - 1. The "**see to it**" part of this verse can also be understood as "do your best" or "take charge as if in an oversight position and make sure it gets done." This is a serious directive from God that we as individuals and as a church are to give zealous attention to.
 - 2. The "**no one**" part of this verse means just what it says – no one!
 - 3. The "**comes short**" part can also be interpreted as:
 - a. **fall back** – as in fall back from a position already attained, or
 - b. **fail to arrive in time** – as in getting to a desired destination (i.e., a store or restaurant) after it is closed.
 - 4. I suspect we already know that this "**come short**" language here in this verse is not the first time God addresses this issue. In fact, He cautions us about this issue in other scriptures outside the book of Hebrews and **five** specific times in Hebrews, including this one.

These five statements in Hebrews contain several important points that we dare not ignore, but I want to remind us of just two.

- a. **First**, growth in godliness is opposed by an enemy that **never** rests – which means we must **always** be on guard so that this enemy does not overpower us and gain the victory.
 - b. **Second**, guarding against the enemy of godliness is both an individual responsibility and a corporate responsibility. God tells us to individually maintain vigilance for the safety of our soul, and He tells us to corporately maintain vigilance for the safety and purity of the whole body.
5. Listen for these two truths that we dare not ignore as I read through the five statements God makes here in Hebrews about coming short of the grace of God.
- a. **Hebrews 3:12-13** . . . Take care, brethren, that there not be in **any one of you** an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. [13] But **encourage one another** day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.
 - b. **Hebrews 4:1-2** . . . Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, **any one of you** may seem to have come short of it. [2] For indeed **we** have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard.
 - c. **Hebrews 10:23-27** . . . Let **us** hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; [24] and let us consider how to stimulate **one another** to love and good deeds, [25] not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. [26] For if **we** go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, [27] but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.
 - d. **Hebrews 10:35-39** . . . Therefore, do not throw away **your** confidence, which has a great reward. [36] For **you** have need of endurance, so that when **you** have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. [37] For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay. [38] But my **righteous one** shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back,

My soul has no pleasure in him. [39] But **we** are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.

- e. **Hebrews 12:15-17** . . . See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; [16] that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. [17] For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.
- 6. Continuing on with verse 15 – the words “**grace of God**” speak of His saving and keeping or preserving grace.
 - a. This is the grace that brought Israel into the Promised Land from Egypt and back to the Promised Land from captivity.
 - b. This is the grace which saves us in this life and brings us into God’s eternal presence in the next.
 - c. And this is the grace of God which the enemy of God wants us to miss out on – and that is why he is doing all he can to make us miss out on it or come short of it or arrive at the door too late – that is, after it is shut so as to shut us out eternally.
- 7. The most important point of what we have talked about so far is that of being personally active and corporately active in doing all we can on the human level to make sure we don’t miss out and that no one else who is part of the church misses out on God’s saving and keeping grace.
 - a. And though popular theology teaches us that “saving faith” is the only important factor in not missing out on God’s saving and keeping grace, God’s word makes it clear here in **Hebrews 12:15-17**, that godly living in this life is the other side of a two-sided coin – and therefore Godly living is equally vital in making certain we experience God’s saving and keeping grace.
 - b. Oh that we would value holiness as much as we value saving faith; that we would treat the necessity of sanctification as equal to the necessity of salvation; that we would be as serious and zealous in promoting holiness among believers as we are in promoting salvation among unbelievers.

- (1) Or to quote John Piper, for those who appreciate his teaching, “The proof of our pardon is in our passion for purity.”
 - (2) And to quote John Cassian, for those who appreciate the Church Fathers, “In vain, therefore, does someone strive for the vision of God who does not reject the contagion of vice.” Or to say it in modern English, there is no hope of seeing God without pursuing purity of heart and life.
 - c. If this were our mindset and condition and the mindset and condition of the church at large, there would be no need for revival – for we would be in a state of spiritual health and zeal that makes revival unnecessary.
- B. The next thing God says to us here in **Hebrews 12:15-17** is that there are three general enemies of holiness that we must guard against – bitterness, immorality, and godlessness.
1. See to it that no root of **bitterness** springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.
 - a. Bitterness is a feeling of unhappiness or anger leading to resentment or even hostility toward someone you find offensive, hurtful, or threatening to your sense of well-being.
 - b. For the Christian facing persecution, hardship, or suffering of any kind, it is tempting to blame God to the point of becoming bitter over the way He is treating you or over what He is allowing to happen to you. Such bitterness, when once it takes root in one Christian, spreads like cancer to any other Christian who is frustrated or hurt or angry over God’s dealings. It is in this way that bitterness toward God causes trouble and defiles many in the church.
 - c. For Christians in a local church, bitterness directed toward others in the church can take on a life of its own over almost anything that two or more believers can disagree on.
 - (1) As many of us know from experience, what starts as a criticism, small disagreement or difference of opinion can easily turn into a conflict that leads to dissension and division, which in turn can split the church. This is one significant reason God says that bitterness is an enemy of holiness which causes trouble and defiles many in the church.

- (2) Consider these petty disagreements and conflicts that have divided churches and driven Christians apart as if enemies: the color of the walls, the color of the drapes, one person being selected over another for a position of importance, pastors salary, dismissing or removing a church leader – be it a pastor or youth leader or some other person in leadership, theological differences on issues where the scripture is not clear – and this list could go on and on.
 - d. What God is saying here is that we – individually and corporately – must be on guard against bitterness toward God and bitterness against each other, because both kinds of bitterness do the kind of harm to the spiritual health of the individual and the church as a whole that could result in many coming short of the grace of God.
- 2. See to it that there be no **immoral** or **godless** person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal.
 - a. **Immorality** – The two most talked about competitors to God are money and sexual immorality – or we might say, financial security and physical pleasure. Why? Because so many of us are naturally attracted to one or both of them – and when we nurture or allow our attraction to sway us toward either of them, we end up worshiping them like the heathen worship idols.
 - (1) In our day, immorality is on the rise both in the world and in the church. We are not charged by God to stop the immorality in the world, but we are charged by Him to do all we can to keep immorality – of every conceivable kind and amount – out of the church.
 - (2) Why? Because immorality of any kind and to any degree requires rebellion against God and unfaithfulness to our spouse. It pollutes our mind, degrades our character, weakens our resolve to resist temptation, provides an open door for Satan to have access to our heart and mind, keeps our fleshly desires in a heightened state of sensuality, damages our marriages, brings sin into the church – thus polluting it and weakening its effectiveness, and hardens our heart to the voice of God and conviction of the Holy Spirit in this area of life.

- (3) And as with all sin, we don't start with the grosser expressions of immorality. We start with the smaller sins related to immorality and work our way up. In the same way, no Church sets out to build a membership of immoral Christians. Immorality creeps in via one or two or three individuals and like a cancer, their attitudes and beliefs and activities that make immorality acceptable to them, spreads.
 - (4) And so God is saying to us here in **Hebrews 12:16** – INDIVIDUALLY AND CORPORATELY MAKE EVERY EFFORT to keep immorality of any kind and to any degree out of each individual member of the church and out of the church as a whole so no one misses out on the grace of God.
- b. **Godlessness** – Esau's godlessness was manifested by his willingness to sell his birthright to satisfy a physical appetite (desire). He traded a blessing that was worth immeasurably more than a bowl of soup for immediate happiness and pleasure. And like most godless people, he ignored the future consequences of his present actions until it was too late.
- (1) When we talk about godlessness we tend to think of those who are without God or those who reject God and the Christian way.
 - (2) The truth is, we face a constant temptation to godlessness. However, we call it worldliness – and it is a serious and powerful enemy of holiness.
 - (3) God makes this clear in **I John 2:15-17** . . . Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. [16] For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. [17] The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.
 - (4) Like bitterness and immorality, worldliness creeps up on us and ensnares us by getting us to love its small or seemingly insignificant parts. But like cancer, worldliness is hard to contain and it will grow until it destroys us completely.

- (5) So here again, God speaks to us clearly and loudly concerning making every effort, as individuals and as a body of believers, to ward off the attacks of this enemy of holiness – because if we don't, it will gain the victory and not only prevent us from sharing in God's holiness, it will cause us to come short of the grace of God.
- C. Finally, in using Esau as an example, God lays out before us the consequences of failing to fight against these enemies of both our soul and the church.
 - 1. **Hebrews 12:17** . . For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.
 - a. As with the Noah and the Ark, and as with Esau and his blessing – so it is with the saving and keeping grace of God – once the door is shut there is no reopening it; there is no more opportunity to do what is right and enter in.
 - b. I believe one of the profound messages here for us is that we are to care enough about our own soul and the souls of those in the church with us that we do all we can to make sure no one is left standing outside when the door goes shut.
 - c. I am convinced there is nothing in this life that is worth being stuck outside the grace of God. If you don't believe this right now, you will believe it when it is too late! And what a heart-breaking loss that will be.

III. Conclusion

- A. Growth in godliness is opposed by an enemy that **never** rests – which means we must **always** be on guard so that this enemy does not overpower us and gain the victory.
- B. Guarding against the enemy of godliness is both an individual responsibility and a corporate responsibility. God tells us to individually maintain vigilance for the safety of our soul, and He tells us to corporately maintain vigilance for the safety and purity of the whole body.
- C. May this be the lesson we gain from God's word stated here in **Hebrews 12:15-17**.