

More on the Duty of Peace-making Holiness (Heb.12.15-24)

WestminsterReformedChurch.org

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8-30-2009

Hebrews 12:15-24 <sup>15</sup> See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; <sup>16</sup> that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. <sup>17</sup> For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. <sup>18</sup> For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest <sup>19</sup> and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. <sup>20</sup> For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." <sup>21</sup> Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." <sup>22</sup> But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, <sup>23</sup> and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, <sup>24</sup> and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Introduction

Our text this morning (Heb.12.15-24) follows immediately on the heels of the exhortation to strive after peace and holiness (12.14). These are strange words in our world: peace with all kinds of people, believers and unbelievers alike, and holiness that is required for entry into heaven. In 12.14, all the exhortations to perseverance in the book of Hebrews show up in a single short verse. In our passage for today, the author opens up this single short verse to give more detail to the duty to run the path of peace and holiness. Notably, there is no period at the end of verse 14; the grammar is such that the end of this verse is "a comma, not a full stop" (Hughes, 538). Picture the race track again: the runner is to look intensely at a person sitting beyond the finish line (that is 12.1-4), but he is also to look at the pathway that leads to the finish line, which is the path of peace and holiness (that is the point of 12.12-14). Now, leaving the image of athletic competition, the author directs our attention to an even closer look at the necessary duty of peace-making holiness. He does two things here overall: 1) he expands the duty in three ways by three "see to it that" clauses (15-17), and he grounds the duty in two "you have come" sections (one negative, you have not come, v. 18 and one positive, you have come, v. 22). So we have our outline for this message: first, the duty of peace-making holiness expanded and second, the duty of peace-making holiness grounded (expansion and basis or motivation).

1A. More on the duty of peace-making holiness [this duty expanded]

If we follow the "see to it that" phrases, we can identify and meditate on each point by peeling the onion one layer at a time. "See to it that" tells us that we are to give careful regard to these things; these are responsibilities that each of us has. We need to carefully pursue (and strive after) the things to which he points us. There is a blending here of corporate and individual responsibility. Each is a negative; each is something to avoid, but each implies something required.

1) First, we are to avoid failure

**See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God** (12.15). We are all to be on the look out for each other in the Christian family. A central danger for the Christians of the book of Hebrews is that of apostasy. Some, you will recall from earlier in the letter, may turn away from the living God (3.12). They are part of the professing church and participate as far as we can tell in the blessing of the new covenant, but they will hold firm to the end only if they are actually sharers in Christ (3.14). Some (some of them, some of us) may not enter eternal Sabbath rest that stands at the end of the journey through the wilderness and into the heavenly Canaan (4.1; **Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it**). Thus, obtaining the grace of God is a reference to obtaining the glory of heaven. This is not a warning about some minor weakness that may appear in the life of a Christian. It is far more serious and we should all take it to heart. The warning here is that some who make up part of the

fellowship of the saints may cut themselves off from the family and ultimately fail to enter the heavenly Canaan. All of us need to be attentive to this reality for ourselves and look out for one another. When some are in periods of weakness, the rest of us are to come to their aid by prayer and encouragement. See to it that you look carefully to your steps and be alert to the needs of the family on the journey that we are making together.

2) Second, we are to avoid bitterness

In the flow of thought we have: **See to it that...that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled (12.15).** The root of bitterness is an interesting point. It is not referring to a heart sin, say, of being bitter, at least, not directly. It refers to a *person* as we learn from the OT text that lies behind this passage (**Deuteronomy 29:18-19, <sup>18</sup> 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, <sup>19</sup> 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.' This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike**). Clearly and sadly, a member of the local church of Christ may turn out to be a false root that bears poisonous and bitter fruit. Note how such a person "blesses himself in his or her heart" by saying, **I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart** (Deut. 29.19). There is self-deception; he knows he is being stubborn, but tells himself that he will be safe nonetheless. What we do as individuals within the Christian family cannot be isolated from the family as a whole. If we persist in stubbornness, we are like a noxious root that causes trouble (Heb. 12.15) and can contaminate the whole crop. Our writer says that the person who is a root of bitterness may, by rebellion, defile many.

What is this defilement? It means to stain something or someone. Thus, it is moral defilement that leaves its mark and effect on people's lives. The effect may disturb the conscience (Tit.1.15) and it may involve opposition to authority and thus some form of autonomy (Jude 8). The bitter person is hardly a loving person; there is no warmth and love, no benefit to the good of the family, only moral staining (things are not neutral!). Do not be that kind of person; you will avoid being a bitter person, truly avoid it, only if you pound the path of peace and holiness looking to Jesus the author and finisher of your faith. Instead of dragging others down and instead of being dragged down by the unloving, you need to hold each other up; you need to seek mutual up building. See to it that you avoid being bitter.

3) Third, we are to avoid immorality

The last (third) "see to it that" clause brings up the example of Esau. His story is an example of a noxious weed. There are lessons to learn from His life; they are negative lessons, things to avoid. He is not an example of faith but of the unbeliever that displays the qualities of moral defilement. Thus, we have the duty to see to it that **no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. <sup>17</sup> For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears** (12.16-17).

The summons to avoid being "sexually immoral" like Esau speaks to the fact that he was literally a fornicator as well as spiritually defiled. He was a man of strong and uncontrolled passions. He took two foreign women as wives and made life bitter for his parents, Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 26). Esau is an illustration of how defilement of life affects others. There is a caution here to the church regarding sexual promiscuity that defiles the individuals involved and becomes a drag on those associated with them. They pull others in the direction of the same sin and they drag the faithful down with discouragement by draining away valuable emotional energy.

Furthermore, Esau was "unholy" (v. 16, a fornicator spiritually). Notably, his un-holiness is not something confined to a spiritual compartment of life separate from all else. He was unholy or irreligious with regard to his inheritance. The family inheritance comes by promise and it concerns temporal wealth and possessions. Accordingly, when he gave up his future inheritance for a morsel of food in the present (Gen. 25), he trampled on the promise, not just of his parents, but of God because God was at work in his family: the promise of an earthly

inheritance was a gospel promise of divine blessings. Even on the earthly plane where his eyes were fixated, Esau was a squanderer who sold the promise of the future for the momentary and fleeting satisfaction of his stomach. Earthly things are not evil in themselves; they become tools of evil when we place too high a value on them and fail to see them in relation to God. When we fail to hear God's word in all the realities of His creation and when we prize the momentary and fleeting over that which is abiding and eternal, we run the path of the unholy and conform our lives to the folly of Esau.

There is more to the story of Esau's negative example. After giving up his inheritance, he later found himself desiring it. Time changes things and for Esau, one of the changes was the poor health and desire on the part of his father Isaac to pronounce the blessing of the firstborn. But what occurred? Well, the writer reminds us of what we should know from the OT: **For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected** (12.17). This is a powerful statement: he was rejected. What he lost he lost forever. His unholy earth-centeredness and passion for momentary gratification of the flesh, whether by sex or food, had the consequence of irretrievably forfeiting his earthly inheritance. We should know this as a warning that we forfeit any heavenly inheritance if we turn away from the peace-making path of holiness.

It is important that we note that he found no place in his heart for repentance despite the fact that he sought his birthright with tears: **afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears** (KJV, 12.17). What did his tears reflect? They showed that he was sorry that he lost his inheritance; he was not sorry that he profaned the gospel promise represented by his inheritance. He was sorrowful about his loss not his sin. Thus, the expansion regarding the pathway of peace and holiness has three negatives: see to it that you avoid failure, bitterness, and immorality; give careful regard to these things.

## 2A. The duty of peace-making holiness grounded

In the next section, we have the ground or basis of this responsibility. Its design is to deepen our sense of duty and to motivate it more fully. It comes in the form of a contrast of mountains: Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. In a word, becoming Christians and coming into the family of brothers and sisters with Christ as elder brother means that we have not come to Mount Sinai; instead, we have come to Mount Zion. If you absorb this contrast, you will find encouragement to take up your duty of god-likeness with a special spring in your step.

Now we ask, "Why are we to do these things? What encouragement does the author give to this end?" To help us move forward at a better pace to the great goal of eternal Sabbath rest, to prompt our movement over the peace-making path of holiness, the author has us consider where we have come in coming to Christ. Broadly speaking, we have come to the new that surpasses the old. We have come to greater privilege, which carries with it greater responsibility. The answer to the "where have you come?" question is first negative and then positive.

### 1B. Negative: you have not come to Mount Sinai

You have not come to a mountain of gloom, a harsh word, and death. To appreciate this section of the text, we have to contemplate the big ideas here. The writer takes us back to the edge of Mount Sinai where God gave the Law to His people that He brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand. When Moses went up to the top of the mountain to receive the Law on tablets of stone, the people were to stay at a distance. It was a frightening scene.

Note the descriptive sketch (of Ex. 19 & Deut. 4) that we have in Hebrews 12.18-21: <sup>18</sup> **For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest** <sup>19</sup> **and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.** <sup>20</sup> **For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned."** <sup>21</sup> **Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear".** You will recall that Israel in the wilderness is called the church or assembly. God called them out of Egypt, they wandered in the wilderness for forty years, and at Mount Sinai, He gave them the Law to guide them in a newly formed national

existence. When they assembled at Sinai, God's command was that no one come near or touch the mountain for whoever touches it shall be put to death (Ex. 19.12).

We have not come to these things. We have not come to a blazing fire (Deut. 4.11), to darkness, gloom, and a tempest (Deut. 4.11), to **the sound of the trumpet [that] grew louder and louder** (Ex. 19.19), and to a word from God that instilled such fear that the hearers begged **that no further messages be spoken to them** (Heb. 12.19). Even Moses trembled with fear (Heb. 12.21) and the people were overcome by the threat of death, such that even animals that might touch the mountain were to be stoned (Heb. 12.20). Flames of fire in the darkness were followed by thunder and lightening. Even the very mountain shook as if in fear: **there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled.** <sup>17</sup> **Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain.** <sup>18</sup> **Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.** <sup>19</sup> **And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder** (Ex.19.16-19). Imagine hearing the voice of God in thunder and recoiling with fear from His word. Imagine having the voice of the Lord God in your ears and begging Him not to speak!

The picture as a whole reveals the fact of sin and the result that sin prevents us from drawing near to God to hear His voice with comfort in His presence. But that is not where you have come. Consider the positive in the big picture.

2B. Positive: you have come to Mount Zion

<sup>22</sup> **But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,** <sup>23</sup> **and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,** <sup>24</sup> **and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel** (Heb.12.22-24).

Instead of coming to an assembly in the shadows of the old covenant you have come to the city of the living God, to the heavenly Jerusalem, to God, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkling of His blood. That means that you have the good news of His high priestly work ringing in your ears. You assemble in His presence with joy because He suffered in death in your place. Instead of a message of death enforced by the Law, you have the message of eternal life enforced by the corrective discipline of the living God (Heb.12.5-11) who is your loving heavenly Father.

## Conclusion

Therefore, because of where you have come see to it that you avoid failure, bitterness, and immorality. You can make progress in these duties because, and only because, you have Christ as your mediator. These works have their grounding in His accomplished work; there is no self-reliance in these duties. You do these works resting, resting in His mediation by the suffering of death in your place. Each implies a positive and that is where you can look for some applications of this text.

So let us consider each positive with this over all exhortation in mind: see to it that you persevere (do not fail), as a sweet person who builds up (not bitter causing damage), and with purity (not immorality).

1) Persevere in running the race of peace-promoting holiness. Put forth strenuous effort, by the grace of God and in hope of His promise of enabling. In other words, keep to the running lane. Strive after holiness (Heb. 12.14) and strive to enter the eternal Sabbath (Heb. 4.1).

2) Put forth solid effort to display a sweet spirit as a sweet person instead of a bitter one. Bitter is how others taste your manner: conduct yourself with sweetness and not bitterness. In this context, sweetness brings cleansing instead of defilement; it is up building in the faith. It is exemplified in gracious speech, seasoned with salt to minister grace to the hearers (Col. 4.6). This is the heart and core of one anothering love.

3) And aim firmly with resolve to maintain sexual and spiritual purity. Back in the days of the Bible, there were prostitutes on every corner as today, but they did not have television,

film, and the internet. You have to be on guard against the pitfalls of voyeurism, the lust of the eye that Jesus spoke of in the Sermon on the Mount (Mat. 5.27-30: <sup>27</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' <sup>28</sup> But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup> If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. <sup>30</sup> And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell). Jesus calls for decisive action with regard to sexual purity of mind and body. Temptation is to be nipped in the bud, cut off, with this consideration in mind: if temptation to impurity were my eye or hand, I best gouge it out and cut it off then to lose my entire life, body and soul in hell forever. By graphic hyperbole, the teaching of Jesus fills out some of the strenuous effort that it takes to go down the path of peace-making holiness; you need discipline of mind and decisiveness to walk, to run, with the Lord in the light of His word.

**Let us fall down before the majesty of our God in due acknowledgment of our need of Jesus as our mediator by His death and resurrection; may the Holy Spirit enable us to strive with great effort, with strenuous effort, to run the track of peace and holiness, and to do so wisely resting in His work and His work alone. To the triune God be all glory forever, amen.**