

The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

Completing Well (part 2)

Hebrews 12:12-17

12 Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. 14 Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. 15 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.

**Lord, give us the meaning and spirit of Your Word while it lies open before us;
Apply Your Word with power to our souls, threatening or promise, doctrine or precept,
whatever it may be; lead us with trembling and with joy into the soul and marrow of Your Word.
(adapted from C.H. Spurgeon)**

I begin this morning with this rather humorous and perhaps familiar story about four persons named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody.

There was an important job to be done and Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it.

Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about that because it was Everybody's job.

Everybody thought that Anybody could do it, but Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn't do it.

It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have done.

The moral of the story, if Nobody takes responsibility for Somebody and Anybody, then Everybody ends up losing.

In Hebrews 12:12-17, we have looked at two of three points by which we are exhorted to run the race of faith – a metaphor for living the Christian life. We have already seen that we are to run reinvigorated, that is strengthened, refreshed and renewed with enthusiasm as we set aright our hearts, attitudes and course of life focused on following the example of Christ from verses 12-13. Additionally, we have seen the resolve we are to have in verse 15, to have our lives characterized by peace, that is in right relationship with all men so as to speak to them of the truths of God, as well as by holiness, sanctification, purity of life. For unless we are exhibiting the peace and holiness of God in our lives, no one, unbeliever or believer, will see the Lord at work in our lives.

This morning we come to the final set of exhortations in Hebrews 12:15-17 calling us to complete the race of faith well – and to do so, we must run the race responsibly. I hope to show you from these verses that each of us has a responsibility not only for ourselves, but also for one another; a responsibility that we dare not leave off thinking somebody will do it, for while anybody could do it and somebody might do it, everybody is responsible. So then, from these verses we find three more instructions to be heeded and put into practice if we are to

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complete the race of faith. But before we consider these three exhortations individually, let us note the link that ties these exhortations together, that link being the phrase at the beginning of verse 15, “**see to it...**”

I find this phrase “see to it” interesting. It comes from a Greek word you might recognize, *episkopontes*. We get the English word “Episcopal” which we generally associate with the church that bears that name, the “Episcopal” church. The word Episcopal literally means “overseer” – one who carefully watches over others. In our text it is in a verb form meaning “to oversee” – that is to be carefully watching over; to be diligently looking after or to be attentively guarding. Right now my son is learning to drive and when he does; either Laura or I am carefully watching him. Is he obeying the rules of the road? Is he handling the car in a right manner? It is our responsibility to see to it that he drives safely. This phrase “see to it” is used in 1 Peter 5:2 to describe the responsibilities of elders:

shepherd the flock of God among you, [and how do you shepherd the flock of God? By...] exercising oversight [carefully watching over; attentively guarding and leading] not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;

I submit to you that our text is informing us that we have a responsibility to one another in the context of the church, a responsibility to see to it, to exercise oversight, both in your own life as well as in the lives of other believers, that certain things, things explained in the coming verses, are not found in our midst; or, if they are found, that they are lovingly confronted so as to encourage healthy, holy Christian living. What I also would have you note is that this statement, “see to it” is not the actual command of this passage. This statement is tied back to the command in verse 14 to “pursue,” that is, as we saw last week, to run after with resolve and purpose in order to catch something. What are we commanded to pursue? Peace, that to be at rest or right relationship with people so as to speak to them the truth; and sanctification, or personal holiness. For, as our text says, if our lives do not manifest peace and holiness, the other will not see the Lord in our lives and be drawn to trust Him.

There is a sense then in which verses 15-17 answer this question for us; “How are we to pursue peace and holiness? What should this pursuit look like? How will we know if we are fulfilling this responsibility?” And so we read, “see to it...!” Make sure these things are being accomplished! Here is the responsibility of everybody – that is every believer in Jesus Christ; of everyone here who professes to be part of the body of Christ and specifically is identified with this local gathering of believers. There are three specific responsibilities addressed. See to it that no one (among you)...

1. Is deficient in knowledge of salvation

See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God

This first statement calls us to the responsibility of knowing, or at least making every effort to know the spiritual condition of one another’s souls. We are to “see to it that no one” [not one] “comes short”. To “come short” literally means to be late or tardy; to fall short. It speaks of just missing the appointed time. A few years back when Russ and I returned from a missionary trip to Mexico, while in flight, our arrival to Dallas was delayed making our ability to catch our connecting flight home difficult. Once our plane landed (clear on the other end of DFW), we ran like mad men through the terminal (I didn’t know Russ could move that fast).

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We made it the gate and literally the attendant was just shutting the door. I informed her that that was our plane to which she replied, “I am sorry, but you just missed it and will have to catch the next flight.” I was devastated. I had never missed a flight before. I had come up short, just missing the mark or goal.

Our responsibility to one another is to “see to it that no one...” is just a little late, a little slow, just misses the goal? This phrase “comes short” is found in a very familiar verse to most of you – Romans 3:23:

...for all have sinned and fall short [come short – miss the goal] of the glory of God

In Romans 3:23 we are taught that all people are incapable in themselves to attain the goal of God’s glory, that is the holiness and standing of God. This is why we need a Savior. In Hebrews 12:15 what is the goal? We are responsible to see to it that no one misses the goal of “the grace of God.” I take this to refer to salvation. Turn to Acts 11:19-24 (the gospel being preached and Gentiles were believing, receiving salvation):

19 So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. 20 But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord [experienced salvation]. 22 The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch [to investigate; to see if salvation had come to the Gentiles]. 23 Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God [salvation], he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord;

Beloved, Barnabas was seeing to it that none of these had come short of salvation, of the grace of God. There are other references that reveal “the grace of God” as speaking of salvation including Acts 20:24 and Romans 5:15. Now then, what does this mean for us? Are we fulfilling this instruction? Do we take this seriously – that we are to attentively guard and carefully watch to see if there is anyone among us who might not truly know the grace of God? How can we do this? I would start by asking you this question? Do you know the testimonies of these with whom you worship? Do you know how they came to put their faith in Jesus Christ as their only hope of salvation? Do we adequately and frequently speak to one another of what it is that we believe about Jesus and how our belief in Him is transforming us into His image?

Here is the bottom line. To truly be a member of the church one must have a conversion experience, they must be born-again. To be born-again means to have an adequate and biblical understanding of who God is in His holiness, who Jesus is as the perfect sacrifice come to take away sin, and who man is in his sinfulness, in his separation from God. It is the believer’s responsibility to know whether or not the people around you are Christians. If they are, then we encourage one another on to an even better, deeper understanding of doctrine and of authentic Christian living. If they are not, if in our conversations it is perceived that they are coming short of the grace of God, it is our responsibility to evangelize, to teach the gospel, to walk a person through to the point of conversion. This is what it means to see to

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it that no one comes short of the grace of God – to pursue them with the gospel, to see the gospel of God's grace at work in the lives of others. This is our first responsibility and let us not assume that Somebody else will do what Anybody could do so that Nobody does what Everybody should.

2. Is deceived and defiled by sinfulness

...that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled...

This second responsibility flows right out of the first, that we must see to it that no one is deceived and defiled by sinfulness. Generally speaking, we might see that word bitterness and think this is nothing but a call to make sure no one is unhappy or slighted in the church causing them to become bitter. What is at issue here however is much deeper and much more sinister than that.

We noted last week that Hebrews 12:12 is actually a veiled quote of Isaiah 35:3. Additionally, Hebrews 12:13, "and make straight paths for your feet" appears to be based on Proverbs 4:26, "Watch the paths of your feet and all your ways will be established." In keeping with these Old Testament allusions, Hebrews 12:15 seems to appeal back to Deuteronomy 29:14-18 which says:

14 Now not with you alone am I [Moses] making this covenant and this oath, 15 but both with those who stand here with us today in the presence of the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here today 16 (for you know how we lived in the land of Egypt, and how we came through the midst of the nations through which you passed; 17 moreover, you have seen their abominations and their idols of wood, stone, silver, and gold, which they had with them); 18 so that there will not be among you a man or woman, or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the Lord our God, to go and serve the gods of those nations; that there will not be among you a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood [of bitterness].

Both here in Deuteronomy and back in our Hebrews 12:15 passage, the point is this, we have a responsibility to make sure that those among us understand and communicate the truth of God, that there are not among us ideas, teachings, idols, habits or practices that might turn hearts away from the Lord. We are to see to it that no deep seated sources of evil continue among us. Beloved, here is a call to us to understand the pervasive nature of sin. It is a poison that can affect or "defile" – that morally contaminate many. Beloved sin must be dealt with. "Be killing sin or sin will be killing you!"

Now, by that I am not suggesting that we kill people in the church. Just how ought we to deal with sin within the body of Christ. To begin with, let us be aware of sin's potential in our own lives and then, after that introspection, watch carefully for sin's potential in one another's lives. Look with me at Matthew 26. Here we read of the last hours of Jesus before His crucifixion. And as He and His disciples celebrate Passover, Jesus makes a startling revelation, one that informs us that Jesus knew each of His disciples well. Beginning in Matthew 26:20 we read,

20 Now when evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the twelve disciples. 21 As they were eating, He said, "Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me."

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Our Lord Jesus here, yes truly God, but also truly Man, knew His disciples. And He knew that a root of bitterness had crept into the life of Judas. But the other disciples did not know yet who it was. So, what did they do? Did they point fingers at one another? Did they jump up and make wild accusations against one another? Let us read 26:22 –

Being deeply grieved, they each one began to say to Him, “Surely not I, Lord?” [or, here I prefer the NKJV – “Lord, is it I?”].

These followers of Jesus were keenly aware of sin’s potential to drag them away from the Lord, so they examined and questioned themselves first. But let also heed the example of Christ here, who knew those with whom He fellowshiped. He sought to know them not just as God knows them, but even as men know men, as people know people. We are to see to it that deep-seated sin does not have the opportunity to poison the fellowship. In order to fulfill this, I say to you again, that we must know one another. We must be engaged and involved in one another’s lives. We are responsible to encourage and exhort one another – is that not right? Are we all sinners? Yes, but when was the last time you confessed a struggle with sin to another that it might not consume you and become a root of bitterness to the rest of the congregation? When was the last time you knew someone in the fellowship well enough to identify a potential root of bitterness that it might be plucked out before it spreads its poison?

Perhaps my illustration will fall short because it speaks of a preacher, but may this become the joyful burden of every believer. John Welsh was a Scottish preacher in the late 1500’s married to the youngest daughter of John Knox, the Scottish Reformer. Late one many a cold winter night, Welsh was found by his wife weeping on the ground and wrestling with the Lord on account of his congregation. When his wife pressed him for an explanation of his distress, he replied, *“I have the souls of three thousand to answer for while I know not how it is with many of them.”* Beloved, whether it is to know the condition of their standing before Christ to see that no one comes short of the grace of God, or to know one another’s struggles with sin so that no root of bitterness defiles the congregation, we must know one another. We must be watching for the signs of sin, which includes in part “separating from the fellowship” (Proverbs 18:1);

He who separates himself seeks his own desire, He quarrels against all sound wisdom.

the overflow of many words (Proverbs 10:19);

When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, But he who restrains his lips is wise.

or even doing what is right in one’s own eyes whether good or bad, to the exclusion of other commands of God (Proverbs 16:25).

There is a way which seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death.

It is our responsibility in the race of faith so oversee such things.

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3. Is diseased by sensuality

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.

Finally then, we are to see to it that no one is diseased by sensuality. By “sensuality” I mean those things that excite inappropriate focus and attention on the things that simply please the flesh at the expense of living by the Spirit of God. It is our responsibility to see to it that there be no immoral [person]. The word for immoral here is *pornos* from which we get our word “pornography” – that is the graphic depiction of unholy sex. The word immoral here speaks of a person who was involving him or herself in sexual relations outside the bounds of marriage. This word *pornos* will be used again in Hebrews 13:4 reminding us that marriage is the only God sanctioned sphere for honorable sexual relations and that all who defile that are *pornos* , they are immoral and such will be judged.

Remember that the church at Corinth, in 1 Corinthians 5, was sharply rebuked because they allowed know immorality to go unchallenged. Here then is the call to sexual purity within the church that the body of Christ strives to see to it that no one is involving him or herself in unlawful (biblically speaking) sexual activity. And yes men, that includes the mind. Are we watching out for one another, carefully and lovingly pointing out areas that may expose us to participate in immorality, be it physical or even mental? Immorality is a disease that is to be lovingly cured by each one of us watching over each other, guarding against immoralities subtle entrance into our lives.

In addition to watching for any signs of immorality within the body of Christ, we are also given the responsibility to watch for any who may be turning “godless...like Esau...” The phrase “godless person” in our text is quite vivid. It literally speaks of a person who is common, concerned only with common, earthly, fleshly things. We know that believers are called to be holy even as the Lord is holy (1 Peter 1:15) – but the “godless” is just the opposite. His mind is focused on the secular rather than the sacred; on the world rather than on He who is wonderful; on the profane rather than on the pure. To be godless is to take the things of God under little or no consideration. It is to think first of the kingdom of self rather than upon the kingdom of God.

We are to see to it that there is no one like this, no “godless person.” How do we do that? Again, we must be engaged and involved with one another. We must desire to know one another and be known. For such godlessness reveals itself in one’s speech, in one’s thoughts, and in one’s actions. So, how is godlessness to be identified in the body? May I call you to listen carefully to what it is we speak about, what we laugh about, what we stress about. The philosopher Aristotle so aptly has said, “*Nothing reveals the character of a man more than what he laughs at and what makes him cry.*” Do you bother to notice what it is your brother and sisters in Christ and others around you laugh at and cry about? And, for personal reflection, let me tweak Aristotle’s statement to be used for self-examination in this matter, “*Nothing reveals the character of a person more than what he thinks about.*” What do you find yourself thinking about the majority of the time? If the mind is not coming back continually to the things of God, if we are not trying to tie spiritual principles and practices into everything that we do, then we are guilty of being godless. Let us see to it that such godlessness is repented of and done away with.

To Biblically demonstrate his point, the author of Hebrews does something rather remarkable. He appeals to the example of a character of Scripture. This may not seem

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remarkable, until we note that he points us to a rather seedy character. “Ok,” you say, “what’s so intriguing about that?” Remember all the names in Hebrews 11, great persons of faith. They were all positive examples of faith. But now we have Esau, not as a positive example, but a negative one. Esau’s life pictured this sensuality that we are to see to it that no one in the church embraces. Esau then is not some archaic, irrelevant picture but rather an accurate depiction of modern thinking. Our culture is inherently Esau-like; meaning it is immoral and godless, concerned more about physical appetite, than honorable heritage or birthright. Esau was willing to give up the greatest blessing and long term position to be bestowed upon a son in order to fill his stomach for but a moment. Esau lived for the moment, lived for pleasure. By selling his birthright, Esau was centered on personal gratification rather than upon the Spirit’s grace. He was more concerned with the latest and greatest things available to him at that moment rather than striving after things that will last for eternity.

The immoral and godless attitude of modern Esau’s are seen in the willingness of some who squander their families, their good name, and their relationship to the church by recklessly satisfying their carnal appetites. This is the lifestyle and attitude promoted in our society. And the bottom line is this: See to it that those in the church are not like Esau, are not overcome with the disease of sensuality. Why? Because the church must be different! You and I are to be different! And the responsibility for ensuring that such attitudes and actions are not found in the church is found right here: *it is you*. You and I are to watch over, to attentively guard and diligently look after the church to ensure no one falls prey to the godlessness of our age.

To be sure it can get confusing, because there are those, who like Esau, will weep when then see what they could have had by following the Lord, but their sorrow, their sadness, their tears are not accompanied by repentance, they have no real desire to change their ways and see their lives conformed to Christ. They want the blessings of Christ without the burden of Christ.

Beloved, it is our responsibility to God and to one another to be obedient to these instructions. We must care for the body of Christ. We responsible for one another, to see to it that no one come short of the grace of God, that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, that no one be immoral or godless. To do this we must give attention to individuals. We have a responsibility to initiate and engage in meaningful, one-to-one relationships in the church. Through these relationships we help one another in the pursuit of peace and holiness. Without such relationships we cannot grow but rather are subject to succumb to these vices. Let us see to it! May it not be left to just anybody, or somebody meaning that nobody will do it. Everybody is to do it, you are responsible. Let us watch out and care for one another. For in so doing we are running well the race of faith to the glory of God.

Soli Deo Gloria

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