

Text: Hebrews 12:14-17

Title: The Pursuit of Peace and Holiness

Truth: Christians are commanded to strive for peace with others and holiness with God.

Date/Location: Sunday November 27, 2011 at FBC

Introduction

The text seems to be taking a turn at verse 14. A new subject is being introduced after what we learned about divine discipline and strength when we are weak. In fact, we are beginning to move into the fifth and final warning passage of the book.

I. Pursue Peace and Holiness, v. 14

A. The meaning of *pursue*.

1. The word means to move rapidly and decisively toward the objective. To round out our understanding of the word, we should note that it can also mean to chase or persecute. We are making every effort in this direction.
2. The verb *pursue* and the associated participle “looking carefully” are plural, indicating that the audience collectively have a responsibility toward the entire congregation. So it is with us. Some who attend are not born again. Some are weak in the faith. Some are immature. Some are in danger of falling into sin. Since we do not infallibly know everyone’s spiritual state, we have to be aware that some are even in danger of falling away.

B. Peace

1. Define: Peace is a state of harmony in relationships. The text tells us that we need to strive for peace with everyone. This includes those outside of the church, and especially those inside the church. See Romans 14:19 and Psalm 133:1.
2. Process: This harmony is something that is to be pursued decisively. We are to strive for it.
 - a. If you encounter a situation in the home or in the church where there is a lack of peace, you need to make EVERY EFFORT get a peaceful outcome. That would include repenting of wrongs done and offering forgiveness. It would include being patient with each other, trying to understand each other, agreeing to disagree but still live with each other, etc.

- b. Did I mention that you are to make *every effort* to accomplish peace? If you have not made every effort, and you decide to go off in a huff, or abandon peace with a brother short of every attempt, then you have not carried out the meaning or spirit of this passage.
- c. If you have done everything possible, then Rom 12:18 would be helpful to your conscience. Sometimes the other people simply refuse to be dwelt with peaceably. So be it.

C. Sanctification

1. Define: The Bible refers to three variant types of sanctification. The one in this verse is something that we are pursuing, so it is ongoing and must therefore be present sanctification. In short, it means becoming more like Jesus Christ in our thinking and conduct. See 1 Thess. 4:3, 7.
2. Process: In other words, how do we “pursue” this holiness? 1. In the context, we get holiness by responding properly to God’s disciplinary instruction (12:9-11). We must endure God’s discipline to achieve the peaceable fruit of righteousness as the outcome. 2. From the wider Biblical context, we must mortify the deeds of the sinful nature (Col. 3:5-9, 2 Cor. 7:1). 3. We must learn the Bible (Psalm 119:9-11). 4. We need to be with other Christians to see and follow their example (Philippians 3:17).
3. Result: Moral purity and holy character. We alluded to the idea of holiness last time when we tied in to Prov 4:26-27. The chapter enjoined the young to the way of wisdom as opposed to the way of wickedness and perversity of speech.

D. Without which no one will see the Lord

1. Does this phrase refer to peace and holiness, or just holiness? Because of the word order and agreement of the relative pronoun *which* with holiness, I understand *without which* to refer to holiness only. However, you cannot be very holy if you never have peaceable relationships with other people.
2. This really means what it says. No sanctification = no salvation. We have to understand that justification inevitably yields sanctification. Therefore, if there is no sanctification, that means that there has not (yet) been justification, which means the person is not saved. The implications of this are profound for the multitude of *professing* Christians whose lives look just like the world.

E. Note the relationship of peace and sanctification.

1. Peace deals with our “horizontal” relationships, with other people.
2. Holiness deals with our “vertical” relationship, with God.
3. Peace and sanctification *must* go together. Neither one must be pursued at the expense of the other—both must be pursued, we could say, equally. This assertion is not explicitly made in the text, but implicitly it is there (pursue peace AND holiness). You cannot pursue one and ignore the other lest the characteristic you are pursuing itself be sullied.
4. The mantra today in generic Christianity is to love everyone and have unity (sounds like peace), and supposedly all will be well. But love has to be coupled with holiness in our lives, in an analogous manner to how love and holiness are joined together perfectly in God’s character.

F. Four impediments to peace and sanctification are called out clearly in the text. In the NKJV you can see them associated with the repeated word “lest” in verses 15-16. The same thing is shown in the NIV, NAS, and ESV with the repetition of “that.” The four impediments to holiness are:

1. Unbelief
2. Bitterness
3. Sexual immorality
4. Worldliness

We will look at each in turn.

G. Note that each of the four impediments is actually indicative of an unsaved state. If these terms are accurate characterizations of a person’s life, that person is not a Christian person.

II. Make Sure There is No Unbelief, v. 15a

- A. Note that congregationally it is our responsibility to be looking out diligently for anyone in these conditions. The verb is the one that means “to oversee,” like an overseer (pastor). The whole church has some “pastoral” responsibility in that sense.
- B. *Anyone* refers to individuals in the congregation that may be falling short of God’s grace.
- C. *Falling short* is the idea we learned about in Hebrews 4:1.
- D. Falling short *of the grace of God* means the person is not saved. You have to “have” the grace of God and be “in” it to be saved. If you do not

recognize that salvation is by God's unmerited favor (i.e. you think it is either all of or part of works), then you are falling short of God's grace.

1. Acts 20:24 – the good news we preach is the gospel of the grace of God.

2. Other verses on the subject of grace are 1 Cor. 1:4, Gal 2:21, Col. 1:6.

E. The responsibility of a believer is to participate in helping others understand God's grace. This is not "heresy hunting" or anything of the arrogant sort. We are simply to see to it that we all are truly pursuing peace and holiness and not deceiving ourselves in unbelief.

III. Make Sure There is No Bitterness, v. 15b

Bitterness gets its negative connotation from the realm of food.

A. Not exactly the emotional state

1. Maybe your first reading of the verse about bitterness is that this bitterness is an emotional state of mind, such as between two people in the church due to lack of forgiveness. This is a serious situation, and can grow up into bigger problems and defile other people as well.
2. We are to put away all bitterness (Eph. 4:31); and husbands are not to be embittered toward their wives. That is a command. We are to love our wives, and not be bitter toward them.
3. But it is easier in our flesh to be bitter than to truly love, isn't it? You can fall into bitterness without even trying.
4. Bitterness of this sort is a serious attack on the pursuit of peace commanded in the previous verse. I understand that it is a valid application of this verse to talk about this emotional kind of bitterness. However...

B. A worse kind of bitterness

1. As serious as the above kind of bitterness is, and as necessary as it is to remove it from our midst, the bitterness warned against in 12:15 is even more deadly.
2. There is an allusion to Deuteronomy 29:18 which brings out this notion. The kind of bitterness we are talking about has to do with idolatry and departing from the living God (Heb. 3:12). See Acts 8:23 and Rom 3:14 for uses of the word that refer to unbelievers.

3. The result of such bitterness is trouble and defilement to others. Whereas the previous problem (falling short of God's grace) was a problem of a more individual nature, the sin of rebellion against God in teaching or practice spreads like a disease—a plague—among God's people. It is like leaven that has an effect on a whole batch of dough (1 Cor. 5:6).
4. With the diligence that Israel was to watch for idolaters popping up in their midst, so we are obligated to watch out for wolves rising in our midst. A man who is a bitter root will spread by gathering converts to his view and cause all sorts of trouble in the church. The need for church discipline is obvious in this kind of scenario.

IV. Make Sure There is No Fornication, v. 16a

A. The word *fornication* in English refers to a man and a woman engaging in intercourse outside of marriage. Whether the person is married (we call him or her an adulterer) or not married (we call him or her a fornicator), the act is the same. I won't press any distinction between the terms here, though the Bible does indicate a distinction in some passages such as 1 Corinthians 6:9 and Hebrews 13:4.

B. Fornication is a sin.

1 Cor. 6:13-18, among many other passages makes it painfully obvious that such immorality is sin. It displeases God and brings His judgment (Hebrews 13:4). See also 1 Thess 4:2-8.

C. Prevalence of Sexual Immorality

Sins of this sort are rampant in our society. Everywhere you turn, it is there.

Application: Either violence or sexual content causes me to be basically unable to watch the television, even to enjoy a simple sporting event.

Application: As part of my corporate responsibility to pursue holiness, I check with dating/unmarried couples to make sure that they are pure in their conduct and have the proper fences put in place to make sure they do not fall into fornication.

V. Make Sure There is No Worldliness, v. 16b-17

A. One question that you might ask right away is this: was Esau a fornicator? I do not believe this text says he was. Read it this way: "See to it that

there is no fornicator (comma), or profane person like Esau who..." All we can glean for certain from verse 16 is that Esau was profane.

B. The meaning of profane is, as the BDAG Greek dictionary puts it, is *totally worldly*.

1. If someone is profane, they have no interest in *transcendent matters*, that is, the things of God. Other ways to translate it are *unholy* or *godless* or irreverent.
2. Esau had no interest in the promises that God made to Abraham, which were passed on to Isaac. These promises brought with them great blessing. One meal was enough for him to trade away his birthright. The account in Genesis 25:29-34 records Esau asking "What use is this birthright to me?" and it closes with "So Esau despised his birthright." To despise it means that he depreciated it, disparaged it, and hated it.
3. Notice other texts that use this same word: 1 Timothy 1:9, 4:7, 6:20; 2 Tim. 2:16. Notice how often it has to do with speech.

C. The consequences entailed real loss.

1. When he realized what he had done, he did not like the consequences (Genesis 27:33-41). This caused great anger on his part, so much so that he planned to murder his brother.
2. I believe that Esau wanted the blessing (the goods, the inheritance) but he did not care so much about the "God part" of the blessing.
3. Look at the pattern of his life. One thing he did was he married two Hittite women. The first problem is the polygamy. His parents did not believe in that. They were evidently not godly wives because they were a grief for his parents (Gen. 26:34-35).

We ought to recognize, having grown up in this church or been here for some while, that it is absolutely NOT OK for a believer to marry an unbeliever. Likewise, if you are an unbeliever, you should be marrying an unbeliever. And if you are in a relationship of the mixed sort, you need to stop right away. Don't fool yourself.

4. If you doubt this analysis of Esau, then just remember the Bible here in Hebrews calls him *profane*. He did not pursue holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.

D. Esau's repentance was a false kind of repentance

1. The kind of repentance that Esau had was not the true kind we read of from 2 Cor. 7:8-12. His was clearly the worldly kind that does not have to do with salvation or the things of God. Exodus 10:16-20 is another example of a false kind of repentance, one that was just about the consequences of sin.
2. Real repentance means a change of mind regarding the badness of the thing that was done *with regard to God*. It is turning away from sinful things, and correspondingly it is associated with a turning toward God. The turning away is repentance, the turning toward is faith. This happens at the inception of the Christian life and we call the package of repentance and faith by the name *conversion*. But those who are in the middle of the Christian life also repent and believe in response to sin in their lives. The same kind of attitude, thinking, and response toward sin then marks the entire life of the Christian.
3. At its base, repentance is not an emotional thing, although it likely has an emotional reaction tied up in it. The sorrow of 2 Cor. 7 has to do not with, "Uh oh, I'm sorry I did that because now I have to deal with consequences." It is "I am sorry I did that because it was wrong and God is displeased with it." There is a massive difference.

E. The consequences were irreversible.

1. The Bible says Esau was rejected. This means he was regarded as unworthy or unfit. This rejection was by God more than by Isaac.
2. The Bible says there was no opportunity for repentance. It was too late. There was no blessing left. Isaac had given the inheritance to Jacob. We probably find it hard to understand this because we think like "Just call back Jacob, tell him he is a sinner, take the blessing from him and give it to his brother." Official pronouncements could not so simply be undone in Old Testament times. Words had meaning and significance and were not simply to be used lightly (perhaps the Lord reminds us of this in Matthew 12:36).
3. There are other places in the Scripture where this irreversible idea comes out.
 - a. Consider Hebrews 6:4-6 again, just a few pages earlier in the Bible.
 - b. A similar thing is mentioned in Romans 1:24, 26, and 28. God "giving them over" refers to God permitting them to fulfill their depraved desires and go down a path of no return.

c. Another instance is in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12. In this passage, God promises to send a delusion to people who follow the deception of Satan. They will believe the lie and be condemned. This is another “point of no return” situation.

4. We cannot say for sure when someone is on this path, or if every person that begins to go there will have no chance of salvation. I believe there is a scary reality that some are on that road right now. There is also ample evidence that the worst of sinners can be saved.

5. We might question God in this connection about how He runs the world. How can God disallow any further opportunity? That’s not fair!!!

a. Most people call it “no second chance.” The reality is that many people probably had a first, second, third, and one thousandth chance. We are talking about opportunity number 1,001. God is not obligated to give us any chance, much less 1,001 of them.

b. The Bible’s answer to such questioning of God is this: Submit to God and His wisdom, and stop questioning. Job learned that (start reading at chapter 38). Paul echoes the same in Romans 9:19-21.

F. Watching out for “profane” people in our churches is very important. People whose interests seem to be all on the worldly plane need to be warned of their status before God.

Conclusion

Removing these four barriers is a great and very necessary way to pursue peace and holiness in our lives and in our churches. They are not the only things we can do, but they rank right up there at the top of the list:

Watch out for unbelief.

Watch out for unbelieving bitterness.

Watch out for sexual immorality.

Watch out for worldliness.

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