

SERIES: The Absolute Supremacy of Christ in Hebrews
 SERMON: *Holy Living for a Holy God*
 SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 12:12-29
 SPEAKER: Pastor Josh Black
 DATE: April 18, 2010

Throughout his letter the author of Hebrews urges his readers to persevere in the faith. In chapter 12 he compares the Christian life to a race that must be run with perseverance. As I studied our passage for this morning I began to realize that the second half of chapter 12 is further developing the race metaphor that the author began in the first half of the chapter. In the first half of the chapter he shows us the place discipline has in persevering faith – “no pain, no gain.” In the second half of the chapter we see how important it is to stay in the race to the very end. The author draws out this aspect of perseverance by giving us two commands and two motivations to fulfill those commands.

1st Command: Stay on the path. (14-17)

12:14 *Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.*

I'd like to answer three questions regarding this command: What does it mean to stay on the path, why should we stay on the path, and how can we stay on the path?

First, what does it mean to stay on the path? Those who stay on the path will strive for peace and holiness. When verse 14 says we need to “*strive for peace with everyone*” (ESV) the author is speaking primarily about peace with other believers. When it says we need to *make every effort...to be holy* it is referring to at least two things. 1) Holiness refers to our devotion to God; our set-apartness (consecration).¹ 2) Holiness also refers to our sanctification; our growth in Christ-likeness. So a Christian who is staying on the path (or staying in the race) will strive to live at peace with everyone, they will devote their whole life to God, and they will be growing in Christ-likeness.

Second, why should we stay on the path? Verse 14 says “*without holiness no one will see God.*” No one is holy, except for God. In fact, we are all sinners who have fallen short of the glory of God; we're not holy. And in our sin we are separated from God. So can we become holy? Do we have any chance of seeing God? The only way we can become holy is through Christ. Christ has paid the penalty for our sin on the cross so that our unholiness could be removed, but that is not all. Christ also lived a perfect, holy life, without sin. If we believe this good news (this gospel) then we will receive Christ's payment for sin and Christ's holiness; we will have peace and holiness.

When verse 14 tells us to strive for peace and holiness it is simply commanding us to pursue what we already have!² Or in other words to show in concrete ways who we are in Christ. If we're Christians who have been reconciled to God and made holy by Christ then we will live lives marked by peace and holiness. Peace and holiness in our daily lives will serve as evidence

¹ O'Brien, 2010.

² Ibid.

that we are reconciled to God and made holy by Christ. If we live lives marked by unresolved conflict and ungodly living then our faith will be called into question. Let me explain.

Think of Pastor Phil and Pastor Dick (and if you've been around long enough add Tom Macy and Duane Bebee to the list). What do these men have in common? Many of you are undoubtedly thinking of the Nebraska Cornhuskers. But what if I told you that all of these guys were actually die-hard K-State fans? You probably wouldn't believe me, if you know them at all. All of the evidence points to the Huskers. As a matter of fact Phil asked us to put a Huskers' message on the new electronic sign. It would be a joke if I made the claim that these men are K-State fans, because there is no evidence to support my claim. In a similar way, if we claim to be reconciled to God and made holy by Christ there should be some evidence in our lives. The primary evidence will be peace with other Christians and a life marked by devotion to God and growth in Christ-likeness.

Third, how can we stay on the path? There are two things I'll mention.

1) We should tenaciously strive for peace and holiness. Verse 14 says, "*Make every effort...*" (NIV). Other translations say "*strive*" (ESV), "*pursue*" (NASB), or "*try*" (NLT). It's hard to translate the Greek word with any one English word. All of these translations get at one aspect of the full meaning of the Greek word. I would put it like this: "Be intentional and intense in your pursuit of peace and holiness." We don't work to earn God's favor – Christ's work did that for us. But because Christ's work has secured our peace and holiness we are called to work it out in concrete ways in our lives. We see this in **Philippians 2:12-13** "*Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*"

2) We need to be on look out for one another. We live in an individualistic society that values autonomy and independence. And so our tendency is to bring autonomy and independence into the church. It is common to say things like this: "I have a *personal* relationship with Christ," and "you need to do *personal* evangelism." Don't get me wrong, our relationship with God is nothing less than personal, but the Bible has a bigger view of the Christian life. The Bible continually speaks of the corporate relationship Christians have with one another. Eugene Peterson has said there is no notion of an only child in the family of God.³ We're saved into a large family, a body of believers. And as a body we have to look out for the other members in the body. As a family we have to look out for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

12:15-17 *See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.¹⁶ See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son.¹⁷ Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.*

We can't stay on the path alone. We need the help of other Christians. That's what verse 15 is getting at when it says, "*See to it that no one misses the grace of God.*" In chapter 13, verse 17

³ Patterson, pg 10.

we are told that the *leaders* in the church keep watch over the souls in the flock. In our text this morning we're told that *each of us* has a responsibility to keep watch over our fellow believers' souls. We're each called to be on the look out for people who appear to be straying from the path. We're to do this for the sake of the individual, but also for the sake of the body as a whole, for a "bitter root" in the body will "defile many," not just the individual.

If there are people in the body who are showing signs that they have left the path we need to lovingly redirect them toward the path. This may require gentle encouragement, but it may also require strong exhortation and warning. Remember **Hebrews 3:12-13** "*See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.* ¹³*But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*" If we really love one another we will do everything we can to keep them from straying from the path. People who *profess* faith, but show no sign of *possession* of faith are in danger of missing the grace of God – and if they miss the grace of God then they will not see God. If someone professes faith we need to encourage them and challenge them to live a life that reflects their faith.

Let me give you an example of how my wife did this once with me. I have had a bad temper for most of my life. As a teenager I had many anger explosions, but as I have grown in my faith these episodes have become less frequent and less intense. But occasionally my temper will still rear its ugly head. One Sunday afternoon a few years ago I was frustrated with my kids for not picking up their toys in the back yard. My frustration grew into anger and I eventually had a major explosion. My wife came out to me. I expected an argument, but I got something different. Maggie spoke to me in a gentle, but firm tone of voice: "Josh, calm down, please calm down. This is not who you are. You are a man of God." I don't know how, but God used my wife that day to diffuse my anger. But that's not all she did; she spoke truth into my life that has stuck with me to this day; she reminded me that my behavior was not congruent with my identity as a Christian; she also showed me how my anger was a bitter root that was hurting the whole family.

Maggie's actions capture the heart of Christian exhortation. When we see our brothers and sisters showing patterns of behavior that are incongruent with their Christian identity, we need to gently, but firmly, remind them of who they are and urge them to get back on the path. Exhortation isn't arrogant, it isn't "holier than thou" either; on the contrary exhortation is one way we love our brothers and sisters and look out for them.

But it will be difficult to look out for one another if we don't have meaningful relationships with other believers. Are there other believers in your life who really know you; who are encouraging you to follow Christ; who are asking you tough questions? Many of you are involved in a lot of activity at church, and are known by name and by face. But are there believers in your life who know your heart? We need each other to persevere in the faith, but we have to know each other if we are going to look out for one another. If you don't have other believers in your life who really know you I want to challenge you today. Don't blame your lack of deep relationships on other people; take responsibility and begin intentionally cultivating relationships with people who you will invite to look into your heart. If there are people who know your heart, but don't

have the guts to challenge you then I encourage you to invite them to challenge you, or find someone who will.

We need one another to make sure we don't have sinful unbelieving hearts that turn away from the living God. But what does it look like to miss the grace of God? What does it look like to get off of the path? What should we be looking for in others and what should they be looking for in us? The author of Hebrews puts Esau forward as an example of someone who got way off the path in verses 16-17.

Esau was the firstborn son of Isaac, therefore he had full rights to inherit the lion's share of Isaac's estate, but that is not all. As the firstborn, Esau would have been the only son eligible to receive his father's blessing. And Isaac's blessing included the everlasting promises of God, made to Abraham.⁴ Esau would have known that his blessing and inheritance were bound up in God's promises and God's blessings. However, when Esau sold his inheritance rights to his brother (Jacob) he exchanged his lasting inheritance and blessing for the immediate gratification of a meal. Esau rejected the promises of God for fleeting pleasures. And in rejecting the promises of God, Esau in effect rejected God. And therefore God rejected him.

The author of Hebrews puts Esau forward as an apostate, as a prime example of what it looks like to turn your back on God and ultimately forfeit the blessing of God. Verse 17 tells us that Esau sought his blessing with tears, in the end. But in the end it was too late. Isaac gave the blessing to Jacob, not Esau. Esau sought the blessing with tears, but not because he was sorry for his sin – "*He could bring about no change of mind;*" he was only sorry for what he lost.

Esau was an apostate; we know this for a fact. But the author of Hebrews never comes out and says he knows of specific people in the congregation who were apostate. He is simply warning all people who profess faith to not reject God. We're not called to determine whether or not someone is a true Christian or an apostate; only God knows that. We're called to look for signs or evidence in people's life that they are rejecting God. Another way to say this is that we're not called to judge the *root* (whether or not someone's a Christian); we're called to judge the *fruit*.⁵ And if the fruit in someone's life shows a tendency to favor fleeting pleasures and immediate gratification over against the path, which leads to eternal life, we need to lovingly redirect them back toward the path.

I'd like to look now at two motivations for staying on the path.

1st Motivation: There is great gain at the finish line. (18-24)

Throughout the letter the author has compared the old covenant of Judaism, with the new covenant Christ initiated. In verses 18-24 he uses two mountains to again contrast the two covenants.

The law was given to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai and therefore it represents the old covenant. Jerusalem is located on Mt. Zion. Jerusalem was the place where Israel's king lived and the

⁴ O'Brien, 2010.

⁵ Piper, April 14, 2010.

place where the temple was located. Jesus is now the eternal king and serves as the temple. Jesus inaugurated the new covenant by his blood. Mt. Zion represents the new covenant.

Listen to the contrast between these two mountains.

12:18-24 *You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; ¹⁹to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, ²⁰because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." ²¹The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."*

²²*But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, ²⁴to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

Sinai: As you read verses 18-20 there is a dark tone and a terrifying picture of God painted at Sinai. One reason for this fear is simply the holiness of God. The sound of God's voice and the display of his presence on the mountain caused the people to tremble.

Another reason the people feared God at Mt. Sinai was because he was unapproachable. When the law was given, God's presence was on the mountain, but only Moses could approach God. Any other person or animal that approached the mountain would die.

In verse 21 we are told that even Moses was afraid. But Moses was afraid for a different reason than the people were. Verse 21 is actually a reference to Deuteronomy 9:19, which recalls the sin of the Israelites when they made the golden calf at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Moses says, "*I feared the anger and wrath of the LORD, for he was angry enough with you to destroy you. But again the LORD listened to me.*" Moses was not afraid of God's holiness; he was afraid of God's wrath. He was afraid that God would wipe out the Israelites because of their sin. Even though Moses had a different reason than the Israelites, everyone was terrified at Mt. Sinai.

Zion: In verse 18 it essentially says, "*You have not come to [Sinai].*" This is followed by verse 22 which says, "*You have come to Mt. Zion.*" Under the new covenant we should still fear God, but it is a different kind of fear. We need to revere God because he is holy and worthy of glory. But God is not unapproachable. The phrase "*you have come*" in verse 22 is a loaded phrase. The word translated as "*come*" is the same word which is elsewhere translated "*draw near*;" the book of Hebrews frequently commands us to draw near to God (4:16; 7:25; 10:22; 11:6).⁶ Under the old covenant God was unapproachable; under the new covenant we can draw near to God; he is approachable.

Not only do we not have to fear approaching God under the new covenant, we also don't have to fear the wrath of God, if we have put our faith in Christ. We all will one day come "*to God, the judge of all men,*" as verse 23 says, but we don't have to fear this judgment if we have been reconciled to God and made holy by Jesus.

⁶ O'Brien, 2010.

Verse 24 says, the blood of Jesus, “*speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*” When Abel died his blood spoke – it spoke vengeance for what Cain had done. But Christ’s blood covers the wrath of God and therefore speaks a better word than the blood of Abel because it offers forgiveness.

So instead of being terrified of God, under the new covenant, we can come to Mt. Zion with joy, as verse 22 says. There will be a grand celebration at the finish line for those who have put their trust in Christ’s death and resurrection. For on that day we’ll join the angels and all the people of God in the joyful assembly, if we stay on the path.

This great reward which awaits us at the finish line should motivate us to stay on the path now, but we have to keep our eyes on Jesus and the finish line if we’re going to be motivated. One way we do this is simply by spending time in God’s Word. As we read God’s Word daily, study it, memorize it, meditate on it, and hear it preached⁷ we are reminded of our great salvation, our great Savior, and our great reward. But if we take our eyes off of our great Savior and our great reward it’s easy to get off track. Let’s look now at the second motivation to stay on track.

2nd Motivation: There is no alternate route. (vv. 25-27)

12:25-27 *See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?* ²⁶*At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens."* ²⁷*The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.*

We have seen many “greater than” arguments in the book of Hebrews. Most of the arguments show either how Christ is greater than something (i.e. greater than angels, Moses, Joshua, etc.) or how the new covenant is greater than the old; but some of the arguments show how the warnings are greater for us on this side of the cross than they were for the Israelites before Christ. That’s what this argument is doing in verses 25-27. God revealed himself at Mt. Sinai, but he has revealed himself more fully in Jesus Christ. If the Israelites, who rejected God and the promise of land, died in the wilderness, then how much more should we be afraid if we reject God and the promise of eternal life, through Jesus Christ?

In the Old Testament God’s voice shook the mountain. But when the final judgment comes, God’s voice will shake all things. Those who have rejected Christ and his salvation will be removed, as verse 27 says, or separated from those who have stayed on the path. However, those who have put their trust in Christ and have persevered in faith will not be shaken.

I know this is a bit far-fetched, but imagine that the entire earth has been hit by the most catastrophic earthquake the world has ever seen; everybody and everything on the planet is destroyed except for one highway and all of the people on that highway. At the end when Christ returns to judge the world everyone will face the wrath of God except for those who have put

⁷ For further explanation on these disciplines you can access the sermon, *Rest for the Weary* - December 6, 2009, on the church website (www.firstfreewichita.org).

their trust in Christ and stayed on his path. Those on his path will cross the finish line and enter into a kingdom that will never be shaken.

Imagine that! We live in a world that often seems remarkably unstable. The economy is unstable, jobs can be unstable, health is unstable, our relationships can be unstable, people are unpredictable, we don't always feel safe, and we are prone toward emotional insecurity. I could add many more things to this list, and I'm sure you are thinking of things I've left out. So, it's hard to imagine a kingdom that is unshakeable, secure, immovable, steady, and completely safe. But that's what those who are on the path toward Christ have to look forward to!

While there are many paths in life, there is only one path that leads to God. There is no alternate route that leads to God. I know this statement flies in the face of the way the world views life. We live in a world that says we have many choices. We live in a world that says there are many roads that all lead to the same blissful place. But the Bible says there is only one road that leads to God – Christ is the only way. All other paths lead to destruction. This is confirmed in **Matthew 7:13-14**, *“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”*

I also know that modern day preachers aren't supposed scare people into heaven by threatening them with hell. But this text puts forward a very clear picture of the judgment which is coming at the end of the line. You either have faith in Christ, or you refuse Christ. If you refuse Christ, he will refuse you – you will be “shaken.” If you put your trust in Christ you will be unshakable. This may not be a politically correct perspective, but it is a biblical perspective and it should motivate us to stay on the path. Let's look now at the 2nd command.

2nd Command: Give yourself fully to God. (28-29)

12:28 *Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe,*

Those who stay on the path will receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken when they reach the finish line. The only proper response to this great reward is to worship God out of a thankful heart. But what does it mean to worship God out of a thankful heart? When verse 28 says, *“let us... worship God acceptably,”* the author is not limiting worship to singing, or to prayer, or to praise. The Greek word which is translated as “worship” here could just as well be translated as “serve.”⁸ Acceptable worship or service in the New Testament never refers to one aspect of our life; rather it refers to every aspect of our life. I think of Romans 12:1 which says, *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”* Or 1 Corinthians 10:31 which says, *“whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”* Giving yourself fully to God means giving him every aspect of your life, not just Sunday.

Acceptable worship or service involves doing acceptable things for God out of reverence for God. We'll talk more about what those acceptable actions are specifically next week in chapter 13. But for now the emphasis in verse 28 is not on the actions alone because our actions alone

⁸ O'Brien, 2010.

won't be acceptable to God; our attitudes must also be right. If you serve God grudgingly you are not serving God acceptably. But if you serve God intensely and intentionally (see first command), with your whole life, out of gratitude for what he has done for you, your worship will be acceptable to God. This second command is not unlike the first command. Our good deeds won't earn us favor with God; our deeds will flow out of what God has done for us; they will serve as evidence that we are reconciled to God and made holy. Because Christ gave his life for us, the appropriate response is to give our lives in service to him.

As I thought about the best way to explain this I kept thinking of sports teams. The captain of a team is not necessarily the most talented player on the team. The captain of a team is usually the player who plays the hardest; who has the best attitude; and who through modeling inspires others to play harder and with better attitudes. That type of player is always loved by their coaches whereas the most talented athlete on a team may be the coaches' biggest pain in the neck, if they have a bad attitude that brings other players down.

God has given us everything in Christ. He's not looking for the most talented Christians to serve him. He looks at the heart. Christians who are truly grateful for what they have in Christ will give themselves fully to God – we should love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength *because* God first loved us. This type of service will bring the most glory to God, because it will reflect most accurately who God is.

We should give ourselves fully to God because he has given himself fully to us, but there is another reason we should worship God acceptably with reverence and awe:

12:29 *for our God is a consuming fire.*

What does this mean? Is this another appeal to fear? Well, it depends. Remember in verse 14 it says “*without holiness no one will see the Lord.*” That reminds me of Matthew 5:8 which says, “*Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.*” In the Bible holiness and purity are almost synonyms.⁹ If you are pure and holy you don't have to fear God, but if you are impure or unholy you have much to fear. “*God is a consuming fire.*”

I don't know very much about gold, but it is my understanding that gold is purified by fire. When gold ore is put under extreme heat everything in the ore that is not pure is separated from the pure gold.

If you trust in Christ who is pure and holy and who died to pay for our sin, then you will be pure and holy in the eyes of God. When God's fire of judgment comes you will not be consumed; you will be refined; you will be made perfect. But if you reject God and his salvation then God will reject you and when you meet his consuming fire you will experience destruction and separation from God, not deliverance.

Our sin is great, but our Savior is greater!¹⁰ You can put your trust in Christ this morning by believing that his work on your behalf was enough to reconcile you to God and make you holy.

⁹ O'Brien, 2010.

¹⁰ DeYoung, pg 18.

You don't have to come to God in fear; you can come to God with joy and anticipation.¹¹ If you already have put your faith in Christ then I want to encourage you to stay on the path. Make every effort to serve God out of a heart of gratefulness for what he has done. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith.

2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 *With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. ¹²We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

¹¹ Piper, September 7, 1997.

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