

Without holiness

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[0 : 00] to hebrews chapter 12 and let's read again there verses 14 to 16. follow peace with all men and holiness without which no man shall see the lord looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of god lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you and thereby many be defiled lest there be any fornicator or profane person as Esau who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright.

Now in this chapter the writer began by urging us to lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily besets us. And then his thought seems to take a bit of a detour because rather than focusing immediately on sin in the life of the believer he thinks first of all about the passive aspect of Christian experience, Christian conduct, about the need to maintain endurance and tenacity in the face of difficulty, of the need to know how to see when what happens to us in this life comes from the father's hand seeking to correct our ways, seeking to guide us into paths that are right that he approves of. And then having thought about that passive aspect of Christian conduct, about the need to avoid despondency, about the need to recognize that good may be flowing through difficult times because they are all under the control of our father who's using them to shape us in the way he wants. The writer then comes back to the more positive active aspect of Christian conduct. And here at verse 14 the focus is put on two things peace and holiness. And we're not just told these are the goals that we're solemnly warned about the difficulties that we will encounter in achieving those goals.

So what I want to do with you this evening is to consider first of all the the two goals that are presented here for Christian living and then more particularly the threefold oversight that has to be exercised so as to ensure that we pursue these goals aright. And in looking at these things we're trying to do two things. We're trying first of all to recognize where it may be we have gone wrong. We are trying to recognize so that we can repent of what may be a fault, a failure in our living. But more than that we're looking at these verses so that we may not only recognize what has gone wrong but so that we may take action to put what is wrong right. So first of all we have presented to us here two goals of Christian living peace and holiness. Follow peace with all men. Well the men as you'll notice this is in italics and it's an addition. Follow peace with all.

Now who are being described there as all? The major scope of the words seems to be peace with the unbelieving community around those to whom this letter was written. At the end of chapter 10 the writer described how these people in former days after they'd come to a knowledge a saving knowledge of Christian truth had endured a great fight of affliction while they were made a gazing stock both by reproaches and affliction. They were publicly exposed to insult and persecution because of their their standard for Christianity and they were also recognized and identified as those who were companions of those who were publicly persecuted. And so one might think that when the writer says follow peace with all men he's urging a course of common prudence. He's saying to them well if you want to avoid difficulties, if you want to have a life that is undisturbed, don't rock the boat in your neighbourhood. Live so as to avoid being those who are the object of reproach and persecution.

[5 : 18] But I don't think that's what he's getting at all. I don't think that's what's motivating this desire for peace.

I think it's far more positive. It is easier to get close to others. It is easier to witness to others in word and in deed if we're living on good terms with them.

Every effort must be made not to throw away the advantage of access to others. A public perception of the church and of Christians as troublesome and quarrelsome undermines the effectiveness of the church.

The church is preventing the blessing of God's peace flowing through it into the lives of others. If in our daily relationships in this world with others we're not striving for peace.

Why is there a church? The church is a testimony to the fact that God is still at work. The church is the community of those whom God has called from darkness to light.

[6 : 38] They are a monument to his saving grace. But they are more than a monument. The church is a testimony to the church. The church, the existence of the church is more than a testimony to the fact that God has intervened and turned around the lives of many.

The church is also a divinely appointed instrument through which God works to reach out and to save others. It's not enough for us to say the Lord has been at work in me.

It is not enough for us to say I can testify what the Lord has done for me. The Lord wishes not only to work in us but to work through us.

And we must repent and lament any conduct of ours that reduces our effectiveness as a medium through which the Lord may work to establish his kingdom.

There is a world out there that is dying in sin. There is a land, a nation out there that needs above all else the gospel proclaimed.

[7 : 57] And we are flawed in our conduct if we let anything divert us from that task. Follow peace.

Follow peace because that is the entrance that allows you to speak. That breaks down the barrier.

That enables the church to fulfill the task of letting the Lord use it to testify to his grace.

But all doesn't just refer to those out there. It also refers to those within the fellowship. Give no offense.

Do not cause others to stumble. Do not lead them into sin by your own conduct. Give no offense.

Give no offense. Give no offense. Neither to the Jews nor to the Gentiles. There out there, Paul said.

To the Corinthians. Neither to the Jews nor to the Gentiles. Nor to the church of God. Give no offense. Cause no stumbling to the church of God.

[9 : 06] Jesus himself said to his disciples. Have salt within yourselves and have peace one with another.

Peace is not automatic. But peace is needed. Peace is needed. Because a sense of unity within creates the right conditions for spiritual growth and effectiveness.

There is a peace in a graveyard. But it's the peace that arises from the absence of life.

The absence of effort. Peace is needed. And that is not the peace that's being described here. You can easily have peace in the church by turning it into a cemetery.

But that's a travesty of what Jesus wants his church to be like. He wants the peace that is the peace of harmony. The peace of wholesomeness.

[10 : 17] The peace of well-being of cooperation in a common task of serving him and spreading his gospel in this world.

We must strive for peace. It requires earnest and diligent effort to thwart the adversary. Because the devil is going around trying to disrupt the corporate life of any group of believers.

It is a triumph. It is a trophy for him when he succeeds. And all the tensions and all the resentments corrode peace.

In the testing and training ground of this life, we're not to suppose we're going to be left undisturbed. Quite the contrary.

Jesus has assured us we are not going to be left undisturbed. But the task is not to be overcome by the adversary.

[11 : 22] How little of the power and the solemnity of the gospel message is conveyed to others if they can point to the strife and controversy amongst those who call themselves Christians.

When such conditions prevail, the world mocks the church. Ah, well, they can mock us.

But the world also evades the challenge of the gospel. And if that happens, we failed. Our task is to challenge them with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And we should repent and turn from any conduct that holds us back in that task. There's no blessing to ourselves or for others if we don't follow after peace.

Holiness. But it's not just peace. It's equally holiness. Because the peace that is being spoken of is an uncompromised peace.

[12 : 29] Not the peace of the graveyard, nor yet the peace of appeasement, saying, let's just paper over the cracks. Holiness denotes separation to the Lord.

Holiness denotes devotedness to him. And nothing can be a genuine expression of Christianity if it compromises on the basic commitment to Jesus.

And so just as peace isn't automatic, neither is holiness. Oh, there's a sense in which all believers are holy.

There's a situational holiness that's true of every believer. Because a believer has been taken into the Lord's kingdom, he has been placed there by God himself, and therefore he is set apart to the Lord.

But the holiness that's in view here is not the holiness that is true of all those whom the Lord has taken to himself. It's the personal holiness.

[13 : 38] Not just being set apart for the Lord, but living so as to be like the Lord. He is the norm of holiness.

Be ye holy, for I am holy. And pursuit of that aim is a lifelong task from which there's no let up until we're in glory.

Have we been pursuing holiness? Can we come before the Lord tonight and say, yes, that is my goal.

I trust so. But we must also recognize how feeble our efforts have been in approaching that goal. Would that the Lord would stir us up and empower us by his spirit, the spirit of holiness, that we might become more like him, whose we are and whom we serve.

Because the holiness that's spoken of here is qualified in a special way. Literally, it's not just holiness, but the holiness without which no one shall see the Lord.

[14 : 58] You see, there's a spurious holiness. There's an outward sanctimoniousness, a sort of piety that craves the praise of men.

Look how pious I am. The sort of attitude that was roundly condemned by our Lord himself, found in the Pharisees of his day.

Those who made a public show. Those who externalized their religion and wanted everyone to applaud them for it.

But true holiness springs from an inward, single-minded love of the Lord. And it's not just that the Lord is the example of holiness.

The fact that is stressed here is that the desire to be like him is so that we can see him. There is not just the desire for holiness as an end in itself.

[16 : 09] It is because this is the qualification for seeing the Lord. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Now we're preparing ourselves to meet at the Lord's table. And one of the things we desire at the Lord's table is to experience in the measure that's permitted to earthbound creatures the presence of the Lord himself.

We desire in the measure that's permitted to us while we are here below to see the Lord. And here we're being told decisively we cannot have that experience unless we have this holiness.

And it's not just a matter of negatives. Oh yes, there is an element of purification needed. There is an element of sweeping away all that would defile, all that would pollute.

But holiness is also positive. It is a matter of Christ-likeness. We know that when he appears, we know that at the end of all things, we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is.

[17 : 32] But right now, as we come round the earthly table of our Lord and want to see him in measure, we must strive to achieve this same qualification, that of holiness, peace and holiness.

because this is the path that enables us to be like him and to be acceptable in his presence and see him.

Let us then look at ourselves and make sure that we are not blocking up divine blessing, that we are not holding back God's showers of blessing upon us because we have turned away from the path of peace and we have rested satisfied with mere sanctimoniousness rather than the true holiness of heart and life that God does.

Leave it at the level of general exhortation, sound though that is. He then presents a serious challenge, a challenge that directs us more particularly as to how we may achieve these goals.

We've got presented to us the three-fold oversight of the church. Looking diligently.

[19 : 02] Now that's a plural word. This looking diligently, its scope, is coextensive with those who are to follow peace and holiness.

We're told to follow, to strain every fiber of our being to overtake peace and holiness. And we're also told to do this by looking diligently.

So this is not the task that is delegated to some group of super believers. This is a task for everyone in the church of Christ. And it's not just the task of certain designated office bearers.

And that's despite the fact that the word that's found here translated looking diligently is the same word that Peter uses in his letter regarding the elders who are described as taking the oversight.

They have a special responsibility, the elders, but not a unique one. The matter that's being discussed here is so important, it's a responsibility for each one of us.

[20 : 13] Because all who are the lords are brought into the one body of Christ and all are entrusted with duties of mutual welfare.

If we lose sight of that, we imperil our spiritual experience. and there are three specific areas of oversight that are introduced here, each of them beginning with the word lest.

Lest any man, and again that man should be in italics, it's not, at least in this text, it's lest any fail of the grace of God. Lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you and thereby many be defiled.

Lest there be any fornicator or profane person. Collectively, there is an oversight that has to be exercised as a channel through which this holiness, this peace and holiness will be achieved.

And it's to think of these three areas, lest any fail of the grace of God. Now I mentioned that back in verse 1, the Christian life is compared to a race.

[21 : 40] Well the word that's translated fail here is a word that could be used of someone who was in a race and didn't make it to the finishing line.

Someone who competed but didn't have enough strength to finish the course. he's left behind, falls out of the race altogether. And that seems to be the picture.

But it's been variously understood. Some people say, well what's being talked about here is someone who has to ensure that they have the Lord strengthening all the way through the race.

Our need is to walk in dependence on the Lord every step of the way because he's the one who provides grace to help us in our time of need.

And without that grace there's serious deficiency in our Christian living. And so it's argued that the mutual duty is that of encouraging those who seem to be failing in their Christian conduct, those who seem to be flagging in the race, encouraging them to make renewed application to the Lord himself for the grace, the strength they require.

[23 : 00] If need be, making it an intercessory prayer ourselves on their behalf. And there is much to be said for that. But I rather think the other way of looking at it corresponds to what the writer had in mind.

Because throughout this letter there are reminders not to desert the living God. There are warnings of the danger of an empty profession.

Here on earth the church is a mixed body. Because there are those who think they're saved but aren't. There are those who know they're not saved but pretend for one reason or another.

And there is therefore the danger that we don't finish the race because we haven't really been running according to the rules.

And God's grace then refers to all the spiritual mercies and privileges of salvation. And if there's a lack of peace and a lack of holiness those who are in the company of true believers those who are within the professing visible church but yet not truly the Lord's may miss out on all that could have been theirs in Christ.

[24 : 40] Can I put that more particularly? Let me put it this way. What legacy are we leaving to our young folk?

They are within the church but they may not yet be believing. they have the privilege of seeing not only the word procuring the word proclaimed but they also see and know of what goes on and the conduct of believers.

and have we not to look diligently lest any fail of the wonderful salvation that God provides if by our conduct we are giving the lie to the profession that we make.

We have all a terrific responsibility for those in our midst who have not yet found the Lord and who might fail because of our irresponsible conduct.

So we have here first of all I think a specific area of oversight a specific area where we have to make diligent endeavour so that peace and holiness may prevail and that is in the way in which we look to the needs of those who are not yet the Lord's and who need encouragement and example who need to be strengthened and drawn on woe to us if any fail of the grace of God because of our carelessness sin and then there is another area where we must look diligently another area where

we must take joint and mutual oversight lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you and thereby many be defiled what's that telling us it's telling us two things it's telling us that sin is something that is a threat as long as we live on earth it's like the bit of a root of a weed you think you've got the weed out the ground you think you've cleaned that piece of ground you've gone round and you've pulled them all out but there's little bits left and they're ready to spring up given the opportunity we've got here a picture of remaining sin remaining sin that will spring up and spread like contagion if it gets half a chance this phrase the root of bitterness was used by Moses in Deuteronomy and he used it to describe the damage that an individual's conduct could do to the life of the community as a whole he described someone in

[27 : 55] Deuteronomy 29 who thought he would be alright because outwardly he was part of the covenant people he heard the word of blessing and he thought himself secure even if he went in his own way but man or woman clan or tribe whose heart turns away from loyalty to the Lord produces such a poison in the spiritual community that they bring disaster upon all you see it's a wonderful truth but it's also a frightening truth no one is an entity in the church of Christ no one is a nobody and that's a tremendous truth truth each one is precious in the Lord's sight but there's the other side to the coin it means that the conduct of each one can have a tremendous influence on the life of the church as a whole looking diligently taking every effort to make sure that the roots of sin in our heart don't spring up as roots of bitterness not just because that will be to our own demerit not just because that will bring the Lord's chastening upon us as individuals it will trouble us in that sense but also because many will be defiled when sin enters into the life of the church it spreads and causes all sorts of trouble we reach a vital part of the church of Christ and so the spiritual health the vitality of the community depends on the commitment and vitality of each one of us who make it up and so we have to ask ourselves have we taken the oversight there have we looked diligently lest we be roots of bitterness lest we be the cause whereby many are defiled everyone who says

I'm going to go my own way is acting as the root of bitterness in Moses terms and oh that's what's wrong with us that's right back to the garden of Eden that's where man fell they would Adam and Eve would have their own way over against God's way that's the rebellion that's in us still and if that root of bitterness break out if that spirit of rebellion against the Lord become commonplace within the church many are defiled the witness of the church is corrupted and there is evil and havoc in the land the embittered rebellious person can have a disastrous effect on the lives of others and then there is this third area this area that looks to the individual whose conduct is openly contrary to God's law though one who is described as a fornicator or profane person someone who is sexually immoral or in rebellion intellectual rebellion against

God you see the root of bitterness like the weed in the garden it grows up sometimes not quite noticed until it's quite big but this third list is focusing on those whose conduct is open and blatant those whose conduct shows that they think little or nothing of the privileges that are theirs like Esau selling his birthright for a single meal and unable to recover it afterwards though he shed bitter tears why because he hadn't never really believed in the reality of the divine promise it was just pious words his father had uttered to him it was something that hadn't gripped his heart it was something that hadn't transformed his life at its very core and so his conduct became open in its rebellion against God and that too is something that the church has ever to be collectively watchful take heed take heed brethren lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God that is what is here summed up as the fornicator or profane person the one whose heart is unbelieving and has departed but if he's been within the visible church of Christ he can cause havoc to the peace and holiness that should be there now let's turn all this just for a moment to ourselves where we are right now this evening we're thinking of preparing ourselves for coming to the Lord's table the Lord wants to see at his table those who have a desire to be like him because it's those who are like him that will see him and enjoy fellowship with him let us then ask ourselves have we made a goal of pursuing of following intently after peace and holiness have we made it our hearts desire to have peace with all and holiness without which no one will see the Lord and if we find that we have fallen short let us come in true repentance before the Lord and seek from him more of his Holy Spirit to be at work within our hearts and lives so that we will not fall short in our dedication to the twofold goal of peace and holiness let us also take care that we are not the root of bitterness that we are not those who are poisoning the life of the collective life of the people of God because coming to the Lord's table is not just an individual act it is a collective act it is something

that we do in company with others and we must therefore not only look to our own inner soul's position as before

God we must also consider how it is we have conducted ourselves as part of the life of the church the life of the people of God have we our priorities straight have we our number one goal that of Christ likeness have we made every endeavour to ensure that the sin that is within us is not a root of bitterness that defiles many oh that the Lord would give us the power by his spirit to quell every word and every thought and every action that might give offence to any and so let us come seeking grace let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall how solemn those words how solemn those words because they point to the reality that fall possibility of a fall is ever present until we're made perfect in holiness and so we have to come not only come for ourselves but come with this collective oversight seeking the good of others also not some censoriousness not going around with carping criticism the whole time

[37 : 02] I'm not often in favour of modern educational techniques but there's one that caught my eye the other day and that's positive reinforcement don't go around saying that's bad that's wrong stop that rather focus on something that someone is doing that is good and encourage it we're very good at criticizing we can be very good and criticism can be presented in a way that's devastating this joint oversight this responsibility we have towards one another can we can we not do it positively can we not seek to build each other up can we not come to the Lord's table and rejoice in the oneness that is ours in Christ a oneness in peace and holiness a oneness that turns away from all that is profane and immoral a oneness that turns away from all that will divide and separate and puts Christ in first place puts the demands of his kingdom first and seeks to follow after that no matter what so it's not just a matter of looking to the past and seeing where we're wrong it's a matter of looking to the future and asking that the

Lord would help us to live for him so that he may be at work in us and he may be at work through us to the glory of his name let us pray oh lord we confess before thee that so often we are those who are easily provoked so often we are those who seem not to seek peace but rather war oh lord we pray that thou wouldst quell the rebellious instinct within us help us not to fight against thee and the standards of thy word help us not to fight against the inner urgings of thy holy spirit as he points to us the way of righteousness and truth help us oh lord to have peace one with another so that we might present a picture of harmony and be united in effort in proclaiming the gospel of christ we confess that there is much amiss we confess that we have fallen short but oh lord our god we dare not give over in pleading before thee that thou wouldst renew us that thou wouldst cleanse and purify us and draw us to thyself oh lord may it not be that the cause of christ would falter in our midst because of our sin and our folly show us oh lord that the powers thine show us oh lord that thou art the one who art still at work and able to do wonders far beyond our understanding oh lord our god we plead with thee may it be that none would be ashamed for our sakes but rather that thou wouldst be pleased to cleanse and purify and renew and bless abundantly we are those who fall far short but as thou hast given us the hope of glory in jesus christ ready us for it we pray cleanse us and grant that we would daily be found growing more like him hear us bless us and guide us in thy truth for his name's sake amen