

HEBREWS VERSE BY VERSE - The New and Living Way - Part seventeen

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LET US THEREFORE STRIVE TO ENTER THAT REST

Hebrews 4:11-13 - "Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. [12] For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. [13] And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

Striving and *resting* seem to be opposites. One implies *effort*. The other implies some kind of *ceasing* of effort. The rest mentioned, we know from previous studies, is trusting in divine grace as it has finally been revealed in the Christ, God the Son, and His finished atoning work on the cross. It's a ceasing of *merit-based righteousness* for securing relationship with God. All references to the Old Covenant Sabbath are a picture of this great *resting* in the finished work of redemption just as the original Sabbath rest was a rest after the finished work of original creation.

Our text, perhaps to the surprise of many, indicates *resting* in Christ's gracious atoning work isn't the same as *relaxing* in Christ's finished work. No. There is a *striving* demanded in that **eleventh verse** - "Let us therefore strive to enter that rest...."

There is nothing in the exhortation of this text to indicate this striving is somehow *contrary* to divine grace. There is no hint of *legalism* here - no resorting back into some kind of *works* theology. No. Nothing of the kind. Here we have a divinely inspired, new covenant endorsed, Holy Spirit infused call to *strive* to enter into the *rest* of grace. We have to do something with this. It is, after all, a *divine* call to new covenant striving.

We can learn much from the context of this command. Our call to enter into promised redemptive rest is rooted in a comparison with God's call to Israel to enter into the promised land rest in Canaan:

Hebrews 3:16-4:1 - "For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? [17] And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? [18] And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? [19] So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief. [1] Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it."

Why didn't they all enter the land at God's command at Kadesh? We know the answer to that question. They refused to enter because God hadn't cleared out all the enemies presently residing in that land *before* He told Israel to enter it. In other words, when they were told to enter the land it was full of potential *enemies* - full of *resistance* - to their taking possession of it. It was a land out of which *opposition* had to be driven.

Do you see it? They would have to *strive* to enter God's promised land rest. The land was theirs by divine grace. They had done nothing to deserve it. They didn't *buy* the land. The *gift of the land* was as much of grace as their *deliverance from Egypt*. They had no way to get out of the bondage of Egypt. That deliverance was all of divine grace. And now God promised to drive out the present inhabitants of the land as well. But not yet. And not without their *striving* to enter it.

They resisted entering the land because there was *opposition* in the land. There were *giants* in the land. There were *fortified cities* in the land. There were *horses and chariots* aplenty in the land. *Opposition*. That's what was in the land waiting for them.

All of this is in our writer's mind as he pours out his heart to the New Testament church. Note his words in that eleventh verse carefully - **Hebrews 4:11** - "Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience."

Notice - not just *disobedience* - but "*...the same sort of disobedience.*" Don't miss divine rest *the same way* they missed divine rest. Don't make the same *sort* of mistake. And the mistake they made was they didn't take the promise of God seriously enough to *strive* to enter the land just as He said.

Our text makes application to the church that's easy to see. We all know not everyone finds the promise of the gospel compelling. Not everyone who makes a *start* in the Christian life *follows through*. Everyone knows some people quit the faith with nothing but a

bad taste in their mouth. What's happening here? Nothing surprising, really. There is **opposition** to life in Christ. And not everyone **strives** against it.

We need to think this through.

1) **STRIVING IS NECESSARY BECAUSE THE CALL OF CHRIST IN THIS WORLD IS STRIKINGLY COUNTER-CULTURAL AND MANY CAN'T STRIVE AGAINST THE WEIGHT OF THAT**

Matthew 7:13-14 - "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and ***the way is easy*** that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are ***many***. [14] For the gate is narrow and ***the way is hard*** that leads to life, and those who find it are ***few***."

These quotable words from Jesus contain more than many think. Of course, they tell us one path is easy and one is hard. And the easy gate is wide and the difficult one narrow. Nothing new there.

But embedded right in these words is also the **reason** the hard gate is hard and the easy gate easy. The gate that leads to life is hard precisely **because** most people refuse it. In other words, those taking the narrow gate leading to life face the brunt of an entire culture committed to the opposite direction.

This means the narrow gate takes great courage because you are constantly calling yourself back to convictions not shared by the community through which your narrow path is cut. And it is always easier for the majority to make the convictions of the minority feel uncomfortable and unreasonable than the other way around. The minority must constantly reinforce its own identity and authenticity.

It's like walking a crowded sidewalk on fifth avenue in New York City at rush hour. It's easy to walk **with** the crowd. It's another story entirely to walk **against** the crowd. You will **strive** to reach your destination walking against the crowd.

O how we need to instruct people engaging in the first steps - right at the **entry point** - of kingdom commitment that there will be instant and persistent opposition. O how we need to tell people they must never evaluate the reality of Christian hope and truth by the way the culture around them rejects it.

Yes. Grace is sweet and powerfully converting. Yes. There is hope eternal. Yes. There is freedom from condemnation. But also, yes, there will come immediate and increasing rejection and persecution and opposition. If anyone is going to enter he or she will have to **"strive to enter that rest."**

Jesus re-addressed striving against cultural rejection over and over again. Here's just one more example - **Mark 13:10-13** - "And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. [11] And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. [12] And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. [13] And ***you will be hated by all for my name's sake***. But the one who ***endures*** to the end will be saved."

Endurance is just another form of **striving**. And we must do this right till **"the end"** (13). I have to move on.

2) **STRIVING IS NECESSARY BECAUSE THE CALL TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN THIS WORLD WORKS IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION OF MANY OF OUR NATURAL INSTINCTS AND WE MUST STRIVE TO TAKE UP OUR CROSS**

This is different from outward cultural persecution. This striving is more **inward**. There are precepts to the gospel that call us to walk in ways foreign to **deeply embedded affections**. Jesus recognized this inward conflict in many would-be followers:

Matthew 19:16-23 - "And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" [17] And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." [18] He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, [19] Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." [20] The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still

lack?" [21] Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." [22] When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. [23] And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven."

Please notice what's happening in this text. This good man is perfectly happy to hear Jesus recite from the commandments of righteous law-keeping. He loves to hear Jesus call him to obedience when he is already *keeping* those laws. His *pride* is being polished up. This is a devoutly religious Jew.

But the call to give away his money *isn't* one of the commands - at least not directly. Jesus isn't confronting this man's *orthodoxy*. He's addressing his *self-centeredness*. He's dealing with this man's *nature* - his *material reflexes*. And while this man isn't afraid to *strive* to keep the commandments, he isn't willing to *strive* against his natural loves. And he never *closes* with Jesus. It's too hard a fight. He walks away "*sorrowful*" (22).

I've only brushed through two examples of the things we must all *strive against* as we press into the rest of grace in Christ Jesus. These are the *types* of resident enemies of the call of Christ.

There are others. Jesus addressed our battle with the basic fact of the human weakness of the flesh - Matthew 26:40-41 - "And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? [41] Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

This is not a *sinful* weakness. It's human fatigue. And there are times following Jesus calls each of us to *strive against* it. It is easy to justify laziness and distraction. It's easy to justify *not* expending exorbitant energy in kingdom pursuit.

All of these are what our writer was referring to in the first verse of today's text - Hebrews 4:11 - "Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience."

3) WE NEED TO HEAR THE COMMAND TO CONTINUALLY STRIVE BECAUSE IT IS EASY FOR ALL OF US TO SECURE OURSELVES IN CERTAIN SINS

Hebrews 4:12-13 - "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. [13] And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

It is the nature of the beginnings of inward sins that their presence is virtually hidden from us. Sin *begins* in the inward life the way ants *begin* their presence in your kitchen.

In 1668 *John Owen* wrote these words as he commented on these verses from Hebrews chapter four - "*Herein consists no small part of the deceitfulness of sin, that it confounds and hides things in the soul, that the soul is not able to make a right judgement about itself....It is very apt to become secure in an ill condition....We are apt to take a very light measure of our failings, and so esteem this or that folly, neglect, or decay, to have no great guilt attending it.*"

This is why it is immediately on the heels of our writer's discussion of *striving to enter Gospel grace* that he reminds us all of the need for *living revelation* that can *penetrate the thoughts and intentions of our hearts*. We need God's Word to push us beyond a *surface evaluation* of our spiritual health.

The outward appearance of my life - the way it may look to you people right now - isn't the issue before God. The part of my life He looks into is the part you don't see. And - even more importantly - it may be the part *I hide from myself*.

This is the particular danger of inward sins. We forget the way sins that grow in our own nature affect the way our own nature can identify them as sinful. Think about this carefully. Sins that affect the way I *think* affect the way I identify *sin*.

We have examples of this in our Bibles:

Christ's words to the *church in Ephesus* - Revelation 2:3-5 - "I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. [4] But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had

at first. [5] ***Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.***

There are things this church did well. And that **caused** them to miss their inward decline. They are called to **remember** what they had forgotten - to **notice** what they hadn't noticed.

Christ's words to the **church at Sardis** - **Revelation 3:1-3** - "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. "I know your works. ***You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.*** [2] ***Wake up,*** and strengthen what remains and is ***about to die,*** for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. [3] Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you."

What words! Jesus talks to a church with a glowing **"reputation" (1)**.

It is full of applause but about to die. They don't **see** past what everyone else is saying about their church. And here is Jesus - **telling** this church it is **"about to die" (2) before it dies!**

Christ's words to the **church at Laodicea** - **Revelation 3:17-20** - "For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and ***I need nothing,*** not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. [18] I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, ***so that you may see.*** [19] Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. [20] Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me."

So how do we wrap up? Our Hebrews text is calling - warning - Christian people about the need to **strive** after Christ's gracious provision and life. And our text calls us all to consider that generation who failed to enter God's promised land rest because of the opposition still to be driven out. Our writer holds this generation up and makes them our example of God's displeasure with those who don't press into God's promise - who don't **strive** deeper and deeper into promised provision and blessing. So think and pray about the example of that rebellious generation who died in the wilderness. Because it's always better to **have** such an example than to **be** such an example.

And everyone said....