

## HEBREWS VERSE BY VERSE - The New and Living Way - Part fifty-two

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### HOW HOLY DO YOU HAVE TO BE TO GET INTO THE KINGDOM?

**Hebrews 12:12-17** - “Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, [13] and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. [14] Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. [15] See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; [16] that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. [17] For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.”

The issue we want to get to eventually today is boiled down pretty simply in **verse 14** - “**Strive for peace with everyone, and [strive] for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.**” I’ve added that word “**strive**” a second time because linguistically it’s a verb that gets applied equally to the two nouns, **peace** and **holiness**. These are two things Christians must “**strive**” after as they run the race.

And at once we all know the issue this relates to as we consider the subject of holiness and grace and works. What is this **striving** after personal holiness and how does this relate to the freely given **imputed righteousness** of Christ?

I think we all know there are verses that make holiness look **easy** and there are verses that make it look **hard**. Which are we to go by? How do they **relate** to each other? How are we to work our way around verses like these?:

**Ephesians 2:8-9** - “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is **not your own doing**; it is the **gift of God**, [9] **not a result of works**, so that no one may boast.”

**Philippians 3:9** - “....and be found in him, **not having a righteousness of my own** that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the **righteousness from God that depends on faith....**”

And then there are verses like these:

**1 Corinthians 6:9-10** - “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, [10] nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers **will inherit the kingdom of God.**”

**James 2:12-16** - “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. [13] For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. [14] **What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?** Can that faith save him? [15] If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, [16] and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?”

**2 Peter 3:11-14** - “Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, **what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness**, [12] waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! [13] But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. [14] Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, **be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.**”

I think you can probably see my point in these four passages. The tension in **verse 14** of today’s Hebrews text is one carried on throughout the entire New Testament. We need an answer to this issue.

Let’s get into our text:

- 1) **A REPENTANT, STEP-BY-STEP WALKING IN THE TRUTH WE KNOW IS THE SUREST WAY TO REMAIN IN THE HEALING POWER OF DIVINE GRACE**

**Hebrews 12:12-13** - “**Therefore** lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, [13] and **make straight paths for your feet**, so that **what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.**”

**Connectors** are the important words in the Biblical text. That word, “**Therefore**,” connects these verses with the

exhortation in **verse 11** regarding the kind of cultural pressure these Hebrew believers were facing for their commitment to Christ - **“For the moment all discipline *seems painful rather than pleasant*, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those *who have been trained by it.*”**

There are times when faith in Christ as Lord makes life more difficult rather than easy. Following Jesus faithfully in a world like ours can seem **“painful”** rather than **“pleasant”**(11). But those painful times can still be **fruitful** and **productive**. They are times of **training** (11). God is wanting to grow a **“peaceable fruit of righteousness”** in our hearts (11). They are times when God is **“receiving”** us, not abandoning us(12:6).

And now we come to our text - **“Therefore....”** In view of this reminder **“lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet....”**(12-13a).

It may be our writer makes a slight distinction in these two verses between the kind of thoughts we allow to form in our **minds** and the way we allow these thoughts to affect our **actions**. There is an **inward despondency** pictured by drooping hands and a stooped posture. You can see the **discouragement** and the **fatigue**. There is a **loneliness** in cultural rejection. **Self-pity** can flood a clear understanding of God’s training program. Thoughts of **quitting**, or at least **compromising** can flitter around in our heads.

And then our writer mentions the **feet** and the **path they choose**. It’s never easy to hold the shaping power of thoughts at bay. Inward **attitudes** - even poor attitudes - can have enormous motivating power over our unguarded **actions**.

Our writer calls his persecuted readers back to the reminder of **Proverbs 4:26** - **“Ponder the *path of your feet*; then all your ways will be sure.”**

Our writer knows what he’s doing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. There is great encouragement in this picture of telling these persecuted believers to **“make straight paths for your feet”**(12). The emphasis is the **path** of following the Lord, your **feet** as the means of traveling that path, and the **next step** you take as your immediate focus of obedience and concentration. This is not **earning** a standing with God by merit. It is planting your feet in the strengthening **pathway of grace**. Divine inward grace makes us strategic in where we place our feet.

Take these words home from church today. When you feel discouraged and lonely and possibly ridiculed as you try to sustain loyalty to Jesus in a rejecting culture - as you may be hated and even mistreated - you may well come to seasons when you feel like packing it all in. You may well be described as having the hands that once loved serving Jesus starting to **droop and hang down**. This is our text’s picture of inward weariness.

What you do next matters. The way you start to **think** matters. You may not think you have strength for the whole journey. But our writer wants you to honor Jesus with your **next step**. You can always honor Jesus with the **next step**.

I’m sure you still have a long way to go. So do I. And I’m sure you’re not yet perfectly mature in Christ. Nor am I. And you may stumble **on the pathway**. But don’t **leave the path**. God is a wonderful God of the **next step**. You may **fall** on the path, but still **stay** on the path.

This is a solidly repeated New Testament principle. You can see it in the way Paul addresses the spiritual stumbling of beloved Peter in **Galatians 2:14** - **“But when I saw that their conduct was not *in step with the truth of the gospel*, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?”**

It’s easy to miss those little words, **“not in step with the truth....”** Paul is describing Peter’s **steps**. Peter **falls**. But Peter **listens** to Paul, even in the face of the embarrassment of being scolded in front of all the other believers. Peter doesn’t want this mistake to be **fatal**. He knows how to be **humble** and **repentant**. Staying on the **straight and narrow path** means more to Peter than his own glory or reputation.

Remember this account of Peter. He wasn’t **“in step with the truth,”** but he **stayed on the right path**. It would have been easy for Peter to grow bitter or defensive. Being corrected for a **mis-step** - especially if you’re a spiritual leader - isn’t a painless process. Mishandling correction is the fastest and surest way a Christian may depart from the path altogether.

The **next step** mattered for these persecuted Hebrews disciples. And the **next step** after correction mattered for

Peter. And the next step - in the face of fear and discouragement and even failure - matters for you and me.

This isn't just a sermon truth. It needs constant replay in our minds. We never learn this truth just once. Every small single step of loyalty to Christ has more potential in it than is usually apparent. Small steps only seem small to us. Small steps are the only way to keep moving on the straight path.

Our text brims with encouragement when our repentance and our obedience seems small in comparison to the obstacles in our way. At times our **problems** can seem so great and the prescribed **remedies** can seem so small. But small steps in faithfulness have incredible power through the mighty grace of God to actually **heal what has been broken** - **Hebrews 12:13** - **"....and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed."**

## 2) **AUTHENTIC DISCIPLESHIP FACES THE PRESSURES OF A HOSTILE CULTURE BY LOOKING FORWARD TO THE FULFILLED PROMISE OF SEEING THE LORD**

**Hebrews 12:14** - **"Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord."**

We need to understand that phrase, **"...without which no one will see the Lord."** It has a very particular meaning because we're plainly told in the Scriptures that **everyone** will see the Lord when He comes - **Revelation 1:7** - **"Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen."**

So even those who don't **want** to see Jesus will see Him when He comes. Clearly this isn't the kind of **"seeing"** our Hebrews text is describing. Our writer is describing a **happy, unashamed** seeing of the Lord. He's picturing the consummation of our redemption - the goal of our union with Christ.

But remember the context of these words. These were deeply persecuted believers. They were discouraged and weary. Some were on the edge of turning back from their new faith in Christ due to intense pain and pressure from their friends, family, and a hostile religious culture.

This is the context for the twofold plea to **strive for peace with all men** and to **strive for holiness before the Lord** (14). They were to strive first for **peace with all men**. The particular emphasis is probably the people who were treating them particularly harshly. They were not to respond in kind. They were to be the kind of shining lights Jesus described:

**Matthew 5:11-16** - **"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. [12] Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. [13] "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. [14] "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. [15] Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. [16] In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."**

But in all of this non-retaliation these Hebrew disciples were still to remain **un-compromised** in their holiness. There was to be no participation with the values of a fallen culture. They were to place their feet in the path of loyalty to Jesus as those longing to see Him joyfully when He returned. **Love** for the culture was never to turn into **likeness** to the culture.

## 3) **WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THIS LONG-TERM VIEW OF SEEING THE LORD IS FORGOTTEN?**

**Hebrews 12:15-17** - **"See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; [16] that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. [17] For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears."**

Esau is put forward as the classic example of the person who had an **immediate situation** that blinded him to **long-term priorities**. And, though in a different fashion, this was exactly what our writer was warning his Hebrew readers about. We can find ourselves in situations that feel like they **require** a certain course of action. Present

instincts can make long-term loyalty feel unreasonable. One day soon **you** will be in a similar situation.

Included in Esau's birthright was more than just a bunch of land and money. It was the passing on of the reality of the **covenant handed down through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**. The promised redemption of God was tied up in it. Esau despised his whole Jewish covenant.

And in these verses our writer is very careful to make his point as bluntly as possible. Esau did all of this for a **"single meal"**(16). How long does it take you to eat lunch? We're made to see the stupidity of his action. How can anyone be that blind? We're being forced to calculate the difference between the time it takes to eat lunch and the vast, unmeasurable stretch of eternity.

The pressures of any challenging moment have enormous deceptive power. It is never a simple achievement to focus on **"seeing the Lord."** The apostle Peter calls the church to think about this issue very specifically - **2 Peter 1:9** - **"For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins."**

Terrible things happen when professing believers forget about **"seeing the Lord"** - even if they just forget momentarily. People tune into internet porn. People sell their spiritual disciplines for money. People get their bodies hooked up on addictions. People have inappropriate sexual relationships. People neglect their marriages. People stay home from church. People do all sorts of self-destructive things - **things no less insane than Esau's lunch swap for his entire future.**

And here's the strange thing. I've witnessed it a few times as well. Usually, when people have long departed from loyalty to Christ they still want His blessing. Look at Esau - **Hebrews 12:17** - **"For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears."**

Just take note of that important time word - **"afterward."** It means **after** he traded away his birthright. Esau wants to make his decisions on his own selfish terms and then come for his birthright **afterwards**. He doesn't see the connection between **loyalty** and **birthright**. He thinks he's still entitled. That's the important word - **entitled**.

The Holy Spirit didn't choose to end the tragic account of Esau with a poetic benediction. He placed himself outside the path of divine grace. God wants this warning to stand starkly in our minds for a while. Time your lunch break today. Any time you compromise loyalty to Jesus for **anything else** it's just as foolish and just as damning.

And all the people said.....