

Run With Endurance part 10

I pray you would be blessed this morning as we turn back to Hebrews chapter 12. If you would open there with me, we'll be specifically in verse 15 this morning, Hebrews 12:15.

And I know many of you, like myself, have enjoyed playing sports at some point in your life. Maybe you're still playing sports. And particularly, if you've ever played a team sport, then you may have experienced something like this that I experienced playing football.

Our coaches were very keen on creating a sense of camaraderie and team spirit among the players. And so one of the ways they attempted to instill this sense of camaraderie among us was to give out team-wide consequences for the mistakes of one individual. The lesson, of course, they were trying to teach us is that we all rise and fall together. When one man falls or blunders, the effect is felt by the whole team.

Now, I'm not sure it had the intended effect that they were hoping because usually it just caused conflict and tempers to flare and fights to break out. But I can say there was one distinct effect I remember of this technique. And that is it caused us to not only focus on our own individual effort, but the effort of the rest of the team.

We became aware of teammates when they were struggling. We sought to come alongside and encourage and help them, albeit not always with pure motives. The desire was to be done with the activity. And in order for us to be done, they had to succeed as well.

But that illustration does remind us this morning of one key truth about Christianity in general. And that is that God has designed the Christian life to be a corporate reality. God has designed the Christian life to be a corporate reality.

While it is true that God saves us as individuals in bringing us to repentance and faith through the preaching of the gospel, He has not designed the Christian life to be lived as individuals only.

It's true in the same way that we're born physically, individually, one at a time. We are born spiritually, individually, one at a time. But also just as we're born immediately into a family unit in our physical birth, we are immediately born into the family of God with real brothers and sisters in Christ.

And so God's design is that we not only concern ourselves with our own personal growth, our own personal spiritual health and encouragement, but that we take a vested interest in the spiritual life, health, and growth of those around us.

In our passage today, the author is going to move our attention away from simply the pursuit of our own personal growth and holiness to our attention to the pursuit of corporate holiness. And this highlights the fact that we run the race of faith, and as we do so, we do not run alone. We are on this journey running towards Christ, longing for the day in which He will bring us home, and yet we are surrounded by a group of family members on every side running the race as well.

And the end goal is that we cross the finish line of glory not just individually, but together as brothers and sisters in Christ. As we turn our thoughts to that reality, let's remember where we've been so far in Hebrews. If you haven't been with us, the theme of Hebrews as a whole is **The superiority of Christ**.

And the author has proven that to us time and time again. You'll see some of the ways he's proven that there on the screen. But now we've been applying this truth for some time, the fact that Christ is superior over all.

And as we've come to chapter 12, we began by applying in the first two verses all of chapter 11, the faith chapter, that we are to **Run Faith's Race with Endurance**. We are to **Consider Christ's Enduring Faith** in verse 3. We're to **Battle Sin Unto Death**. We're to Embrace God's Fatherly Discipline. And **God's Discipline Motivates Our Endurance** in the faith because He uses it for our good. You'll see four of the purposes for discipline there on the screen.

And then finally, that culminated in those first 11 verses with three encouragements concerning God's fatherly discipline. **God's Discipline Affirms Our Adoption**. **God's Discipline Deserves Our Submission**. **And God's Discipline Produces Our Sanctification**.

And this last encouragement of God's discipline producing our sanctification is really still in view today. As we look at how God providentially uses circumstances in life to grow us and to test us and to stretch us, not only individually, but as a church body.

So with that in mind, let's turn back to the section that we've been studying now for a few weeks. Hebrews 12, verses 12 to 17. Verse 12 reads,

"¹² Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. ¹⁴ Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; ¹⁶ that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷ For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears."

The theme that we've been unpacking over the last few weeks is that **Understanding God's discipline strengthens us to take heart and run with endurance**. And today, we'll be called to run harder still.

Remember, there are three commands in these verses we just read, and out of those commands, there are four responses. We've seen those over the last few weeks.

We are to **Take Heart**, verse 12. The idea is strengthen the hands that are weak. Encourage yourself when you are spiritually fatigued, preaching the truth to yourself. Secondly, **Run Straight**. He says, *make straight paths for your feet*. The straight path is the path of obedience. So we believe the truth, verse 12, and we obey the truth in verse 13.

The third command is what we've been looking at the last two Sundays. We are to **Pursue Peace**. That's the first half. And secondly, we **Pursue Holiness**. Verse 14, remember, reads, *"pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord."* As we said, this pursuit is to be proactive, a proactive pursuing of peace in our interpersonal relationships, and proactivity in the pursuit of holiness.

Now, today, as I've mentioned, we cross the bridge from that individual commitment alone to a corporate commitment. Remember the context here in Hebrews. This is a church that's spiritually weary. They've grown weary in their faith. Some of them are looking back over the fence at Judaism, their old life in Judaism, and thinking, you know, things were better then. We're being persecuted. Life is hard. Many have lost their possessions. Some have been thrown in jail, and their faith is wavering.

Now, if you haven't been with us in the study of Hebrews, you might not realize that throughout the book, there are these warnings of the dangers of falling away, the dangers of apostasy. And let me just remind us quickly of a couple of those instances. Remember Hebrews chapter 2, verses 1 to 4. He says,

"For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.² For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, (listen to verse 3) ³ how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?"

That's one warning. There's another warning in Hebrews 3, verse 12.

"Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God."

You can jot down these other examples. We won't read them, but Hebrews 6, 4-6. Hebrews 10, 26-31. These are these warnings, and we really get into another one this morning that opens up this same idea of the warning to keep running the race.

Some of these Christians, as we said, have grown weary, and the author is concerned that they not go off path, away from the faith, and experience the devastating consequences of doing so.

Now just in case you've not been with us, I do want to pause quickly because I want to explain what the sin of apostasy refers to. It's very important that we are not confused here, and it's very important that you hear me say clearly, the Bible teaches very pointedly that it is not possible for a true Christian to ever lose his or her salvation.

So when we're talking about the sin of apostasy, that's not what we're talking about. It's not a reference to a true Christian losing salvation. Instead, the Bible describes in many places this reality that in every local gathering of the body of Christ, there's always a mixture of true believers and unbelievers.

An apostate is ultimately a false convert who may have claimed outwardly to be a Christian for a time. They may have played the part outwardly and even attached themselves to the Christian community, all the while never having truly been redeemed.

And as Jesus says in the parable of the sower, when difficulties and trials come and test them and test that profession, they ultimately reject the faith, even though they temporarily attach themselves to it, and they finally harden their hearts against God and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We see this in places like 1 John 2:19. It says, "*they went out from us*, (speaking of people leaving the church, not just the local church, totally), *but they went out from us, but they were not really of us, for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us. But they went out so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.*" What John is saying is that they appeared to be part of us, truly redeemed, but in leaving and rejecting the faith, they have proven what was true all along, they were not really in Christ.

So the apostate then has not lost his or her salvation, but instead has now made clear what was true about them the entire time. And the reason I think it's important to say that very clearly is because when we talk about apostasy, people get nervous. It's a scary doctrine.

And I want you to understand very pointedly this morning that the author's goal is not to shake the assurance of true believers here this morning. The goal of putting these kinds of passages here before us is to take struggling Christians who are fatigued and growing weary and to wake them up, to show them again the beauties of Christ and to put wind in their sails to keep running the race.

As we saw at the end of last week, it's impossible for a true Christian to ultimately fall away from the faith, not because we're so great, but because God has committed Himself to holding us fast. Remember this, one of the most encouraging passages in Scripture, John 10, verses 27 to 30.

"27 My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; 28 and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one."

So in this pursuit of holiness that we are to ardently pursue, we have confidence that it will last, not because of us, but because of a gracious God who holds us in His sovereign hand.

Now with all of that in the background, I want us to understand a key truth that we're going to see in verse 15 today, and that is that God often uses what we call temporal means to accomplish his eternal plans. Let me say that again. **God uses temporal means to accomplish his eternal plans.** Let me give you an example that's outside the scope of our text, just for illustration.

The Bible clearly teaches that God has predestined those in eternity past who will come to saving faith. Ephesians 1 couldn't be clearer on that point, and yet at the same time, He has determined that He will accomplish that eternal decree by means. That is the preaching of the gospel.

That's why we're called to preach the gospel and to make disciples, because God uses the temporary means of preaching to save His people and accomplish His eternal words. We'll

see the same thing this morning in our passage. God uses the temporal means, a temporal means, to fulfill His commitment to preserve His people, and one of the temporal means to help us all in the faith is the loving care of the body of Christ.

The encouragement and the service and the fellowship and the building up of one another in the body is one of the temporal means God uses to help us all stay on the path and run the path of obedience.

Now, in our passage, we see that these two commands that we've looked at in verse 14, to pursue peace and to pursue sanctification, now have further implications for us as it comes to church life. What we have in verses 15 to 17 are three dangers that the congregation must guard against individually and corporately as they commit to pursuing peace and holiness.

Really, these three dangers describe three different kinds of people for whom we need to be concerned and proactively pursue, because these are all examples of people who are teeter-tottering on the edge of walking off the path of obedience and abandoning the faith, people that we must go after lovingly with the gospel, to care enough about them to pursue them.

And the spiritual state of this person then could be one of two things. This is either a false convert who's on the edge of walking away from the gospel and the church wholesale into the sin of apostasy or it's a true believer who's grown weary in his or her faith and is in great danger of wandering off the trail because of the deceitfulness of sin.

But either way, both circumstances need the body of Christ to go after them lovingly with the gospel, sharing with them the implications of the gospel, calling them back. That brings us to the first danger that we need to be aware of and committed to helping with in verse 15. We'll call it the drifter.

Danger number one is **The Drifter**. Look back at verse 15. "¹⁵*See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God.*" Now right off the bat, I want to explain that while this reads like a command in the English text, it's actually not a command, it's a participle, meaning it supports, modifies the commands we've seen in verse 14. I think actually a better way to translate the word is "seeing to it", instead of see to it, seeing to it.

And the reason I make that point is because we've not changed gears here. This is not a separate point in isolation from what we've already studied. It flows right out of where we've been.

This is the way it works, grammatically speaking. You have two commands, pursue peace, pursue sanctification. And as you're doing that, you're seeing to it that these three dangers are, you're on guard for these three dangers.

That's the idea. As we're pursuing peace with all men, as we're pursuing sanctification, we also have a concern to watch out for the body of Christ as a whole.

Now how do we know that this is speaking of a corporate responsibility and not just the individual responsibility that we have for ourselves? Well look back at verse 15.

“Seeing to it that no one, seeing to it that no one comes short.” The idea is we're to be looking out for everyone in the body of Christ. No one is isolated from inclusion in this description.

The scriptures make it clear that the leadership of the church is responsible to shepherd the church and to love the church and to come alongside and encourage and even confront and even discipline in some cases. And yet that is not a responsibility only given to the leadership. There is another reality in scripture in which every believer in the body of Christ has a responsibility to love and care for the other believers in the church.

And that's what we see here. We are to love one another enough to pursue each other. In fact, it is our love for each other that Jesus said would make us distinct from the world. The world would know that we belong to Him because of our love.

John 13, 34-35,

“34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

So as those who have been graciously given the love of God, we ought to dispense that love to others.

That means very practically that we need to be proactive in our care for the well-being of Christ's church. So as we talk about these three dangers, what we're going to do is apply them to ourselves individually and then also apply them to the church corporately.

You can see that there are three clear dangers just by following the word “that.” Look back at verse 15, *seeing to it that* and then halfway through verse 15 *that* and then the beginning of verse 16 *that*. There are three things that we're seeing to it. Three dangers that we're to be on guard for.

This first one is the drifter seeing to it that “*no one comes short of the grace of God.*” What does it mean to come short of the grace of God? Let's break it into its parts. Let's consider first of all this phrase “come short.” Here's the definition of that Greek word “to come short.” It means “to miss out on something through one's own fault. To miss, fail to reach.”

So the author's used this language before actually with two key illustrations in Hebrews. If you've been with us in Hebrews for a while you might remember the first illustration was the people of Israel in the wilderness. Remember the wilderness generation that came out of Egypt. They didn't make it into the promised land because they hardened their hearts against God and they were not allowed to enter into the promised land and they came short of God's rest he said earlier in Hebrews. Hebrews 3:11

*“AS I SWORE IN MY WRATH,
'THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST.'”*

That's one way that phrase is used in Hebrews, but there's another illustration which is the one we're in the middle of, the illustration of a race.

Runners running the race of faith and here the idea is coming short of finishing the race. Going off path, quitting the race, walking away from the race. Now it's important to understand even in the definition of the term, it's very clear that the issue is not the grace of God. It's not that there's some deficiency in God's grace. It is that the person has chosen to miss out, to fall short of the grace of God. In other words, they have rejected the grace of God.

The grace of God is sufficient, more than sufficient, not only to save but to help the believer to grow in the faith, to resist sin, to put off sin. And so this falling short of God's grace is a willful rejection of His grace that is so freely and graciously offered.

But what is grace? That's a word we use a lot. What is grace? There's a good definition from Alan Cairns. Grace is "a mode of the goodness of God often described as undeserved favor. It's more than that. It is undeserved favor bestowed upon those who are positively deserving of the wrath of God."

Grace is so wonderful because what he's saying is it's not just that God bestows favor on you even though you haven't earned it. It is that God bestows favor on you when you have earned His judgment. You've earned the opposite of it. This is God's grace. It's mind-blowing. It's beyond our wildest imaginations.

This is what the person rejects when they come short of the grace of God. This wonderful favor of God that He has so graciously given.

Often it's not simply a turning away and a rejection of the grace of God. It's a turning away from God to something else. Galatians 5:4 makes this point.

⁴ You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.

In Galatians there in context the people are going back. They're tempted to go back to certain aspects of the law to add that to their faith as if they need to keep certain aspects of the Mosaic Law. He's saying listen you've fallen away from grace in the sense that you've rejected the pure grace of Christ in the gospel for a works-based gospel.

I actually don't believe that warning in Galatians is too far off from the meaning here in Hebrews because what do we have here? We have some Jewish Christians who are tempted by their old way of life. They're looking back over the fence. This is what he's saying. Be on guard seeing to it that no one comes short of the grace of God. That they don't reject the grace of God for any other thing. For any other system. For any other works-based righteousness. Anything that ultimately cannot save.

The only thing that can save church is what we sang of the all-sufficient merit of Christ. The gospel is a gospel of pure grace. That is you can do nothing to save yourself. You must put your faith in Jesus Christ alone. This is the pure gospel.

To turn to anything else is to turn to a deception and a lie and it ultimately is to reject the good gift of God in the grace offered in His Son.

So how can we be on guard against this? What are some of the warning signs that a person may be teetering on the edge of coming short of the grace of God? Well, ultimately, the key warning is that a person begins to believe lies about God and His Word. This has been true since the beginning in the garden.

One of the key warning signs that a person is teeter-tottering with this is when they give in to the enemy's tactic to question God's character, what He says about Himself and to question God's Word, what God says is true.

When we give in to a failure to trust God's character that He really is who He says He is and when we give in to the lie that His Word is not true in some way, we open ourselves up to a whole host of other sins.

One of the key reasons, in fact, that a person rejects God's grace is because they've been so deceived in their minds about the reality of who God really is and what the truth really is that they literally don't see God's grace as grace.

They don't see it for what it is. What they see in the offering of the gospel is a heavy burden meant to steal their joy and independence when, in fact, the gospel of grace is freedom. Freedom from the bondage of sin. Freedom from having to live apart from God. Freedom to know God. To fellowship with God and obey God. It is not a ball and chain. It is the greatest gift of freedom. But to the deceived mind, all they see in the gospel of grace is a prison cell, not the goodness of God.

They either think it's a prison cell or a fairy tale, but either way, they don't see it for what it really is. So if we want to be on guard in our own hearts and help others not to fall into this temptation, what we need to do is double down in our faith on God's character, who He is, and His word. We cannot let go of believing, no matter how difficult our circumstances may be, of believing that God really is who He says He is and that His word really is as true as He says it is.

And if we're going to be on guard corporately, and we've got to be willing to go after those who are fighting and struggling with these deceptive thoughts about God and about His word, what are some of the warning signs that a person may be tempted in this way? How do we know when we need to go after a person?

Well, I want to mention a couple of things. The first one is pulling away. And when I say pulling away, I mean not just from our local church but from the church. Pulling away from the truth. Pulling away from the things of God. There are other faithful churches in our area. I'm not saying a person can't leave our local church and go to another healthy local church. I'm saying when a person begins to drift away wholesale, we need to be very on guard.

And so very practically, if you haven't seen somebody in a while at church or small group, call them. Send them a message. Now, call them not assuming they're on the edge of apostasy. Let me be very clear. There are a lot of reasons that a person may not have been

at church. They're sick, vacation, work trip, whatever it may be. But I'm just saying I have found personally in my life that every time I have thought, I wonder if I should call so and so. When I have done that, I've never regretted it. I've never regretted when a person comes to mind by name, calling them, praying for them, because it's always an encouragement to them. They may be having a great time walking in the Lord faithfully and we get to rejoice in that, but sometimes I call and I find out they're in a very difficult time and we get to walk together through that.

So if the Lord brings to mind a specific person today this morning that you're like, you know, I haven't seen so and so, let me encourage you just call them. Just call them and encourage them wherever they are.

But the real sign that a person may be drifting is not just that you haven't seen them in a few weeks. It's that when you begin to talk to them, they say things that reveal their believing lies about who God is and what His Word says. That's the real danger zone. When things are coming out of their mouth, when they're not believing that God is good, when they're not trusting in His grace, when they are contradicting something that the Word clearly says is true, now we are drifting and this is the danger zone.

You know, and often people slide into that danger zone as we've rehearsed in Hebrews because they're walking through difficult circumstances. They're currently shell-shocked. They're hurting due to some trial in their life and so as things are coming out of their mouth and you're hearing things that are not accurate according to Scripture, they're speaking out of a place of great difficulty and hurt.

So what do you do in those moments? How do you respond to a person in that situation? Let me encourage you that you might say something like this:

Oh brother, sister, I am so sorry to hear about what you've been walking through. My heart breaks with you. I weep with you and I'll be here to walk with you no matter how long it takes. We will walk through this together, but I also want you to know that God loves you, that God has been good to you and He will never do anything but good to you even if you can't see that in this moment. Let me encourage you not to let the pain of your trial drive you away from the good God who loves you and gave His own Son for you. Can I just pray with you? Can we stop and just pray together?

And you do that. You do that. You show genuine concern for what they're walking through, not just brushing it aside and tell them to get with it, but also speak the truth lovingly to them that they need to hear and then you pray with them and then you walk with them in the days ahead through that trial.

They may not immediately respond with gratitude to that. Be patient with them. But a true believer who has the Holy Spirit indwelling them when you lovingly care for them and speak truth to them they will respond because they have the Spirit and the Spirit awakens that desire and the truth of God's Word is like music to our ears and we love our Savior even when we are hurting and it's difficult we love Him and we want to hear the truth, ultimately, even when it's hard to hear.

This is 1 Thessalonians 5:14

"We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone."

Be patient with everyone regardless of what kind of person you encounter. Don't miss church, how much a privilege it is to minister to one another in this way. It is a great privilege to walk alongside one another, to show concern for the body of Christ and understand this is one of the means that God uses to help us stay on the path.

Honestly let's just be honest, all of us can have times in our lives in which it's difficult, we're struggling to keep the pace in the race of faith. All of us can encounter difficulties and trials that take the wind out of our sails, that knock our breath away, and we need the encouragement of the body to come alongside and to be willing to hear what we're walking through, and bear our burdens, and share our grief, and remind us to keep going and that Christ still loves us. He's still on His throne and He's still at work.

What a privilege to care for Christ's church in this way. Let me ask you pointedly this morning, will you love this body of believers enough to look around and come alongside someone who's hurting, alongside someone who's struggling, and build them up in Christ?

Will you love the body of Christ enough to say "Hey, I'll run with you. Put your arm on my shoulder. I know you're hurting. Let's run together. I can't run your race but I can run with you while you run your race." Will you love the body of Christ enough to care, to take a vested interest?

I was reminded of this reality as I studied of my days in college ministry when we would take long trips, long bus rides into the mountains of Colorado and as a leader on the trip I felt an enormous weight of responsibility for all these students.

Their parents have allowed them to go on this trip they've entrusted them to me and so I would sit at the front of the bus so that no one could get on or off without me knowing that and every time we made a pit stop, I would get off first and get back on last and we would do a head count twice to make sure every single person was accounted for and the wheels wouldn't roll until those numbers matched up. The reason was because we weren't going to leave anybody behind and that's the picture that's painted for us here. No one left behind.

I am not just concerned about how well I'm running and how strong I'm doing in the Lord and how certain I am that I'm going to make it across the finish line. I'm concerned about you too. And if I'm running well and I'm marching down the stream and I look over and somebody is stumbling and they're struggling to catch their breath I don't just blow, by I slow down and I come over and say "Hey, can I run with you? Keep running. Don't give up."

That's the idea. No one left behind. Seeing to it that no one comes short of the grace of God.

Take this as if it said to our local church because these words are inspired by the Holy Spirit they are applicable to all churches of all times. It's as if God is saying to us today, "Northlake Bible Church, see to it that no one comes short of the grace of God."

Now that brings us to a second danger we must be on guard against. Danger number two we'll call **The Defiler**. The Defiler. The second half of verse 15. Notice he says, seeing to it "*that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled*" That no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble and by it many be defiled. Now this second danger will prove to be even more serious than the first. In fact, that's true progressively through these three dangers.

We culminate ultimately with the dangerous example of Esau that we'll get to next week. But we've just moved from an individual in the first danger who is struggling not to drift away, now we have come to the defiler who is not only hardening their own heart towards God and the truth, but they are seeking to harden the hearts of others to become a root of bitterness in the church to harm the church as a whole.

The term there the Greek term root of bitterness is not referring to the sin of bitterness specifically, although that's an awful sin that is infectious. The actual translation is this is a root that bears bitter fruit. That's the idea. Bitter or poisonous fruit. The root that bears bitter fruit.

And this is actually a reference to a specific Old Testament passage that he has in mind here from Deuteronomy 29 verse 18. I want us to go back there and see that because the context of Deuteronomy 29 helps us understand how to apply this here in Hebrews chapter 12.

Now just quickly, in Deuteronomy 29 you have this new generation that's about to enter into the promised land. Moses is reiterating the law to them and calling them to obey it. In chapter 28 there's a long list of blessings and curses for either obeying or disobeying God's covenant.

That's followed by chapter 29 and this warning that's given to us here. 29 verse 14.

¹⁴ "Now not with you alone am I making this covenant and this oath, ¹⁵ but both with those who stand here with us today in the presence of the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here today" (He means both this generation and the coming generations.)

¹⁶ (for you know how we lived in the land of Egypt, and how we came through the midst of the nations through which you passed; ¹⁷ moreover, you have seen their abominations and their idols of wood, stone, silver, and gold, which they had with them); (Here's our verse.) ¹⁸ so that there will not be among you a man or woman, or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the Lord our God, to go and serve the gods of those nations; (here's our quote) that there will not be among you a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood.¹⁹ It shall be when he hears the words of this curse, that he will boast, saying, 'I have peace though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart in order to destroy the watered land with the dry.' ²⁰ The Lord shall never be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the Lord and His jealousy will burn against that man, and every curse which is written in this book will rest on him, and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven. Now that is a stern warning. In context, remember the people are under the Mosaic Law. He's basically threatening against this idea warning and threatening against the idea of an individual or a group of people who entice others to go into idolatry.

To disobey the covenant that's given to them and to entice others to infect others by enticing them into idolatry and what he says basically verse 20 is God's way of saying all the curses that I just outlined in chapter 28 will fall on the person who does such a thing.

Now obviously this is under the Old Covenant. We're no longer under the Old Covenant and yet the author sees here something in that verse that applies, in his opinion, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to us today under the new covenant. So let's talk about that for a moment.

First of all, he shortens the quote just a little bit. He says that no root of bitterness. He leaves out the poisonous part. He kind of puts wormwood and poison together. Wormwood is an herb that is known for being exceptionally bitter in taste and that's the idea here.

The reference in Hebrews is applied to this Christian congregation because they are going through this difficult time of persecution and what can happen in those scenarios is that a person begins to harden his or her heart against God because of the difficulty of their circumstance, and in their anger against God and their bitterness against God they begin to sow those lies and deception in the ears of others, trying to get others to defect and leave with them. This is a great danger that must be guarded against.

The guard is to be willing to lovingly but honestly confront a person who is doing such a thing. Who has so hardened their heart that they're speaking these lies about the character of God and His truth. Maybe heretical things. We must be bold enough and love them enough and the church enough to confront those things. This is part of the reason God has given us a process of church discipline in Matthew 18.

I want to read that in just a moment that process, but notice the first step in the process in Matthew 18 is a personal confrontation that usually is not coming from the leadership of the church but the person in the church who is connected to that situation and first finds out or realizes this person has hardened their heart against sin. Matthew 18:15-17 outlines that process this way:

¹⁵ "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. (There's the private confrontation and it's over at that moment if the person repents. But there's another step. 16) ¹⁶ But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. (Now we have a small group going to confront that person who's hardened their heart against the Lord. Number 17) ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

So yes the leadership is responsible, ultimately, for church discipline especially when it comes to that corporate telling of the church but notice the process involves the whole body, even with a private one on one confrontation.

Practically then as you and I are pursuing peace with all men and we're pursuing sanctification in our own lives, we're to be on guard against a hardened unrepentant heart in ourselves and in one another.

And when a person begins to demonstrate that hardened heart and even a willingness to go beyond that and trying to bring others along we confront that speaking truth to that person calling them to repent. And we do that both for their good that they might repent but also for the good of the church that the church may be protected from such a poisonous and bitter fruit that would seek to defile others. This ultimately is an act of love. We have to love each other enough not to avoid such hard conversations, but to speak the truth with one another.

Now I hope what you're seeing from both of these first two dangers is that to be a member of a local church is not a passive activity. Church is not a spectator sport. We do not come simply to take in, take in, take in and leave. We are blessed every time we come to church. We do hear the word. We do worship God and we're encouraged and built up but we also have a responsibility to be a blessing to the people around us, to build them up in Christ, to care about their lives and what they're walking through and their spiritual health.

We have to care enough to give our time and to give our energy for the benefit of one another. We have to be willing to bear one another's burdens, to come under the heaviness of their situation with them, for the glory of God. We must be willing to encourage a brother who's just had the wind knocked out of him to even confront a brother or sister who is hardening their heart in sin.

Let me ask you very personally. Are you personally willing to love Christ's church in this way? Are you willing to love the people of this church with this much proactivity and intentionality to encourage them and build them up and even help them come back to center in the truth of God's word? After all, remember this morning that this is actually part of discipleship and it always has been.

Remember the Great Commission. What does Jesus say specifically there? Matthew 28, 19-20:

"¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, (verse 20) ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Notice he does not say teaching them to understand intellectually all that I'm commanding you. He says to observe it. That is to do it. Part of discipleship is not just disseminating information to people, but helping them by God's grace to do the things that God commands. To walk in newness of life. To walk in a manner worthy of the calling that we've received in Christ.

This is what discipleship is. To not only know the word but obey the word. Brothers and sisters, we can't get around this reality. I've been struck by this this week. The scriptures are so clear. When another brother or sister is struggling, and when they have given in to sin, what do we do? Galatians 6:

"Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one (and how do you restore them?) in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted."

Listen to the command in verse 2. ² “Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ” Bear one another's burdens. Be willing to proactively bear the burdens of others. Let me ask you, whose life are you investing in today in this church? Who this morning potentially is giving thanks to the Lord even this week for the encouraging call, the encouraging text, the encouraging coffee? Who over this last year is thanking God for your kind and loving influence because they're more faithful in the word than they were, they're more faithful to pray than they were, they're more faithful in the battle of sin than they were, their marriage is healthier than it was, they better understand how to shepherd their children than they did, because you took the time to care and to speak the truth to them and to love them and to walk with them.

This is how we're to think about church. Why aren't we more quick to put forth the effort and the time that it takes to invest in each other in these ways? Well, I thought about that. I think there are many things we could say. I want to mention just eight things that I think keep us from this and there are many others.

We'll mention these quickly for the sake of time but here are some of the things I think that keep us from taking a more proactive interest in the lives of others.

One is **Fear**. What if they don't want to talk to me? What if they get mad if I have to tell them the truth about something they've said? What if it affects our relationship negatively? Fear keeps us from engaging with people.

Number two is **Distraction**. Just very practically our lives are full. When I talk to people, how are you doing? Almost without fail we'll say, well, really busy and that's because people who are when we're serious about honoring the Lord and living life for the Lord, it's going to be a busy life. We get distracted in all seriousness. There's soccer practice. There's homeschool. There's work. There's all kinds of extracurricular activities and to be honest, most of our time and effort is spent just trying to figure out how to make it through this day. How do I get to the end successfully, go to sleep, and get up and do it over again? But when we live life that way, there's little mental effort left to care about the people around us. So we have to be... We have to break that cycle of only thinking about our tasks that must get done.

Thirdly, we'll call **Perspective**. Perspective. The Christian life is to be an eternal perspective. We're to see all people, in every circumstance in life through, the lens of Christ and the gospel and eternity. When you look at a person in the face and you think about their soul in relation to eternity, it will change the way you think about that conversation. When you go to work and you think about your job in relationship to eternity, it will change the way you go to work, what you say, whom you interact with, and how, and how you do your work. So we must cultivate an eternal perspective and then we will notice that we're more intentional in the lives of other people because that eternal perspective will foster that.

One of my mentors, Rocky Wyatt, used to say to me often that ministry is not convenient. It's never convenient. He doesn't just mean for pastors. He means ministering to people in general is not convenient. People often need you at what is the worst time for you personally. And when possible, go, call, pray, talk to them, spend time with them, sacrifice your schedule for them, not to the extent that you disobey God's clear commands in other areas. I don't mean that, but we ought to be sacrificial in our care and time with others.

Number four is **Fatigue**. Sometimes we're just so worn out physically and emotionally. We've got nothing left to give and I do want to say there's a time for rest and there's a time if you're in the middle of a crisis yourself in which you're the one that needs the help and we want to help you, but we want to grow through those things and we want to arrange our schedule in such a way that if it's physical rest that we need that we're getting that so that we can have something left to give to others.

Number five is **Hurt**. Many times when a person is hurt by another brother or sister in the church, especially if they had once a very close relationship and now that relationship is fractured in some way, our flesh begins to lie to us and we're tempted to say something like this.

"You know, it's probably just better if I keep things surface level from here on out. You know, it's just too painful to let somebody in or to get into their life that closely. I'll just live casually towards people. It's a lot safer"

But it's impossible to obey the commands of how we're to love and care for one another and maintain that arm's length distance.

Number six is **Bitterness**. If we don't deal with the hurt, it festers into bitterness and now we don't believe the best of others. We assume the worst of them and we assume they don't really want me around anyway. They wouldn't really care what I have to say and so I'm not even going to say anything. It's just bitterness that keeps us from caring for others the way we should.

Number seven is **Selfishness**, which is attached to all of these really. Selfishness keeps us from helping others because the cost, in our opinion, is too much. The time and the effort that it would take to be in that is time that I want to spend on other things.

It turns out that loving Christ's church effectively and proactively is not compatible with the love of self. It requires dying to self, laying down your preferences.

Number eight, finally, is **Unbelief**. Unbelief in the sense of believing that a person is beyond help. It discounts God's instruction that love hopes all things.

The truth is, do you believe this Christian, that when God is involved, nothing is impossible, meaning that a person is never so far gone that God's grace cannot reach them? Do you believe that? We have to treat people that way. We can become convinced in our mind that what's the point? What's the point of putting forth the effort? They're never going to change. We're not considering God and His sovereignty and His care in the equation when we think that way.

But those are just a few examples. Let me ask you very personally, I want you to answer the question in your mind, what keeps you personally from more proactively pouring into the lives of others in this church? What is it for you personally that keeps you from doing that more effectively? And then let me ask you, are you willing to lay that down this morning in an overflow of love for Christ and His church to be more faithful in these things?

It is such a privilege to minister to the church of Christ, not just as a pastor, as a Christian. It is a privilege to minister to the church of Christ, to pray with other Christians, to encourage them with speaking truth, to listen to them and let them explain to you the hurt and the pain they're walking through, to speak truth to them, even lovingly to confront them as hard as that is. It is a privilege to do these things as the people of God.

And so let me conclude with this one simple application. **Encourage the Wavering.** Encourage the wavering. Commit yourself this morning to take a proactive interest not only in your own pursuit of holiness, but in the health of the body of Christ as a whole. Commit to praying.

Please pray that God would protect our church from the defiler, that He would protect our church from bitter and poisonous fruit that would seek to fracture the church and lead the church away from God. And let me encourage us this morning to be more faithful in looking around the room for those that we might build up in Christ, for those that we might proactively spend time with, for their benefit and for the glory of God.

And let me just say, if you're here this morning and you're one of those that's hurting, and this is a really difficult time, and you're the one that's struggling to believe the best of God, to believe the truth of God, please come and ask for help. Don't bear that burden alone. Let us help you. We will walk with you. We will help you by God's grace to walk on the straight path. But don't leave here today carrying that burden alone.

And if you're here this morning and you've never come to know the Lord Jesus Christ, maybe you've been a pretender, maybe you've lived in the local church most of your life, and most people would assume you're a believer, but you know you're not. Today is the day of salvation. Come to the Lord in humble repentance and faith. Confess the truth about your soul. Turn from your sin and put your faith in Christ, and you will know forgiveness. You will know salvation and eternal life.

May we be a church who is busy about the work of proactively building each other up for the glory of His name.

Let's pray. Lord God, this is our prayer that You would help us to be a faithful body who loves each other enough to go across the aisle, who loves each other enough to ask probing questions, who loves each other enough to pray both in private and in person. And God, we pray You would use it to bear good fruit among us, that You would build this church up in Christ, that You would be glorified and honored as we seek to love each other well.

Thank You for loving us, for saving us. Equip us to do these things by Your grace. We ask it in Christ's name.

Amen