

*Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. 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; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. 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.* Hebrews 12:14-17

A story is told of a businessman who flew into the airport in a large city and hired a taxi to take him downtown. As he was riding along they came to a red light and the taxi driver went right on through without stopping. The businessman said, "Hey, the light was red. You're supposed to stop." The driver said, "Yeah, I know, but my brother does it all the time." Soon they came to a second red light and again he went right straight through. The passenger said, "You're going to get us killed. That light was red. Why didn't you stop?" The driver said, "Don't worry about it. My brother does it all the time." Then they came to a green light and the taxi driver stopped the cab. The business man said, "The light is green. Now is the time to go. Why don't you drive on through?" The driver answered, "I know it's green. But you never know when my brother might be coming through." We live in a world where there seems to be a lot of confusion. We feel the tension of this confusion in our hearts and lives when our expectations are not met or when our values are not valued or when our standards conflict with the standards of others or when miscommunication create misunderstandings that causes us pain. It at such times it seems as if a lot of people are driving through red and stopping on green.

This should not come as a surprise. The Bible tells us that we are a fallen people who live in a fallen world, and so, as in the words from Eliphaz spoken to Job: *“Affliction does not come from the dust, nor does trouble sprout from the ground, but man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.”* Those of you who know Job's story know that while he was a man who was *“blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil”* (Job 1:1) his life literally fell apart for no good reason at all, except that God allowed it to happen. Job lost his health and his property and all of his children because the devil thought he could crush Job's faith in God. And though Job's wife told him he should *“curse God and die”* (Job 2:9), Job said: *“Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil? . . . Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord”* (Job 2:10; 1:21). God's Word tells us that in spite of confusion that Job struggled with regarding the reason for his affliction - *“in all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong”* (Job 1:22) and *“in all this Job did not sin with his lips”* (Job 2:10) - because Job had placed his faith in the One who sovereignly makes the rules and majestically reigns over all and providentially decides what will happen in life. In the midst of his worse struggle, Job declared: *“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!”* (Job 19:25-27). Our God still sits on the throne when people drive through red and stop on green.

A story is told of a little boy who came running to his mother, shouting, “Mother, I am nine feet tall.” His mother responded, “No you aren't. That's nonsense.” “But,” he said, “I really am nine feet tall. I measured myself.” “Well, how did you measure yourself?” asked his mother. The boy replied: “I took off my shoe and measured myself with that. It is the same size as my foot, and I am really nine feet tall.” With a smile the mother replied: “Now I understand, but you can't use your shoe to measure yourself. When we measure ourselves in feet, we do not measure ourselves by the size of our own feet, but we use a 12-inch ruler.” In 2 Corinthians 10:12 God's Word tells us that those who *“measure themselves”* by the measurement of themselves *“are without understanding.”* In using the false standard of measurement of his own foot, the little boy did not understand the true measurement of a foot. And in the same way, in using the false standard of measurement of our own personal expectations of God, we do not understand the true measurement of who God is and what God is doing.

Our text for today tells us the true measurement of God is His holiness: “*Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.*” Consider for a moment the implication of this verse. Without holiness, “*no one will see the Lord.*” The weight of this passage is clear in that we cannot see and we will never ever be with God without first being holy. This is where we connect with our current Seeking Him series which is focused on how we can know a deeper intimacy in our relationship with God. Today we will be looking at another *means* in God’s Word, by which by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can seek God and grow in our walk with God. In the past weeks we’ve already seen the need, and have taken the steps of humility, honesty repentance and grace - and today we are looking at both the need and the means by which we can seek God through *His holiness*.

Of all the things about God that are hard for us to focus on perhaps the most difficult is His holiness. Holiness is one of those uncomfortable attributes because it reminds us how much unlike God we are. The holiness of God is so far beyond our comprehension that we struggle to grasp it. If we could grasp a complete image of an infinite God with our finite mind, then we could fully grasp His holiness. But even a small glimpse of God drives men to their knees. When Isaiah saw a vision of God and cried, “*Woe to me/Woe is me for I am lost/undone/ruined* (Hebrew: “dust - Isaiah 6:5). Throughout the Bible you see the same response whenever men encountered God. No human being has or can see God in all His glory because whatever does not measure up to God’s holiness cannot survive in His presence.

What is God’s holiness? The holiness of God is His inherent and transcendent purity, the standard of the greatness of His perfect righteousness to which the whole universe was created. God does not conform to any standard created by others because *He is the standard*. There are two basic aspects to God’s holiness. The first is the idea of *greatness*. God is totally above and beyond us. He is in a class by Himself. God is great and grand and majestic and glorious in that there is a profound difference between Him and everything in all the universe. The second aspect of holiness is the idea of *purity*. God is perfectly pure in who He is and pure in everything He does. God is unstained by and is aggressively uncompromising with sin. God does not bend in any way when it comes to purity. The picture that scripture gives us of God’s purity is “*light*” - which we see when the apostle John writes: “*In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it*” (John 1:4) “*God is light, and in him is no darkness at all*” (1 John 1:5). Holiness is the centerpiece of God’s attributes. Of all the things God is, holiness is at the center of His being. God’s holiness unlocks the door to understanding everything else about God because His holiness infiltrates His other attributes. His love is a holy love. His all-knowing is a holy all-knowing. His all-presence is a holy all-presence. His power is a holy power. His grace is a holy grace. His greatness is a holy greatness. His purity is a holy purity. His joy is a holy joy. His mercy is a holy mercy. His forgiveness is a holy forgiveness. His glory is a holy glory. Everything about God is permeated with His holiness.

In simple terms “*holiness*” means “to be set apart.” God is set apart from everything. He is gloriously unique and above His creation. Nothing measures up to God and nothing can be compared to God.

*Pragmatically* God’s holiness works in us in two different ways. The first way is *positional holiness* which is what God imparts to us when we become children of God. Since God is holy and we are sinners we are reconciled to God by being made *positionally holy* through Jesus’ death and shed blood on the cross. Colossians 1:19-22 tells us: “*For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.*” God imparts Christ’ righteousness into us making us holy and blameless before him. That’s our spiritual position in Christ. The second way God’s holiness works in us is through *personal holiness* which is the outworking fruit of positional holiness, evidenced in everything we think, say and do. Because we belong to God and the Holy Spirit equips us and empowers us to live according to God’s will in every way. This *personal holiness* is the context and focus of our text for this morning.

*“Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”* Our text begins with the word *“strive”* which connects with idea of “seeking” God. In the Greek, the word *“strive”* means “to run after or pursue or press on toward a goal.” Remember from last week that Jewish Christians to whom the words in Hebrews were written, were going through a pretty hard time of persecution and prosecution, some even to the point of being tortured and put to death for their faith in Jesus. As a result, some of those in the church, who were going through some difficult trials, were beginning to reject their public profession of faith in Christ so that they wouldn’t have to put up with all the struggles they were experiencing. This is why the writer of Hebrews not only encouraged, challenged and cautioned them against rejecting their faith in Christ, but also warned them against the complacency and apathy and anger and distractions of self-interest that were infecting the church.

The call to follow Jesus Christ is a serious commitment. It’s not only a commitment to God, but also a commitment to a life that reflects and reveals God, in everything we are and have and say and do. In these verses we are being urged to live out our commitment to God through Jesus Christ specifically in two areas – in our relationship with God and in our relationships with one another. *“Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”* This is the same call we heard from our Lord Jesus when he shared with us the greatest commandment is to – *“love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. . . . and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these”* (Mark 12:30-31).

Our text for this morning reflects these same words of Jesus in exhorting us to *“strive”* for *“peace”* (*wholeness* – Jewish understanding of “shalom”) in all of our personal relationships as we *“strive”* for *“holiness”* in our relationship with God. And so the point the writer is trying to make here – in the context of Hebrews, which recounts the great struggles and trials and sufferings of many men and women of the past who persevered through it all for their good and for God’s glory - is that if Jesus is truly *“the founder and perfecter”* of our faith, then *“peace with everyone”* and the *“holiness”* of *“the Lord”* will be the fruit of the pain, suffering, trials and difficult circumstances we experience in life.

The striving for peace in all of our personal relationships, and the striving to be more holy in our relationship with God, involves submitting to the process of our most sovereign God - which includes pain, struggle, trials, suffering and difficult circumstances in life. Accepting such things, as of from God, and allowing them to break us and bring us to Him, creates a softness and tenderness of heart that is more inclined toward peace and holiness. And we read that this process will lead us to *“see the Lord”!* Notice this striving doesn’t *earn* a look at the Lord. Rather this is striving to have a relationship with God so pure that it overflows into all other relationships, that it *guarantees* that we will *“see the Lord.”* To put it another way, if peace in relationships and holiness of character are of no concern to us - we will *not* see the Lord. *“Strive for peace with everyone”* means we are to be about the business of doing good towards those God has put in our lives. We are called to be proactive in this pursuit, willing to forgive and reconcile rather than criticize, judge and condemn. As followers of Jesus we are to be diligent in promoting peace, which in Christ *does not mean the absence* of conflict and difficulty, *but rather the sharing* of mercy and grace and love in the midst of conflict and difficulty. Jesus himself said: *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God”* (Matthew 5:9).

*“Strive for peace with everyone; and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”* As followers of Christ we are strive for peace and pursue holiness in order to deepen our relationship with God so that our lives reflect the heart and character of God in all of our attitudes and actions. But as saved saints who are still sinners that’s not possible - *unless* we surrender our hearts to God and cooperate with the Holy Spirit in our striving for peace and holiness. God is the only sovereign power that can make us more like Jesus, and when we surrender to Him He will empowers us by His Spirit to pursue peace and holiness through humility, honesty, repentance, and grace – and we will *“see the Lord.”*

Brothers and sisters, we were made to see God because we were created to have an intimate, holy, face-to-face relationship with God. Personal holiness (sanctification) is the process of growing more Christ-like in our thoughts and actions, as the Holy Spirit changes us and transforms us and enables us to see God. Jesus spoke of this in Matthew 5:8: *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."* But our text for this morning tells us that in our striving for peace in all of our personal relationships and in our striving for holiness in our relationship with God - we will face three major obstacles that will either inhibit or prohibit our progress in our pursuit of peace and holiness.

1) The first major obstacle we face in our pursuit of peace and holiness is a lack of grace. *"See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God."* Notice that this is not saying, see to it that you do not come short of the grace of God, but rather, see to it that *"no one"* comes up short of the grace of God. God's Word tells us that we are called to be a *people of grace* who have been *"chosen by grace"* (Romans 11:5) *"and from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace"* (John 1:16) and as a result we are to *"excel in this act of grace"* (2 Corinthians 8:7) to *"give grace"* to those around us (Ephesians 4:29). In 2 Corinthians 6:1 Paul writes: *"We appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain."* It is your responsibility, it is my responsibility, our responsibility to speak grace into the lives of anyone and everyone we meet, and we are to show grace in any and every situation and circumstance we find ourselves in - both for the good of people (peace) and for the glory of God (holiness).

What this means is that your commitment, my commitment, our commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, is also a commitment to *"encourage one another and build one another up"* (1 Thessalonians 5:11) by living out the *grace of God* we have been given - by caring for one another, loving one another, forgiving each other and helping one another. The reciprocal side of this is that when we fail to see that *everyone* obtains the grace of God through us - by not caring for one another, not loving one another, not forgiving each other and not helping one another - its because we are lacking the grace of God in our own lives. Jesus told us that the measure of grace we show towards each other is the measure of grace that we will receive from God. *"Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. . . . For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you"* (Luke 6:37-38). Jesus is telling us here that when we don't show grace towards each other and others our progress in peace towards one another and holiness towards God, is hindered - by the lack of grace in our own lives, *which then causes God to withhold grace from us*. We see here the principle of God that calls us to live out our faith as a community: we will not see God if we do not *together* pursue peace and holiness. *"Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption"* (Ephesians 4:29-30). We are to *"see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God."*

2) The second major obstacle we face in our pursuit of peace and holiness is a lack of forgiveness. *"See to it . . . that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble."* The phrase *"root of bitterness"* written of here is from the Old Testament, which we see in Deuteronomy 29:18: *"Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the Lord our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit."* The image here is a root that produces bitter, poisonous plants. In the biblical context this is *"bitterness"* of the heart - fallen, selfish, sinful, human bitterness. It's much like the weed system we all fight in our yards and lawns. Even though we may spray and pull and cut and curse the weeds, and they may slow down or disappear for a while - they always return because beneath the ground there is immense root system that spreads out shoots that produces more weeds in other places in our yards.

It is extremely difficult at best to get at the roots of your weeds. That's exactly what the Word of God is describing here. If we allow resentment, which is the root that produces bitter fruit, to attach itself to our hearts - we will produce bitter fruit which will sprout up in our lives, in our marriages, in our families, in our friends, in our church and in our community.

We have all been hurt by someone. We have all experienced a lack of grace from one another. We have all known a *lack of forgiveness* from others and from ourselves. We have all known resentment that was born out of unfulfilled expectations. And as long as the weeds of that resentment remains, there is no room for our relationships to grow, whether it be with God or one another. I have been wounded throughout my life: some of it from family, some from friends, some from my enemies, some from people I don't even know, some from those in the church, some comes from myself. And I been a senior pastor long enough to know the same is true, to differing degrees, all of us. We are after all, saved saints who still sin and we live in a fallen sinful world. And sadly, sometimes its more than difficult to get beyond the resentment and bitterness of something that has happened to us in the past.

But the truth is, brothers and sisters, a Christian is someone who finds their identity not in some pain from the past, but in the hope and healing the have received at the cross of Christ. Jesus sacrificed his life on a cross so we might know forgiveness – a forgiveness we are to both receive and give. Again, as we have seen with God's grace, God distributes forgiveness by the same measure it is given. In Colossians 3:13 the apostle Paul tells us: *"As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."* In Matthew 6:14-15 Jesus said: *"If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."* What this means is that when we cannot get beyond our anger or resentment or bitterness - it is *because* we have not been forgiven by God *because we have not forgiven those whom we are angry, resentful and bitter.* Now we may not like hearing that, but that is what Jesus said. But Jesus also told us when we do forgive, even when forgiveness has not been asked for, God will forgive us of our unforgiveness, which will then cleanse us from all anger, resentment and *"bitterness."* In Christ there is freedom when we are forgiven and when we forgive. In Colossians 1:27 the apostle Paul calls this: *"Christ in you, the hope of glory."* Jesus said, *"Behold, I am making all things new"* (Revelation 21:5). 2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us: *"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."* Ephesians 4:31-32 tells us: *"Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."* We must *"see to it . . . that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble."*

3) The third major obstacle we face in our pursuit of wholeness and holiness is a lack of love for God. *"See to it . . . that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal."* As we read of Esau in the Old Testament, it's not hard to see that his heart was not set fully on God. Esau was a man of the world; his desires led him to marry women outside the faith. He was man of fleshly passions, who gave into every feeling, every sensual appetite. Esau didn't care much about God. He lived his life for himself. We see this clearly when we read of the time when his brother Jacob, who did love God and who wanted God's blessing so badly that he sought to receive God's blessing through manipulation by offering a hungry Esau a pot of stew. His price for the meal was Esau's birthright, which was God's blessing given to the oldest son. Esau responded by accepting the offer, thereby giving up his right to God's blessing, in order to satisfy his personal hunger. The choices given to Esau are the same choices we face; choices between our own hungers of the flesh and the hunger for God that lies within our hearts.

This is the same struggle we have today. Much of our modern Christianity of focused on a faith that is lived out for the self rather than for God. Jesus addressed this issue when he spoke to a church which he acknowledged had a lot of ministry activity going on. But they had become drawn away from loving God by loving themselves: *"But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 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"* (Revelation 2:4-5). Brothers and sisters, we must not allow our appetite for the things of this life to become so important that we grow complacent and apathetic about the things of God. And we must not embrace the culture of individual rights and personal entitlement which turns the focus of our hearts on ourselves rather than on God.

God is the true standard of measurement for all things in this life and in the life to come. Isaiah 45:5 He says: *"I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God."* But in being created in the image of God, we were created for holiness. In Leviticus 11:44 God said: *"For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy."* What this means is once we've truly surrendered our hearts and lives to God through Jesus Christ, we will inherit God's intolerance towards sin - which means we will then become fully aware of the war that is going on in our hearts. Because salvation does not impart perfection, the remaining sin in our lives will fight against the Spirit of God within us. Paul speaks of this war in detail in Romans 7 and Galatians 5. The truth of God's holiness is that if you aren't experiencing the struggle against sin within your heart, you may have just made peace with your sin. But if you've given your heart and your life to Jesus as Lord and Savior, *you will not make peace with your sin* because you are positionally holy before God which will cause you to passionately pursue the fruit of personal holiness. Sin is a deceiver, a murderer, an enemy. Sin wants to kill us. The only posture we can take with regard to sin is one of unyielding, unceasing, unwavering hostility and hatred. We must hate sin as the enemy of our souls; we must do everything in our power to *separate ourselves* from sin and eradicate it from our hearts and our lives.

A genuine faith in Christ will produce an appetite for holiness, a yearning for righteousness, and longing for the things of God beyond this world. That doesn't mean everything of this world is bad, but rather that there is nothing in this world that truly satisfies like God Himself. Jesus said: *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied"* (Matthew 5:6). Our *positional holiness in God* is the character of God that sets us apart from the world, imputed into us through Jesus' death and shed blood on the cross. Our *personal holiness* is the bearing of the fruit of our *positional holiness in God* by striving for peace with everyone; by pursuing the holiness of being set apart for God so we might see Him; by speaking grace and showing grace and giving grace to one another and others; by forgiving one another and others as God has forgiven us; and by loving God and treasuring God and seeking the things of God in this life and in the life to come. The true standard of measurement for all things in life is *God*. We dare not measure who He is and what happens to us in life by our own personal expectations. God alone is holy. We will see Him when we strive for peace and holiness. And He will always sit on the throne, even when people drive through red and stop on green.

*Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."* 1 Peter 1:13-16

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