



“Do Not Fall Short of God’s Grace”  
(Hebrews 12:15-17)

Introduction: The author to the Hebrews has reminded us that we are all in a race, a race towards Christ-likeness, a race towards heaven. He has urged us not to give up the race on account of sin, but to struggle against it, even to the point of death, if necessary. He has also reminded us that if we should fall into sin, if we should deviate from the straight path, the Father in His love and mercy will chasten us, to get us back on track.

Now using this same analogy of the race, last week he exhorted us to continue to press straight forward. He told us to pursue peace with all men. As much as it depends on us, we should do all we can to promote peace among all men, especially our brethren. And he told us to pursue sanctification. We are to become more like Christ in all things. Now we must bear in mind that he also gave us a very serious and sobering warning as well. He said that if we do not pursue this holiness, this Christ-likeness, if we are not dying more and more to sin and living more and more to righteousness, then we are not on the narrow path to life, but on the broad road to destruction. If we are not now growing in holiness, we will not see the face of the Lord in blessing as our Father and Savior, but we will see Him as our Judge.

I believe it is this point that he now expands on in our text this evening. Seeing that there is a race to be won, and there is the possibility of failure -- not from the aspect of God’s election, for all whom the Lord elected will make it to the finish line, but from the aspect of human effort, for there are perhaps many who begin, but few who finish --, he now gives us some final exhortations. The three he gives us this evening are things which we must make certain we do for ourselves, but his focus is more on the responsibility that we have to do them for one another. And they all really boil down to one thing, and that is,

*We are to watch out for each other that no one fails in this race.*

**I. He first says, “See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God.” This is the more general of the three exhortations.**

A. It is a call for each of us watch out for one another.

1. As Christians, we must remember that we do not live only for ourselves, but also for others.
  - a. Those who live only for themselves don’t care too much about others. They are like the man who, when he had an unusually large crop one year, instead of sharing his surplus with his neighbor in need, tore down his barns to build larger ones, so that he could take it easy and live off his increase for years to come. The Lord told him he was a fool, and that very night his soul would be required of him.
  - b. They are like the rich man who wouldn’t comfort poor Lazarus or take care of his needs, and so ended up in hell.
  - c. They are the goats, who didn’t work to help their brethren in need, and who will be condemned on the day of judgment. What did they really gain by being selfish? Nothing! But they lost everything.
2. But, on the other hand, those who also live for others are the sheep.
  - a. They are those who give themselves away to their brethren in need, who give their food to feed them, their clothes to clothe them, who visit them when in prison, and who house them when homeless.
  - b. They are those who are lending to the Lord, who will receive back what they have given in heaven where they can keep it forever.
  - c. Jesus has told us that if would love Him, we must keep His commandments, the second greatest of which is to love our neighbor as ourselves.
  - d. In order to do this, we cannot always have our eyes focussed on our own needs. We also need to look out for the needs of those around us, especially our brethren. If we would but experience the blessing which comes from doing this, we would complain less, and get more done for God’s kingdom and glory.

B. But now among the many things we are to do to minister to one another, the Lord here tells us that we must watch out for one another, so that no one among us will fail to finish his or her race. He writes, “See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God.” Literally, he is telling us that we must watch to ensure that no one falls away.

1. But how can we do this?
  - a. Is the author saying that somehow it is in our hands as to whether or not a person is ultimately saved, as though we can guarantee their salvation?
  - b. Of course not. The Lord does not hold us responsible for things we cannot do. That would be like the Lord commanding us to jump to the moon, and then condemning us when we fail.
  - c. Now it is true that God sometimes does command men to do things they are unable to do. For instance, God commands all men to keep His commandments perfectly. Can they do this? No. But does that leave them off the hook? No. God made them capable of keeping His commandments. He made them upright. It's not His fault that now they can't. It's their fault. Even now they could keep them, if they wanted to. There's nothing impossible about the commandments. But the problem is they don't want to. That is why God finds fault with them. They won't keep them.
2. But since the Lord is not commanding us here to ensure that souls are ultimately brought safely to heaven, what is He commanding us?
  - a. He is telling us that we must do what we can humanly, with His gracious gifts, and with the strength He supplies, to make sure that, as much as it depends on us, we encourage, admonish, exhort and rebuke our brethren, as necessary, if we should see them wavering in their race toward heaven.
  - b. Remember that even though God determines the outcome of the race ahead of time, it still matters what we do. Those who will ultimately be saved and enter into heaven will do so because they persevered in God's Word to the end. One of the things that will have helped them to do so, is the necessary encouragement of their brethren. And those who ultimately will not be saved will be lost either because they never actually began the race, or having begun it, never finished it, because they didn't continue in God's Word, perhaps because they didn't receive the necessary encouragement from their brethren.
  - c. God works through these means, in order to bring about His ends. Just because He ordained something, doesn't mean that it will happen by itself. God works, and we work. His work produces our works. He works in us and through us.
  - d. The Lord tells us that we must look out for one another, and do what we can to help one another finish the race. Many of you are already doing this, and some of saints are already giving thanks to God for your help. For instance, I thank the Lord for His encouragement in my life through Nick Roorda. But perhaps some of you are not encouraging, or being encouraged. This is to remind you that the Lord intends for you to be involved on both ends: to be both an encourager and to receive encouragement.

**II. But again, this is just the general exhortation. The author now gets more specific. He writes, "See to it . . . that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled" (v. 15). We are to watch more specifically that no root of bitterness springs up to cause trouble. What does he mean by this?**

- A. He could be speaking specifically about making sure that your heart and the hearts of your brethren never become hardened with the poison of bitterness.
  1. A bitter person is an angry person, one who cannot forgive, one who holds grudges.
  2. You've perhaps known some people like this. They have the tendency to spread their discontentment and anger to others, and cause divisions. The author warns that through this the congregation can become infected, or defiled with that sin.
  3. Certainly this is something that we should always be on the lookout for in ourselves and in our brethren, for remember the Lord hates those who spread strife among brethren (Prov. 6:19).
- B. Or perhaps, he is speaking more broadly about any dangerous doctrine or moral deviation. This could prove to be a root of bitterness among the congregation, in this case not bitterness in the heart itself, although it could result in that, but the bitterness *that results* from the doctrine or the moral deviation.
  1. Paul warns us on two occasions how false doctrine and bad morals can corrupt the whole flock. He says to the Corinthians, "Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?" (1 Cor. 5:6). Here, he is speaking about their toleration of a man who was committing incest with his father's wife.
  2. And he says to the Galatians, "This persuasion *did not come* from Him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough" (5:8-9). This persuasion was the false teaching of the Judiazers that a man, besides believing in Christ, must also be circumcised and keep the ceremonial law to be saved.
  3. Certainly any false doctrine or immoral practice which is tolerated in a congregation will eventually

spread to and defile many.

C. But there is one more possibility which better fits the context.

1. It may be that the author has in view the situation addressed by Moses in Deuteronomy 29.
  - a. There Moses writes, “Now not with you alone am I making this covenant and this oath, 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 (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. Moreover, you have seen their abominations and their idols *of* wood, stone, silver, and gold, which *they had* with them); lest there shall 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; lest there shall be among you a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood” (vv. 14-18).
  - b. The word “wormwood,” is used here symbolically to refer to bitterness. The Greek word which was used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, is the same word in our text.
2. The significance of this would be that what the author to the Hebrews was warning them against was apostasy.
  - a. Moses warned them to watch out that none of them turns from the Lord to serve idols. This would become a root among them which would end up bearing great bitterness. It so often happens that people, even within the church, are more disposed to follow error, than the way of truth. The reason is that sin is very deceptive. Just look at the history of the Old Covenant and New Covenant church, and how often the people went astray. It is only during times of revival, when the Spirit of God is plentifully poured out, that there appears to be a large number of people steadfastly walking in the truth.
  - b. Now since the purpose of the author to the Hebrews was to persuade the people not to go back to the Jewish ceremonial system, in other words, not to apostatize, this interpretation fits in quite nicely.
  - c. What he would be saying is, “See to it . . . that no one turns from Christ back to the sacrificial system, for this would prove to be a root bearing great bitterness for many” (v. 15).
3. The cure would be the same in any case, wherever you find a root of bitterness, it needs to be rooted out.
  - a. If that bitterness is in your own heart, it must be removed through repentance, confession and forgiveness. If you don’t remove it, it will continue to infect and defile many.
  - b. If it is a false doctrine or practice, it needs to be discarded and the truth proclaimed and followed. If it is an immoral person, who refuses to repent of his or her sins, they must be put out of the fellowship, lest their sin spread to others. And while they are unrepentant, you must not fellowship with them as Christians, so as to put them to shame, otherwise you will be undermining the very process the Lord instituted to reclaim them.
  - c. If that root is a tendency for some among the congregation to fall away from the Lord, which would end in bitterness for many, this too must be rooted out. Those involved must be admonished to turn from their sins, to fix their eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, and to run the race with endurance, just as the author to the Hebrews is here doing for his audience.
  - d. We must all be watching for these tendencies among our brethren, and do our part to correct and heal them.

**III. I believe that the root of bitterness being a warning against apostasy is seen to be even more plausible when you consider the third and final exhortation. The author writes, “See to it . . . that *there be* no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a *single meal*” (v. 16). Now what is he referring to here?**

- A. Well he could be warning us generally against sexual immorality and wickedness.
  1. Those are certainly things we should be watching out for, and should not tolerate. Certainly anyone who practices cannot be converted, and should be removed from the church.
  2. But the problem with this view is that he gives Esau as an example, who although he was an ungodly man, didn’t appear to be an example of gross sexual immorality.
- B. That is why I believe that this statement simply builds on the preceding warnings against apostasy.
  1. First, he told us to make sure that there are none among us who fall short of the grace of God, which

means to make sure that none apostatize.

2. Secondly, he said that we be on the look out for a root of bitterness which defiles many. If the third interpretation is the right one, this too is a warning against apostasy.
3. This third warning I believe is really the same thing, only now with a specific example, that of Esau, for Esau was an apostate.
  - a. The author refers to Esau here as an immoral and godless person. What was it that Esau did?
  - b. The author here tells us what he did: he sold his birthright for a bowl of soup. What's wrong with that, you might ask? At first glance it might seem like a small thing, until you realize the importance of the birthright to the Covenant people of God. What Esau did was to give up the right of the first-born, the right of the inheritance, which in this case would have been the continuation of the Abrahamic blessings to him and to his posterity, and what he gave it up for was a bowl of soup. What would you think of a person who sold something as precious as that for something as worthless and worldly as one meal? The author tells us that it was an immoral and profane act. He apostatized from God, which is spiritual adultery, and he despised the blessings of the Lord, which is blasphemy.
  - c. Esau forfeited the blessings of the eternal kingdom of redemption by selling it for a bowl of soup. What a terrible offense against the holiness of God.
  - d. And even after he sold his birthright, he still tried to receive the blessing which came with it from his father. But the Lord ensured that he would not receive it. It was given to Jacob. And even afterwards, when he wept at his father's feet because of the blessing his father gave him, there was still no way that he could get it back. He had forfeited it forever.
  - e. Does this mean that Esau sold his salvation for a bowl of stew? Yes and no. Before he was born, before he had done anything good or bad, the Lord had already determined to hate him, that is, not to have mercy on him. He was foreordained to hell. But did the Lord condemn him for no reason? No. Esau was condemned to hell for his sins, not the least of which was his apostasy from the Lord.
  - f. And as to the fact that Esau found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears, the author does not mean that Esau tried to repent, but couldn't. It only means that he was sorry that he missed out on the physical blessings the promise would have given him, but he had lost them for good. All his tears could not change what he had done.
  - g. This stands as the final warning to the Hebrews and to us that we should not fall short of the grace of God, for if we should quit this race, if we should turn from the Lord, we may very well end up in Esau's position, or in the position of those whom the author speaks of in Hebrews 6, who have become incapable of being renewed to repentance, because they have sinned against so much might.
  - h. The point is, let us watch out for ourselves, and for one another, that no one among become hardened and turn away from the Lord and turn to destruction. May the Lord grant us His mercy and His love that we may do so for one another and encourage one another as long as it is still called today, lest any of us be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Amen.