

WHAT PERSEVERANCE LOOKS LIKE

Hebrews 12:12–17 • Pastor Luke Herche

Our sermon text for this morning comes from the book of Hebrews.
Hebrews 12:12-17.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the fact that you have not left us to ourselves. You've not left us to our own thoughts. You've not left us to our own imaginations. But, you have given us your word. You've given us the Scriptures that we might know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent that we might know your gospel and that we might know your grace and mercy. We might know how to live for you in the world. And we pray, Father, that you would speak to us now. We pray that you would speak to us through your word. Give us wisdom and direction. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Let's read Hebrews 12, beginning with verse 12.

Therefore, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. 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 attain 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.

Well, the Christian life is not easy. But that doesn't mean it should be confusing.

I've had this thought a lot recently. Obviously, there is a lot of mystery in the Christian life; there are things about God that we will never fathom. But that doesn't mean that we should be confused about how to live the Christian life day by day. It isn't the same thing as, "here's the three easy steps to a better you," but it is recognition that the Bible gives us clear instructions on how to live the Christian life.

Some Christians worry that if we talk about the Bible's instructions that we will somehow distort grace. I have no interest in distorting grace and I don't think that talk of Scripture's instructions will. Jesus didn't think so either. Neither did the apostles. The New Testament is full of instructions and commands and rules and principles.

Chapters four and five of Ephesians include commands like:

- **You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do**
- **Put off your old self**
- **Be renewed in the spirit of your minds**
- **Put on the new self**
- **Speak the truth with your neighbor**
- **Do not be angry and do not sin**
- **Give no opportunity to the devil**
- **Let the thief no longer steal**
- **Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths but only such as as good for building up as fits the occasion**
- **Be kind to one another tender-hearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you**
- **Be imitators of God as beloved children**
- **Walk in love as Christ loved us**
- **Walk as children of light**
- **Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness**
- **Look carefully how you walk not as unwise but as wise making the best use of the time**
- **Do not get drunk with wine for that is the boundary but be filled with the Spirit**
- **Give thanks always and for everything to God the Father**
- **Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ**

That is quite a number of exhortations. *Paul is not thereby distorting grace; he is telling us how to live in it.*

In the beginning of this chapter, our writer exhorts us to run the race set before us and he said that our difficulties are a part of God's bootcamp. His training shapes us into His image knowing that all of our struggles and trials are according to His plan. His loving discipline in our lives includes the aforementioned exhortations.

I'm going to discuss them further under three headings: Get ready, Work hard, and Watch out.

Because you know your suffering is a part of God's plan in your life, it is not in vain. It is not meaningless. God is using it, get ready.

It is easy to be discouraged, to languish, to give up, to waste away, to droop and wilt and fade. We can see no good purpose to trials; we can see no way forward; we just want to hit the eject button. We want out. We want it all to be over. But, seeing no way out, we simply begin to exist. We plod along with no expectations or real hope. We drag our feet and our hands dangle by our sides. We frequently stumble because we're not even looking where we're going. We subsist. We are surviving but not thriving.

And sometimes, in the Christian life, this is because we're struggling with some sin. We don't feel that we are growing. We are not victorious over sin. We feel defeated. We feel like failures. And we just hope that Jesus will come back soon so we can be done with it all.

Our first two verses this morning are our general exhortation in the midst of that giving up. Get ready to not drop out of the race, but to brace yourself for what lies ahead. Verse 12, says, **Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees.**

Lifting the hands and strengthening the knees are the physical manifestations of taking heart or gaining courage or getting ready.

We see this in Isaiah 35, where God says,

**Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who have an anxious heart,
Be strong; fear not!
Behold, your God
will come with vengeance,
with the recompense of God.
He will come and save you.**

Why is it that we can take heart? Why is it that we can get ready?

Behold your God! All of our struggles are a part of God's plan!

If God is working for our good yesterday, today and tomorrow then we are not alone. We can have hope that God is at work in the midst of all and the proof of that is in the cross and the resurrection. Jesus died for our sins in our place. And then, the Father raised him from the dead.

The resurrection shows us that God does not abandon His people. No matter how low you go in this life, God will exalt you in the life to come. God is writing His story in our lives. God is not done with us. God will not abandon us. God will come through and so we endure. We take heart.

The phrase "strengthening your weak knees" seems like an odd exhortation. But, it makes sense. If I am weak, I have weak knees.

How can I strengthen myself? How do I become strong?

First, you look outside of yourself. You look to God and God's faithfulness. You look to God's work in Jesus. You look to God's power and presence in the spirit. You find strength in him.

Second, you use what you have. You use the strength that you have and not the strength that you wish you had. You pray like the father of the convulsing boy in Mark 9 who says, **"I believe; help my unbelief!"**

You pray,

Father, I want to lift my hands and I want to strengthen my hands. I want to strengthen my knees, but I feel so weak. I'm looking to you to help me to look to you.

The act of asking Jesus is the act of lifting yourself up out of the mire and out of unbelief, sadness, confusion, and hopelessness. For, he is the one who is at work in the midst of your troubles.

In verse 13, the writer continues,

...and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.

I recently went on a trip with my sons, Tom and Nathaniel, to North Dakota. To make a straight path meant to plan for that trip. I had to know the way to go. Of course, Google did that for me, but I had to make sure, to the best of my ability, that there were no obstacles in my way.

To make straight paths for your feet means you consider the way before you. Consider the path itself. You clear out any obstacles that are in your way. This metaphorical language has practical implications. The race set before us does not suggest a physical race, but walking a life of faith in Christ.

So how will you run the race? How do you live the Christian life? Well, Hebrews 12:2 told us to keep our eyes on Jesus.

What are those things that hinder you from keeping your eyes on Jesus? Are there things that you love or things that you feel you need? Are there things that you

would say you can't live without? Are there things which distract you or rule your heart? Is there anything that would distract you from Jesus?

Get those things out of the way. Why? Because when you keep the fading things of this world in your heart, you are seeking life in created things. You cause yourself to stumble, because you're holding on to the broken and fading things in this world. There is something in your life that causes you to stumble? Get rid of it. That thing may be a person who entices you to sin and you need to disconnect because they keep pushing you toward the wrong path. It may be an object that represents your agenda rather than God's agenda for your life. Maybe you're holding on to a dream which is inconsistent with God's call on your life. If there is something in your life that's hindering you from healing and growing in the Christian life, get rid of it. God is at work in your life; he will bring you to the end and it will be glorious.

Number one is "Get ready." Number two is "Work hard."

Our writer moves to a positive one-word exhortation: strive.

Again, the Christian life is not easy.

Why? First, this life is filled with suffering.

Second, I am filled with sin. And so, I've got this evil outside of me and I've got evil inside of me. Both of them seek to hinder my pursuit of Jesus. Both of them get in the way, both of them are obstacles.

Third, there is work to be done. It's not the kind of work that you just do a little here and you do a little there and you do some when you get around to it. No, the writer says strive or press on.

Paul uses the phrase in Philippians 3:12.

Not that I already have obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

Striving or pressing on means earnestly and zealously seeking after something. If you want to live the Christian life, you can't just try for peace and holiness. You can't just hope for it or wish it would happen at some point. You've got to strive to do whatever it takes to pursue peace and gain holiness. There is nothing more important.

Above all, pursue peace and holiness. Strive for these two things.

The writer highlights them in verse 14,

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Why these two?

They summarize what it looks like to be in a right relationship with God. Peace is this macro-concept. Peace means everything is the way it ought to be. Everything is thriving, growing, interacting in beauty and order, and peace with everyone.

In this context, this concept would have included those listeners who were oppressing them. The Hebrews were facing various kinds of persecution and oppression. But, the suffering was mild. The writer says, **you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood.** That doesn't mean that it wasn't real and it wasn't difficult. It can be just as hard to strive for peace with your family members or your co-workers as with an outside oppressive force.

Striving for peace means you do whatever you can to make peace.

Paul says in Romans 12:18,

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Peace is not always possible. Peace depends not just on me; there are some things I cannot do. I can't disobey God for the sake of peace. Therefore, sometimes, with some people, we won't get to peace. And yet, Romans 12:18 raises the standard: do everything that you can do to make peace happen. It means making the hard phone call, saying you're sorry, admitting you're wrong, giving up your rights at times, letting hurts go when appropriate. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be willing to enter into the hard conversation and to seek peace with those around you.

Sometimes, people just don't want peace. They want to persist in unhealthy and unloving ways of living. You can't change their actions and they are not your responsibility. But, according to Romans 12:18, if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

God, our father is the model of this exhortation.

Romans 5:10.

For while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son..

Jesus came and preached peace to you who were still far off and peace to those who were near. Jesus came preaching peace, offering peace, bringing reconciliation, bearing hurts, forgiving sins, with arms wide open.

As Paul puts it in Ephesians 4:32

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you.

We forgive as we have been forgiven. Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

You see, when we understand grace as Christ's love for us and God's forgiveness of us, we also become instruments of grace. When we understand grace, we can begin to live it. We show it to those around us.

Strive for peace with everyone. Strive for the same peace that God has made with you in Christ, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

To be holy is to be wholly dedicated to God. Holiness is not simply a list of manmade rules. It is a life offered up to God in every part. Holiness is a non-negotiable. It is recognizing that you belong to God. I belong to God, not to myself and not to this world. Netflix doesn't own me. Beauty doesn't own me. Academics doesn't own me. Family doesn't own me. My friends don't own me. My house doesn't own me. My pleasure doesn't own me. My desires. don't own me. Comfort doesn't own me. Politics doesn't own me.

I belong to Jesus.

I am wholly dedicated, wholly consecrated, and holy set apart for him.

Romans 12:1

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

One of those sacrifices in the Old Testament was the whole burnt offering. The lesson of this offering is that our whole lives are dedicated to God; not one part is left out.

Our writer says that without this whole dedication, we will not see God.

The discussion of seeing God is amazing and deep. Scripture says no one can see God and live. And yet, in the same book, we learn that Moses, Aaron and seventy of the elders of Israel went up on Mount Sinai. They saw the God of Israel and he did not lay a hand on them. They beheld God and ate and drank. John tells us that no one has ever seen God. On the other hand, Revelation 22 says God's servants will see his face.

Seeing God could mean a few different things. It definitely means different things at different times. Are we talking about the eyes in our head or the eyes of faith? Hebrews 11:27, which we looked at a few weeks ago, says Moses left Egypt and **endured as seeing him who is invisible**. He saw with the eyes of faith,

Are we talking about physical sight or spiritual sight? Are we talking about seeing God in this age or seeing God in the age to come? Or, seeing God in all his glory or gaining a glimpse of His grace?

I think when the writer says, without holiness, no one will see the Lord, there are at least two senses in which that is true.

The first sense is in the future. No one can enter God's presence who is not holy. That is why our hope is in the work of Christ. He who began a good work in us will bring it to completion on the day of Christ Jesus. We have been declared holy and righteous in God's sight. We are being made holy through the work of sanctification. And, we need Jesus to complete his sanctifying work in us. We need Jesus to make us holy, to prepare us for the presence of the Father. Without holiness, no one will see the Lord. That holiness for us is in Jesus. It's not a holiness we manufacture. It's holiness Jesus has given to us and then works in us.

The second sense is in the present. We cannot see God now with the eyes in our head, but we can see him with the eyes of faith. We can be attentive to God's work in the world; we can have a sense of what God is doing. If our lives are constantly mixed with sin, if we are divided in heart, we will not be aware of what God is doing. As our devotion to the Father grows, we have a sense of his working in the world. We gain the eyes of faith.

Seeing God is true joy. That's what's at stake here. God is the source of all good, all truth, all beauty. Everything that is good or true or beautiful is a pale reflection of something in him. Everything that is tasty and delightful and wonderful is a pale reflection of his wonder and glory. We must see God because we were made for joy.

Holiness is necessary to seeing God and seeing God is true joy, therefore, holiness is necessary for true joy.

Do you want joy? Strive for holiness instead of joy. How foolish we often are. When we strive for joy in sin, it just doesn't work. True joy is only found in seeing our God and knowing him - his love, his grace, his mercy, his holiness and every seeing him in all of his glory.

How do we strive for holiness? There are two answers in the Christian life.

The first is what we can do. We can read our Bibles; we can pray; we can attend worship; we can confess our sins to one another. We can mourn our sin; we can set our eyes on Jesus; we can meditate on the gospel; we can seek to obey God's word; we can serve those around us in tangible and physical ways. In all of these things, we are striving after holiness.

We don't do them in our own strength. We do them consciously dependent on the work of the Spirit to use those means in our lives.

This second answer lies in a genuine gratitude centered on the Triune God. We strive for holiness by using the means of grace. We repent, believe, newly obey and we rely on the Spirit to use these means to work holiness in us, according to His timing and will.

Finally, "Watch out."

That the writer follows up his general exhortation in verses 12 and 13 and his positive exhortation in verse 14 with three negative exhortations in verses 15 to 17.

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; 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.

If you're getting ready for athletic competition, it's not enough to write up a practice schedule and set your alarm for 5 am. You've also must be aware of those things which will trip you up along the way - like binge-watching your favorite Netflix show until late at night. Or, eating an entire Papa Del's pizza and following that up with a trip to Jarlings for frozen custard. These choices will slow you down when you try to hit the gym later.

We need to be aware not only of the right way forward, but also of the roadblocks or the detours along the way.

Our writer mentions three of them.

Before we look at them, I want us to step back and notice the plural nature of these exhortations. In fact, this plurality has been present throughout these verses in Hebrews. The nouns are plural: lift your hands, your drooping hands, make straight paths for your feet. The verbs are plural. The writer is saying you all strive. Or, if you're in the south, y'all strive. Or, if you're in Philly, yuz guys strive. All of you together strive.

When we arrive at verse 15, the community emphasis increases. **See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God. See to it that no root of bitterness springs up.** No root of bitterness springs up in the community. As we will continue to see in our study of Hebrews 12, our burden is not simply for our own peace and holiness, but that of the whole church. Christian life is not a solitary endeavor and you will not be able to live it on your own right. You need the church. You need God's people. We need one another.

That burden requires knowing each other. It requires vulnerability. It demands creativity in the time of COVID. How do we maintain community in the midst of all this craziness? This level of honesty with one another will make us uncomfortable. If you are not uncomfortable in our community at times with your own level of honesty or others, we're probably not being honest enough. I find sometimes non-Christians are actually more honest with one another. Of course, they've chucked all the moral absolutes. We can't do that. But we can be honest - not because we don't believe in moral absolutes - but because we believe in a God of grace.

Our writer has already said that we need community to protect us.

Hebrews 3:12-13

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today" that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

We need daily exhortation from the body - not weekly, not once a week, not just Sunday or during a midweek Bible study. Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called today.

In chapter 12, the call is to watch over one another or "see to it." We get the noun "overseer" from the same word. While there are appointed overseers in the church, everyone is responsible to oversee one another. The formal leadership in any church can't know everyone as well as we need to be known. We need to know one another and to see one another often.

There are three specific things of which we should be aware. I'm only going to talk about the first one this week: **see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God.**

We need God's daily grace -every day, always new, fresh grace - in order to obtain peace and holiness. How do we receive it? We receive it by hearing the gospel, partaking of the sacraments, praying and being prayed for, and benefiting from the speaking and serving gifts within the body. Our job as a church is to see to it that every member gets the grace every day that they need. It's not just my job. It's not just the other elders', David and Scott's and Brian and Todd's, job. It's our job as a church, all of us, to see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God.

Friends, let's make sure that no one in our midst fails to obtain the grace of God. We must show that grace with our lives. We must speak that grace with our lips. We must exhort others to repentance and faith and new obedience every day. Get ready. Work hard. Watch out.

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God. We need grace because we need holiness. We need holiness because we need to see our God. We need to see our God because we were made for joy. Joy is found alone in his presence.

Let's pray.

Our Father, we pray that you would help us to strive for peace with everyone and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. We pray that you would help us to help one another along that road. We thank you for the church. We thank you that you haven't left us alone in this striving but you've given us a community that we might strive together ultimately to pursue you and to pursue your grace. Pour out your spirit on us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.