

# HOW [NOT] TO FAIL TO OBTAIN GOD'S GRACE

Hebrews 12:15–17 • Pastor Luke Herche

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Turn with me in your Bibles if you would to the book of Hebrews. We are working our way through Hebrews and we're nearing the end. We're in chapter 12. This morning, we're going to be looking at just a few verses, verses 15 through 17. Hebrews 12:15–17, and before we read that together, let's pray together.

*Our Father, we thank you for your Word. We thank you for your grace. We thank you for the songs that we get to sing and rejoice, in your mercy and love. Father, we pray that you would be with us now, that you would pour out your Spirit on us, that you would give us eyes to see and ears to hear and minds to understand and hearts to receive the things that we're about to consider. We pray, Father, that your Word would sink deeply into our hearts, and that by your Holy Spirit, you would use it to transform us, to change us, to turn our hearts and minds to you. Father, we trust that you alone can do these things, but we trust that you can do these things and that you will do them because of your mercy and Jesus. So come and work in us as we hear your word this morning. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.*

Again, our sermon text is Hebrews 12, verses 15 through 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.**

Well, I want to start off with an illustration. I'm a little hesitant because it's a short one. A simple one, but it's liable to be misunderstood and it's kind of trivial. The last thing I want to do is trivialize grace, but it does capture something helpful. Have you ever heard one of those advertisements that said, “free with every purchase while supplies last”? The aspect of that which I want you to note is just because something is free does not mean you will get it. That doesn't make it less free, but there may be other obstacles in the way besides cost. Now, there is no limit to God's grace; it never runs out. And yet, still some fail to receive it. Not because of something in God, but because of something in them. God is ready to give, but they are not ready to

receive. Hence this warning in our passage this morning, **See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God.** Our passage this morning is a warning.

Now, not every passage in the Scriptures is a warning. Some passages comfort us with the comforts of grace. Some passages encourage us with the love of God. Some passages give us hope, others motivate us, others point us to the power of the Spirit. But this morning's passage is a warning, a short one, but a warning nonetheless. And because our text is a warning, then my job this morning is to warn. You see, God has this wonderful gift in Jesus. Are you missing out? Are you in danger of failing to obtain grace? So this morning first, we're going to briefly ask the question, "Well, what is God's grace?" Then we're going to look at how do you fail to obtain that grace, or three dangers/three offramps in the pursuit of grace.

So first, what is God's grace? That's what we're going to look at first.

You know the Father, God the Father, through Jesus wants to welcome you into His family, call you His child, forgive your sins, and make you new. He wants to welcome you into His presence now to give you hope for the future and a faith that perseveres through hard things. All that is made possible through Jesus, who became a person to be tempted as a person to suffer as a person that He might sympathize with sinful suffering people. Jesus, who acts as our mediator and makes us right with God by becoming the sacrifice for sin and then pleading with the Father for our forgiveness, a prayer that cannot go unanswered. Now the good news of grace is the Father's love found in the death and Resurrection of Jesus, who died for sin and then rose again on the third day, inaugurating a new creation.

And just as I've very quickly run through what grace is, do you see how important it is? We need God's grace in order to receive forgiveness and mercy. We need God's grace to have confidence and hope. We need His grace to persevere through trials and temptations. There is nothing more important than obtaining the grace of God, your very life depends on it. This is not about us getting it right, this is not about laws or rules, this is not about your performance, this is not about how good you can be, this is not about checking off boxes so that God will love you. This is about grace, God's free, forgiving and transforming favor. But though it is free, not everyone receives it. Which brings us back to our question, are you in danger of failing to obtain the grace of God or failing to obtain God's free, forgiving and transforming favor?

There are many things that would turn us from grace, things that distract us, things that draw us away, things that pick us off, things which mislead and misdirect, are you in danger of failing to receive grace? Now that kind of begs a question: How do you receive grace? God's grace is found in Jesus, OK, but how does it become ours? Well, you receive God's grace by looking to Jesus in faith. Trust in Him. Trust in His

work. Trust in His life, death and resurrection. Look to Jesus and God's free favor is yours. You will know that the Father loves you. You will know your sins are forgiven. You will know the power of God's Spirit through looking to the Cross and the Resurrection of Jesus. Put your faith, your trust, your hope in Him.

But if it's that easy (just look to Jesus; trust in Him), how could anyone fail to receive it? Well, our writer give us three warnings, all really different sides of the same thing. So we can talk about three ways of failing to obtain the grace of God, and this is how to do it. In some ways, it's very easy. If you want to fail to obtain the grace of God, just go in alone, turn a blind eye, and downplay spiritual things. Now when I say this is how you do it, I hope it's clear this is not something I am recommending; I'm just describing so you can avoid such things. I want you to receive the grace of God by looking to Jesus. But for a moment, we need to look at how people fall short of it; how they fail to obtain the grace of God. That's the warning, **See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God**. Or we could put it this way: here are three dangers as you pursue grace, three roadblocks, three offramps, three detours in the pursuit of grace to avoid: going it alone, turning a blind eye, and downplaying spiritual things.

So off ramp number one: going in alone.

Notice these exhortations and verses 15 and 16. They are plural. Verse 15 says, **See to it that no one**, that is, see to it that no one in the church. We must see to one another's spiritual condition. We saw this last week, but it bears repeating again this week. Verse 15 says, **See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God**. Not just "see to it that YOU don't fail to obtain it," but no one. See to it **that no "root of bitterness" springs up**, that is, no root of bitterness in the community as we will see. See to it that no one is **immoral or unholy like Esau**, not just "make sure you are not immoral or unholy," but see to it that no one is. Our burden here is not simply for our own spiritual health, but that of the whole community, the church. The Christian life is not a solitary endeavor, and you will not be able to live it on your own. You need the church, you need God's people. We need one another. Hebrews has already said that we need the community back in Chapter 3. The writer said, **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** [Hebrews 3:12-13]. So we need daily exhortation from the body, exhort one another every day so that we are not hardened and deceived by sin. Hebrews 10 says something similar. The writer says, **And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near** [Hebrews 24-25]. We need regular encouragement, regular stirring up to do what is right from one another.

Now here in Hebrews chapter 12, verse 15, the call is to watch over one another, "see to it." Now that is the verb from which we get the noun "overseer," which goes to show that while there are appointed overseers in the church, everyone is responsible to oversee, to watch over one another. And notice how different this is from how we often do spirituality nowadays. We are each trying to figure out what is right for me. We say we are each "on our own journey" and the last thing we want is someone butting into our business. We seek to go it alone. Well, you know, but we have the same strength in numbers for a reason. AA, the most successful alcohol recovery program out there, depends upon community to work. You're never alone if you're a part of AA. It's the animal that strays from the herd that is most likely to get picked off and eaten. Community is pretty important. Now we have our excuses for why we don't do life together. We're busy people after all, and I get it, I know. COVID limits our gatherings, true enough. It's awkward and uncomfortable to be honest with people about my mess, no doubt. But whatever excuse we come up with it doesn't negate our need. We need one another.

So get creative. As you're comfortable, you can gather together in one another's homes, or you can get together via zoom, or you can meet outside, or you can meet in your garage, or you can talk on the phone, or through text or e-mail or snail mail if you like. However you make it work, don't try to do it alone. We need others who have gone before us, those who know the path of faith to help guide us. We need those who are right there with us walking the same path, stumbling in the same places, but nevertheless encouraging us to persevere. In short, we need the church. Not the building, but the people. We need church leaders, we need one another, we need to be honest about our sin. We need to be honest about our brokenness. We need to be honest about our failures. We need to be honest about our weakness. We need to be honest in the particulars, not just in vague generalities. It's only as we own our brokenness that we overcome. It is as we uncover our sin and shame that they die in the light. As we boast in our weakness, we begin the power of God. So if you want to fail to obtain the grace of God, it's easy, just go in alone, keep to yourself, look out for number one, don't let anybody in. But if you want to obtain grace, stay close to the community of grace, the church. Stick together, do life together, and so avoid this offramp from grace; avoid it by clinging to the people of God in a local church.

So that's off ramp number one, go it alone. Off ramp number two: turn a blind eye.

You see, you might say, "Well, I'm not doing life alone. I've got my boys, I've got my gang, I've got my crew." But let me ask, are they the crew that will help you obtain grace? Look again at verse 15. Verse 15 goes on, **See to it that [...] no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.** Now by root of bitterness here, the writer doesn't mean "see to it that no one becomes bitter about something." Though that's certainly a danger, that's actually not what

he's talking about. He is referring to Deuteronomy 29:18–19. He's referencing a passage in the Book of Deuteronomy and Deuteronomy 29 says, **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, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.' This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike.** See, the danger that Deuteronomy is describing is someone who decides that they're going to continue in some sin, in some idolatry. They hear God's Word, they hear His covenant, they hear what God commands, and they say, "eh, no big deal. God's not gonna care. I'm gonna keep doing this thing." Someone who says, "I can go on doing my own thing, and God won't hold me accountable." And "God doesn't really care about a little porn, right?" or "God doesn't really care about a little cheating on my taxes, right?" or "God is not concerned about how I treat my wife and kids, right? I mean, God is not going to hold this against me, right? I shall be safe though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart." Notice what's going on here, this person is a part of God's people, a part of the church, but they've decided not to act like it. "I'll be a Christian on Sundays, but Monday through Saturday is for me." Or "I'm dealing with this area of sin in my life, but I'm going to leave that area alone. I'm doing so good in the other areas. God won't mind if I just hold on to this one sin." No, God wants all of you. That's what holiness is, being wholly devoted to our God, not devoting one hour a week, not devoting an hour a day, but the whole of life devoted to God.

Notice that the consequences of someone living this double life in the in the body in the church. Someone who stubbornly refuses to repent remaining in the body will, the writer says, defile many. You see, some people will see the sin, and they'll decide to join in. Others will see it and they'll become cynical that this person is "getting away with something." We may all have to deal with the social and relational consequences of that sin as it affects us and others in the body. And the Deuteronomy passage warns that when God's judgment comes, it will come upon the whole community, sweeping away moist and dry alike. Hence this warning. And so as we run the race together, if someone in our midst decides to take a detour, our job is to track them down and lovingly point them back to the right path, to call them to repentance and faith, to once again put their eyes on Jesus. See, allowing someone in the church to continue in unrepentant sin does neither them nor church any good. They increasingly hardened in their sin, and the church is drawn into either sin or cynicism.

Notice how countercultural this is. Nowadays, we think community is built on pure tolerance; "Just live and let live." But we want to help each other in the Christian life. We don't want to be a part of a destructive community, we want to be a part of a redemptive community. Not a community that tears us down, but one that builds us

up. So if we see a brother or sister persisting in sin, we can't say, "Well, it's not me. It's their problem, not mine." **See to it that [...] no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.** Deal with that root for their sake. Deal with that root for the community's sake. Now again, people in recovery know this kind of thing. When you are recovering from drug or a drug or alcohol addiction, one of the first things they tell you is this, "You will never change if you don't change the people you hang out with." Paul actually says something similar, not quite the same, but similar in 1 Corinthians 15:33. He said, **bad company ruins good morals.** Now, don't misunderstand, this is not talking about people struggling with some sin who want to be done for it, but are having a hard time overcoming. There is grace for strugglers. That is what the church is for: people who struggle. This is not talking about people who have not yet committed to Jesus. You don't get your life together and then come to Jesus; we come to Jesus because our lives are not together. We come to Jesus every day because we are a mess. The danger here is someone who professes faith in Jesus and doesn't struggle with sin, but it's just decided they don't care. They're going to continue in sin and hope God doesn't notice. That is a dangerous place to be. It's dangerous for the individual, it's dangerous for the community, and that is an off ramp of the life of faith. Is the community that you are a part of fellow strugglers on the path encouraging one another along the way, or committed to their sin and so leading you off the path of grace?

So off ramp number one: go it alone. Off ramp number two, that's when we say "I'm not alone," but we just turn a blind eye to whatever is going on in the community. Off ramp. Number three: downplay spiritual things.

What is most important in your life right now? Is it your family, or your friends, or your career, or your education, your health? What you value shapes your trajectory. What you think is important determines the path that you are on. I could have phrased all of the points in this sermon in terms of God's community; I could have talked about the necessity of God's community (that would have been point one), the accountability in God's community (that would have been point two), then this point, point three, would have been about the values of God's community. What do we value? So we have this final exhortation in our text, **See to it**, and then verse 16, **See to it [...] that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau.** Esau is an illustration. If I can summarize it first, he's an illustration of apostasy, of turning away from the faith. He's a child of Isaac, but he gives up his birthright. He abandons the promise. Esau's problem is apostasy. The very thing facing the people to whom this letter was written as they struggle with persecution for their faith. And the question is, "Why is apostasy or turning from the faith so tempting?" The answer is because it brings immediate relief. If you are being persecuted or picked on for your faith, the quickest way to end that is to give up your faith. Notice how Esau is a picture of that seeking immediate relief. Esau sold his birthright for a single meal. Now we've heard this story earlier in the service, but I want to refresh your memory. It comes from Genesis, and it reads

like this. **Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted. And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!" Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright now." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me now." So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright** [Genesis 25: 29–34. Now, Esau was a hunter. He was a man's man, we would say, but that also meant that his appetite controlled him. His God was his belly, in Paul's words. and Esau came in from the field and was worn out from the hunt, and he wanted food. Jacob sees his opportunity "Sell me your birthright. Swear it right now." Esau doesn't care. What goodwill his birthright do? That's years in the future, he's hungry now. There's so much to say about Esau, isn't there? He's ruled by his desires. He demands immediate gratification. He can't see the long game, and he undervalues what is truly important. He sells his birthright for a bowl of soup.

It's pretty comical, right, and we could laugh if we weren't so ready to do the same thing. You see, everyday people fail to obtain the grace of God because something else catches their eye. We get consumed with family or work or sports or sex or study or entertainment. We're not openly rejecting spiritual things, we just aren't thinking about them. Another way of translating the word "unholy" in verse 16 is "profane." Now we think of profanity as using certain bad words, but that's really not very helpful. To profane something is to not value sacred things. It is to treat the holy as if it were common, ordinary. It is to trivialize what is most weighty in life. It is to undervalue what is truly valuable. This is why Esau is a picture of profanity. Esau is an illustration. He takes what is truly valuable (his father's inheritance) and sells it for what is trivial (a cup of soup). That is profanity. Now. Interestingly, sexual immorality is lumped in with profanity here and there are one of a couple possible reasons. Either A. the writer is using this language to refer to spiritual adultery. He's not talking then about physical immorality but spiritual immorality. So he's saying "Don't be unfaithful to God or unholy like Esau. Don't be committed to the present age and neglect the age to come. Or he could be saying sexual immorality and unholiness are both in the same category, that sexual immorality profanes sex, as it were, just as unholiness, profanes sacred things. Either way, the problem is we devalue what is truly valuable. Ultimately, Esau's problem or our danger is that we would devalue spiritual things. We allow our present desires, and maybe not bad in themselves, to control us rather than practicing self-control. We pursue short term gain rather than long term, and we undervalue what is most truly valuable. We sell our birthright for a bowl of soup.

Now consider by way of contrast, two parables of Jesus. One in Matthew 13, Jesus says, **The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field [Matthew 13:44].** Again, Jesus says, **the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all**

**that he had and bought it** [Matthew 13:45–46. Now, Jesus and His grace are the treasure. Jesus and His grace are the Pearl of great price. The question is, are we willing to sell all that we have and buy that field? Now what does that mean? What does that look like? Are we willing to put our pursuit of Jesus and his grace above our pursuit of everything else? It doesn't mean there are other things that we do in this life, but that this is the most important thing. Do we value Him and His grace so much that we will let nothing get in our way of obtaining Jesus? Now the story of Esau doesn't end with the purchase of soup. Later in his life, he seeks his father's blessing, a blessing which is his right by birth, but Jacob, his wily brother, tricks their father into giving him the blessing, the blessing which Esau had forfeited years earlier when he sold it for a cup of soup. Now of course, as soon as Esau realized what had happened, he was heartbroken. Verse 17 of our text says, **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.** Now remember, Esau is a picture. He's an illustration. He sold his earthly birthright, his earthly inheritance, and we are in danger of selling our heavenly one.

And the point is not "In this life, if you sin, there's no chance of repentance. It's too late!" The point is definitely not "If you sin and seek forgiveness, you won't find it." No, the point is twofold. First, Esau had real tears, but they were not tears over his sin. They were tears over his loss. You know, many people who care nothing for God feel sorrow over the consequences of sin. They're not turning to God, they're just filled with regret, and regret is not the same as genuine repentance, turning back to God. The second there is a time afterward when it is too late. It's not too late now. Right now, you may be in the process of selling your birthright for a bowl of soup. You may be giving up the grace held out by Jesus for degrees and position and power and money and sex. But you can still repent. The opportunity is there. You can still realize the ultimate value of Jesus and His grace. Turn from creative things and cling to Him in faith. We can do that together, today and tomorrow and every day from now on until Jesus returns. We need grace.

Let's make sure nothing will stop us from getting grace. This is not about being better than other people. We are not. This is about us being broken and needing Jesus to make us whole, being full of guilt and needing Jesus to forgive our sins, being full of shame and needing Jesus to make us clean, being full of sinful desires and needing Jesus to turn us from those desires and to fill our heart with desire for Him. We are not better than, we're not even trying to be better than, we are trying to get Jesus. We are striving after grace. Let's do it together.

Let's pray.

*Our Father, we do pray that you would help us to get grace. Help us not to be among those that whom the writer says, "failed to obtain the grace of God." Father set our eyes*

*on Jesus, set our faith on Jesus. Father, give us confidence in Jesus. Help us to rest in Jesus. Father, do that work by your Spirit. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*