**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**Hebrews (42): The Book Of Better Things**

**“Rightly Responding to Fatherly Discipline”**

**Hebrews 12:12-17**

**April 13, 2025**

As we saw in last week’s study, the author of Hebrews has been assuring his readers that the hardships of the Christian life are all part of “the Lord’s discipline.” They are the necessary “means by which their heavenly Father hammers them into shape for a harvest of holiness. If they were not being thus hammered, they would have reason to doubt whether they were His children at all. Strong stuff! – but it makes crystal clear what we need to know: God’s priority in all His dealings with us is to make us holy” (J. I. Packer, Rediscovering Holiness.)

Knowing God’s great goal for us makes all the difference in the world! If we do not embrace this basic truth, if we do not yield to God’s sovereign but loving purposes in our lives, we will eventually become bitter and resentful and angry. We will find ourselves constantly putting God in the “witness chair,” challenging Him with our accusatory questions: “Why is life so hard?” or, “How can I believe that God loves me?” or, “If I am truly Your child, why do You allow me to suffer?”

But as we also saw last week, it is precisely *because* we are His children that He trains us and educates and refines us with various trials. It isn’t for *lack of love* that we frequently struggle and suffer. Sometimes love *requires* it. In the words of F. F. Bruce, “The man (or woman) who accepts discipline at the hand of God as something designed by his heavenly Father for his good will cease to feel resentful and rebellious; he has ‘stilled and quieted’ his soul, which provides fertile soil for the cultivation of a righteous life, responsive to the will of God.”

The verses before us today begin with the all-important word “Therefore” (v. 12a). This clearly directs our attention back to what our author has just said in the previous verses (vv. 3-11). It is *because* we know that God is our loving Father, who always disciplines us for our good, that we should respond to the directives in these verses with gratitude and joy (vv. 12-17).

These exhortations are *not* directed to us as individual Christians. They are given to the entire church family. In the words of a longtime friend, “We are more than a bunch of isolated bowling pins who look out only for number one. We must look out for each other” (Storms). **Q.** How so? **A.** First, by encouraging one another to press on in the race (12:12-13); second, by promoting peace and holiness within the fellowship (12:14); third, by warning others against the perils of apostasy (12:15-17).

**A. The First Directive (12:12-13):** “*Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ‘Make level paths for your feet’* (Prov. 4:26), *so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed*.” This language, of course, is obviously figurative. The athletic metaphor of 12:1-2 is still with us. There we were exhorted to run the race set before us by keeping our weight down, our limbs free, and our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfector of the faith. Here, as well, the author returns to the real problem facing his readers.

His fear is that because of the *length* of the race (a marathon, not a wind sprint) and because of the fatigue that can often result, there might be some who would allow their “arms” to drop to the sides; others might begin to experience a debilitating weakness in their “knees” and drop out of the race all together. He is speaking about *spiritual discouragement, emotional weariness, and mental fatigue*. This language, therefore, points back to the same concept he had in mind in verse 3. There were some, he feared, who were becoming “weary” and “losing heart.”

Is there anyone here feeling that way today? If so, then the author is urging us to renew our efforts in running this race: “*strengthen*” *your feeble arms and weak knees . . .*” Those words are taken from Isaiah 35:3. When the exiles were fearful that their promised return to the land would never arrive, the Lord encouraged them by saying: “*Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts.’ Be strong, do not fear; your God will come . . . he will come to save you*.’”

The author also appeals to Proverbs 4:26 when he urges the church to “*make level paths for your feet*.” Why? So that “the lame” (the weak among their members) may not be “disabled” (and thus unable to complete the race). Clearly the author believes that we are in this race *together*. By caring for the weaker members of the fellowship, those who are stronger can help them along the way. Rather than be “disabled,” they can be “healed.” In the words of F. F. Bruce, “sprains and similar injuries must by bound up, so that the whole community may complete the course without loss.”

**Q.** So, how do you and I help the spiritually exhausted and discouraged members of our church family? Or, to borrow from the language of verse 3, how do we help those who have become “*weary*” and “*fainthearted*?” **A.** By getting out of our bubbles and *asking* how they are coping with the difficulties they are in; by *pointing* to the promises of Scripture; by *reminding* them that we don’t have to be led around by our feelings when we are led by facts; by *praying* for them; by *loving* them and *encouraging* them to press on in the race!

**B. The Second Directive (v. 14):** “*Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord*.” These ethical disciplines are also embraced through “the power of mutual influence” (Hawthorne), since this exhortation is addressed to the corporate body of Christ as well. There are two things to note about this verse.

First, it isn’t enough to “keep” the peace with others; we must pursue it (create it, sustain it, preserve it). It’s not enough to avoid getting into stupid arguments with each other, or to steer clear of divisive circumstances. To “*make every effort*” to live in peace with everyone means that we attempt to make peace where it doesn’t exist; to seek to restore damaged relationships; to become agents of reconciliation. Establishing peace, of course, isn’t always possible; for in Romans 12:18 Paul writes, “*If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone*.” The other person may not want peace. But as far as it depends on us, we are called to put aside the cause of division and strife. The point is that we must be sure the lack of peace isn’t our fault. If others refuse to be reconciled, that’s their problem. Just make sure it isn’t ours!

Second, the “*holiness*” about which our author is speaking is a practical conformity to the standards of God’s Word, which “sets us apart” from the world’s standards. As we can see, this is not “an optional extra in the Christian life but something which belongs to its essence” (Bruce). Does this mean that if we *don’t* pursue holiness we *won’t* wind up in heaven? Yes, that’s precisely what it means! We must never forget that although we are saved by *faith alone*, the faith that saves is *never alone*. It is an active, working, fruitful and energizing faith; it’s evidenced by a continuing faith in Christ, love for the brethren and obedience to God’s Word. The opposite is also true: those involved in unholy things are barred from inheriting the Kingdom of God (Cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Gal 5:19-21; Eph. 5:3-7; Rev. 22:14-15).

**C. The Third Directive (vv. 15-17).** In these final verses, the author calls upon the entire church to care for one another in three specific ways. We must not come short of obtaining God’s grace (v. 15a); we must guard against a “bitter root” springing up in our midst (v. 15b); we must not allow any immoral or godless person to disrupt the ranks (vv. 16-17).

**1.** “*See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God . . .*” (v. 15a). Once again, it’s clear that you and I are responsible for the spiritual welfare of others in this local church. The author doesn’t say, “See to it that *you* don’t fall short of God’s grace;” but rather, “see to it that *no one* falls short. Clearly, we have a responsibility to look out for one another.

**Q.** But what does it mean to fall short of the “*grace of God*?” **A.** It’s possible that by “grace” he’s talking about the final stage of saving grace, when we enter God’s presence and enjoy Him forever. If so, then this reinforces the exhortation of Hebrews 4:11; “*Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by the same sort of disobedience*.” In other words, we should encourage one another to keep running the race toward heaven!

But there is another way to understand this exhortation. The word “grace” is often used to describe the ever present, sustaining power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, as in 2 Corinthians 12:9; “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*,” and in James 4:5; “*He gives us more grace*.” **Q.** How, then, would we help others avail themselves of this “grace?” **A.** If we know of anyone who is wavering or weakening, we should go to their aid; speak to them; pray for them; encourage them to join our midweek fellowship and Sunday worship on a steady basis, as in Hebrews 10:24-25; “*And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another* . . .”

**2.** “*See to it that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many*” (v. 15b). This “bitter root” could be a reference to *any* bitter spirit that arises within the church, be it pride, animosity, rivalry, jealousy, or anything else harmful to others. Such bitterness is toxic and does spread throughout the assembly, causing a great deal of trouble!

However, our author is probably using the language borrowed from Deuteronomy 29:18, where Moses is warning the Israelites against falling into the idolatrous practices of Canaan: “*Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the LORD our God to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison*.” This would be a reference to the apostate, whose rejection of the Lord would be a bitter, poisonous spirit that would defile many beside himself. That being said, the previous warning in Hebrews 3:12 would be the best commentary on our author’s admonition here: “*See to it, brethren, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God*.”

**3.** “*See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears*” (vv. 16-17). Esau is the classic example of an Old Testament apostate. Outwardly, he was a member of the covenant community. Yet he so disregarded his covenant commitment that he married two Canaanite women, thereby rejecting the example which Abraham had set (Gen. 24:1-3), which grieved Isaac and Rebekah greatly (Gen. 26:34-35; 27:46).

Even worse, he bargained away his inheritance rights as the first-born son (Gen. 25:29-34). By despising his birthright, he demonstrated that he never recognized its true value. His insistence on gratifying his immediate needs led him to overlook what was of infinitely greater value. In due course, however, he wanted that blessing back (Gen. 27:30-40). But as our author emphasizes, “he could bring about no change of mind” (literally, “he could not repent”), even though he sought the blessing with tears (worldly sorrow vs godly sorrow; 2 Cor. 7:10). So, it is with apostates. There comes a point when a person’s heart becomes so hardened that he or she cannot come back. For an apostate, no “second repentance” is possible (Cf. Heb. 6:4-6). An apostate cannot be saved.

How, then, *should* we respond to God’s loving, fatherly, continual discipline? With great gratitude, and an even greater resolve to press on in the race of faith, making every effort to pursue peace and holiness, and by guarding ourselves against the perils of apostasy. That’s what we call “growing up” in the family of God!