

The author of Hebrews has written “a word of exhortation” (13:22) which consists of a series of warnings and examples with the objective of encouraging his readers to hold fast to their faith in Jesus in spite of very real trouble, discomforts, losses which they have experienced because of their faith in Jesus. The temptation to apostatize, to cast away our confidence, to draw back to perdition (10:35-39) has been the sin that has easily beset generations of Jesus followers, and we are not exempt from that temptation.

In light of this temptation to fall away he has exhorted his readers to hold on to their faith (10:19-25), to resist falling away (10:26-31), and not to abandon their faith (10:32-39). He has offered the example of Old Testament saints to illustrate that it is indeed possible for the just to live by faith (10:38-11:40), as well as the ultimate example of living by faith: our Lord Jesus (12:1-3). As an evidence of their sonship, the author holds before them the discipline of their heavenly Father (12:4-13) and they are exhorted to endure to the end in view of this loving discipline.

In verses 14-17 the author gives specific instruction for the kind of behavior and attitude – the duties – which will enable them to “lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us” and to “run with patience (endurance) the race that is set before us” (12:1).

1. Pursue Peace (v. 14)

The righteous “seek peace and pursue it” (Psalm 34:14; Romans 12:18), first with God and then with others. Those who are lovingly disciplined (trained – again the discipline is not punitive) “yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness” (12:11). One of the ways in which we bear up under the trials inflicted on us by the enemies of Christ and his gospel is to love them and pray for them (Matthew 5:43-44), to submit to them, respect them, and honor them if they are in God-ordained positions of authority over us (1 Peter 2:13-17). In his first epistle to the diaspora, Peter encouraged the persecuted Christians throughout the Roman empire to “seek peace, and ensue it” (1 Peter 3:11), an exhortation which falls in the context of passively receiving the wrongs done to us (1 Peter 3:8-12) which concludes with the encouraging promise that “the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers” (v. 12). God ultimately vindicates us by preparing a table before us in the presence of our enemies (Psalm 23).

2. Pursue Holiness (v. 14)

Holiness is not optional, for without it, no man shall see the Lord. Seeking holiness is the opposite of falling away, of drawing back, of casting away our confidence. It should not be understood in terms of sinlessness but rather describes those who continue to seek and pursue the Lord.

3. Be Vigilant (v. 15)

“Looking diligently” is an exhortation for the believers to be watchful over the whole assembly of believers. This watchfulness is especially focused in three areas, all having to do with exposing unregenerate professors:

- *“Lest any man fail of the grace of God”* (v. 15)

The Greek word translated “fail” means to “come short of or be deficient in. The author is not suggesting that the grace of God can somehow fail, allowing a believer to lose their salvation. To fail of the grace of God is to be exposed to God’s grace through the life of the church (6:4,5) but then “come short” of actual saving faith (4:1). This is the person described in 10:29 who “has done despite unto the Spirit of grace.”

- *“Lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled”* (v. 15)

In verse 15, the author has in view **Deuteronomy 29:18-19** which is a warning to anyone “whose heart turneth away this day from the Lord our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations; **lest there should be among you a root that beareth gall and wormwood.**” The warning is to those who abandon the Lord but have a deceptive peace when they say, “I shall have peace, though I walk in the imagination of mine heart” (Deuteronomy 29:19). Such a person believes themselves to be safe from judgement, but the opposite is true (see Deuteronomy 29:20). The author warns that his readers are in danger of falling into the same deception through the influence of such a person (“thereby many be defiled”). The “root of bitterness” is the person whose heart has turned from the Lord. We are to examine ourselves to ensure that we are not such a person, and we are to take heed to the assembly to ensure that any such person is confronted and exposed. Apostates are not to be tolerated.

- *“Lest there be any fornicator or profane person”* (v. 16)

Fornication is a violation of the second table of the law. Profanity is a violation of the first table of the law. Both would be indications that a professing Christian was not pursuing holiness and therefore in danger of being apostate, if not already apostate.

John Owen: “To profane is to violate, to corrupt, to prostitute to common use things sacred, either in their nature or by Divine institution. A profane person is one that despises, sets light by, or condemns sacred things.”

The thing profaned in the context is “the blood of the covenant” which the apostate has counted as “an unholy thing” (10:29).

Esau (vv. 16b-17) is held forth by the author as an example of the person who has come short of God’s grace, was bitter against the Lord, and profaned that which was holy, namely, his birthright and the blessing.

There is some debate over the proper interpretation of verse 17 as it relates to exactly what Esau was seeking with tears: was he seeking with tears the blessing he forfeited (“after he sold his birthright, he was rejected”) or was he seeking with tears the opportunity to repent with tears (“he found no place of repentance”)?

We must be careful not to interpret the verse in a way that suggest the author is saying God doesn’t allow people to repent even if they wish to. The author is saying that Esau had the opportunity to receive the blessing, but he forfeited the blessing by his own sinful actions, and the time had passed for him to receive the blessing no matter how much he desired to have it. By forfeiting the blessing, he profaned that which God had made holy. And why did he forfeit the blessing? To satisfy his temporary hunger, which serves as an example to these Hebrew Christians to not deny the Lord simply to gain the approval of the world and temporary relief from their suffering.

In the context of Hebrews, the forfeiting of the blessing would be for them to turn away from Christ, and should they do so, there is no guarantee that another opportunity to repent will be offered to them (see 6:4-6 and 10:26-27).