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Pursue Peace and Holiness

Hebrews 12:14-29

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One of the kind things that members of our church do, this time of year, is bring some of the produce of their gardens to share with the staff and the Caring Cupboard. People bring in potatoes, cucumbers, tomatoes, zucchini, cookies, whatever they happen to grow, and it's all appreciated. Jill and I are not gardeners – although last year, with some help, we did have tomatoes. Anyone who has a garden, whether for food or flowers, knows that one thing you must consistently do is tend and water the plants you want to cultivate and grow, and pull out and clear out the weeds that will compete with your desired plants for soil, water, and sun.

In today's passage, from *Hebrews 12:14-29*, we learn about two virtues – or behaviors – that we're to cultivate and grow, as followers of Christ, and one that we need to weed out so that we “*obtain the grace of God.*” Listen to *Hebrews 12:14-29*.

“Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails **to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled.** See to it that no one becomes like **Esau**, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal. You know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, even though he sought the blessing with tears. **You have not come** to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. (For they could not endure the order that was given, ‘If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.’ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear.’) **But you have come** to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to **God the judge of all**, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to **Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant**, and to the **sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.** See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we

escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! At that time his voice **shook** the earth; but now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will **shake** not only the earth but also the heaven.’ This phrase, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of what is **shaken** — that is, created things — so that what cannot be **shaken** may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be **shaken**, let us give thanks, by which **we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.**”

In today’s passage from *Hebrews 12*, we’re told about three significant things — two we want to cultivate and grow: **peace and holiness**; and one we want to weed out and eliminate: **bitterness**. **Let’s think together about peace, holiness, and bitterness.**

Peace is a Biblical word — Shalom in Hebrew, Eirene in Greek. It implies wholeness, wellness, right relationship with God and other people. Jesus said, in *Matthew 5:9*, **“Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God.”**

Peace is not passive. **We’re to pursue peace.** When we pursue something — whether a dream, a job, or a competitor who is ahead of us in a race — pursuing something or someone requires energy, focus, and at times, maybe some risk.

We’re to **pursue peace**, and not as an abstract concept, not just with one person or a couple of people we know and love dearly; we’re to pursue peace **with everyone!** This is when some of us start to talk back to our Bible. “You’re kidding right? Pursue peace with everyone?” Yes, everyone. “Even the people who are mean to me?” Yes. *“If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Romans 12:18).* “Pursue peace, even with my enemies?” Yes. Jesus said, *“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).* This sounds hard. The Lord’s response to us might be, “How does living according to the values and ways of the world seem to be working out for you and for the whole world?”

Pursuing peace with everyone includes ourselves, others, and God. Some of us may struggle more with being at peace and content with ourselves than we do with other people. I don’t know if it’s possible to pursue peace with everyone — or anyone — unless we’re first at peace with ourselves and with God. When we’re secure in our relationship with God, when we know we’re deeply loved and valued, we can have a sense of

contentment and peace that then can shape our relationships and attitude toward others. Pursuing peace involves humility, practicing an attitude of openness, rather than defensiveness, vindictiveness, cruelty, condescension, judgment, or violence. It's a willingness to be engaged with other people, even when it's uncomfortable – and, as Paul says in *1 Corinthians 13*, it helps if we don't always insist on getting our own way.

How might your relationships and perspective toward other people change – whether with those closest to you in your family, or friends, or with strangers you encounter throughout the course of your day – if you consciously sought to pursue peace with everyone? It's an experiment worth trying.

The second behavior – or virtue – we're told to pursue is **Holiness**. We sang, in one of our songs today, *"Holiness is what I long for, holiness is what I need, holiness is what you want from me."* Why should holiness matter to you? Why should you care about it and want to cultivate it and grow in it? Because Hebrews says that without holiness, **no one will see the Lord**. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, **"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God"** (*Matthew 5:8*). I find it interesting that Jesus' statements about the peacemakers and the pure in heart (which relates to holiness) are right next to each other in the Sermon on the Mount, and Hebrews connects them in the same sentence.

When it comes to cultivating holiness, it begins in our **heart**, not in our external behavior. The Book of Proverbs is filled with practical advice about how we can avoid negative emotions and behaviors, and instead, grow in holiness. **Proverbs 4:23-27** is a good example. It says, *"Keep **your heart** with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. Put away from you **crooked speech**, and put **devious talk** far from you. Let **your eyes** look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you. Keep straight the path of **your feet**, and all your ways will be sure. Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn **your foot** away from evil."*

Notice the different parts of the body that are mentioned, in pursuing holiness. It begins with **our heart**. If our heart is deceitful, dishonest, rotten, mean, brutal, callous, or selfish, what flows from it will be polluted and unhealthy for others and ourselves. If we strive, as much as possible, to have a pure heart and godly motives, then what flows from it will be like *"the springs of life."* The next thing that's mentioned is our **speech** – **how we talk** to, with, and about others. People who are crooked, who misrepresent the

truth, often use devious talk, which is speech that hides our true motives, often by lying, tricking, or manipulating people. People who speak this way are far from holy.

Keep your heart; put away inappropriate ways of speaking; next, **our eyes** are mentioned, and we're warned to look straight ahead. This foreshadows *Proverbs 5*, which warns not to be lured, tempted, or enticed into an inappropriate relationship. Such a relationship often begins in one's heart; and moves to the eyes, which looks for an opportunity; and then our feet, rather than staying on the straight and narrow path of wisdom and holiness, swerve toward evil. What's described, in *Proverbs 4*, are two ways in life, and we all choose one – the way of wisdom and holiness, or the way of the wicked. *Hebrews 12* exhorts us to pursue peace, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. Those are the two things we want in our life; then, there's the third thing that we don't.

That third thing Hebrews mentions is a nasty weed in the garden of your life, and that's **bitterness**. **Hebrews warns us about three things related to bitterness.** **First**, it says *“that no root of bitterness springs up.”* That tells us that bitterness can be taking root in our heart, mind, soul, and body, before it's evident to anyone else. Bitterness grows beneath the surface for a while, as we tell ourselves how wronged we've been, how it's the other person's fault, the world's fault, anyone else's fault. Bitterness gets its roots into us, and then it *“springs up,”* and suddenly, our bitterness breaks the surface and becomes clear to anyone who gets close to us. The idea that bitterness **springs up** also conveys how quickly it can grow.

The second thing Hebrews says about bitterness is that it causes trouble. Try to think of time in your life when you were bitter about someone or something – and **what happened next**. When you were feeling bitter, what was your heart rate and blood pressure – did you feel physically well? When you allowed bitterness to grow, did your next conversations go well or poorly? Were they helpful or did matters seem to get worse? How was your driving? I think if we did some honest reflection, most of our lives would reflect the truth Hebrews is stating – **bitterness causes trouble**.

And it doesn't just cause trouble **for us** – and that leads to **the third thing about bitterness**, *“through it many people become defiled.”* Bitterness is contagious, easily transmittable, and can infect and negatively impact many people.

Charles Stanley wrote in his book, “Put the Past Behind You and Give the Gift of Forgiveness”, “**Bitterness** is like a continually running machine that uses our bodies for its energy source. It runs when we are sleeping, it runs when we are talking with our friends, and it runs when we are simply sitting and being quiet. Because bitterness is a lifestyle and not an isolated occurrence, it never shuts down. It keeps operating and draining energy.” Our attitude is infectious – whether we’re loving, kind, joyful, and peaceful, or harsh, uncaring, and bitter – and it’s something we need to be mindful of, every day.

Then, in *Hebrews 12:16*, the preacher warns us, “See to it that no one becomes like **Esau, an immoral and godless person**, who sold his birthright for a single meal.” (See *Genesis 25:29-34*.) Esau couldn’t keep his heart with all vigilance. He couldn’t delay gratification. He was self-indulgent, foolish, and couldn’t endure some short-term hardship for long term gain. As a result, he sold his birthright, as the oldest son, for a bowl of lentil stew! He didn’t even get a good meal of lasagna or spaghetti. *Hebrews* says: don’t be like that! Don’t make choices and decisions that you can’t change, that you’ll regret, with tears, because there’s no going back. Don’t quit on Jesus because of hardship in the present, because there is so much to look forward to in the future.

When Esau finds out that Jacob also deceived their father and tricked him into thinking he was Esau so his father would bless him, he’s both heartbroken and filled with anger. *Genesis 27:34* describes the scene. “When Esau heard his father’s words, he cried out with **an exceedingly great and bitter cry**, and said to his father, ‘Bless me, me also, father!’” *Genesis 27:41* then states, “Now Esau **hated** Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, ‘The days of mourning for my father are approaching; **then I will kill my brother Jacob.**’”

After being deceived and cheated, it’s no wonder that a root of bitterness sprung up quickly, and Esau wanted to kill his brother Jacob. *Hebrews* says: don’t be like Esau, who is foolish, not peaceful or holy, but filled with bitterness and anger.

We can learn from Jesus how one pursues peace and holiness, with heart and hands open to God’s grace and forgiveness and closed to bitterness. Jesus teaches his followers to travel light – depending on God, rather than their own material preparation – but he also tells us to travel light when it comes to

emotional and psychological baggage. When Jesus sends out 70 followers, he tells them, *“Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you”* (Luke 10:4-6). Jesus doesn’t want his followers getting into bitter arguments with people who don’t receive them in a peaceful way. You bless them, and move on. Peace is a fruit of the spirit, and followers of Jesus are to be peaceful people. Being peaceful requires that we learn how to forgive.

We each choose whether we will allow bitterness to destroy us, or whether we will allow God to develop us into the peaceful, holy people God wants us to be. We can choose to view our circumstances and hurts as tools to be used by God to further develop our spiritual lives. Or we can care for our bitterness like a pet – feeding it, holding it, and living with it every day.

The good news is, we can change our attitude and our perspective – and I want to close by returning to Esau. While Hebrews urges us not to be like Esau at the point of selling his birthright, I could build a strong case that Esau demonstrates one of the greatest arcs of personal growth and transformation of anyone we meet in the Bible. *Genesis 32-33* tells the story of Jacob being told by the Lord to return to the land of his ancestors with his wives, children and all his belongings, and he’s terrified of what Esau will do. Jacob prays, *“Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children”* (Genesis 32:11).

We don’t know anything about the inner thoughts or daily life of Esau in the twenty years since he and Jacob last saw each other, but Esau’s response to Jacob could not have shown greater generosity of spirit. Far from attacking Jacob, Esau takes the initiative and comes with 400 men. He declines Jacob’s extravagant gift and says he has enough and to keep it for himself, but Jacob insists, saying in one of the most beautiful statements of reconciliation in the Bible, *“No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; **for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God – since you have received me with such favor**”* (Genesis 33:10).

Then, Esau expressed a clear desire for renewed relationship, *“**Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you**”* (Genesis 33:12). Jacob says that won’t

be necessary (*Genesis 33:15*), and Esau replies with a kind offer of protection, “*Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me.*” But he said, “***Why should my lord be so kind to me?***”

Perhaps, the only explanation of why Esau can be so kind to the brother who took so much from him is that, in the twenty years since they were last together, Esau had pursued peace and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. He didn’t allow a root of bitterness to spring up and cause trouble, so he obtained the grace of God, which he then was able to share with his brother, who had treated him so poorly.

I pray we will all pursue peace and holiness and obtain the grace of God, so we may show others the kind of favor and kindness that Esau showed to his brother Jacob.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What does “*pursue peace with everyone*” look like in real life? Who might be difficult for us to pursue peace with, and why?
2. Hebrews connects pursuing peace with personal holiness. Why do you think our relationships with other people are connected to our relationship with God?
3. Bitterness is like “luggage” we carry with us. What kinds of emotional baggage — anger, resentment, hurt, disappointment, grudges — can we find ourselves carrying, and how does it affect us?
4. A “root of bitterness” can affect more than just the person who is bitter. How can one person’s unresolved bitterness or resentment spread to and affect a family, friendship, church, or other group?
5. What is the difference between forgiving someone and restoring a relationship with them? Can we genuinely forgive someone while still maintaining healthy boundaries or distance?
6. How can you “travel light” by releasing bitterness to God? What might it look like, practically, to begin letting go of something you have been carrying?

Bonus Exercise:

I want to give you a spiritual exercise I’ve shared with several people who were struggling with bitterness and the inability to forgive – even though they sincerely wanted to – that they have found helpful.

Step 1. Sit down and write all your feelings, thoughts, and responses about the person or situation, and how you have been offended or hurt. It’s important to handwrite and not type because writing by hand forces us to go slow and take our time, which is important in most spiritual exercises. Write until you’ve gotten it all out and you’re satisfied.

Step 2. Make a list of your own faults and the things you’ve done for which God has forgiven you.

Step 3. Ask God to forgive you for your bitterness toward that person, and decide in your heart to accept total responsibility for your attitude.

Step 4. Go outside in your yard or to a quiet place with all your writing, and burn it. As the flames burn, the smoke rises, and the ashes fall, turn the whole situation over to the Lord, and release the person and the situation to God – and don’t take it up again.

Sometimes, if it will not cause more problems than it solves, it may be possible to approach the person, confess your bitterness and ask forgiveness. But this is not always possible, or wise, because it is difficult to do without taking it up again.