

XXXII. Disciplined for Holiness

April 9/10/11, 2019

Hebrews 12:4-17

Aim: To recognize that the Lord's discipline, when properly viewed as delivered from a loving Father to teach His children, produces lives of holiness and righteousness.

A. The Discipline of Sons (Hebrews 12:4-11)

MacArthur: The key word of 12:4-11 is 'discipline,' used both as a noun and a verb. It is from the Greek *paideia*, which, in turn, comes from *pais* ('child') and denotes the training of a child. The word is a broad term, signifying whatever parents and teachers do to train, correct, cultivate, and educate children in order to help them develop and mature as they ought. It is used nine times in these eight verses. The figure changes from that of a race to that of a family. Christian living involves running, working, fighting, and enduring. It also involves relationships, especially our relationship to God and to other believers. The emphasis of this passage is on the heavenly Father's use of discipline in the lives of His children.

Phillips: These verses speak of divine discipline: the biblical teaching that God chastises and trains His children by means of the difficulties and hardships of life. This is a topic we hardly care about when God does not seem to be doing it; but when His hand of chastisement falls, Christians greatly need the encouragement and instruction found here.

1. The Purpose of Discipline (12:4-8)

a) *Struggle Against Sin (12:4)*

⁴In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Hughes: The preacher/writer begins this section with a pair of gentle reproaches. First, he reminds them that life is not as bad as some may supposed. Jesus, of course, had suffered death because of his decision to stay on track—all the way to the cross. And some of the heroes of the faith so memorably praised at the end of chapter 11 had paid the ultimate price as well. But though the Hebrew church had experienced severe persecution early on, under the Emperor Claudius, no one had yet been martyred. The parallels with the modern church in the West are plain to see. The tides of neo-paganism are rising, but none of us has resisted to the point of spilling blood. Then, like now, was no time to be discouraged—especially considering the great examples of those who have remained steadfast amidst far greater hardships.

Phillips: These verses arise out of a pastor's concern that his readers would fail to think rightly about the troubles they were experiencing. His chief purpose in this letter is to exhort Christians to be steadfast under trial, to hold fast to the faith. To that end, he reminds them that they have yet to suffer to the extent that Jesus did, or even as martyrs had done for the faith. Notice that their struggle is against sin, not against the Roman persecutors or the Jewish community that was afflicting them. Verses 1-3 portray the Christian life as a race to be run with perseverance, and now verse 4 conceives of it as a boxing context, another Greek sporting event, in which we contend through trials against our opponent, sin. If only we could be rid of our sin, God would have no purpose in allowing us to enter hardship; and when sin finally is gone from the world, then, but only then, will there finally be peace on earth.

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Schreiner: The readers have suffered for the sake of the gospel, but they have not yet spilled their blood. Intriguingly, he describes their life thus far as a struggle against sin. The temptation to fall away, in other words, can also be described as a temptation to yield to sin. The situation facing the readers was not easy, for they were in a battle in which sin threatened to triumph over them; they were tempted to give in to social pressure and thereby avoid persecution. Still, he reminds them that they haven't faced the most arduous test. None of them has been called to martyrdom. Here they stand in contrast to Jesus, who went to the cross and experienced the ultimate shame (12:2).

Bruce: The recipients of this epistle had in earlier days endured severe persecution for their faith, but they had not yet been called upon to seal their testimony with their blood. They might yet have to meet fiercer trials than had come their way thus far, but this was no time to be discouraged, when they thought of others who remained steadfast amid sufferings much worse than theirs. They ought rather to realize that their present hardships were a token of their heavenly Father's love for them, and the means by which He was training them to be more truly His sons.

MacArthur: None of the suffering Hebrews to whom this letter was written had endured what Jesus had endured. None had given his life for the gospel. Nor had any of them lived an absolutely sinless life as Jesus had done, living in perfect obedience to the Father, and thus deserving no punishment at all. On the contrary, some of their suffering was deserved and was intended for their spiritual discipline and growth.

b) *The Lord Disciplines Sons (12:5-6)*

(1) Forgotten Exhortation (12:5a)

⁵*And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?*

Hughes: The preacher's other reproach was this: they had failed to recall and reassure themselves with God's Word. Of course, this is an even more common sin of the modern church. This also brings us to the indisputable axiom, *we cannot be profoundly influenced (or encouraged) by that which we do not know*. The comfort and strength of God's Word will avail us not at all if we do not *know* it. Knowing God's Word is essential for spiritual survival, as the preacher earlier insisted in his letter: 'Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it' (2:1).

Phillips: After briefly making his first point, the writer moves quickly to his main concern. Given that his readers were enduring hardship, his principal concern was that they not draw the wrong conclusion from their trials. How easy it is for us to think we are out of God's favor when circumstances turn against us; indeed, there is nothing more perilous in trials than to conclude that God has forgotten or betrayed us. Therefore, verse 5 begins by making a statement that probably is intended as a question: 'Have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?' This refers to Proverbs 3:11-12. Understanding this, the readers should not lose heart when God rebukes them through affliction. The assumption bound up with the message of these verses is that when Christians experience trials it is not because God is unable to protect them. God can preserve us from every trial. He is sovereign over every aspect of our lives. Therefore, when we enter into trials, God has allowed them and even ordained them. It is this realization that sometimes causes believers to question their relationship with God when times get tough.

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Schreiner: The readers have forgotten the exhortation given to them in the Scriptures. Clearly the author believes the words recorded in Proverbs 3:11-12 function as an encouragement for the readers of his day. They are not merely words of antiquity directed to a former generation. What was written long ago is also addressed to contemporary readers.

Bruce: Let them recall the words of wisdom in Proverbs 3:11ff., and they would be able to view their troubles in their proper perspective. These words remind those who would be truly wise that when hardship is their lot they should accept it as God's method of training and disciplining them, and as a token that they are really His beloved sons and daughters.

MacArthur: Suffering for God's sake was nothing new. Being disciplined by Him was not new. These believers were upset about their afflictions partly because they had forgotten God's Word. In the Old Testament God not only had spoken to them about suffering and discipline, but He had spoken to them 'as sons.' They had forgotten more than simply divine truths, they had 'forgotten the exhortation' of their heavenly Father. Turning to Scripture is listening to God, for Scripture is His Word. For believers, it is the Word of their Father. This forgotten exhortation tells us of two perils of discipline—regarding it lightly and fainting because of it.

(2) Quoted Exhortation (12:5bc-6)

(a) Our Attitude Toward Discipline (12:5bc)

(i) Disdain (12:5b)

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord...”

Hughes: Having reproached his congregation for forgetting God's Word, the preacher calls for their attention in a special word of encouragement that addressed them specifically as God's children. This is taken from the Greek rendering of Proverbs 3:11-12. Verse 5 (Prov. 3:1), which clearly warns those undergoing hard times of two opposite pitfalls of *disdain* and *dismay* regarding divine discipline. Regarding the perils of *disdain*, 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord.' The fact is, many who experience the unpleasantness of discipline choose to remain indifferent as to its significance. They vaguely intuit that they are experiencing discipline, but refuse to meditate upon what it might mean. They make light of it—they blow it off! By refusing to consider their deep waters, their lives remain perpetually shallow.

Phillips: There are a number of ways Christians can and do respond to God's discipline when it takes shape in difficult circumstances. One is the response of the stoic, who grimly seeks to accept what he cannot avoid. Such a person responds with defiant resignation, certainly without gratitude, seeking simply to get the struggle over with. This, it seems, is one of the concerns on the writer's mind, for he says in verse 5, 'Do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord.' Such a person sees no purpose in suffering and therefore seeks to learn none of its lessons. He just wants to get through the storm to sunnier days.

Schreiner: The readers should not dismiss the Lord's discipline by taking it lightly. The discipline in view here should not be understood as punitive but as corrective and educative. Still, the discipline here includes both training for godliness in general and discipline for sin. Not all discipline is due to sin, but some discipline is given to wean believers away from sin. It is part of the training God has planned for His children so they grow in righteousness. They should consider its purposes and benefits.

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MacArthur: The first thing that can keep God from accomplishing what He wants in our lives is to ‘regard lightly the discipline of the Lord.’ If we do not understand our problems as being discipline that the Lord sends for our good, we cannot profit from them as He intends. Our reactions cannot be right if our view of what is happening is not right. The spiritual weakness mentioned in this verse is not that of taking our problems lightly but of taking the Lord’s discipline through them lightly. It is usually because we take our problems too seriously that we take the Lord’s discipline too lightly. Our focus is on the experience rather than on our heavenly Father and on what He wants to do for us through the experience.

MacArthur: We can take God’s discipline lightly in many ways. We can become *callous* to God and His Word, so that when He is doing something in us or for us, we do not recognize His hand in it. When we are calloused, God’s discipline will harden us instead of soften us. We may also treat God’s discipline lightly by *complaining*. In this case, we do not forget God; in fact, our attention is on Him, but in the wrong way. Instead of showing patience endurance, like the hero saints, we gripe and grumble. We can prevent God from accomplishing His desired result through discipline through *questioning*. Like complaining, questioning shows a clear lack of faith. Perhaps the greatest danger in regarding God’s discipline lightly is *carelessness*. When we do not care about what purpose God has in the discipline or about how we can profit from it, His discipline cannot be effective. It becomes like a blessing that we misuse. He gives it for our benefit and His glory, but we do not use it for either.

(ii) Dismay (12:5c)

...nor be weary when reproved by him.

Hughes: The other pitfall is *dismay*—‘nor...be weary when reproved by Him.’ Far from being indifferent to discipline, there are some who are overwhelmed by it all. They are paralyzed—just as the runners described in verse 3 came to ‘grow weary or fainthearted’ and collapsed on the track. Such giving up is inexcusable because none of God’s children will ever be tested beyond their strength (cp. 1 Cor. 10:13).

Phillips: Other respond to trials with self-pity and anger. We hear this sort of thing when people lash out, ‘What did I ever do to deserve this?!’ This, too, is a concern to our writer, for he says, ‘Nor be weary when reproved by Him.’ Some believers manifest abounding joy when God is blessing them with worldly goodness, but quickly resort to sullen resentment when God is blessing them with trials. Such Christians will never make much progress, because they fail to realize that trials are part and parcel of the Christian life, that they are a sign not of God’s neglect but of His fatherly involvement. Affliction is a sign that we are children, that our conduct is important to God and has a bearing on His glory.

Schreiner: Nor should they be discouraged or ‘grow weary’ (*εκλινου, ekluou*) when they are ‘reproved’ by God. Here the author picks up his admonition from verse 3 where he instructs the readers to consider the opposition Jesus received so they won’t ‘lose heart’ (*εκλυομενοι, ekluomenoi*). The difficult circumstances in which they find themselves could exhaust and enervate them, but, as the author explains here, they should draw the opposite conclusion. Their suffering signify that they truly belong to God, that they are His sons, and that they are deeply loved by God.

MacArthur: Some people become so overcome by their problems that they give up; they become despondent, depressed, ‘faint.’ They become inert, unresponsive to what God is doing or why.

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They are not callous, complaining, questioning, or careless. They are simply immobilized. They give up and collapse. The cure for hopelessness is hope in God (cp. Ps. 42:11). The child of God has no need to faint because of God's discipline. God gives it to strengthen us, not to weaken us, to encourage us, not to discourage us, to build us up, not to tear us down.

(b) His Application of Discipline (12:6)

Hughes: So we see that when disciplined we must not afford ourselves either the luxury of *disdain* or of *dismay*. Why? Because discipline is the telltale sign of being loved by God and in family relationship to Him. In other words, if we cop out in respect to the Lord's discipline either by *disdain* (making light of it) or *dismay* (fainting away), we are turning our back on the personal evidence of His love and relationship to us. Discipline is the divinely ordained path to a deepening relationship with God and a growing love with Him. It is the only path! Thus to refuse discipline is to turn our back on growth and love. Therefore we must heed God's word of encouragement to us—especially as they are given in the following verses, which are an elaboration of Proverbs 3:11-12.

Phillips: The important teaching in this passage is delivered in verse 6, namely, that 'the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son whom He receives.' Divine chastisement is a sign of sonship, a term that applies to both male and female Christians and speaks of our adoption into the family of God.

(i) God's Discipline (12:6a)

⁶*For the Lord disciplines the one he loves...*

Phillips: The writer tells us two things God does to raise us right, beginning with fatherly discipline. The Greek word for this is *paideia*, from the word *pais*, meaning 'child,' and speaks of the raising of a child. This is the primary way we should think about God's treatment of us in our trials. Just as a parent trains up a child, subjecting him or her to a process of education and arranging demanding experiences designed to spur development, so God also leads us through this life. As with a son or daughter in childhood, our whole lives are preparations for the age of maturity that waits for us in the life to come. This explains so many of our trials. God sends us challenges and hardships, not out of spite, but out of paternal love. Trials are designed to make us stronger, to apply force against the muscle of our faith to push us forward toward our spiritual potential.

MacArthur: To the Christian who is responsive to the Lord's discipline, it proves two things: His love and our sonship. The first thing we should think of when we are suffering is our Father's love, 'for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines.' God loves His children and is bound by His own nature and His own covenant to do them only good. Therefore, whatever we receive for God's hand, including discipline, is from God's love. More than any earthly father, the heavenly Father wants His children to be righteous, mature, obedient, competent, responsible, capable, and trusting. We benefit in all these ways, and many more, when we accept His discipline.

Schreiner: The author explains why the readers should not dismiss the Lord's discipline or grow discouraged by it. Discouragement would be the expected reaction if discipline signified the Lord's anger with the readers. But it is precisely the opposite. The Lord is disciplining the readers because He loves them.

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(ii) God’s Chastisement (12:6b)

...and chastises every son whom he receives.”

Phillips: Sometimes, however, God employs chastising hardships to punish sin in our lives. Along with discipline, God employs fatherly correction. This is not to be thought of as the damning wrath of God, but rather as the corrective punishment of a parent. The key word is *mastigoi*, which means scourging or whipping as an intense form of punishment. If we think God would never do that, we are obviously mistaken. While we are not judicially punished by God as Judge—Christ having borne all the penalty of our sin on the cross—God as Father gives painful, corrective punishment the way any loving parent does, because He wants us to grow up the right way. The writer’s point is that, as Calvin puts it, ‘the scourges of God bear witness of His love toward us.’ Any Christian with much experience knows that we need this kind of training and discipline, for without fear and anxiety and life we forget God and heaven all too easily. On our own we become comfortable with the world and even with sin.

MacArthur: The second thing that discipline proves is closely related to the first. It proves our sonship. All men are subject to God’s punishment, but only His children receive His discipline. We know from our discipline that we are His children, because ‘He scourges every son whom He receives.’ An undisciplined child is an unloved child and a miserable child. God’s love will not allow Him not to discipline us. The other side, the tragic side, of this truth is that those who are not disciplined by God are not His children. ‘He scourges every son’ is inclusive. Not a single one of His children will miss out on His loving discipline. ‘Whom He receives,’ however, is exclusive. Only those He receives through their faith in His Son are His children. ‘Scourges’ (*mastigoō*) refers to flogging with a whip, and was a common Jewish practice (Mt. 10:17; 23:34). It was a severe and extremely painful beating. The point of Hebrews 12:6b, and of Proverbs 3:12 (from which it is quoted), is that God’s discipline can sometimes be severe. When our disobedience is great or our apathy is great, His discipline will be great.

Schreiner: He ‘chastises’ (*μαστιγοι, mastigoi*) ‘every son’ He accepts. Their stresses and strains are not unusual but represent the course of life of everyone who belongs to the family of God. Discipline, in this context, is not a sign of God’s anger or punishment but his favor and acceptance.

Phillips: What a difference it makes that God relates to us as His own beloved children. In the terms of the ancient world, God relates to us specifically the way a father did to his sons—those who would inherit from him, represent him in life, and bear his name in the world. This means that God’s own heart is bound up with us, that we are the apple of His eye. Surely this ought to be the most welcome of news, even if coupled with the hardships by which God is raising us as His own.

c) *Discipline Means Sonship (12:7-8)*

(1) Endure as Sons (12:7a)

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons.

Phillips: This leads to a third kind of response, the one commended in verse 7: ‘It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons.’ The point here is to see the purpose in our trials. There may be any number of reasons we are suffering, but one of them is always sure: God is training us for godliness. It is productive discipline we are going through (cp. 1 Pe. 1:6-7; James 1:2-3, 12).

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Schreiner: The main verb in verse 7, ‘endure’ (*υπομενετε, hypomenete*), could be indicative or imperative. The ESV takes it as indicative: ‘It is for discipline that you have to endure’ (cp. also NKJV). In context, it is more likely an imperative: ‘Endure suffering as discipline’ (HSCB; cp. NIV). Such a reading fits with the letter as a whole. The writer isn’t saying that the readers *are enduring*. Whether they endure is what faces them in their current situation so they are not commended for enduring but are exhorted to endure. The author communicates here the main point of the paragraph, one that fits with the purpose of the letter as a whole. In verses 1-3 they are summoned to run the race, and the thought is similar here. They are commanded to endure to the end, recognizing that endurance is a discipline that entails hardship and suffering.

Hughes: Jesus ‘endured’ (v. 2), and it is imperative that we ‘endure.’ The word ‘discipline’ comes from a root word generally meaning ‘to teach or instruct as one would a child’ (cp. Acts 22:3; 1 Tim. 1:20; Titus 2:12). Often it means ‘to correct or punish’—as it means here (cp. v. 10; Lk. 23:16, 22). Broadly, it signifies much of what we would think of as discipline for the purpose of education. We experience God’s education through hardship or affliction. Significantly, God’s discipline of His children never involves His wrath. Every reference in the New Testament on the subject indicates that God’s wrath rests upon and is reserved for the unbelieving. God has no such thoughts toward His own—no thoughts of calamity. So the preacher to the Hebrews, who exhorts his flock to ‘endure their hardships as ‘discipline,’ is enjoining them to a most positive pursuit that has as its goal the very growth of their souls.

(2) True Sons (12:7b)

For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?

Hughes: The primary reason for the intelligence embrace of and endurance in affliction is that discipline is a sign of God’s paternity—it is evidence that we are His children.

Phillips: In the ancient world, discipline was the unquestioned prerogative and duty of a father. It was not a sign of favor when a child was not disciplined by his father, but of neglect or rejection. Fatherly love and discipline go together, and this awareness ought to transform the way Christians think about trials.

Schreiner: Such discipline should not surprise them. It is an indication that God is dealing with them as His sons (cp. Prov. 13:24; 29:17), so it functions as proof that they are part of the family. What it means to be a son, the author goes on to explain, is to be disciplined and trained by the father. Discipline viewed rightly, then, has an element of encouragement, for it is an indication of God’s love.

MacArthur: So, discipline in the Christian life is not in spite of sonship, but because of sonship. ‘For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? A truly loving father is absolutely committed to helping his child conform to the highest standards. How much more is our heavenly Father committed to our conforming to His standards, and to inflicting the pain to make such conformity a reality.

Bruce: A father would spend much care and patience on the upbringing of a trueborn son whom he hoped to make a worthy heir; and at the time such a son might have to undergo much more irksome discipline than an illegitimate child for whom no future of honor and responsibility was envisaged, and wherefore might be left more or less to please himself. All sons have to be disciplined, our author says; he has already said that even Christ, Son though He was, ‘learned obedience by what He suffered’ (5:8).

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(3) Illegitimate Sons (12:8)

⁸*If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.*

Schreiner: The author continues to encourage the readers as they face difficult circumstances. No true son, no genuine child, is spared by the father. If discipline is withheld, it indicates that one doesn't belong to the family at all, that one is an illegitimate child (*vothoi, nothoi*). Education in the ancient world was limited to legitimate children and wasn't given to children who were illegitimate. Furthermore, illegitimate sons didn't receive any inheritance. Since they are truly God's sons, they experience discipline that comes from the hands of a kind father.

MacArthur: When we look at how well many unbelievers are doing, and then at how much trouble we are having, we should take this as evidence that we belong to God and they do not. If they 'are without discipline,' the 'are illegitimate children and not sons.' We should pity, not envy, the prosperous, healthy, popular, and attractive person who does not know God. We should not wish them our trials or suffering.

Hughes: The ancient world found it incomprehensible that a father could possibly love his child and not punish him. In fact, a real son would draw more discipline than, say, an illegitimate child for the precise reason that greater honor and responsibility were to be his. The ultimate example of this is, of course, Jesus, who as the supreme Son 'learned obedience through what He suffered. And being made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him' (5:8-9). There is no doubt about it—the hardships and discipline we endure are signs of our legitimacy and ought to be embraced as telltale signs of grace.

2. The Products of Discipline (12:9-11)

MacArthur: God's discipline produces life and produces holiness.

a) *Life* (12:9)

(1) Earthly Fathers (12:9a)

⁹*Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them.*

Hughes: Another reason we should opt for the intelligent acceptance of enduring hardship as discipline is the *a fortiori* argument from the lesser to the greater. Respect and submission characterized ancients in regard to their *natural* fathers—and it developed a disciplined productive life in the child. But, *a fortiori*, how much more should we submit to our *supernatural* Father and live a life that is life indeed! Submission to the discipline of our *temporal* fathers brought good things, but how much more will come through submission to the discipline of our *eternal* Father. Conscious submission to our divine Father is essential to truly live in the here and now and to have an ever-deepening experience of the abundant life.

Phillips: Our passage begins with a pastor's concern that his suffering flock might draw mistaken conclusions from their trials. Next, he moves to a comparison, making an argument from the lesser to the greater, comparing the discipline of our earthly father to the discipline of our Father in heaven. Verse 9 compares the father of our flesh to the father of our spirit, that is, our earthly father to our heavenly Father. Experience shows that parents grow in respect when they are involved in their children's lives, when they set clear boundaries and enforce them with discipline. Parents who try to win their children's affection by treating them as peers and

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friends, giving them what they want and neglecting discipline, not only fail in their duty but gain contempt instead of admiration. If discipline causes us to respect our earthly fathers, then the same should be true with regard to our heaven Father.

Schreiner: An analogy is drawn between earthly fathers and the discipline they mete out and God's discipline of His children. Earthly fathers discipline their children, and their children respect and honor them. If that is true of earthly fathers, now much more should this be true of God's fatherly discipline? Often in the letter the earthly is contrasted with the heavenly, and such a disjunction appears again here, and the heavenly is always superior to the earthly. The readers, then, should respect and honor God for the discipline He wisely appoints for them. And it goes even further than this. They should 'submit' to such a Father, recognizing that He disciplines them in His wisdom and love. Indeed, He disciplines not to destroy or slay them, but so they will 'live.'

Bruce: Our earthly fathers, he continues, disciplined us for the limited period of years that preceded our coming of age, and received proper respect from us. We accepted the discipline because it was their province to impose it and our duty to submit to it; they knew, or thought they knew, what was best for us and subjected us to the discipline that commended itself to them. If our heavenly father also imposes discipline on us, shall we not accept it willingly from Him?

MacArthur: Since we respected our earthly fathers even while they were disciplining us, 'shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?' Our response to God's discipline should not be resentful resignation, but willing and grateful submission. We should want to benefit as much from our heavenly Father's discipline as we possibly can.

(2) Father of Spirits (12:9b)

Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?

Schreiner: The author uses a somewhat strange phrase here: 'Father of spirits' (*τῷ πατρὶ τῶν πνευματῶν*, *tō patri tōn pneumatōn*). Usually the word 'spirits' alone refers to angels or heavenly beings, but in this context it certainly refers to human beings. It is difficult to know why he uses the word 'spirits.' Perhaps he does so because he contrasts the earthly and the heavenly. In any case, the author emphasizes God's sovereignty and love in the lives of human beings.

Bruce: The designation of God as 'the Father of our spirits' is unique. We may compare it with the phrase 'the God of the spirits of all flesh' in Num. 16:22; 27:16, and with the frequent designation of God as 'the Lord of spirits' in the *Parables of Enoch* (1 Enoch 37:2, etc.). But in the present context its force is plain: as 'the fathers of our flesh' are physical (or earthly) fathers, so 'the Father of our spirits' is our spiritual (or heavenly) Father.

MacArthur: I believe the teaching here may include the idea that when we are 'subject to the Father of spirits,' we will have a richer, more abundant life. You do not know what victory is until you have fought a battle. You do not know what living is all about until you have experienced some problems and hardships. No one lives so well as the believer who loves God's law and will, who receives everything from his Father's hand willingly and joyously.

Phillips: We should 'be subject to the Father of spirits and live.' The point is that like little children guided and guarded by a parent's disciplining hand, we should realize that our lives are on the line—our eternal lives—and thus revere God for the care He gives to our souls.

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Furthermore, discipline makes all the difference in the quality and the usefulness of our lives. William Lane comments, ‘God is training His children for the enjoyment of life in its fullest sense,’ and we ought therefore to respond eagerly, perceiving the dangers of disobedience and the benefits of God’s disciplining care.

b) *Holiness (12:10)*

¹⁰*For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.*

Hughes: Next, the author argues for our continued endurance of affliction by giving us a sanctifying reason for it. Every earthly father, if he is candid, will admit he had meted out imperfect discipline at best. All fathers learn by doing. Sometimes we were too severe, other times too lax. Sometimes we showed favoritism. Sometimes we punished the wrong child. Sometimes a child ‘got it’ because the boss had ‘given it’ to us. But God has never made such a mistake. No discipline of His was ever capricious or ill-informed or ill-tempered. None of His discipline has ever been misplaced. Moreover, all the disciplines of the heavenly Father have one grand aim, which is nothing less than to make His people like Him—holy (cp. Lev. 19:2; Mt. 5:48; 1 Pe. 1:15-16). The most holy of us are those who have properly endured the most discipline. What a gift, then, discipline is!

Phillips: The second point of comparison is found in verse 10, namely, that our earthly discipline has value for this world, for a short life of however many years, but God’s discipline is of eternal value for a life that never ends. Third, the writer says that our fathers ‘disciplined us...as it seemed best to them. Every father makes mistakes, operates out of mixed motives, acts in sin toward his children in one way or another, and yet is still to be revered by his children. Even a bad often exerts a positive influence on children by means of the discipline he gives. When it comes to God, we have no such problem to overcome: ‘[God] disciplines us *for our good*, that we may share His holiness.’ What a difference it makes to realize that God, who is good, has only good for us in His manner of discipline. However difficult it is for us to perceive, He is making ‘all things work together for good’ in our lives (Rom. 8:28). Since God is holy all His intentions for us are also holy. They are pure, they are for our benefit, and they bring credit to Him. Because God is love, even when the worst afflictions pour upon our heads, behind them is a hand motivated by love.

Schreiner: Earthly fathers who discipline are respected by their children, and yet their discipline is of limited benefit. Parents train their children ‘based on what seems good to them,’ and hence it follows that their discipline is imperfect and flawed. Sometimes parents are mistaken in the discipline they apply, even if they have the best intentions in the world. The discipline of parents is limited from another perspective. It is temporary and restricted to the few days in which parents are in charge of their children. God’s discipline, on the other hand, does not suffer from a partial vision of the whole. He always knows what His children need, and thus His discipline is always ‘for our benefit.’ The benefit is described as participation in God’s holiness. God trains believers so they become more righteous. Believers, therefore, should submit to God’s discipline (v. 9) and endure since it is for their good.

Bruce: Our earthly fathers may sometimes have been mistaken in their estimate of the discipline we needed; our heavenly Father, in the perfection of His wisdom and love, can be relied upon never to impose any discipline on us that is not for our good. The supreme good He has in view for His children is this, that they should share His holiness. Here positive holiness of life is

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meant; the emphasis is rather different from that found earlier in the epistle where the sanctification procured for believers by the sacrifice of Christ is that cleansing of conscience which fits them to approach God in worship. That was the initial gift of holiness; the holiness mentioned here is rather the goal for which God is preparing His people—that entire sanctification which is consummated in their manifestation with Christ in glory.

MacArthur: To live for the Lord is to live in holiness. God’s primary desire for us is that we be holy as He is holy (1 Pe. 1:16), that ‘we may share in His holiness.’ Because God is perfect, His discipline is always perfect. Human parents discipline as seem ‘best to them,’ but our best is often mistaken and is always imperfect. Sometimes we punish more out of anger than love, and sometimes we punish more severely than the offense calls for. Sometimes we even mistakenly punish a child for something he did not do.

c) Righteousness (12:11)

¹¹*For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*

Hughes: The writer concludes his train of thought by giving a hedonistic, pain/pleasure reason for enduring discipline. First, concerning *pain*: ‘For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant.’ That is certainly true whatever the level of discipline—a spanking a privilege suspended, a possession removed, an injury an illness a persecution. But eventually there comes *pleasure*: ‘...but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.’ ‘The peaceful fruit of righteousness’ comes to believers who endure under discipline—not just the objective, imputed righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21), but a subjective, day-to-day righteous life. To the eyes of onlookers the believer’s righteous life becomes apparent—as he more and more shows the character of God. But that is just half the crop, the other half being a harvest of peace—*shalom*. Peace—*shalom*—means not only quietness of soul but wholeness. This only comes through enduring hardship as discipline. It does not come through fighting the hard things in life, but from accepting them as discipline from God.

Phillips: God disciplines us for our good, and that good is our growth in holiness. Indeed, verse 10 tells us that He would have us share in His holiness in order that we would be like Him, pure and holy. In verse 11 the writer concludes his argument. Of course discipline is painful at the time, which is why it gets our attention. But the Christian, whose eye is on the horizon of a life to come, perceives a reward at the end of the trial, a great gain from the present pain. The famous football coach Tom Landry put it this way, ‘The job of a coach is to make men do what they don’t want to do, in order to be what they’ve always wanted to be.’ That is not a bad description of what God is doing for and in us because of His desire for our good. He is making us what we were meant to be, and what in our sanest moments we want to be, by means we would never choose on our own. This being the case, we will think of God’s discipline according to what we think of holiness. If we long to be made holy—if we cry out to have hearts renewed, for sin to be removed, to be like God in our thoughts and desires—then we will not flinch when He enters us into afflictions, since they are the regiment of His training for all who would be holy.

Schreiner: The author acknowledges that discipline is distasteful, brining grief rather than joy. In the long run, though, discipline yields a harvest that makes the painful training worthwhile. The harvest is ‘the peaceful fruit of righteousness’ (*καρπον ειρηνικον ... δικαιοσυνης, karpon eirēnikon ... dikaiosunēs*). That is, the ‘peaceful fruit’ is righteousness. Righteousness, then, is

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another way of describing holiness. What is emphasized here is that such righteousness is ‘peaceful,’ i.e., it is pleasing and satisfying. The contrast between present pain and future benefits calls to mind what is said about Moses in 11:24-26. He rejected present pleasures and chose to suffer with the people of God to obtain a future reward.

Bruce: Our Lord bade His disciples rejoice when they were persecuted for righteousness sake, because the kingdom of heaven was theirs (Mt. 5:10-12; Lk. 6:22ff.). The Christians of Thessalonica are similarly told that the persecutions endured by them, while they are a token of God’s righteous judgment on their persecutors, are the means by which they themselves are fitted for the kingdom of God (2 Th. 1:4-7).

MacArthur: Discipline itself is not meant to be pleasant. If it were pleasant, it would have little corrective power. By its very nature, discipline is unpleasant to administer and to endure. Medicine, surgery, physical therapy, and other such treatments that we willingly endure are very often painful, uncomfortable, and inconvenient. We endure them for the sake of the end result—better health. How much more should we be willing to endure the Lord’s treatment of our spiritual needs, which ‘afterwards ... yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness?’ We should consider our troubles as spiritual treatment, which builds our character and our faith, our love and our righteousness.

Hughes: Hardships will do one of two things to us. They will *distract* our focus from Christ, so that we are slowed down or even drop out of the race. Or they will *intensify* our focus on Christ, so that we ‘run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of faith’ (12:1-2). If we do this we will neither *despise* the Lord’s discipline nor *dismay* and lose heart (cp. v 3). We will understand that the disciplines we endure are evidences of the love and relationship God has for us (cp. v. 6). And thus we will do our best to endure embracing the reasons we out to endure hardship as discipline.

B. The Life of Holiness (Hebrews 12:12-17)

MacArthur: The basic thrust of Hebrews 12:12-17 is clearly exhortation. ‘Strengthen,’ ‘make straight,’ ‘pursue,’ and ‘see to it’ are all terms of exhortation. The purpose here is not to teach truth only but to encourage living up to the truth. With all the doctrine that the book of Hebrews contains, its primary original purpose was not to teach but to exhort. Much of the doctrine the readers had heard before. They had a good intellectual grasp of the gospel. They were being urged now to believe it and to follow it, to trust it and to obey it.

Hughes: The spiritual life is a long-distance run (vv. 1-3). Though we will ‘hit the wall’ many times, we are called to ‘tough it out,’ realizing that the hardships we endure are disciplines that enable us to share in God’s holiness (vv. 4-11). The author’s transcending desire is that his flock, and indeed the Church universal, will finish well. So he expounds the metaphor further in verses 12-17 with specific advice on what to do (vv. 12-14) and what to guard against (vv. 15-17) in order to finish well.

1. What to Do (12:12-14)

a) *Be Strengthened (12:12-13)*

(1) Isaiah 35:3 (12:12)

¹²*Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees...*

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Hughes: The telltale signs of flagging energy are dropping arms, flopping hands, and wobbling knees that reduce the runner's stride to a mincing gait. These signs were proverbial in Biblical culture for mental and spiritual slowdown. Isaiah encouraged his despairing, stumbling people by saying, '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"' (Is. 35:3-4). Job was heartened by Eliphaz, the Temanite who reminded him, 'Behold...you have strengthen the weak hands. Your words have upheld him who was stumbling, and you have made firm the feeble knees' (Job 4:3-4). The command to 'strengthen' comes from the word from which we derive our English word 'orthopedic.' The sense is, 'make upright or straight'—or in modern coaching terms, 'Straighten up! Get those hands and feet up!' Of course, he is not promoting a do-it-yourself, bootstrap Christian life. But Christians must will to tough it out by God's grace. Life for the believer is full of repeated hardships that come as divine discipline. In fact, these disciplines are substantive signs that we are authentic sons and daughters (cp. vv. 7-8). But they still require grit every bit analogous to the determined marathoners.

Phillips: Verses 12 and 13 include a fervent exhortation that flows from the logic of the writer's argument in the previous verses. Christians should show determination in their struggle and fatigue, understanding the purpose of their trials and God's fatherly care. Verse 12 borrows its words from Isaiah 35:3—'Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the weak knees'—which then goes on to say, 'Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come...He will come and save you."' Like runners who see the finish line ahead, the readers of Hebrews are to take heart, lifting up their arms and legs to run the race to the end.

MacArthur: Verses 12-13 resume the race metaphor. The first thing that happens to a runner when he starts to tire is that his arms drop. The position and motion of the arms are extremely important in running, to maintain proper body coordination and rhythm. Your arms actually help you pull through your stride, and they are the first parts of the body to show fatigue. The second to go are the knees. First the arms begin to droop and then the knees begin to wobble. But if you concentrate on the drooping or on the wobbling, you are finished. The only way you can hope to continue is by focusing on your goal. When we experience spiritual 'hands that are weak' and 'knees that are feeble,' our only hope is in 'fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith' (12:2).

Bruce: Reverting to his athletic figure of speech, our author bids his readers brace their flagging limbs and press on to the goal. Some of their number were feeling especially discouraged and disinclined to make the necessary effort; the others should do everything possible to help them. The aptness of the Isaiah quotation (Is. 35:3) needs no emphasizing. The context of the quotation, if not the words actually reproduced, repeats the assurance of 10:37 that in 'a very little while, the Coming One will come; He will make no delay.'

Schreiner: Recognizing and realizing that discipline is for their good should 'therefore' lead believers to be encouraged despite their present circumstances. They should strengthen hands that are feeble and knees that are weak. The author alludes here to Is. 35:3: 'Strengthen the weak hands, steady the shaking knees!' Their weakness corresponds to their discouragement and dispiritedness. Isaiah's words are in a context which promise the coming kingdom. The desert will blossom, the lame will be healed, streams will flow in the desert, and Israel will return to Zion. The days of exile will be over. Like Jesus they have the joy set before them (12:2), but presently they must strengthen the weak and discouraged with the promise of what is to come. They should strengthen their arms and knees for the race they are running.

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MacArthur: The writer of Hebrews got his metaphor from Isaiah. The faithful in Israel had been through a lot. They were discouraged and despondent, ready to give up. So the prophet reminds them of the coming kingdom, when ‘the wilderness and the desert will be glad’ and ‘they will see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God’ (Is. 35:1-2). Then he counsels them to counsel each other: ‘Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble. Say to those with anxious heart, “Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; the recompense of God will come, but He will save you’ (vv. 3-4). In other words, ‘Don’t give up now. A better day is coming. Look to that and you will have the encouragement and strength you need. Victory is ahead!’ The emphasis of Hebrews 12:12 is the same as that of Isaiah 35:3-4. We are not told to strengthen our hands or our weak and feeble knees, but *the* hands and *the* knees, regardless of whose they are. In other words, we are not to concentrate on our own weaknesses but to help strengthen other Christians in theirs.

(2) Proverbs 4:26-27 (12:13)

...¹³ *and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.*

Hughes: In the next verse the writer alludes to Proverbs 4:25-27 as he calls his people to corporate toughness in helping one another to run well. Here the ESV translates *orthos* as ‘straight,’ other translations say ‘level,’ but the idea remains clear—to put the paths in better order so as to make the race easier for the lame—‘so that what is lame may not be put out of joint.’ The point is, every consideration should be made to help everyone finish the race. Hebrews is full of this idea of helping each other make it (cp. 3:13; 4:1, 11; 6:11; 10:25).

Phillips: Verse 13 then echoes the words of Proverbs 4:26-27, telling us to make level paths, not swerving to the right or left. Here we are reminded of our Lord’s own teaching, that the broad lane, followed by many, leads to destruction, but the narrow path, a path of turning away from sin, leads to life. Verse 13 ends with a reminder that our example has an influence on others, especially helping or hindering those who are lame or weak in the faith. With these challenges set before us, surely we will not resent the reproofs God gives us through Scripture or through other Christians, or His chastisement in circumstances that are hard. Instead, we should receive them with thanksgiving, eagerly repenting and seeking God’s grace for power to change. He is working ‘for our good, that we may share His holiness.’

Schreiner: Perhaps the race imagery continues, as the author draws from Isaiah 35 where Israel returned to Zion from exile. But in Hebrews God’s people are traveling to a new Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem (11:10, 13-16; 12:22; 13:14). To do so, ‘straight paths’ (*τροχίας ὀρθας*, *trochias orthas*) are needed for their feet. The author also seems to pick up the language of Proverbs here, for the wicked follow ‘paths’ that are ‘crooked’ and ‘devious’ (Prov. 2:15). We find the exact phrase used here in Hebrews in Proverbs 4:15, where the father instructs the son about ‘straight paths’ (cp. also Prov. 4:26 LXX). The straight paths are the paths of righteousness and holiness, and this fits with Isaiah 35:8. The readers must continue in their moral education.

MacArthur: ‘Let your eyes look directly ahead, and let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you. Watch the path of your feet, and all your ways will be established. Do not turn to the right nor to the left; turn your foot from evil,’ we are told in Proverbs 4:25-27. ‘And make straight paths for your feet’ refers to staying in your own lane in the race. When you get out of your lane, you not only disqualify yourself, but often interfere with other runners. ‘Paths’ (*trochia*)

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refers to the tracks left by the wheels of a cart or chariot, which later travels follow. We should take great care that the tracks we leave are straight. The only way we will leave a straight track is to live right and run a straight course.

Bruce: The precise meaning of the Hebrew verb in Proverbs 4:26a is uncertain (AV/KJV ‘ponder’; ERV/ARV ‘make level’; RSV ‘take heed to’), but the Septuagint is here used (with the singular number replaced by the plural) to urge the smoothing of the way (*τροχια, trochia*) for those who are weak and spiritually lame, and who might be prevent from continuing their course if they were tripped up and permanently disabled. The verb translated ‘be put out of joint’ (*εκτραπη, ektrapē*) is rendered ‘be turned out of the way’ in the AV/KJV, but dislocation, not deviation, is suggested by the following words, ‘but rather be healed.’ Sprains and similar injuries must be bound up, so that the whole community may complete the course without loss.

Schreiner: The language of the lame being ‘healed’ also evokes Isaiah 35, for the ‘lame will leap like a deer’ (Is. 35:6). The readers should make straight paths, i.e., follow righteousness so that the lame should ‘not be disabled (*εκτραπη, ektrapē*)’ but instead be healed. Hebrews picks up on the figurative meaning of Isaiah. Those who are spiritually lame will find healing if they walk in straight paths, if they continue to follow Jesus. The reader should follow the paths of righteousness to avoid apostasy.

Hughes: I am sure that the real joy of the race set before us will be in the finishing. But I also believe there is a double joy—and that is finishing together! As we run the race, we must exorcise the wretched curse of American individualism that so hinders the church. Sure we have to be tough. We have to ‘gut it out’ by God’s grace. But we also have to hang tough *together*. The strong among us must hold up the dangling hands and wobbling knees of the weak with our prayers and acts of mercy. Those who are strong must make straight paths for the weak by exemplary direction of their lives. The lives of the strong must keep the weak on the right road. Their lives must never cause the weak to stumble. We have to run tough, and we have to run together!

b) *Strive for Peace (12:14a)*

Phillips: Verse 14 continues the discourse begun by the author in verse 1 of chapter 12, giving the specific guidance Christians need. It consists of an exhortation to pursue two specific aims: ‘Strive for peace with everyone, and for holiness.’ The first of these has to do with our relationship with other people, and the second with our relationship with God.

¹⁴*Strive for peace with everyone...*

Hughes: As we run we are encouraged to a dual pursuit—namely, peace and holiness. Our experience tells us that though we may have peace with God, we do not always have peace with all men and women. Commitment to Christ incurs the enmity of the world (Jn. 15:18). If we follow Christ, we must expect conflict. But how unexpected and disheartening is it when conflict is encountered in the church! Conflict in the church brings glory to Satan and disgraces our God. Few things will grieve God more and impede the great race more than conflict in the Body of Christ. In fact, conflict in the church—and the failure to pursue peace—is the most public reason so many never finish. So as we run the race we must pursue peace with ‘everyone’—both Christians and non-believers alike. The word for ‘strive’ or ‘pursue’ is an uniquely aggressive word. It is often used in the sense of ‘to chase after one’s enemies—to persecute.’ We must chase after peace!

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Phillips: Christians are commanded to live peacefully with the people around them, to be peacemakers in the world (cp. Mt. 5:9; Rom. 12:18). This is what all of us must pursue in Christ's name: 'Strive for peace with everyone.' This is a sustained and determined pursuit; as one hunts prey, so Christians are to seek after peace. We should think of this peace in broad terms, as the effect of the gospel upon society as it is transmitted through our lives.

Schreiner: The next exhortation may seem out of place, for the call to pursue peace with all doesn't seem to follow naturally what preceded. It fits, however, with the notion of seeking righteousness and holiness (12:12-13). The author probably alludes to Prov. 4:25-27 in the LXX, which emphasizes concentration on the road ahead of you, making straight paths for one's feet (cp. v. 13), keeping on the right paths, and as a result enjoying peace. Those who seek the Lord are at peace with others, and, the author probably has fellow believers particularly in mind.

Bruce: The athletic metaphor is now abandoned, and the same teaching is expressed in straightforward ethical terms. 'Pursue peace with everybody.' We recall our Lord's benediction on the peacemakers, 'for they shall be called sons of God' (Mt. 5:9), and Paul's injunction to the Roman Christians: 'If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all' (Rom. 12:18).

MacArthur: I believe the writer is speaking of practical peace and righteousness. Positionally, in Christ, Christians already are at peace and already are righteous, but practically we have a great deal to do. Because we are at peace with God, we should be peacemakers. Because we are counted righteous, we should live righteously. Our practice should match our position. Pursuing peace primarily relates to loving men, and pursuing righteousness primarily to loving God. If we love men, we will be at peace with them, and if we love God we will live righteously.

c) *Strive For Holiness (12:14b)*

...and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Schreiner: At the same time believers should seek and pursue 'holiness' (*αγιασμον, hagianon*). Holiness is not optional, for apart from it 'no one will see the Lord.' Seeking holiness is the opposite of falling away or apostasy. Holiness should not be understood in terms of sinlessness, but describes those who continue to seek and pursue the Lord. The reward is described here in personal terms. Those who seek holiness will see the Lord, i.e., they will 'experience eternal life.'

Bruce: 'The sanctification apart from which no one will see the Lord' is, as the words themselves make plain, no optional extra in the Christian life but something that belongs to its essence. It is the pure in heart, and none but they, who shall see God (Mt. 5:8). Here, as in verse 10, practical holiness of life is meant, the converse of those things against which a warning is uttered in the verse which follow.

MacArthur: Sanctification has to do with our loving God. It speaks of the pure, obedient, holy life we live set apart for God's glory, because of that love. When we love Him, we will want to be like Him, and when we are like Him, others will see Him in us and be attracted to Him. Love toward men and love toward God are inseparable.

Hughes: The preacher has linked the pursuit of peace with the pursuit of practical holiness (purity of soul) because he sees a logical association between them. Significantly, Jesus made the same association between peace and purity by joining them in successive beatitudes. 'Blessed are the pure in heart' is followed by 'Blessed are the peacemakers' (Mt. 5:8-9).

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Character and peace are woven together as a single garment of the soul. Ultimately, it is holy people who finish the race, for it is they who ‘shall see God’ (Mt. 5:8) at His glorious return or in the glory that comes with death.

Phillips: The Christian life is not only focused on our relations with other people, but it also has a vertical dimension: our relationship with God. Therefore, the writer adds, ‘Strive...for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.’ The Greek word translated ‘holiness’ is elsewhere rendered ‘sanctification,’ that process by which Christians are freed from the power of sin and transformed into godliness. Sanctification is God’s work in us, but one in which we are active by faith. Holiness means ‘set apart’; set apart *from* the sinful world and *to* God for His pleasure and service. This is not an option for the believer. Christian salvation is not caused by our holiness, but it necessitates our holiness, for this is God’s purpose in saving us, that we might ‘be conformed to the image of His Son’ (Rom. 8:29). Holiness is necessary for us to be saved. It is not necessary as a *condition* of our acceptance with God, since we are justified by faith in Christ alone, apart from works. But it is necessary as a *consequence* of our acceptance with God (cp. James 2:17).

Phillips: It is the advance of this progressive work of internal transformation that Christians are zealously to seek in this life. Therefore, although we are to be a blessing to the world, a source of peace to those around us so far as we are able, it is never by compromising with the world, or by becoming worldly. Indeed, Christians are the most good to the world when we are lest like the world: when we are godly, when we have light to bring into the dark realm of sin. Our striving after peace and holiness go together. Of course, this is a struggle for sinners like us, which is why the text exhorts us to ‘make every effort’ (cp. Phil. 3:12-14). This is how a Christian pursues holiness, longing more to reflect God’s character and to see the death of sin in our hearts by the power of His grace.

2. What to Avoid (12:15-17)

Hughes: As the writer continues his advice about finishing well, he turns from the positive charges (regarding running tough, running tough together, and running after peace and holiness) to negative admonitions about what to guard oneself against. The warnings come in three successive clauses.

a) *Apostasy (12:15a)*

¹⁵*See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God...*

(1) The Danger

Phillips: The writer of Hebrews goes on to list three threats to Christians, both individually and corporately. The first is found in verse 15: ‘See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God.’ This is the writer’s overarching concern, that someone might fall behind or drop out of the race. The writer has expressed this concern about apostasy a number of times in Hebrews, that there would be people among his readers who under trial would deny Christ and fall away (2:1; 3:12; 6:4; 10:36). Now in this fifth exhortation against apostasy, the writer of Hebrews returns to the same theme, describing it as missing or falling back from the grace of God. This reminds us that while the Bible teaches that all true Christians are secure in God’s saving work—we are ‘kept by God’s power’ (1 Pe. 1:5)—the Bible also teaches that the reality of our faith is proved by our perseverance to the end. A true Christian will persevere, however he may stumble, just as Paul assures us in Philippians 1:6 that God will complete a work that is truly begun by Him. If you

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are weak, this should comfort your (cp. Jn. 10:28). But if your Christian life is superficial, perhaps you should be concerned, for this makes clear that there are many who make a profession of faith in Christ yet fall back from God's grace, especially when the going gets tough.

Hughes: The first clause is in verse 15a and warns against what we shall call gracelessness. Grace is the divine attitude of benevolence God has toward His children. The unchanging truth is, we can have no need that outstrips His grace, and we never will! Even if we fall into deep sin, greater grace is available, as Paul said: 'But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more' (Rom. 5:20b). 'For daily need there is daily grace; for sudden need, there is sudden grace; for overwhelming need, there is overwhelming grace,' wrote John Blanchard. Because of this, what a tragedy gracelessness is—and hence the warning, 'See to it that no one falls to obtain the grace of God' (literally, 'falls short of the grace of God')—the idea being that of 'falling behind, not keeping pace with the movement of divine grace which meets and stirs the progress of the Christian.

Hughes: And how does this gracelessness come to afflict a child of grace? First and primarily, through unconfessed sin. Lack of confession, in effect, places a hand against the tilted pitcher with a tragic power that omnipotence refuses to overcome. Secondly, one often misses the grace of God by a self-imposed famine of God's Word. Those who do not read and meditate on it are self-condemned to a state of spiritual anorexia. A third way to gracelessness is the absenting of oneself from the fellowship of the church, Christ's Body. The movement of divine grace through Christ's Body is meant to be a corporate experience.

Bruce: If such holiness is to be pursued, then care must be taken to detect and nip in the bud any tendency that would be inimical to it. Let them see to it that none of them fails to attain the grace of God. If it is the grace of God that sets people's feet at the entrance of the pathway of faith, it is equally the grace of God that enables them to continue and compete that pathway.

(2) The Cure

Phillips: Verse 15 includes an antidote for this first danger, namely, the pastoral care of Christians for each other: 'See to it,' the author writes, 'that no one fails to obtain the grace of God.' He means that the Hebrew Christians are to actively beware of this danger, no doubt especially as they are facing tribulation. The Greek word for 'see to it' is *episkopeō*, from which comes *episkopos*, one of the main New Testament words for an elder or minister. The writer is not restricting this duty to officers in the church, but surely this is one of a minister's principal duties; to check up on the flock, to make sure all are coming along, and especially to take note of any who have disappeared. In our passage, this obligation, which especially applies to ministers and elders, is given generally to all Christians. We are to seek out those who seem to have fallen back or turned away, to inquire about their struggle, to exhort and encourage them in the truth of the gospel, and in that way we are used by God for the perseverance of those who are His own.

Schreiner: Continuing on the right pathway and pursuing holiness are not optional. According to the author, life and death are at stake. Hence believers should 'watch over' (*επισκοποουντες*, *episkopountes*) one another, exhorting one another not to '[fall] short of the grace of God.' Those who fall short commit apostasy since they don't continue in God's grace.

MacArthur: 'See to it' translates a single Greek word (*episkopeō*) that is closely related to *episkopos* (an overseer, or bishop, and synonymous with elder). We are to have oversight of

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each other, helping each other grow in holiness and Christlikeness. We are also to look out for, oversee, those in our midst, especially within the church, who may not be believers. The first purpose of our oversight should be to win the unsaved to Christ. ‘Comes short’ means to come too late, to be let out. If an unbeliever dies before trusting in Jesus Christ, he will be lost forever. We are exhorted, *commanded*, to make every effort to ‘see to it that no one comes short of the grace of God.’

Hughes: Beautifully here in our text ‘see to it’ is a plural command, making it everyone’s responsibility to make sure no one misses the grace of God. Moreover, ‘see to it’ is an unusual word that bears the sense of oversight (in fact, we derive the word *bishop* from this verb). The idea is: ‘All of you, act like bishops in seeing that no one succumbs to gracelessness.’ We must consciously involve ourselves in the Body of Christ, assuming responsibility for seeing others go on in grace, and also humbly receiving their loving care for us. We all need grace to finish the race!

b) *Heresy (12:15b)*

...that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled...

Phillips: Verse 15 notes a second danger. See to it, he adds, ‘that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.’ This is an allusion to Deuteronomy 29:18. The danger is that a group might arise in the church to promote unbiblical teaching and practices. Such a root is not merely bitter in that it tastes bad, but it is deadly poison that brings spiritual death. It causes trouble and defiles—that is, it excludes people from God’s presence, so that the concern, again, is about apostasy, this time because of heresy in the church. This is why today we need oversight when it comes to teaching and practice, lest bitter roots grow in our midst and cause the fall of some in our ranks.

Schreiner: The bitterness here could be understood literally, and certainly bitterness defiles and stains where it spreads. But it is more likely that the root of bitterness is metaphorical here, which means that the author has in mind a bitter root that produces terrible consequences. The author draws on Deuteronomy 29:18-19. The bitter and poisonous root refers to those who abandon the Lord and worship other gods. They abandon the Lord, and yet think they will be safe and secure from judgment. The author of Hebrews worries that his readers will fall into the same trap. He assures them that they won’t be safe from judgment if they abandon the Lord. The word ‘defiled’ (*μυανθωσιν*, *mianthōsin*) in the OT refers to those who are unclean (cp. Lev. 5:3; etc.), and the defilement is sometimes ceremonial and sometimes moral. In Hebrews, however, the defilement is moral, signifying that those who have given themselves over to apostasy are unclean and outside of the covenant.

Bruce: If some incipient sin manifests itself in their midst, it must be eradicated at once; if it is tolerated, this is a sure way of falling short of God’s grace, for many, if not the whole community, will then be contaminated. Such a sin is called a ‘root of bitterness,’ in language borrowed from Deuteronomy 29:18, where Moses warns the Israelites against any inclination to fall into the idolatrous practices of Canaan, ‘lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit’ (lit. ‘breeding gall and wormwood’).

MacArthur: The second purpose for vigilance is to prevent bitterness (cp. Dt. 29:18-19). The ‘root of bitterness’ refers to a person who is superficially identified with God’s people, and who falls back into paganism. But he is no ordinary apostate. He is arrogant and defiant concerning the things of God. He thumbs his nose at the Lord. An important purpose of vigilance is to be

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on guard against such apostates, lest they cause ‘trouble, and by it many be defiled.’ Some apostates simply fall away from the church and are never heard from again. A person in the root of bitterness, however, is a corrupting influence, a serious contamination in the Body. He stays in or near the fellowship of the church and spreads wickedness, doubt, and general defilement. He is not content to apostatize by himself.

Hughes: The next clause calls the church to steel itself against idolatry and apostasy if it is to finish well, warning the believers to beware ‘that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.’ The image of idolatry as a bitter root comes from Deuteronomy 29:18, where the Lord formally warned His people against apostasy. The phrase in our text that depicts the root’s apostatizing growth is freighted with even further insight because it describes a hidden seed that takes root and grows slowly, so that only time reveals what it is. Virtually every church has such bitter roots, and it is the height of arrogance to imagine otherwise. The call here is for vigilance. Certainly this does not enjoin a witch-hunt. Nevertheless, we must be alert. Every fellowship of any size has a few ‘bitter roots’ who follow false gods and subtly poison those around them. If we are to run well, the price is vigilance—especially in the good times.

c) *Worldliness (12:16-17)*

(1) The Example of Esau (12:16)

...¹⁶*that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.*

Phillips: Verse 16 brings a third warning, against sensual and godless patterns that cause people to turn away from the eternal to the worldly: ‘See to it...that no one is sexually immoral or unholy.’ These two terms describe a profane attitude about life, namely, that which is sensual and earth-bound, that which pursues carnal cravings of all sorts, sexual and otherwise, rather than spiritual blessing. This attitude is all around us today; indeed, our nation’s economy is practically built upon these twin pillars of worldliness: the sensual and the godless.

Phillips: One prime example of this mindset, as well as a good warning against it, comes from the life of Esau, the elder son of the patriarch Isaac and the brother of Jacob. Esau was sensually oriented, which is why he took pagan wives and thus grieved his godly parents. But the grossest example of his sensuality came with his willingness to trade his birthright—the covenant of salvation with the Lord—for a bowl of stew. This is what verse 16 highlights, that he ‘sold his birthright for a single meal,’ a dreadful act of follow recorded in Genesis 25:29-34. Genesis says that ‘Esau despised his birthright’—that is, his covenant relationship with God. Surely that is the height of disdain for the things of God, and yet it is a choice that is repeated by the hour in our own time. Our job as Christians, says the writer of Hebrews, is to make sure this king of secular attitude finds no place in the church, and that every believer is warned against it.

Schreiner: Believers should be on guard so that no one would be sexually immoral or profane like Esau. He is the foil of the faithful described in 11:1-40. The word ‘immoral’ (*πορνος*, *pornos*) always refers to sexual immorality (1 Cor. 5:9-11; Eph. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:10; Heb. 13:4; Rev. 21:8; 22:15), and thus it likely has that meaning here as well. But how was Esau sexually immoral? Perhaps in his decision to marry Hittite women (Gen. 26:34). His lack of concern for holy things is evident in his disdain for his birthright. It was so trivial to him that he sold it for one meal (Gen. 25:29-34), and hence he ‘despised his birthright’ (Gen. 25:34). The author is

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concerned that the readers will fall into the same trap as Esau. They have been given something precious and beautiful in the gospel and must not forsake it for the comforts or joys of the present evil age.

Bruce: In telling them to make sure that they have no fornicator among them, he may conceivably be following Old Testament usage in employing this terminology to denote idolatry or apostasy (cp. Jdg. 2:17; etc.); but most probably he has in mind the literal sense of the word. It may be that Esau is mentioned only as an example of an ‘irreligious person’ (*βεβηλος* *bebēlos*, ‘profane’), since in the Old Testament record Esau is not charged with fornication—unless the meaning of the term be stretched to cover his marriage with two daughters of Heth, who made life bitter for his parents (Gen. 26:34ff.). The incident which our author recalls from Esau’s career illustrates not fornication but ‘profaneness’ or ‘irreligion,’ that is to say, the lack of any sense of spiritual values. So little did Esau value the birthright with which his heritage was bound up that in a moment of hunger he sold it ‘for a mess of pottage.’ ‘Thus Esau despised his birthright’ is the summing up of that incident in the Old Testament record (Gen. 25:34).

Hughes: Verse 16 indicates there are two appetites that can torpedo the race—the *sexual* appetite and the *physical* appetite. Here the writer asserts in clearest terms that Esau was sexually immoral, calling him a *pornos*, from which we get the word *pornography*. Interestingly, the Old Testament does not say he was a fornicator unless it is implied in his marrying the two Canaanite daughters of Heth, who subsequently made life miserable for his parents (Gen. 26:34-35). Esau’s essential sensuality made God quite unreal to him—as lust always does. This goes hand in glove with the text’s second assertion that he was ‘unholy’ (*bebēlos*), a man who had no regard for God, whose focus was only on physical pleasures. Esau was completely earthbound. All his thoughts were on what he could touch, taste, and suck. Instant gratification was his rule of thumb. He was void of spiritual values. Godless!

MacArthur: Perhaps the saddest and most godless person in Scripture outside of Judas is Esau. Esau not only was ‘immoral,’ but was ‘godless.’ He had no ethics or faith, no scruples or reverence. He had no regard for the good, the truthful, the divine. He was totally worldly, totally secular, totally profane. Christians are to be vigilant that no person such as Esau contaminate Christ’s Body.

(2) The Failure of Esau (12:17)

¹⁷*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.*

Phillips: Verse 17 tells us why Esau’s sensual frame of mind is so greatly to be avoided. It refers to Esau’s predicament when, years later, the covenant blessing he had despised was actually given to Jacob instead of him. Genesis 27 records that Esau regretted having given away something so valuable. He wasn’t sorry for his sin or depraved attitude, but only for its consequence. But he was unable to undo what he had done, and in the same way people with a sensual and godless attitude today are unable to undo their many foolish choices, however many tears they shed. How many people even blame God for not helping them, when they have first rejected Him in favor of the world, a world that turns out not to live up to its glittering promises. See to it, we are commanded, that this attitude and its terrible toll of tears do not find a place in the Christian community.

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Schreiner: The consequences of despising the birthright are explained. Esau longed to inherit the blessing from his father, but Jacob by deception removed it instead (Gen. 27:27-30). When Esau discovered the ruse perpetrated by Jacob, he bitterly asked Isaac to bless him as well (Gen. 27:34), but the blessing, like the birthright, was irrevocable. Both the blessing and the birthright, which are closely merged together in the story (Gen. 27:36), were given to Jacob, and hence he would serve as Esau's master (Gen. 27:36-40). Hebrews draws a lesson for the readers: repentance isn't available forever. Time may run out in receiving the grace of God. Esau wanted the blessing, but the time had passed. The author isn't saying God doesn't allow people to repent even if they wish to. His point is that the time passed when Esau could repent, and he doesn't want the same to happen to his readers. If they turn away from Christ, they, like Esau, will be filled with bitter regret.

Bruce: Esau did, indeed, regret his hasty action later. Our author sees a close link between his despising of his birthright in Gen. 25:29-34 and his losing the blessing due to the firstborn in Gen. 27:1-40. When he came in from the field to receive the blessing, he found himself 'rejected' (*απεδοκιμασθη, apedokimasthē*), and though he wept loudly and bitterly there was no way of retrieving the situation. His father could not and would not call back the blessing pronounced on Jacob: 'yes, and he shall be blessed' (Gen. 27:33). The pronoun 'it' in the clause 'though he begged for it with tears' most probably refers to the blessing. The application is plain; it is a reinforcement of the warning given at an earlier stage in the argument, that after apostasy no second repentance is possible. 'Let us therefore fear lest, when the promise of entering into His rest has been left open, any of you should turn out to have fallen short of it' (4:1).

MacArthur: When Esau finally woke up to some extent and realized what he had forsaken, he made a half-hearted attempt to retrieve it. Just because 'he sought for it with tears' does not indicate sincerity or true remorse. 'He found no place for repentance.' He bitterly regretted, but he did not repent. He selfishly wanted God's blessings, but he did not want God. He had fully apostatized, and was forever outside the pale of God's grace. He went on 'sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth,' and there no longer remained any sacrifice to cover his sins (10:26).

Hughes: In Esau's pathetic case he went on to lose his birthright and blessing (cp. Gen. 27). And there was no remediation, as our text concludes. If Esau sought forgiveness (and perhaps he did), God would have given it to him. But there was no way Esau's pleading could undo what was done. He had to live with the consequences. He could never possibly finished as well as he had begun. God's message to all who are in the race is so clear. Sexual and physical appetites, given free rein, will ruin our race. Sure, we can repent of any sin, but Esau-like sins will leave deficiencies that can never be regained. How tragic, then that so many today are selling a glorious finish for a cheap meal!

Phillips: These are real dangers facing us today, as always, First is the general concern that some will fall away; second is the threat of heresy within the church; and third is the danger of sensual godlessness, a threat we must take very seriously, especially with our young people and others who are prone to being easily influenced by worldly values.

3. What to Be (12:14)

Phillips: There is one statement that dominates this passage (12:12-17). The writer says we are to strive for holiness 'without out which no one will see the Lord' (v. 14). This is a verse that

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has caused many Christians to lose sleep, because they infer from it that salvation results from our moral attainment. We are not saved by our works, which are uniformly tainted by sin and thus are unacceptable to God, but rather by the perfect work of Jesus Christ. This is the great message of the Book of Hebrews, that Christ has made perfect what must be presented to God (cp. 7:26-27).

Phillips: Therefore, the point of Hebrews 12:14 is not that you must be saved by your own holiness, a teaching that can only drive you to despair. But the point of this statement is nonetheless quite direct and serious. It is about the necessity of sanctification for everyone who calls himself a Christian and seeks to be saved. What it says is true: ‘Without holiness—without sanctification—no one will see the Lord.’ Jesus made this point in positive terms in the Sermon on the Mount: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’ (Mt. 5:8). Having begun our holiness in this life, we will enjoy its perfection in the life to come, and we will gaze upon God in the beauty of holiness.

Phillips: This being true, there are three ways in which Hebrews 12:14 exhorts us to a present pursuit of that holiness which alone enables us to see the Lord. First, we are exhorted to holiness because holiness is our preparation for heaven. The only ones who will be perfected in holiness then are those who are being perfected in holiness now, however slowly and with however much difficulty.

Phillips: Second, we must persevere in our faith if we want to be saved, and perseverance is not possible without holiness. This is why Hebrews 12:1 begins this section of teaching by telling us to ‘throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.’ If we do not strive against sin, we will be overcome and will not finish the race. Unless we do what this passage commands, therefore, making every effort not only to live in peace but also to be holy, we will not see the Lord because we will not persevere in the faith. As in the case of Esau, a secular and sensual mindset is one that goes on to despise the Lord and His blessings. People shun holiness because they love the world, and this love will keep them from heaven.

Phillips: Third, and finally, we must press on in holiness because our present actions have eternal implications. This, too, is the lesson of Esau; his careless actions led to ultimate alienation from eternal riches in God. On the one hand, there is no sin that cannot be repented of, no attitude that cannot be nailed to the cross through faith in Christ. The point is not that sin cannot be repented of and forgiven, because it can be. The point is that we must pursue holiness because what we think and do now matters eternally (cp. Gal. 6:8).

Phillips: The life in store for us is a holy life. Therefore, let us make every effort to be holy, for it is with holiness that someday we will see our precious Lord, and it is with holiness that others can see Him now in us.

For next time: Read Hebrews 12:18-29.