

# Careful Inspection Part 2

a sermon in the series  
Hebrews: An Epistle of Encouragement

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## Hebrews 12:12-17

*Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; 13 And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed. 14 Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: 15 Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; 16 Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. 17 For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.*

Last Sunday morning we examined these same verses and we were exhorted by them to carefully inspect our brothers' and sisters' endurance and stamina under pressure. It is our responsibility being some other Christians' brother or sister to attentively pay close attention to them, and when a dear one is weak we are to provide strength. When they are lame we are to provide healing. Many of you have commented to me how blessed you were by the message of last Sunday, for which I am grateful to the Lord. I am convinced that such a word encouraged your hearts because you all have hearts that desire to be strength and health to one another. You do love the brethren for you possess the love of God in your hearts by the Holy Spirit, which is given unto you (Romans 5:5).

If you lack anything it is the knowledge of how to be strength and health to a brother or sister. Might I offer you this suggestion, just do it, and not worry about finesse or methods. The admonition is simple—just be there for one another. Be there! Give yourself to each other, and it will come to you by the Holy Spirit how you can minister to each other.

The writer of Hebrews does give us some concrete things to be on the look out for in our fellow Christian's life. This is a serious warning, which means careful inspection of each other is extremely important. The stakes are high, much too high, for you and me to be lax in caring for each other. I wonder how many pilgrims who once walked with us walk no more because we were not serious about carefully inspecting each other's lives? Perhaps we were ignorant of our role as our brother's keeper. Perhaps we believed that it was not our business to be interfering with our neighbor's relationship with Christ. The concept of "personal Savior" is both good and

dangerous. It is good in that it reminds us that salvation is personal and that Christ died for us personally as well as for the entire elect body. However, it is dangerous in that it promotes the idea that my relationship with Christ is my own business and nobody else's. The word "personal" seems to get transformed into the word "private." My relationship with Christ is personal, but it is far from being private. It is your business to find out if I am growing in grace, needing grace to grow, or failing of the grace of God.

Last week the writer of Hebrews commanded us to strengthen and heal as well as to pursue peace and holiness. Today, the same text will command us to carefully inspect against spiritual disease. We are to carefully inspect for the purpose of:

### **III. PREVENTING SPIRITUAL DISEASE**

As we stated in our last message, the key words of this paragraph are "looking diligently." We are to look diligently to our brothers and sisters to help them with their burdens. The failure to do so can lead to disastrous results. For example in verse fifteen the author says,

*Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God (Hebrews 12:15).*

#### **Come Short of the Grace of God**

As you remember the writer of Hebrews is dealing with a people who had gone through the "wring-er." They had endured persecution for being Christians. The author called it "the chastening of the Lord." When we as God's people undergo adversity that was not created by our own doing, we can rest assured it is by the doing of the Lord. Good and bad comes from the Lord. I think of Job's words after he received all the reports of devastation and loss, he said, "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD (Job 1:21). Again Job said in the second chapter and verse ten, "What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" God confirmed that Job was right in his analysis and theology at this point for the verse continues, "In all this did not Job sin with his lips."

Therefore, the trials that you and I bear are given to us from the Lord. Unfortunately, many believers in Christ do not believe this. They believe that when calamity or severe difficulty strikes that Satan was the originator. They have reasoned that a good and loving God could not cause such pain and suffering. But the Apostle Paul did not subscribe to such a teaching. In Second Corinthians chapter twelve, verses seven through nine, Paul tells us that for his benefit God gave the apostle a messenger from Satan to "buffet" him.

*And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).*

This past week it was relayed to me how a man accused Paul of weak faith and for that reason he suffered this thorn in the flesh. He said that Paul had been worrying about the churches to the point that he was anxious and lacked faith. What criminal nonsense and raping of the text! Such drivel is forcing upon God's word a false and evil interpretation, all because someone's belief in God cannot allow for a loving God to introduce suffering into the life of one of His dear children.

My dear friend, I ask you, if God has nothing to do with our suffering and pain, then how can you be sure He has the power to do anything about our prospering and joy? There is evil all around us. How can we be sure He can interrupt the evil of this world and do us good? Is He not strong enough to resist the devil and his agents of torment? Is not God's power enough to ward off messengers of Satan sent to buffet us? Yes, more than enough. Then we can conclude from the Word of God there is a reason in God allowing the assaults. The comforting truth of Scripture is that pain is not introduced to our lives without a loving God directing that pain and marking its boundary. As our omnipotent God controls the oceans and sets their boundaries, so has He already established the amount and duration of pain you shall endure.

But why would a loving God ordain and appoint seasons of trial and affliction for those He especially loves? What kind of love is this? It is the kind of love that is interested in your spiritual development. It is the kind of love that desires to promote your holiness, which will promote your happiness. The writer of Hebrews has already told us in this twelfth chapter that the discipline of the Lord will yield a good crop. In verses ten and eleven he states,

*For they (our earthly fathers) verily for a few days chastened [us] after their own pleasure; but he for [our] profit, that [we] might be partakers of his holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby (Hebrews 12:10-11).*

But we should not be naïve and think that there is no danger in the scourging of the Lord. When our Lord's hand is applied to our back, the pain can be almost more than we can endure. Surely you noticed the word "scourging." This is the same word used when our Lord Jesus, our dear Christ was tied to a whipping post and beaten with the Roman cat-o-nine. This was a brutal form of punishment that was so severe that some men died by its cruelty. This is the word that the writer of Hebrews uses to describe our Lord's loving discipline. Indeed, many professing Christians get so discouraged by God's loving discipline that they may falter under it. It can be quite painful. Thus, the writer of Hebrews tells us to be on the alert for a brother or sister who is undergoing these periods of God's chastening. We are to carefully look out for them and be there to encourage them. In fact, the danger of them getting discouraged under the affliction is so great they can come short of the grace of God.

It is a shame that this verse has been misrepresented by both those who believe that this phrase, "fail of the grace of God," means that a believer can lose his salvation, as well as by those who believe that a believer cannot lose their salvation.

What does this term “fail of the grace of God” mean? First, the word “fail” does not mean, “fall.” The author of our text is not in the least suggesting that a believer will fall from God’s grace. The word “fail” means “lack, come behind in, or short of.” The young rich ruler asks the Lord what he lacked in inheriting eternal life. The word he uses is the same word in our text, “hustereo”. Listen to how it is used in Matthew chapter nineteen and verse twenty.

*The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet (Matthew 19:20)?*

*Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me (Mark 10:21).*

Our Lord was telling the young enquirer that he did not have something that was necessary for eternal life. The word “fail” or “lack” speaks of not possessing something that is needed. In Luke 15:14 the word “hustereo” is again used to mean the absence of something.

*And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want (Luke 15:14).*

The words “in want” are the same word “hustereo” The well-known verse, Romans chapter three and verse twenty-three uses this same word. It is translated “come short of.”

*For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).*

Upon the weight of biblical evidence we can say with all assurance that the author of Hebrews is in no way stating that a believer will fall from God’s grace and lose their salvation. What he is saying is that under grave and painful discipline a professing Christian is very apt to misunderstand the suffering and resist the Lord’s will. They will be tempted to question God’s goodness and love for them and sink into despair. They are at a dangerous junction of turning their back on Christ and walking with Him no more. Have you not heard and seen a professing Christian say that they could not endure the present suffering and question the love of God? Why, I have seen men turn their back on God and forsake the faith they once professed. This is what “failing the grace of God” means. It is in the end to prove to all that you had come short of the grace of God. In other words, you had lacked the grace of God; you never received it, and therefore, came short of it.

We know, because of verses like Philippians chapter one and verse six that grace does not leave something undone. It says, “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform [it] until the day of Jesus Christ.” Salvation is not conversion only, meaning it is not just God’s act of forgiving a sinner of his or her guilt. It is the complete victory over sin, Satan and death. And that salvation is finished when we stand glorified before the Lord. Thus to lack or come short of grace means to have never had grace.

No doubt, one of the purposes of suffering in the church is to purify the church. A few verses later our beloved author of Hebrews will tell us that God is shaking all things to do a work of separation.

*Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this [word], Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain (Hebrews 12:26-27).*

Once again we come to the question of why would God warn a person who was not really a Christian to be careful lest they end up lacking grace? He certainly is not encouraging them to remain in their false and deluded state. He is not saying if they keep professing to be a Christian, even though they do not possess Christ, that they in the end will make it. Why then warn a man that God is removing from the church through suffering to remain faithful to a God he really does not love nor serve?

The answer is of course, the Lord is not doing so. He is not warning a man to stay in his sinful state and keep pretending he is a Christian. Rather, the warning serves two purposes. It warns the false convert that when trials come and he thinks of deserting the faith that he professes to believe that he is not genuine. It is a means by which all can test the faith they profess to have. But the warning also serves a second purpose; it alerts the genuine believer of danger and becomes a means of encouraging him or her forward. If I see myself becoming so discouraged that I doubt the love of God towards me and reason within my heart that if this is the way God treats His servants I want no part of such a God, then upon reading this warning I am exercised to see my folly and repent. A true believer may falter in grace but never come short of it. These warnings work in his heart to arouse his attention and alarm his weak soul. They are employed to incite caution and holy fear.

Let it be known that we are to carefully inspect each other's faith. When we see a fellow Christian undergoing severe trials we are to employ these warnings, encouraging them to draw closer to Christ instead of drifting from Him. We must resist the idea that it is none of our business and that a man's religion is a private matter.

How many among us this morning are in this very situation? And how will we know if we don't look diligently toward one another? Some dear Christian is here today faltering and failing under the load of problems, thinking that no one cares and especially the Lord. Or is there one of you here who has thought you were one of us on the King's highway, but the truth is you are not really a genuine Christian and this very trial has exposed your heart to this possibility? But again, I ask you how will we know if we do not intervene into our neighbor's life. Notice, I did not say interfere but intervene. It is commanded of us to intervene, and intervention is not interference.

The second spiritual disease we are to carefully inspect against in order to prevent or quickly cure is:

## A Root of Bitterness

We find this ailment also in verse fifteen.

*Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble [you], and thereby many be defiled (Hebrews 12:15).*

Ah, the root of bitterness! What a persistent weed in God's garden. Among the lovely plants of God's husbandry, lurk the seeds of this life-choking vine. It germinates and thrives in the climate of suffering. As our last disease, coming short of the grace of God, so this culprit of bitterness is often the result of experiencing God's discipline.

I have noted already that the hand of God does not only comfort but it also afflicts. David said in Psalm One hundred and nineteen and verse seventy-five "I know, O LORD, that thy judgments [are] right, and [that] thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me." David affirmed the grace of God in God's afflicting him with suffering, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes" (Psalms 119:71). It is in affliction that we come to grips with our pride. There are very few things that make us face our self-sufficiency like pain and suffering. It is in the midst of adversity that we recognize our limitations and are forced to grapple with them. We will humble ourselves and obey God by faith, or we resist the difficulty in pride and arrogance.

I find it amazing that the good things of God either make us or break us. David said it was good that God afflicted him. Yet for many, God afflicting them leads them to bitterness. It is no different with fortune and prosperity. The good gifts of God either humble us and cause worship of God to flourish or they lead to a pride and materialism that leads us away from the worship of God.

So often when men suffer their true hearts are exposed. You see their hidden fears surface. Their pet sins come to light. The writer of Hebrews calls this wrong reaction to God's discipline a "root" of bitterness. The word "root" is the part of the plant that remains unseen and hidden from view. Its place is underneath the surface in the darkness of the earth. Bitterness finds its roots in the darkness of our hearts underneath the surface. But trouble, pain and hurt bring it to light and spread its maniacal shoots above and beyond the heart.

Within each of us there is the seed or root of this evil menace. It is there by nature. Give it a lifetime of disappointment, failures, and unmet expectations and it will grow. Bitterness is nothing more than unresolved anger. The anger may have started for all the right reasons. In the beginning it truly was righteous indignation, justifiable anger, but with time it became corrupted. Now it is a sour expression of self-pity.

The story line is the same; it never changes. Someone does you wrong: you rightly hurt and feel the pain; but you do not forgive, you fester. Pile on top of this pain hundreds of hurts and disappointments and you have bitterness that is no longer a root but now a towering tree. And just like a mature plant, you produce seeds of your fruit in other's hearts with your anger and resent-

ment towards them. No wonder the author of our text said, “and thereby many be defiled.” Sin is always a leaven that leavens the whole lump.

You must hear me. The loving hand of God has administered every hurt and heartache you have suffered. He has brought it to you to do a good work of holiness but you have turned it into a work of impurity. You have resisted the Lord’s chastening. You have refused to learn what suffering teaches about yourself. You have rejected the affliction and with it God’s grace. Every affliction has in some way been the hand of a good God working to conform you into the image of His dear Son. But oh, how hard is the flesh to mold! What a fight it puts up to resist the hand that presses it.

Yes, even that injustice you suffered while doing God’s work was ultimately His hand. It was no different for His Son, Christ Jesus our Lord. Why should it be different for you? He too suffered unjustly, and the Holy Spirit tells us in Acts chapter four, verses twenty-seven and twenty-eight.

*For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done (Acts 4:27-28).*

Even Jesus experienced His Father’s hand of affliction, and surely He was innocent. No sin to be laid at His charge and yet unjustly our sins were laid upon Him. My, suffering friend, you cannot afford bitterness’ price. It will cripple your life and leave you impotent. Lay the axe to the root of bitterness and sever its life. It is hard to deny yourself the pity of your pain, but you must before it destroys you. Remember, it will not in the end destroy just you, but many others. Others whom you love and care for, “many be defiled.” Surely for some of you the root is too large; it is now a huge tree. You have not strength or endurance enough to hew it down. Would to God that brothers and sisters from this assembly would put their hand to the axe and relieve you. Come on, dear saints, this is our task as well. We are to root out the roots of bitterness in our midst. If we do not do so this place will become as dark as a forest whose trees have so grown blocking the sun’s light. One root of bitterness will so grow a forest!

The last disease of which we are to carefully be on the look out for is:

## **Fornication and Profanity**

In verses sixteen and seventeen we read,

*Lest there [be] any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birth-right. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears (Hebrews 12:16-17).*

Fornication and profanity are sins of which the Apostle Paul in Ephesians five and verse three says, “But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you,

as becometh saints.” The word “profane” is a word that means “godless.” It comes from a word that means “trod under foot.” The idea is unholy treatment of the holy and sacred. These two sins are to be guarded against and not allowed to enter the church. Certainly, the writer of Hebrews could have mentioned other sins but he cites these two. Why? Why just these two?

These two types of sin represent the last stages of apostasy. It is being near the “end of the line.” To illustrate this condition, the writer of Hebrews uses Esau as an example. Esau loved other women than those of his own people and he married women that displeased his parents. These women whom Esau pursued and married were idolaters from the land of Canaan. Esau had an appetite for sex that led him to moral ruin.

Sexual immorality is a sin that the Bible constantly and thoroughly warns against. And it is a sin that is not committed without prior priming. A man or woman who is guilty of this sin has not simply been caught unawares and blindly fallen into the trap. Oh no, he or she has cultivated a heart of lust that eventually leads to immoral behavior. Let a man think on impure things long enough, and sure enough he will do them. Sexual sins are like planting seeds in a garden. You do not reap a harvest the very same day you plant them. Time and care must go into the growing and maturing of the seeds until one day fruit appears. But the fruit is not ready yet and must be given time to develop and ripen. So it is with sexual sins. They are all nurtured with time and mental imagination.

That is why we are living in such morally dangerous times. People are being bombarded with sexuality all the time. Pornography is on every hand. Not just the pornography of pictures, the internet, and television, but today people dress pornographically. Young girls and women today dress so immodestly that it is shameful. I speak not just of the world but so many within the church as well. Where has the sense of shame gone? Why is it not an embarrassment for a man or a woman to show their navel or wear tight fitting clothing? Why do our hearts not grieve over these things? It is because they have become common to us that we see no sin in them. Our sense of sexuality and sensuality has changed.

This is a way that leads to final destruction. You cannot allow your mind to think on these things very long until you must find some way to express them. Flirtation leads to temptation, and temptation to vulgarity, and vulgarity to immorality. And once immoral actions have begun it is so difficult to stop them, thus the writer of Hebrews warns us that this is a dangerous pathway to losing out with God totally and finally.

Note how Esau treated the sacred with casualness. His birthright was more than the greater share of inheritance. It was the promised lineage of Christ. But Esau cared more for the fleshly than the spiritual. “For to be carnally minded [is] death; but to be spiritually minded [is] life and peace” (Romans 8:6). Esau valued a taste of food more than God’s will and blessing. This is profanity.



How much do you care for the things of God? Perhaps a better question is which do you really value the most, the things of the flesh and the world, or the things of the Spirit of God? Ah, this is question! Do you forsake the things that promote worldliness, materialism, spiritual laziness? Profane is the man or woman who forsakes the things that would prevent these spiritual maladies. Which are you?

The seventeenth verse ends by showing us the miserable failure Esau was. It show us the end result of a man who treats with despite the things of God. When his brother Jacob received the blessing of the firstborn, Esau sought it with tears. All of the years of his youth and young adulthood he had cared little for it. He had taken for granted that it would be his. But the moment it was taken from him, he now cared. The moment he could not have it he wanted it.

The author of our text says, “for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.” Some believe from this that Esau tried to be repentant but God would not forgive him. Let there be no mistake, God is willing to forgive. Man never has to overcome some reluctance in God to receive forgiveness. This is not what our text is suggesting. What Esau sought was for his father Isaac to reverse the blessing he gave Jacob and give it to him. But Isaac would not repent, or in other words, change his mind. With tears and strong weeping, Esau pleaded for the blessing that he had cared so little for. But Isaac could not undo what had occurred.

I think of the men and women who with tears and strong crying will seek the blessing from God on judgment day. They will with loud voices cry for the blessing they cared so little in this life for. But then it will be too late. The blessing will be given to another and it will not be reversed. Today, dear sinner is the day of salvation. Today is the day for you to seek the blessing of God “carefully with tears.”

To my brothers and sisters I say let you and me love each other that we would jealously guard and watch over each other. Let us spy out each other and be on the lookout for these things we have mentioned today. Much attention has been made over this new plague called SARS. World health organizations and the medical staff of every hospital are on the alert for any symptom of this infectious disease. Why is the church, and specifically you and I, not on as much alert against any of these dreaded spiritual diseases we have discussed today. Why are we so little concerned that a brother may fail of the grace of God, or a sister may have a root of bitterness spring up and defile many, or that our church would suffer immorality and profaneness to find habitation among us?

Surely you have heard of the man who had a climbing accident and amputated his trapped arm with a dull pocket knife in order to save his life. This is the picture that Christ gave us in Matthew chapter five and verses twenty-nine through thirty.

*And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast [it] from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not [that] thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast [it] from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not [that] thy whole body should be cast into hell (Matthew 5:29-30).*

Christ was not advocating or teaching self-mutilation. Rather, He was trying to show the seriousness of pursuing holiness “without which no man shall see the Lord.” Our pursuit of sanctification and spiritual wellness is that important. The Lord has created this church as a means of helping you in that pursuit. And oh, by the way, He has put you in this church to help someone else in their pursuit of holiness. Amen.