

Careful Inspection Part I

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.

Life is as the poet said.

*Life is ever
Since man was born,
Licking honey
From a thorn.
---Louis Ginsberg*

H. L. Mencken said, "Life is like the life of a fly in a room filled with a hundred boys, each armed with a fly swatter." Life is not easy, and you would not certainly describe it as a cakewalk. From the cradle to the casket life is a war. Emerson was right when he said, "As soon as there is life, there is danger." For the Hebrew Christians to whom the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews was writing life was very difficult. Some had been imprisoned for their faith. Others had had their properties and homes confiscated by the law for being Christians. And others had been disowned by their Jewish families.

So often we think when trouble comes our way that it is because God has abandoned us. But God never abandons His children when in difficulty. He steers their vessel through turbulent waters. In other words, you are in difficulty because the Lord has led you to it, not because He has forsaken you.

If not God abandoning us in adversity, then perhaps we suffer problems because we have sinned and deserved it? While a great deal of our problems are self-inflicted, there are times when problems come and we did nothing to deserve it. For example, the Hebrews to whom the Epistle of Hebrews was written were suffering, and they were not guilty of anything but living out their faith and devotion to Christ Jesus.

In chapter twelve and verse four the author tells them that their struggle against sin has not resulted in death. “Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.” The persecution they had thus far received had not led to anyone being martyred. To encourage them, he reminds them of the words of Solomon in Proverbs chapter three and verses eleven and twelve. He writes in verses five and six,

And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth (Hebrews 12:5-6).

Their difficulties were not the result of disobedience but rather obedience, and to top it off, the author of Hebrews calls their suffering the “chastening of the Lord.” Now we have come to understand the word “chastening” as meaning a disciplinary action to correct wrong behavior. But the author cannot be using the word in this manner. They were not being corrected. They were being persecuted. This is remarkable. Christians were being persecuted, and the writer of Hebrews calls it the “chastening of the Lord.”

We have explained to you in a previous message that discipline has two sides to it. One is the common understanding of correction. When your child disobeys, you administer some sort of disciplinary measure that corrects the disobedient behavior. However, the word “discipline” has a second understanding which is instructional. Any lesson which is taught to a child, even if it is in an enjoyable format, is called discipline.

The significance of this for you and me is that in adversity, as well as fortune, our Father is instructing and developing us. What a tremendous encouragement! Whether the suffering is corrective or instructive, it is all from the Lord and it is for our benefit. What a faith builder!

Having stated that, I realize that suffering, pain, and disappointment are still difficult to handle. Enduring problems can sooner or later wear down the strength of even the best of saints. Elijah is probably one of the best examples of this. After defeating the false prophets on Mt. Carmel and calling fire down out of the sky, Elijah receives word that the evil Queen Jezebel is on his trail to have his head. In fear and despondency, Elijah goes on the run and becomes so depressed that he prays that the Lord would go ahead and let him die. It is hard to imagine the daring and dominant Elijah brought down to suicidal thoughts, but it happened.

What are we to do in such times of distress when the weight of the load seems more than we can bear? Well, the Lord has given us a help and we find it in the words of our text. But with the encouragement there is also a stiff warning.

I want you to note the key words of this paragraph found in Hebrews chapter twelve verses twelve through seventeen. They are the words “looking diligently” in verse fifteen. It is our responsibility in being some other Christians’ brother or sister to attentively pay close attention to them

That is why the writer of this blessed book gives a few exhortations that state you and I are to give careful attention to each other to prevent someone from being so discouraged by the “chastening of the Lord.” We are to be on the lookout for any signs that a fellow Christian may be overcome by adversity. No doubt, there are some here today who look like they have it all together, but I assure you their world is collapsing and they need you to support them. Let us look at these exhortations this morning and learn how to carefully inspect our brother’s and sister’s endurance and stamina under pressure.

First, we are to carefully look for those who need:

I. STRENGTHENING AND HEALING

12 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 (Hebrews 12:12-13).

As we have already stated, there is no problem that confronts the Christian that is not by divine decree. The suffering you now endure has been appointed to you. But God-ordained problems are no lighter or less severe than any other problem a man may bear. However, God designed a system to help the believer to endure “chastening” –it’s called the church. Believers are to aid other believers who are undergoing difficulty. We are to provide each other a ministry of strengthening.

The Ministry of Strength

Are your hands strong? Then spy out someone whose hands hang down and lift them up. Are you strong and your legs able to run? Then help a brother whose knees are weak, who is unable to walk much less run. It is interesting that the writer would refer to the knees. It is a fact that the knees are the joints that must support the most weight and exert the most labor. That is why for most people their knees are the weakest joints. Do you have bad knees? If so the probable cause is that you have overexerted them. You have overexerted them by too much weight, work, age, or a combination of all of the above.

I remember helping a friend move his furnishings to a new home. He was short handed, especially for moving a piano. There were only three of us and one was a diabetic, overweight and suffering from gout. Need I say more? So the other two men grabbed one end of the piano, which left me the other end. I knew the proper way to lift any heavy weight was not using the back but the legs. So I squatted down keeping my back straight and heaved upward to lift up my end of the piano.

I was able to do so, but the cost was a severe pain in my knee that took months to finally heal and quit bothering me. The problem was too much weight, or another way of saying it, too heavy a burden for the knees.

Why this very morning there are brothers or sisters whose burdens are too heavy for them and it has weakened them, if not injured them as one trying to lift too heavy a weight. The Word of God in Galatians chapter six and verse two says, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."

But how do we strengthen the weak? The answer is by making up their deficit, supplying them what they need in order that they endure adversity. The only antidote to weakness is strength. And when a brother or sister is weak, you are to be his or her strength. Carefully inspect your brother today, and if you surmise his weakness, come alongside him and provide what he is too weak to do himself.

The Ministry of Healing

Not only are we to provide strength to the weak, but also we are told to heal the lame. The author uses the word "lame" instead of the word "sick." Why do you suppose he did this? It is our duty to heal, why not use the word "sick" rather than "lame"? Wouldn't it make the same point? No, it would not. The author's point is not that the Christian is sick but that he is under attack. Therefore, the word "lame" tells us that he has been injured not infected with some illness.

Again the writer of our text is using imagery that should elicit compassion. When a man or woman is hurting we should have empathy for them. Don't say, "Well, I don't have the gift of mercy. Let those mercy-gifted folks do that." Even we who do not have the ministry of mercy are still to be like our Father, who is merciful. Mercy is not just a gift of the Spirit but is also a fruit of the Spirit, which every believer is to exercise.

It seems to me that more often than healing the lame and injured we choose to wound them all the more. The strong have a tendency to look down their long noses and see the crippled lying along the path, thinking that if the lame were like them, they would not be where they are now. Perhaps the wounded have fallen into the trap of sin and that is how they received their injury. What is our reaction? I fear too often we do not try to heal them but we hurt them all the more with our holier-than-thou looks and self-righteous remarks. Are you not guilty of saying something about someone who has fallen into sin that was critical rather than restorative? Do not justify yourself because you did not say it to the erring believer but said it to someone else. This only spreads a spirit of injury and not healing.

Or perhaps we just ignore them. We do not inflict any more injury with unkind words, we just abandon them. Think about what happens to a wounded lamb that cannot keep up with the flock. Is it not an easy target for the beast of prey? Yes, and it is just a matter of time before it will be killed by the enemy. It is no different for the believer. Our strength is in our fellowship, meaning

in our interdependence upon each other. But segregate one from that interlocking strength of numbers and you doom that person to whatever the enemy wishes. He's an easy mark.

It is your business when you see a fellow Christian who are not themselves to find out what the problem is and minister health and strength. I say, stick your nose in and find out what they need. It may be just your concern that will make the difference. You may not do one thing to change their problem, and indeed you cannot change it, but just knowing that somebody cares about them will give them the added strength they need to keep going. Oh, dear friends, that is church. Again I tell you church is not this building, and it isn't this worship service. We betray what we really believe about the church when we say, "We're going to church this morning." You don't go to a church, you are part of the church. And church is a interlocking dependence of believers.

In First Corinthians chapter ten and verse thirteen we have the well known statement,

There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God [is] faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear [it].

God has given His word that we will not be tempted above what we are able to endure. The word "temptation" means both the enticement to sin and testing and trials. When you are tempted to sin you cannot say that you cannot help yourself. You cannot say you could not resist the enticement. God has said He would not allow you to be tempted beyond a point you can endure.

The same is true with trials and difficulties. The Lord has promised no trial more than you can stand. And the reason is He has provided you a fellowship of believers who will strengthen and minister healing when you are assaulted. You of course must avail yourself to the ministry of other Christians. You must not stand alone as a solitary figure of self-sufficiency. Humility is to be exercised, and you should seek the aid and comfort of other believers. If you do not, you cannot turn to the Lord and accuse Him of being unfaithful to His promise of First Corinthians chapter ten and verse thirteen. You cheated yourself of God's means of keeping you from being tempted or tested with more than you can endure. But ah, dear saints, how many times have we failed to be God's means of escape to some hurting, weak and injured soul?

It is our duty and ministry to carefully inspect each other, looking diligently to find those who need strength and health.

Secondly, the writer of Hebrews says we are to carefully inspect and seek,

II. PEACE AND HOLINESS

Follow peace with all [men], and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14).

It is the duty of Christians, even when suffering, to be at peace with all men, even with those who may be the cause of their sufferings. When you are being hurt by someone, especially for your faith, it is very easy to become defensive. It is more than easy because this is the natural course of human emotions. But the children of God must follow peace with all men. You cannot turn defensive and retaliate when being falsely accused or attacked. The offending party may not be at peace with you but you can be at peace with them.

The Apostle Paul taught the same lesson in Romans chapter twelve and verse eighteen. Paul says, "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men." The Christian life and allegiance to truth no matter the cost will put you at odds with a great many people. But we are not to be of a contentious and argumentative spirit. If the truth were to be known, most people are not upset with the Christian because of his beliefs but because of his actions and spirit which are contrary to his profession.

If a man has a problem with you, go to him and discuss it, and if needed, apologize. Such will do more to reach that man for Christ than a hundred tracts or sermons. Peace is the way of a Christian.

Notice how peace and holiness are connected together; there can be no true peace without holiness. While you endure their attacks, do not respond with your emotions. Let your response be from a spirit of holiness. The way a man responds to adversity will tell much about that man. One man who had visited the Chicago stockyards on a slaughter-day observed that when the hogs were being slaughtered there was squealing and grunting everywhere. The moment the men laid hold of a hog for slaughter, it gave a wild shriek, and the uproar was terrible. But when the man visited where the sheep were being slaughtered, he heard no sounds. The sheep were being slaughtered, without complaining—in silence! Which are you swine or sheep?

"Without holiness no man shall see the Lord." It seems from this word that more is needed to be suitable for heaven than just a profession of faith. This is a word the church world needs to hear much! The writer of Hebrews is not going against a salvation by grace and opting for a salvation by works. Rather he is showing us the true evidence of a salvation of grace, which is a holy life. The grace of God that forgives the guilt of our sin is the same grace that produces holy changes in the forgiven sinner.

Are you cultivating a holy life? Please note that the writer of Hebrews places a responsibility on us to pursue holiness. It is in the heart of a Christian to run after holiness not away from it. The word "follow" means to pursue. To be technical, it is the same word for "persecuted." Just as Paul, known in those days as Saul of Tarsus, went to Damascus to pursue Christians in order that he might persecute them, so are we to pursue growth in the Spirit. We are to chase after a holy life as a sheriff would hunt a fugitive.

We must see these words in context. Often verse fourteen is pulled from its context and is expounded upon by preachers. It is a wonderful verse that will almost preach itself without the aid

of a preacher. But the writer of Hebrews is exhorting a hurting and persecuted church. He has just reminded them to remember that the problems they are enduring are ordained by God and are a part of His discipline in their lives. It is very easy to not pursue holiness when you are suffering. Discouragement can so trouble the heart that the heart's quest for the holy can be interrupted. Again, this is where the church enters to play an important role. It is up to us to carefully look out for one another in the holiness department. The moment we see signs that a brother or sister has quit pursuing holiness, we are to come alongside of him or her and promote the desire for holiness. This is our business!

I want to bring this to some conclusion. We will resume with verses fifteen through seventeen next week. Let me ask you this question, are these verses we have examined today commandments? Yes, most definitely. There is no arguing against these being the expectation of Christ. He expects His church to so perform. We are to carefully look after one another and strengthen the weak, heal the injured, and encourage, and reprove those who are not pursuing peace and holiness.

If this is our responsibility then how can we avoid it without guilt? If we do not tend to one another and especially to him who is in sin, how can we be guiltless ourselves? Are we not also in sin by disregarding these commands to be our brother's keeper?

The test of genuine Christianity is love for the brothers and sisters. How can we be believed when we say we love the brethren if we will not follow these holy verses of Hebrews twelve? Saying "I love you" means nothing but spite to the one you say it to if you do not demonstrate your love. A husband who is unfaithful to his wife yet tells her he loves her hurts her all the more. His words are not only meaningless but they are also barbed hooks that tear more of heart.

How meaningless and damaging are our words of love when we do not care enough to do whatever we must to strengthen, heal and diligently care for one another. And I am sure that is a major factor and reason you, my friend, suffer so much yourself. You are so consumed with your own needs that you do not see the needs of others. Consequently, all you can do is wallow in your own misery. Get up out of the mud of your own misery and exert yourself to help someone else get out of their mud wallow. You will be amazed how such devotion of energy will aid your sorrows and comfort your heart.

The truth is we all have burdens, but we all should be focusing on someone else's burden rather than our own. This way everyone is being helped. Amen.