

Pursue Peace and Holiness

Hebrews 12:14-24

Some of you know that I played basketball for two years in college. The head coach during those two years was a good coach, but he was a grumpy coach. Actually, he was an intimidating coach. My goal during those two years on the team was simply to try to avoid him off the court if I could (i.e. walk the other way around a locker in the locker room, don't make eye contact, etc.).

A couple of years after I finished playing I had the opportunity to get to know him in a different context. And then a couple of years after that my best friend from high school actually married his daughter. And you know what I discovered? He is actually a really nice guy outside the gym. I began to enjoy my interactions with him. I didn't avoid him, but rather sought him out when I had a chance.

Same guy; two very different experiences with him. One fear-based and intimidating; the other friend-based and inviting. I know that part of the change is what God has been doing in his heart, but as well I'm sure that a big part of it was a change in the nature of our relationship.

For followers of Christ, a very similar kind of thing has happened in how we are able to relate to God. The new covenant inaugurated by Christ has changed how God's people can relate to Him. It is a change that should motivate us to obey him.

As we come to Hebrews 12:14-24, the writer gives the Hebrews, and us, some commands. Following these commands he lays a foundation for why the Hebrews should pursue these things. This morning, we are going to look first at the foundation he lays for obedience and then we will come back to take a look at the commands.

I. The Basis for Obedience Is Our Privileged Experience of God (vv. 18-24)

In 18-24, the author contrasts Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. These two mountains serve as metaphors for the old and new covenants. In verse 18 he says, *for you have not come to a mountain that may be touched, but*, verse 22, *you have come to Mount Zion*. The author wants to remind the Hebrews that they live under the new covenant and it is what defines their relationship with God.

He first describes Israel's encounter with God at Mount Sinai when God entered into the old covenant with Israel (see Exodus 19:12-19). Look at verse 18:

¹⁸ For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, ¹⁹ and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not bear the command, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it will be

stoned.”²¹ And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, “I am full of fear and trembling.”

When the Israel drew new to Mount Sinai, this is how they experienced God. They saw *blazing fire* and *darkness* and *gloom*. They heard the sound of a *whirlwind* and *the blast of a trumpet*. And they heard *the sound of words*. God spoke in a direct, unmediated way and they were terrified. In Exodus 20:19, the people say to Moses, “*Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die.*” They feared for their lives in this encounter with God. They knew that if even an animal touched the mountain it would be stoned. Verse 21 tells us that Moses himself was terrified.

This was Israel’s experience with God at Mount Sinai, but the author says that this is not a believer’s experience with God. Rather he, says in verse 22,

²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels,

“This is your experience Hebrews. You’ve come to *Mount Zion*.” *Mount Zion* and *the city of the living God* and *the heavenly Jerusalem* are all are synonymous expressions. Mount Zion was the hill on which David originally made his royal residence after he became king. It is where the Ark of the Covenant was placed in a tent. Eventually, when the temple was built and the ark was moved the name Zion was used for the site of the temple as well as Jerusalem as a whole. Mount Zion and Jerusalem was where Israel gathered to meet God because God had said that this was where He would dwell. Eventually, these terms came to be used in an eschatological sense. *Zion*, or the *heavenly Jerusalem* refers to the final destination of the church. It is the *city of the living God*. It is where God dwells. It is the ultimate destination of believers in eternity.

When the author says *you have come to Mount Zion*, he is saying that as a believer you are already there. Yes, this is the destination to which all believers are journeying towards, it is our hope, but at the same time the author says that we are already there. We have come to the place where God dwells.

Now, where the NASB says, *myriads of angels*, the NIV says, you have come to “thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly.” Zion is a joyful place.

He goes on to say that we have come:

²³ to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.

We have come to the *church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven*. All of God’s people are there.

And we have come to *God, the Judge of all*. The context here with angels celebrating and with what he says next, that we come to *the spirits of the righteous made perfect*, suggests that the judgment faced here turns out well. *The spirits of the righteous* probably refers to men and woman of faith under both covenants who have died and now inhabit the heavenly Jerusalem. They are *made perfect*; nothing is lacking in their relationship with God.

Finally, we have come to *Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant*. His shed blood, in other words, His sacrifice on the cross, is the basis by which we can enter into the very presence of God.

Mount Sinai, the old covenant, and Mount Zion, the new covenant, are two very different experiences of God. The Mount Sinai experience was full of trembling and fear; the Mount Zion experience is full of joy and festivity. At Mount Sinai, though God revealed Himself in an awesomeness way, there was still a hiddenness because of the fire and darkness and gloom. At Zion the revelation is clear. At Mount Sinai God is there, but he is unapproachable. Touch the mountain and you die. At Zion, God is there fully approachable. We can come to him with no fear, because Jesus' blood has made it possible to approach a holy God.

The writer of Hebrews is saying that Mount Sinai is not a believer's experience of God. Our experience of God is Mount Zion. It is an incredibly privileged experience of God. It is this truth that is the basis for obedience. The writer of Hebrews is saying, "You are already there, but you are also on a journey to that destination. And there are some things that you need to keep pursuing as you press forward in this journey." Specifically, he says that we need to pursue peace and holiness. Let's go back to 14-17 and look at the commands that he gives.

II. We are to Pursue Peace and Holiness (v. 14)

In verse 14 he says this:

¹⁴ Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.

Pursue means to strive after something with intense effort. We are to pursue two things – peace with all men and sanctification. Both peace and holiness are things that as believers we already have received through Christ. Positionally, these things are true of us in Christ. But they are also things we are to pursue. Last week in the verses we looked at, we saw that God disciplines us that we might share His holiness (12:10) and that we might experience the peaceful fruit of righteousness (12:11). And so, yes, these things are objectively ours, but we also are to pursue them.

We are to pursue *peace with all men*. The context suggests that we are to make every effort to be at peace with everyone else in the church. The church is a kind of outpost from God in this world and such it should look different because we've had this new

covenant experience of God. We should look different to the world that watches us. We should be marked by peace.

Now, peace is not just the absence of open conflict. You could say that there is not open conflict between the U.S. and North Korea because we are not launching missiles at each other. But is there peace? Of course not. Peace is not just the absence of open conflict. It means harmony. It means walking in unity. It is shalom between two people.

You and I need to pursue peace with ALL people in the church. He doesn't just say "some." He doesn't just say "pursue peace with the folks you like." It's everyone. And the fact that we are commanded to pursue peace suggests that this doesn't always come naturally. And I think we probably all know from experience that it doesn't. But it is something that we need to pursue even when we don't feel like it.

Let me mention some ways that we think about pursuing peace here at Faith. One of the expectations we communicate to new members in our membership class is that we ask them to protect the unity of Faith, which is really another way to say, live in peace with one another.

First, guard the tongue. Don't use your tongue to gossip or to slander others. It can be so tempting at times, but don't do it. It is so destructive to relationships. It destroys peace. Guard your tongue and don't use it in destructive ways.

Second, resolve conflict in a biblical way and a timely way. The reality is that you are probably going to experience conflict with someone at some point. We are all sinful people. It is bound to happen. What happens too often when we experience conflict with someone in the church is that we just say, "Fine, I'll just keep my distance from you. I'll avoid you. I just won't talk to you." But is that peace? Sure there might not be open conflict, but it isn't peace.

To resolve conflict in a biblical way, the Scriptures urge us to go directly to the person with whom you've had the conflict and talk to him or her (Matt. 18:15ff). So often what happens is we go and talk about the conflict with someone else, but we don't talk to the person with whom we've had the conflict. This is called triangulation and it is not a good thing. Go to the person and talk to them. And do it in a timely way. Don't let it linger and fester. Sometimes the conflict will require forgiveness, which can restore peace in a relationship. Resolve conflict in a biblical and a timely way.

Third, respect differing convictions that arise from legitimate biblical study. We believe that the heart of our unity is our doctrinal statement. That is what articulates the central things of our Christian faith. Those are the essentials. We are united around those truths. When you move beyond those essential truths, there are at times legitimate differences of understanding on some minor areas of doctrine. We want to respect each other in these areas.

These are three sort of general principles about pursuing peace. But let me make this more personal. Is there anyone right now in this church with whom you are not at peace? God is saying to you that you need to pursue peace with that person. Romans 12:18 says that as far as it depends upon you, seek to live in peace. Are you doing that? At a heart level do you even want it? Do you even think it is possible? If you don't really want it or if you don't really think peace is possible, let me encourage you to make your starting point prayer. Talk to God about the situation. Talk to Him about your heart. The reality is that prayer is probably where we all need to start in any situation that we are facing.

The stakes are high. If the church is not characterized by peace in our relationships then when the world looks at us they won't see anything different. And they won't see any reason to come check it out because it will not look to them that we have anything to offer them. And so we need to pursue peace with all men.

Now, the second thing we are to pursue is sanctification. He says pursue *the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord*. Back in Hebrews 10:10 he said, "*We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*" Hebrews teaches that our sanctification is an objective reality already accomplished by Christ. It is only by this reality that we are able to see *the Lord*.

But the author is commanding us here to make every effort to make true in our experience, what is true in our position in Christ. We are to pursue lives of moral holiness. We are to put off sin and put on the character of Christ. We are to pursue lives characterized by the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Whatever God is like in His character, we are to be growing to be more and more like that. This is what we are to pursue.

How do we pursue sanctification? This could be a whole sermon series, but let me mention a few points. First, pursue sanctification by faith. Scripture is clear that we cannot change ourselves. We cooperate with God, but it is always a work of God's Spirit within us. And so we need to look to Him in faith to transform us. Express this faith by praying to God. Talk to Him about areas of your lives that need transformed. We saw last week that part of how God works this sanctification out in our lives is through His discipline. And so by faith, we continue to endure knowing that God is disciplining us that we might share his holiness (Heb. 12:10).

Second, we need to be exposing ourselves to God's Word. He has spoken to us. He has revealed His will for us in the Scriptures. How can we pursue growing to be like God if we don't know what He is like or what His will is for us? It is through Scripture that we understand these things. As we've said before reflecting on Scripture is one of the most important things you can do to pursue spiritual growth.

Third, pursue sanctification in community. You can't do this alone. In fact, we see this need for one another in the next verses. Look at what he says:

¹⁵ *See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled;* ¹⁶ *that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birth-right for a single meal.* ¹⁷ *For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.*

This expression, *see to it*, means to “watch over” or to “exercise oversight.” The noun form of this word is where we get our word, “overseer,” which is one of the terms given to elders. Elders are tasked with the responsibility for giving oversight to the church. They watch over it for its spiritual good. In a similar kind of way, he is saying that in the church this kind of oversight is a responsibility that we all share for each other. And the main thing that he says here that we need to watch out for each other is that *no one comes short of the grace of God*.

A couple of weeks ago one of my friends whom I’ve met with for years for mutual encouragement and accountability, out of some things that I had been processing with him, wrote me an email articulating two things that he wanted me to work on over the next season of time. These were things that I’d been saying I needed to do, but really hadn’t been going for and so he came with a strong and loving challenge to actually do these thing. I needed that strong encouragement because it is helping me pursue sanctification.

We pursue sanctification in community. This is one of the reasons that we put so much emphasis on connecting with others in a group. And so, let me encourage you that if you are not living in community with some others, join a group here at Faith next time we have sign ups. And actually, on Tuesday nights there is a group that meets here at Faith called New Friends that is open for you to join at any time. You could go this week.

Make every effort, the author says, to pursue peace and sanctification. Do so motivated by the truth that as believers we have already come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God. But also knowing that it is the destination to which we journey by pursuing peace and sanctification. Amen.