

“Salvation or a Mess of Portage?”

Fixing Our Eyes Upon Jesus, Our High Priest

Hebrews 12:14-17

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Transcriber’s Note: *The recording for the lesson was interrupted. What follows is an earlier sermon Jeff preached on this passage.*

Jeff: Our reading today is from Hebrews chapter 12 and verses 14-17. Listen to the word of God.

“Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. 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 may be defiled. Let there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. 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.”

Let us pray. Father, thank You for the day. Thank You for the Lord and for this inscripturated word of Yours. We come before You in it, asking for You to speak into our hearts and lives. We pray that You will accompany the preached Word. And we pray that it too will go forth in the lives of Your people. And we pray that it will do its work among us. We trust You, and we trust the fact that Your word will work because You say in Your word that it will not return void. So Lord, we give ourselves to You this day, and place ourselves under Your word spoken here. And we ask that You will change us. So we ask it in Jesus’ name. Amen.

About a month ago in the evenings, as I’ve already said, in God’s providence we spent some time with the story of Esau selling his birthright. But what I want to do is that I want to just take the story again, and I’ve already read it. I now want to refresh your memory a bit about some of the details.

To begin with, I think that in order for us to understand this story of the selling of the birthright, we need to think about the practice of the inheritance in ancient Near Eastern cultures. We need to remember that the firstborn had a privileged status. He had what we find in Scripture is called a birthright.

Now that meant that the firstborn son had a right to a double portion of the inheritance, his portion plus another portion. So for example, if there were three sons the firstborn would receive his share of the inheritance plus another share.

Now that meant that there were two siblings left to split one share because the elder son got a double portion.

Now I want you to think about it this way. If there were only two sons the firstborn would receive his share plus the second share, which would leave how many for his brother? You guessed it: none.

Now you know the story. There were problems in the family of Isaac, there were divisions. What started off so well turned out badly, at least for the moment. The parents played favorites among the children. Esau the firstborn was loved by his father who had a

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taste for game. Jacob was the second child and he was loved by his mother, perhaps because he was such a homebody and liked to dwell in tents, and so forth.

And it's against this backdrop of favoritism and rivalry that we need to read the story in Genesis 25. Jacob had been cooking lentil stew. Esau came in from the field. He is famished, or at least he says so. Whether he was really famished, whether he was really about to starve, is a matter of question. Was he on the verge of starvation, or is that merely hyperbole? Regardless, he came in from the field hungry. And seeing what looked to be a hearty red stew in front of his brother, he asks his brother for a bowl of that stew. He even said, "Please give me some of that red stuff!"

Now we need to understand that Jacob seized a moment. But it was a moment that he apparently had been waiting for. And so he said to his brother, "Then today sell me your birthright and I'll give you a bowl of this stew."

Now I want you to notice Esau's response. He says, "*I am about to die; what good is a birthright to me?*" And Jacob said, "No birthright, no stew."

And you again know the story. Esau sold his birthright for some lentil stew, or as it is said because of the King James Version, "*He sold it for a mess of pottage.*" And the text in Genesis finishes in a brief, terse way. It says, "*Esau ate and drank, and rose and went away.*" And then this statement: "*And so Esau despised his birthright.*"

I want us to think about that statement just for a moment. Just think about it. "*He despised his birthright.*" What does that mean? Well, I think that we might say any number of things about that. But it means at least this. He didn't think the birthright was worth having. It meant nothing to him at all, at least for the time.

And there are, as I've already said, a number of reasons for that, not the least of which is likely to be this. At this point in the upbringing of these children Isaac doesn't give the boys any reason to think highly of their birthright, at least not Esau, which is astonishing when you think about what is involved in the birthright. You see, at stake are not a few sheep and some pastureland. But what is at stake is God's blessing given to Abraham, the blessing of numerous children and land, the blessing of being a blessing. And it was this that Esau despised by thinking so little of it.

Now think about this for a minute. What's the Preacher doing in the sermon to the Hebrew congregation in Rome? What's he doing? Well, I'll tell you what I think he's doing. I think he is answering a question that he raised earlier. You say, "What question is that?" In chapter 2, in the midst of an earlier warning, perhaps the earliest warning in the book, he asks the question. And here it is. "*How will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?*" And here is our answer to that question. The answer to that question is, we will not.

Simply look at Esau, who himself neglected so great a salvation, so great a blessing. And what happened to him after his continual neglect? When he did want it, it was closed off to him.

And that raises an obvious question for us, doesn't it? How shall we escape the fate of Esau? And that's the question I want us to consider this morning, because it's the question that the Preacher answers. He tells us that this is how you escape the fate of Esau. This is how you can answer the question in a more positive way than Esau could answer it.

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And so the first thing that I want us to notice as we think about this is this. I want us to notice *the family context here*, the family context. In order to interpret this warning rightly, we need to remember something vital about this context. Think about it. This text is situated just after the text which spoke about Fatherly discipline. And why is that so important? Well, let me put it this way. This text is a reminder of how God treats those who are in the family of Abraham through faith, a family that we learned about in chapter 11.

Now why bring this up here? For a very simple reason. We must hear this warning. This warning is not for outsiders. It is for the wheat. It is for those who are part of the family.

Again, think of Esau. He belonged to the family, the lineage of the patriarchs. He was the eldest son of Isaac. The birthright, not just the sheep and the pastureland, but the promises of Abraham, they belonged to him! And he despised them! He viewed them as of no account! He neglected the promises!

Now you may say, “Well wait a minute, Pastor Jeff. You’ve got to think a little differently here, because we know God’s decree and we know about predestination. We know those promises weren’t really intended for Esau. We’re told that.”

Yes, but listen to me. If you were to sit Esau down and you were to say to Esau, “Esau, did you really want those blessings?”, he would say, “No, not really.” He shows what he wanted, and he neglected what he wanted to neglect. We’re not talking here about decree and predestination. We’re talking here about how one can escape if they neglect so great a salvation. That’s what we’re talking about. And this man who was part of the family, the eldest in the family, despised them!

How do you understand the Preacher’s warning? He’s saying to us, do not be like Esau.

You say to me, “Well, pastor, if we’re predestined, if we’re elected, then we won’t be like Esau.” That’s not the question! The question is if I sat you down and looked at you face to face across the table and said to you, “We don’t know the decree of God. But I have a question for you. Here’s my question. What do you think about the blessing that is being held out to you today?”

And you know, if we did that to Esau, if we sat him down at the table and said, “What do you think about the blessing?”, he would say, “You know, if I had to give you an honest answer, I don’t think much of it.”

Do not be like Esau. That’s the message of the Preacher. Or to put it in the way that he puts it in this sermon, do not neglect so great a salvation by thinking so little of it. And that’s a challenge for us, isn’t it? That’s a challenge for us at just this point.

And if we really think about it, it is a challenge for us. Here we are. We’re the family of God. The epistle of Peter tells us about our birthright, doesn’t it? It tells us about the birthright that we have. It tells us that we have an inheritance that’s kept safe for us in heaven. And what is more, we have the sacraments that are signs and seals pointing to the treasure that awaits. We have the preached Word. We have the word of God itself written to us and we have the preached Word! And through it we are reminded of the promises of God, the faithfulness of God to us! And furthermore we have that indwelling Spirit who

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is a deposit of better things yet to come! And yet if we acknowledge the truth of it, there are times, perhaps times far too often, where we are tempted to neglect so great a salvation. We are lured into thinking that the baubles that surround us are of more worth than the inheritance of God laid up in heaven that we cannot yet see.

And see, this is the importance of faith! This is what we talked about at the beginning of chapter 11. But you see, when our eyes get led away from the treasure that we cannot yet see and they come to rest on the baubles around us, then we begin to neglect so great a salvation.

You see, that’s what we’ve been thinking about. God is good and he has been assuring us and building our confidence and the Preacher has been ministering to us pastorally. We can’t fault him. If we feel some guilt feelings about this, we can’t say, “Oh, the Preacher is just hammering away at us,” and so on. No, we can’t do that. He’s been very pastoral.

But you see, the question has been lurking! Whether he brings it out or not, the question has been lurking around the corner, hasn’t it? Will you escape if you neglect so great a salvation as this?

Now perhaps you say, “Well, I don’t want to. Do you have any counsel for me?” Well, the Preacher is glad you asked. With that family as our backdrop, we can turn now to the second point. You see, the text talks about *family pursuits*.

Now this text is in keeping with the whole tenor of the sermon. I’ve said to you before that this sermon has an *us in Christ together* element running through it. That is in this. You can’t avoid that in the epistle to the Hebrews. It has an *us in Christ together* element.

In fact, there are two ways to translate this opening statement. The first is the way that it’s translated in the New American Standard Bible. There the idea is that we are to “*pursue peace with all men.*” That’s what the text says. We are to pursue peace with all men.

However, there is another way of translating the text which I think actually fits better with the whole *in Christ together* theme of the sermon itself. It would go something like this. “*With all pursue peace.*” That’s putting the emphasis on what? We all, as a family, pursue. And that’s the way we ought to think about being with those who confess Christ.

And there’s another aspect of this that I want us to notice. It says “*with all pursue.*” Now we can go right to what we are to pursue. But I want us to think about the nature of what we’re doing together. We are together in pursuit.

Now the word *pursuit* is an interesting word. It can mean *to follow*. It can mean just what it says here. It can mean *pursue*. But I want you to notice this. I just want you to think about something. I think that we sometimes have a tendency to read a word like this one, and we have a tendency to think, you know, yes, a casual stroll. That’s the whole idea of *pursue*, sort of as I get time to pursue.

But I want you to notice something. This word *pursue* here is translated elsewhere in the New Testament as *persecute*. Do you remember that famous question that Jesus asked Paul? It’s in Acts chapter 9. “*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?*” And that’s our word. “Why do you pursue Me, Paul?” That’s the word. There is an intensity about this word!

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Now obviously this word isn't good or bad, right? It doesn't have inherent bad qualities about it. But it's used in both contexts in the New Testament. But it has a force that I want you to catch, that you have to catch!

Think about it. If we are pursuing in a way synonymous with persecuting, then we are making every effort to obtain that which we are pursuing! That's the idea. And that has to hit home with us. And if it doesn't hit home with us, then we've missed the point.

Incidentally, I find it very striking that the Preacher would use this word here. Why? Because he's writing to a people who are either being persecuted or pursued, or who are about to be pursued or persecuted. Do you feel that? You have to feel that!

But we feel it even more when we notice what it is that they were to pursue together. They, the congregation, we are to pursue peace and holiness. And when you compare those pursuits with the pursuits of those who wanted to persecute the church, you pick up something of the difference between the church and the world. You find out why there's such a rub!

But that's implicit in the text. You see, the Preacher's real focus is on the church's pursuit. And let me be clear. The church is to pursue two things in this text, both of which are a gift from the Lord Himself, and we'll see that as we go along. However, together we are to pursue *peace* and *sanctification*, peace and holiness.

Now let me begin to talk to you about these two things. And what I want to do is that I want to just take a minute to sort of set these two gifts in the context of the sermon itself. Peace and sanctification are Christ's gift to the church. Both of these things result from what Christ has accomplished by His sacrificial substitutionary death on the cross. We can take both of them. But I want us to just take sanctification as our example.

I just want to say this. Everybody gets sort of all bunched up about what this means, that we are to pursue *“sanctification, without which no one will see the Lord.”* I think that if you look at it in the context of the letter, then you begin to understand it and you say, “Oh, I see, I see.” And it doesn't raise nearly the problems that it might if you extracted the verse from the context and then try to consider it on its own. In the sermon to be holy or pure is to be so because Christ has made purification for me.

I want you to go back to chapter 10 and I want you to look at verse 10. And stay there after I read verse 10 because I'm going to read one more verse. Again this is in the whole unfolding and exfoliating of Christ's work on our behalf. Listen to verse 10 of chapter 10. *“By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Christ once for all.”* We will have been purified through the offering of Christ once for all.

Then let your eyes go down to verse 14. *“For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.”*

Do you see what he's saying? The purification that is in mind here is God's gift to us in Jesus Christ. And so we ought to come to this text understanding that in Christ we possess these two things, peace and holiness, as gifts. They are completely ours. We are to regard this definitive aspect of sanctification that is here being spoken of as ours. We have been removed from one realm, the realm of sin and darkness, and we have been placed in another realm where sin is no longer our master.

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And yet this text also has that ongoing aspect to it, does it not? The question is how are we to understand these things?

I want you to think about how we are to pursue the peace and the holiness that we already have. Now first I want to give you an illustration of how we might do that. Let's just say that I came across two Penguins tickets. And I decided that I was going to give one to my friend Bernie. *(Laughter)* Don't get too excited about this, Bernie, okay? *(Laughter)* I tell my personal driver to go and pick him up after work. *(Laughter)* And dinner will be ready for him in the back of my very spacious automobile. He can shower before the game in the back. *(Laughter)* He need not worry about the traffic or the gas. And he can pick Tim up, for Tim is going to use the second ticket along the way.

What is more, I called their bosses and told them that they would be enjoying a game together. All is taken care of. Somebody will be there to wheel them to their seats, helping them to find the exact row, the exact seat. All they really need to do is show up, right? That's all they need to do.

Now you see, that approximates the idea. Christ has achieved our peace, our holiness. It is ours. We need to pursue what is already ours. And you know, you say to me, “Sometimes, pastor, it's just really difficult for me to pursue what is already mine, don't you think?” And that's why you need to say to God, “God, give me the desire and the compulsion of the Spirit in me! Give me all of that to pursue what is mine, because I need to pursue what is mine already.” And I think that approximates the way that we ought to think about this.

So the first thing I want us to do is that I want us to think about *peace*. I want us to think about these two things. I want us first to think about peace.

Now at the very outset let me tell you what our temptation is going to be when we begin to think about peace. Our temptation is going to be to think subjectively about peace. In other words, when it comes to peace, we'll be tempted to ask ourselves something like this. Do I feel at peace with everyone?

Now I'm not against feelings. Mine work pretty well. But we are not being asked to pursue a feeling of peace. We are asked to pursue peace.

Now here's the point. If I'm being asked to pursue peace, it must be more than a feeling that I can conjure despite my circumstances. In other words, you can't do and I can't do what the Old Testament false prophets did in the midst of Israel. If there is absolute unrest in the church I can't stand up here and say, “Peace everyone, peace! Isn't the peace that we enjoy so enjoyable!”

You know what you're going to say. You're going to say, “What planet is he living on?” I can't create peace just by saying, “Don't we enjoy peace?” No, we are to pursue the things that bind us together in unity. Peace is something then that manifests itself in the solidarity of God's people. We are to pursue that which unifies us, that which gives us solidarity.

Do you see why it is so important for us to ask ourselves before we disrupt the peace and the unity of the church if what I'm about to do will disrupt the peace and the unity of the church? Isn't that important?

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This same idea is what we find in the apostle Paul. He says that *“love covers over a multitude of sins.”* Clearly unity is essential in the church.

Now you say to me, “Well, wait a minute. Are you saying, Pastor, that we ought to let go of any heresy because unity is more important than heresy?” No, what I’m saying is this. What I’m saying is, when you look at the New Testament, what do you find. You don’t just find truth abstracted. Look at John 15, 16 and 17. What do you find? You find truth and love wed together! And that’s what you find in the church—truth and love wed together. And that’s why unity is such an important component in the life of God’s church.

But secondly, what about the notion of sanctification? Well, we need to remember that holiness is a gift. As peace is a gift, holiness is a gift without which we will not see God. And therefore we praise God for having made us holy in Jesus Christ.

Now we’ve already noticed that. And therefore we can say something like this. If peace binds us together, then holiness is the quality which identifies us as Christ’s people. Peace binds us together. Holiness is that quality which identifies us as God’s people.

In this way and because of this context I think that we ought to understand holiness and its family likeness. We are growing into the likeness of the family of God. We are being fitted to the family. That’s what we thought about when we thought about how discipline is the mechanism God uses to fit us into this family. But it always takes every effort that I can muster, because I am to “work out my salvation with fear and trembling.” Yes, *“it is God who works in me to will and to do.”* But I must work out my salvation with fear and trembling. And it takes every effort.

I want us to just notice something about this. Isn’t it interesting that these two go hand in hand? They work together so well. It’s sort of like the truth and the love component that I mentioned earlier. In other words, there’s a real sense in which you can’t have one of these without having the other. In other words, you can have solidarity in a social or a political club. In other words, you can have a Republican or a Democratic office. And you can have unity and solidarity. You can have an anti-abortion clinic and have unity and solidarity as a result of that particular issue. But that doesn’t make you the church. A church is unified, yes. But the church has the impress of Christ upon it!

But one cannot have the impress of Christ without also seeking the unity of the brethren. Isn’t that remarkable! These are the things for which we ought to strive with all of our might.

And this leads to a third point. We learned that these things must be viewed from the context of the family. We also learned that there are things that a family pursues. And in this text we learn thirdly *how the family pursues family life.*

You know, each family pursues being a family in a little different way than every other family. But there are commonalities. There are commonalities within families. And there are especially commonalities within God’s family, no matter its geographical location.

Let me just give you an example. Good parents are on the lookout for things that could harm the family. And we find nothing different in this particular family, this particular congregation in Rome. In verse 15 the Preacher says to the family of God in Rome, *“See to it.”*

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That word is an interesting word. That word is used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe the work of an overseer, an elder. It’s ironic and interesting that he’s going to take up the work of an elder later on in chapter 13. Here he says that this characteristic of overseeing or watching out ought to be the characteristic of the family.

And I want you to know something. This watching is not an occasional checkup. You could get the impression that this is watch out! Every six months you take your kids to the doctor. Every year you take them to the dentist. I let my wife do that sort of thing, right? The point is that it’s not an occasional checkup. This is a continual vigilance. We might say it like this. The Preacher wants this family to pursue peace and holiness by watching out continually.

Now the obvious question is this. For what are we as a family to be on the lookout? And that is answered by three clauses that follow, three things that follow. First, *we are to be on the watch for those who lag behind*.

Now I want you to just think for a minute about this. This reminds us of the race imagery, doesn’t it? And, you know, here’s the thing. We’re not running alone. You know, because we’re Americans we hear that race imagery. And you know, we think of ourselves—a marathon, this long-distance runner. And we’re running alone and no one’s around us as we approach the finish line. And we’re just haggard and Jesus is waiting there.

No, no! We’re running together. You know, we’re not kicking people in the knees so that they drop out of the race. (*Laughter*) We’re running together in this race. And this is clear in the text. We’re to watch or see to it that no one comes short or lags behind and so misses the grace of God.

You know, one of the things that I love about Reformed theology is the theology, because sometimes the theology can be used as an excuse. It’s true. So we see somebody lagging behind and what do we say? *“They went out from us because they were never among us”*, right? And that’s Biblical, right? John says that. But we say it from that Reformed ring, like it’s not our responsibility. *“It’s not my responsibility. If he’s not called, he’s not called. If he’s not elect, he’s not elect. That’s why he fell away.”*

But do you know what? This text does not give us that out. The Bible doesn’t give us that out. This text does not give us that out. If you look at this statement in light of all of Hebrews, what you find is that our theology isn’t wrong. But it’s the way that we work out our theology that’s sometimes wrong, because if you remember what this sermon says, it says this, and I’m taking this right out of the sermon. It says, *“Encourage one another daily.”* That’s what it said in chapter 3 in the midst of that text where it talked about rebelling and getting bitter and all that. And it says, *“Encourage one another daily.”* What is that? *Paracoleo*. What are you supposed to do? You’re supposed to say to people, *“Come, stand with me as I stand in Christ.”* So you see somebody lagging behind. You say, *“Come get over here, get over here!”* You see, that’s what you’re supposed to say.

And then what does it say in chapter 10? It says that you’re to *“stir one another up.”* You know, one of the places where that word is used is in the New Testament, when it talks about there being such a great division between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark.

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They were stirred up about each other. That doesn't give us a reason to be mean and nasty. But I'm telling you, this is the intensity of it. We are to *“stir one another up to love and good works”*, and to hang in there! We're to remind people where they ought to be standing and encouraging them to stand.

So look, I want to tell you something. We're in a race together. So the next time you see a brother or a sister lagging behind, your responsibility is right here in this text. Your responsibility is right here in this letter.

Second, *we are to beware of the root of bitterness that can develop in a family*. And I want to tell you something. This saddens me. And it saddens me because it has a personal element to it.

I remember when I was young. Up until I was about ten or twelve years old, my family was the most delightful family to be a part of. I'm talking about grandparents on both sides and aunts and uncles on both sides and cousins. And it was just delightful! We were all young, you know; we were all young. So what we would do is that we would get together at different houses and we'd have picnics together. And we would all play ball together. Even my grandparents would be out there playing ball.

And then my uncle got angry about something. I don't even remember what it was. And he stopped coming to the gatherings. And the gatherings didn't stop immediately, but they slowly stopped. And more and more people got offended. And more and more people got bitter. And then they stopped altogether.

I want you to know something. The poisonous root of bitterness can run through a congregation just like it can in a biological family. And it can ruin it. And that means that we need to guard ourselves. And we need to be on guard for one another so that the root of bitterness does not take hold and take root among us.

Thirdly, *when a desire for God is supplanted, it leaves room for there to grow a desire for the world*. You know, it's amazing to me that when you go through a book and you're thinking about the book, it's amazing, the connections that just happen to come to mind. Do you remember what we learned about Moses? It says in chapter 11 (and this isn't a quote; it's just summarizing), he considered the reproach of Christ and so was willing to endure ill treatment from Egypt. He was willing to lose all that he had as a son of Pharaoh, because he considered the reproach of Christ. Remember, he kept Christ before him. That's what the text says. He knew where to stand.

But not Esau. You see, Esau looked at the promise of Christ and his birthright and he thought, *whatever*, and sold it for a single bowl of soup. That's an amazing contrast!

Let me ask you. Where are you in your thinking about the family these days? Are you pursuing peace and holiness while watching out for those who lag behind, by pulling up the root of bitterness, by guarding yourself and others against ungodly desires that may find their way into the very fabric of this family? Are you watching? That's really the question. Are you watching, or are you lagging behind? Are you angry? Is there a place for a desire other than the desire for Christ to gain a foothold?

You know, if you've been with me for any length of time, you know the remedy to this situation. You don't need to guess at it.

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It begins with where your eyes are. Where are they? On what are they set? Are they on Christ or are they on something else?

Father in heaven, we rejoice in the Lord Jesus because He is so good. And Father, as we come together we realize that we are not. We realize that although we have been removed from the realm of darkness, we realize that in our pursuit of what we already possess in Christ we are sluggards. We neglect the greatness of the gift that we've received. We sometimes fail to hear the promises that You've uttered. Lord, we pray that You would help us. We pray that You would help us to pursue being watchful. We pray that You would help us to pursue Christ. Lord, set Him before us and give us the greatest desire that we've had yet to date to pursue Him and His likeness, the family likeness, with all that is in us, for we ask it in His name. Amen.