

DAY 7: RESPONSIBILITIES OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY

Hebrews 12:12-29

EXHORTATION TO CHRISTIAN LIVING Discipline is the path to righteousness and peace, so Christians must show courage and resolve in trying times. Using the familiar language of Isaiah, readers are urged to strengthen their “*weak hands*” and “*feeble knees*” (Isaiah 35:3). Athletes can remain in a game or return quickly to their sport if their injury or “lameness” is quickly and artfully tended. In using this illustration, the author exhorts his readers to recognize that they are not spectators of faith, but participants, and urges them not to allow anyone to drop out of the race. Smooth, straight paths enable weaker runners to continue their race without tripping. Verse 13 implies that by living lives of unswerving faith and obedience, those strong in faith will maintain a path for those who have been spiritually crippled through suffering or discouragement. By following this level path, the lame can be healed.

Another thing Christians must do to preserve the path of faith is to “*Strive for ... holiness without which no one will see the Lord*” (12:14). Holiness is not an attained state of perfection (12:10), but is experienced as a continuing process in man’s relationship with God. When believers enter into fellowship with God, they become sanctified, or set apart for God. As they walk with Him, more and more they walk like Him. They are continually cleansed in life and conduct. The purity of character produced by the Holy Spirit prepares the believer to “*see the Lord*” face-to-face in eternity.

To grow in holiness, Christians must rely on God’s grace, and they must help others to grasp this truth. We are warned about the “*root of bitterness*” which causes trouble and sin. Deuteronomy 29:18 defines the danger: “*“Beware lest there be among you a man or woman ... whose heart is turning away today from the Lord our God ... Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit.”*”

We must not allow rebellion, and the bitterness it produces, to arise either in our own heart or among fellow believers. The idea that a person could willingly turn from God’s grace reminds our author of Esau. He is considered “*unholy*” because he rejected his inheritance as Isaac’s firstborn son. The birthright of the firstborn son gave him a position of leadership in the clan and the responsibility of protecting the covenant status of Israel. Rejecting this honor and responsibility reveals Esau’s shallow appreciation of his place as the firstborn son.

THINK ABOUT how Esau’s appetite was physical rather than spiritual. Devotion to creature comforts more than to God is a widespread form of godlessness even among “respectable Christians.” We must not let the subtlety of godlessness weaken our commitment to Jesus Christ. Sensual desires and the lure of material things can dull our appetite for spiritual blessings. Esau set his heart on immediately satisfying his physical desires and forfeited spiritual blessing.

MOUNT SINAI AND MOUNT ZION Mount Sinai is the mountain where God spoke to Moses and gave him the Law. Under penalty of death, the people were forbidden to touch the mountain because it was holy. The distance between a holy God and a sinful people was emphasized; even Moses trembled with fear. Upon hearing God’s voice, the people begged not to be spoken to again. Their experience was overwhelming, even frightening.

The author contrasts Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. Earthly Mount Zion is where Abraham was prepared to sacrifice Isaac and Solomon built the temple. Jews and Christians believe the Messiah will establish his rule here. Mount Zion is a more significant place spiritually than Sinai, because of the new covenant. Zion is seen in three ways: as a literal place on earth where God revealed Himself and was worshiped; as a city above, where God dwells; and as the blessedness and enjoyment of life Christians know through Christ.

The heavenly Jerusalem on Mount Zion is not an uninhabited city. First, there are “innumerable angels in festal gathering” (12:22). These angels worship God (Daniel 7:10), attend believers struggling in life (Hebrews 1:14), and minister goodness and mercy wherever



they go. Then the passage speaks of “*the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven*” (12:23). The term becomes more understandable when applied to those saints of old (chapter 11) who lived and died in faith.

On Mount Zion, believers have access to God’s presence, without fear, because they come in the Savior’s righteousness. Believers may approach God joyfully because His grace, made available by the blood of God’s Son, has perfected the spirits of those who believe. Old Testament saints and all believers who have since died were “*just*” when living for God on earth and have now been made perfect. Verses 22-24 recognize the bond of worship between the angels, the living church, and the “*cloud of witnesses*.” Thus, believers stand in a place far superior to that of the Israelites who stood before Mount Sinai in fearful awe. Through Christ, we draw near to God, our judge, with confidence. Jesus’ sprinkled blood secures our forgiveness, unlike Abel’s shed blood, which cried out for retribution.

THINK ABOUT how all who trust in Christ as their Savior “*have come*” to Zion, the city of the living God. We have been saved by Jesus’ death for us; we are being saved as we follow Him; and our salvation will be fully realized in heaven. The immensity of what God has done for us should overflow from us. In Christ we “*have come*” to that place God bids us enter, so we should reach out to others and share the grace He has shown us.

AN UNSHAKABLE KINGDOM Christians must not refuse to hear and obey God’s message given through Jesus. To return to the Law from His gospel of grace is to reject a greater truth than that which confronted the Israelites in the wilderness. The Hebrew Christians are repeatedly warned that unbelief is a present danger. The Israelites of the Exodus stand as an example of those who turned from obedience and suffered judgment.

The events at Sinai are linked with the description of the last days. Everything visible and physical will be destroyed; only the eternal, unseen things will remain. Our confidence cannot be shaken because it rests in that which remains. God has prepared “*a new heaven and a new earth*” that includes “*the new Jerusalem*.” For God’s eternal kingdom, Christians ought to be thankful.

Acceptable worship must be offered with an attitude of reverence and awe, “*for our God is a consuming fire*” (12:29). He, who in absolute holiness descended on Sinai and spoke to His people, is like a refiner’s fire that purges all dross and preserves only that which is pure. Our worship should spring from thankful hearts and keep believers from spiritual apathy and its resulting judgment.

PERSONALIZE this lesson. Two words—*judgment* and *mercy*—sum up all the contrasts in Hebrews 12:14-29. This contrast makes us aware of our responsibility to intentionally choose one or the other. As Esau’s life demonstrated, it is all too possible to go after temporal goals and miss out on eternal treasures. What eternal treasures do you intentionally seek? Does the “good” ever get in the way of the “best” as you go after this heavenly goal? Ask God to give you an appetite for the things that matter most.

REVIEW: RESPONSIBILITIES OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY

11. What, to you, was the most important command or lesson from this section of study? Why?