

Main Idea: Pilgrims make progress *together*. So if we're going to finish well, we need to get serious about two corporate matters addressed in Hebrews 12:14-24.

- I. As pilgrims, we have corporate responsibilities (14-17).
 - A. Here are some things we ought to work together to accomplish (14).
 1. We should pursue peaceful relationships together.
 2. We should pursue holiness together.
 - B. Here are some things we ought to work together to eliminate (15-17).
 1. We ought to be concerned when we see our brothers missing opportunities to experience God's grace.
 2. We ought to be concerned when we see any hint of bitterness in our church.
 3. We ought to be concerned when we see any hint of sexual immorality in our church.
 4. We ought to be concerned when we see any hint of worldliness in our church.
- II. As pilgrims, we have a corporate identity (18-24).
 - A. We shouldn't find our identity at Mount Sinai (18-21).
 1. They saw fire, darkness, and a storm there.
 2. They heard the voice of God there.
 3. They were terrified there.
 - B. We should find our identity at Mount Zion (22-24).
 1. We have a heavenly hope.
 2. We are going to the city of God.
 3. We are going to see a joyful assembly of angels.
 4. We are the church.
 5. We know God the Judge personally.
 6. We're part of a righteous people.
 7. We belong to Jesus and His new covenant.
 8. We have experienced the power of His blood.

Take Inventory: Two responses...

1. Let's celebrate who we are.
2. Let's do life together.

Scripture Reading: Acts 2:42-47

What picture comes to mind when you hear these words taken from Hebrews 12:1?
Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let me describe two different races and you tell me which fits best the scene you imagine when you hear Hebrews 12:1.

In the first race the contestants line up as the finalists in the Olympic marathon. When the gun sounds these athletes begin a grueling 26 mile course that will consume every ounce of energy they possess. There will be very little chit-chat along the way, for each runner is consumed by one ambition, to do his or her best as an individual runner and hopefully win the race. Each thinks, "I want to run the race with perseverance!"

The second race is also an Olympic race, but the atmosphere is quite different. As the story goes, a few years ago at the Seattle Special Olympics, nine contestants, all physically or mentally disabled, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the gun, they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with a relish to run the race to the finish and win.

All, that is, except one boy who stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled over a couple of times and began to cry. The other eight heard the boy cry. They slowed down and looked back. They all turned around and went back. Every one of them.

One girl with Down's Syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, "This will make it better."

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this passage, see the Hebrews series preached at WBC in 2009.

All nine linked arms and walked across the finish line together. Everyone in the stadium stood, and the cheering went on for several minutes. People who were there are still telling the story.²

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

So which of the two races best portrays the exhortation of that verse, the first race or the second? The reality is that as Christians in the west, far too often we read our Bibles with a very individualistic slant. The text is talking *to me*. What does it say *to me*? In this case, what do *I* need to do so *I* can run *my race* with perseverance?

But would you notice the final two words of Hebrews 12:1? The race marked out...*for us*. The writer has in mind a race that is marked out *for us*. This is a race we are in *together*, and we're supposed to run it *together*. It's not just how I do in this race that should matter to me. It's *our* race.

Are you concerned about finishing well in the Christian life? I hope so, for there are no rewards for merely starting well. But whose finish should matter to us? According to Hebrews, it shouldn't be just my own finish, but *ours*.

There's a corporate emphasis in the New Testament epistles that we tend to miss. We're not just marbles in a bag, but a body with connected parts; not islands, but a community. Christ gave His life, not merely to save individuals, but to form a people for His glory.

So as we open our Bibles to Hebrews 12 and continue our series, "Pilgrims in Progress," we need a reminder. By God's design, pilgrims make progress *together*. So if we're going to finish well, we need to get serious about two corporate matters addressed in Hebrews 12:14-24.

One, we have corporate responsibilities (14-17).

Two, we have a corporate identity (18-24).

I. As pilgrims, we have corporate responsibilities (14-17).

In other words, in Christ we are a community, a people, a body, and as such there are some things we are supposed to be doing *together*. Yes, I should be concerned about *my race*—in the words of Galatians 6:5, "Each one should carry his own load." But we're also to "carry each other's burdens," as Galatians 6:2 puts it, for we're in this race together.

Our text identifies two types of corporate responsibilities, the first are some things we need to pursue together (14), and the second are some things we need to remove together (15-17).

A. Here are some things we ought to work together to accomplish (14). "Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord."

Make every effort, says the writer. We're about to be confronted with a couple of things that don't come naturally, yet are essential if we're going to finish well. They're so important that we need to *dioko* them, to strive after, to press forward to attain them (the verb is elsewhere translated "persecute").

1. We should pursue peaceful relationships together. "Make every effort to live in peace with all men." To the Hebrew mind, "peace" means more than the absence of conflict, although that's included, for there's a negative side to it (no fighting) and a positive side (the wholeness of right relationships, both with God and fellow man).

² <http://www.rogerknapp.com/inspire/olympics.htm>

That's what peace is...*shalom*, the state of being in right relationship with God and man. And that's something we ought to be running hard after *together*.

Please realize that in Christ, peace is something we have (Eph. 2:14). But peace is also something we must pursue. A peace-filled church is not an automatic. It takes work to experience it, hence the charge to pursue it.

Think about something. If you have a brother or sister in Christ with whom you are at odds, you are only two heartbeats away from standing in the presence of Christ next to that brother or sister. It's true. If your heart stopped beating right now, and your brother or sister's heart stopped right now, you would both be in the presence of the One who gave His life for both of you, and in His presence there will be nothing between you. So why should there be now?

It takes work to live in peace, brothers and sisters. It takes work husbands and wives, parents and teens, bosses and employees. If there's friction in the relationship, we go hard after peace, for we are to be people who fight to make things right, for Christ's sake.

And *with all men*. Strive for peace with everyone. Think of your relationships—at home, at work, with your neighbors, with your classmates, in the church. Which one needs some extra effort this week to make God-honoring peace a greater reality?

2. *We should pursue holiness together*. "Make every effort...to be holy," says the NIV, literally "pursue holiness."

Again, as with peace, holiness is something we have in Christ (see 10:10). But it's also something for which we must labor. Hebrews 10:14 says, "By one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." In Christ we are perfect, yes, but we are also *being made holy*.

What exactly is this "holiness" that we are to be pursuing? Our text says you can't see the Lord without it, which makes this a top ticket item. The root of holiness, of course, is *holy* (Greek word *hagios*), which by definition means *different, separated, set apart*.

William Barclay explains, "Although he lives in the world, the man who is *hagios* must always in one sense be different from it and separate from it. His standards are not the world's standards, nor his conduct the world's conduct. His aim is not to stand well with men but to stand well with God."³

So God's agenda is that we be, not like the world, but like Him. *Holy*.

That's why He sent His only begotten Son into the world, to pay the penalty for our lack of holiness (our sins), and to provide us with the merit of His perfect and holy life. That's what God's Son accomplished for sinners through His death on the cross and His triumphant resurrection. Through faith in Christ, we are declared to be holy in position and given the potential to become holy in practice.

Beloved, when God's agenda is our agenda, we'll be in the world but we won't look like the world. We won't even want to look like the world for something far more beautiful captures our attention.

Holiness. We want it. And we want it for our brothers and sisters too.

Peace and holiness. Those are two expressions of grace that we're to be pursuing, investing energy towards, praying hard after... And we're to do it *together*.

Our second assignment grows out of the first...

B. Here are some things we ought to work together to eliminate (15-17). "See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a

³ William Barclay, pp. 181-2.

single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.”

See to it, we’re told in verse 15 (‘looking diligently’ AV). The writer uses an unusual word (*episkopountes*). In the noun form it’s the word “bishop.” Here it carries the sense of oversight, emphasizing that believers are supposed to be looking out for each other.

Specifically, there are four things that ought to concern us greatly and that we should seek to eliminate from the church. These four things are barriers to the peaceful relationships and holiness that verse 14 exhorted us to pursue.

1. *We ought to be concerned when we see our brothers missing opportunities to experience God’s grace.* Verse 15 begins, “See to it that no one misses the grace of God.” If we’re going to pursue peace and holiness, then we need grace, for we cannot attain peace and holiness on our own. We need God’s unmerited help.

The question is, how does God give us this grace we desperately need? 2 Peter 1:2 gives us the answer, “Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.” So it’s through the knowledge of God, and particularly through the knowledge of Jesus, that God gives us His grace in abundance.

However, there’s a potential problem. It’s addressed in 2 Corinthians 6:1 which warns us against receiving God’s grace in vain. Galatians 5:4 speaks of falling from His grace. Our text speaks of missing God’s grace, I take that to mean short-changing ourselves of God’s provisions.

Yes, our gracious God is full of grace. He delights in giving us exactly what we need so we can experience life as He intends. But we can foolishly cut ourselves off from these opportunities to experience His grace.

This leads to another question. Just what are these opportunities, these means God has given to us through which we can grow to know His Son better and thus experience His grace? Here are two.

One is His *Word*. The other is His *church*. People who are in the Word and in the church are taking advantage of two key God-given means for growing in the knowledge of Christ and thus experiencing the grace of God. Conversely, when people are *not* in the Word and *not* in church, they are missing out on opportunities to experience God’s grace.

And the writer of Hebrews says that’s something we should *not* allow to happen. *See to it that no one misses the grace of God.*

So do you know any brothers or sisters who aren’t in the Word and in church consistently? What’s your response? Are you content merely with the fact that you yourself are in the Word and in church, that your pilgrimage presently seems to be going well? It ought to matter to us, beloved. We’re pilgrims in progress *together*. And when one of our brothers goes down, we ought to notice, go back, and take action to get him back in the race.

2. *We ought to be concerned when we see any hint of bitterness in our church.* That’s the end of verse 15, “See to it...that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.”

Does it alarm you when you see someone exhibiting a bitter spirit in your church family? You know what I mean. There’s a sourness rather than Christ’s joy, perhaps a tinge of resentment that comes from failing to see the good things God is doing, a negativity that seems to color every conversation. Our text says that when we see that kind of spirit, whether in ourselves or in brother, it should grab our attention and thrust us into action.

See to it that no bitter root grows up.

Bitterness seems so small, yet it grows. Our text says that just one bitter root in the vine has the potential to *cause trouble and defile many*. Don't let that happen, says the Spirit of God through our writer.

"The implication," says Philip Hughes, "is that one embittered and rebellious person in their midst can have a disastrous effect on the community as a whole... One person in whom discouragement because of the hardships of the contest has hardened into a bitter and rebellious spirit and caused him to abandon the race could by his apostasy cause incalculable damage."⁴

I've watched solid relationships disintegrate and somewhere in the mix of contributing factors was bitterness. We've all seen bitterness destroy good friendships, families, and church families.

According to the writer of Hebrews, bitterness is serious business and we ought to take steps to get rid of it as soon as we spot it. Don't let bitterness take root in your own heart, and if you sense it's developing, get on your knees before God and plead with Him to remove it and replace it with Christ-like kindness, forgiveness, and compassion (Eph. 4:31-32).

And if you see it developing in a brother or sister, pray fervently for that person, then pray some more, and then look for ways to keep that bitter root from growing any further. For by helping that one person, you will be helping the whole Body for the glory of the Head of the Body.

3. *We ought to be concerned when we see any hint of sexual immorality in our church.* Verse 16 begins, "See to it that no one is sexually immoral." *Pornos* is the Greek term and it refers to a person who uses sex in self-seeking ways the Creator never intended. According to Genesis 1-2, when the Lord created His image-bearers, He created them as sexual beings, male and female. He intended for the man and the woman to enter a covenant relationship called marriage, and then to use their sexuality for two service-oriented purposes.

One is procreation (to produce children), and the other is pleasure (to provide pleasure for one's spouse). That's why, as 1 Corinthians 7 later explains, a husband is to treat sex as a God-given way to serve and bring satisfaction to his wife, and vice versa, the wife to her husband.

But to use sex before marriage, or outside of marriage, or to engage in sex between two men or two women, or between multiple partners men and women, or with animals, or by yourself, is an abuse of the service-oriented purpose of God's good gift. God gave us sex so we could be givers, not takers. And ignoring God's intent is like using a hammer to cut a board. That's not what the designer had in mind and it's going to make a real mess of things.

That's why we need this exhortation, "See to it that no one is sexually immoral." We're supposed to be looking in the mirror first, and then looking out for each other, to make sure that no one in this church family is cheapening God's good gift by using it for purposes other than God intended.

So how should we respond when we learn that we have a brother who is watching pornography, or a sister who's flirting with another man at work? Brothers, if that man happened to be me, I hope you would love me enough to come after me and plead with me to get back in the race!

⁴ Philip Hughes, p. 539.

Please realize that the misuse of sex isn't restricted to the physical act. We can use sex in God-dishonoring, self-gratifying ways in the jokes we choose to tell, or in the movies we choose to watch, or in the clothing we choose to wear.

Ladies, what should be your response when you notice that a sister in Christ is wearing clothing that is provocative? Will you pray for that sister, build the kind of relationship with her so that you can, as God enables, talk to her about how her clothing choices might be affecting her brothers as they battle with lust?

Isn't that what Hebrews 12:16 would call us to do? When God's Word says, "See to it that no one is sexually immoral," that's our corporate responsibility, to work hard at getting rid of anything in our church family that might undermine God's good goal for our sexuality, or put positively, to do everything we can to protect and promote God's sacred, joy-producing purposes for intimacy.

I'll say it again. We are pilgrims in progress *together*.

4. *We ought to be concerned when we see any hint of worldliness in our church.* Verse 16 continues, "See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau." The Greek word for "godless," *babelos*, describes the unhallowed life, the life that's lived without an awareness of or interest in God, a "completely earthbound life," as Barclay puts it.⁵

If you want an example of that kind of person, think of Esau. Rather than being spiritually minded, Esau was a sensual, secular-minded man who did what produced immediate gratification with little thought of the future. He followed his fleshly instincts. That's why he married two women of the world, Hittite women who worshipped pagan deities and not the true and living God (Gen. 24:34-35). It's also why he sold his inheritance rights for a single meal, for his stomach mattered to him more than God's redemptive purposes for his family. And then later, of course, he regretted his choice and even cried about it, but it was too late. As verse 17 puts it, "He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears."

What should be our attitude towards the spirit of Esau, the spirit of worldliness, and how should we respond when we see it cropping up in ourselves or in our brothers and sisters?

See to it that no one is godless like Esau, says the writer to the church. And when we do see it, it ought to produce great alarm in our hearts that results in swift action.

A godless person is a person who acts like God isn't there. Beloved, when we do things that we wouldn't do if we knew God was standing there watching, we are being godless. We are living life exactly the way the world lives it, hence, we are being *worldly*. And any hint of worldliness in our church ought to concern us greatly.

Beloved, as pilgrims in progress, we need to take seriously our corporate responsibilities. To work together to pursue peace and holiness. To work together to get rid of anything that would cause a brother to miss the grace of God, any root of bitterness, any expression of sexual immorality, and any evidence of godlessness and worldliness.

Now, the call to do life together in the ways we've just considered raises a question. Which is, why? This is pretty radical. So why should we embrace these corporate responsibilities? The answer is this. What we do should always flow out of who we are. And that's the very issue the writer addresses next for us.

II. As pilgrims, we have a corporate identity (18-24).

⁵ William Barclay, p. 183.

You see, we have an identity, a wonderful, God-given identity as the people of God. In the following verses the writer presents yet another contrast between the old and the new, between where we *shouldn't* look to find our identity and where we *should* look.

It's a contrast between two mountains...

Verse 18—"You have not come to a mountain that can be touched."

Verse 22—"But you have come to Mount Zion."

There's quite a difference between these two mountains. One you can see, the other you can't see; one is physical, the other spiritual; one pertains to the past, the other to the present and the future.

Let's read about the first mountain in verses 18-21, "You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.' The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, 'I am trembling with fear.'"

What's the name of this first mountain? The writer doesn't give the name, for his first readers already knew. In fact, they not only knew it, but some of them wanted to go back to it, back to the old covenant, back to Mount Sinai.

Fourteen centuries BC, God met with Moses and the Jews at Mount Sinai. God revealed Himself at Mount Sinai. God gave His Law to His people at Mount Sinai. So Mount Sinai was a special place in redemptive history.

But here's the problem. We don't live in that era of redemptive history. Therefore...

A. We shouldn't find our identity at Mount Sinai (18-21).

But traditions are hard to break. For these first century Jews there were fourteen centuries of traditions, and they all went back to Mount Sinai.

"God spoke with us at Mount Sinai," the critics were saying. "He gave us His Law and the sacrifices at Mount Sinai. You're not going to turn your backs on that are you?"

"The problem is, that's not the whole story," says the writer of Hebrews. "You're forgetting some things about what happened on that mountain."

That's human nature, isn't it? We're prone to distort the past, even to glamorize it with our selective memories. So to help his readers resist the temptation to go back to their old ways, the writer reminds them of what actually happened at Mount Sinai.

1. *They saw fire, darkness, and a storm there.* That's verse 17.
2. *They heard the voice of God there.* That's verse 18.
3. *They were terrified there.* They "heard the voice speaking," says verse 19, and they "begged that no further word be spoken to them." Why this response? Verse 20—"Because they could not bear what was commanded." What they heard overwhelmed them, indeed *terrified* them, so much so that even Moses trembled with fear, says verse 21.

"Why would you want to go back to *that*?" says the writer of Hebrews. That's not our identity, not if we've come to know Messiah Jesus as our Savior.

Think carefully about what happened on that mountain. God spoke and gave His Law to the Israelites. What was His intent for the Law? He gave Law to expose sin, not produce righteousness. Indeed, the commands God gave at Sinai unveiled the lack of righteousness in the hearts of the human hearers. Consequently, as the people heard God's Law, they felt the awesome weight of their own guilt as law-breakers. They discovered that the God in whose presence they were standing is holy and thus terrifying to a sinner.

Again, it's not that going to Mount Sinai is bad. It's just insufficient. Indeed, we all need to go to Mount Sinai or we won't see ourselves rightly, as God sees us, as sinners in desperate need of a Savior.

In fact, some of us need a trip to Mount Sinai this morning, for we've yet to see ourselves as we are. We think we're okay with God because we've "done a lot of good things" in our lives. Yet if we would travel to Mount Sinai we would soon see that as good as we might consider ourselves to be, we are not what God created us to be. We are not holy, and thus we are not fit to enter His presence.

If you think you're on your way to heaven because you're a good person, I challenge you to go to Mount Sinai. Read the Law that God delivered there. Feel the condemning weight of its judgment. Yes, go to Mount Sinai. Stay there until you see yourself the way God sees you, not as a good person but as a rebel who's in desperate need of God's mercy and forgiveness.

And where will you find that mercy and forgiveness? On Mount Sinai? No. Mount Sinai can expose your sin problem, but it cannot fix it. To find the remedy for your sin problem you must travel to another mountain which the writer describes in breathtaking detail in verses 22-24.

He begins with an amazing statement in verse 22, "But you have come to Mount Zion." With those words the author yet again expresses his confidence in the spiritual security of his readers. He's put some pretty serious warnings before them in this letter, warnings designed to cause them to do some soul-searching (in 2:1-4, in 3:7ff, in 5:11ff, in 10:19ff). But now he affirms once again his conviction that while some of his readers may have been wavering, they were still secure in Christ.

You have come to Mount Zion. And once you come to Mount Zion, you can be sure that He who began a good work in you will complete it.

Frankly, some of us may need to leave Mount Sinai this morning. We need to get off the performance-treadmill and settle the issue once and for all that...

B. We should find our identity at Mount Zion (22-24). The writer reminds his readers of their hope in verses 22-24. It's our hope, too, our *identity*, if Christ has saved us.

"But you have come to Mount Zion⁶, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."

Eight wonderful things are true of us if we've come to Mount Zion.

1. *We have a heavenly hope.* We have come "to the heavenly Jerusalem." That's where Zion is. It's not a literal mountain in the Middle East. It's a heavenly city, an out of this world city, and therefore an eternal city.

2. *We are going to the city of God.* That imagery picks up on a word picture the writer already described back in 11:10, where he told us that Abraham was looking forward to "the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." That's our city, too, beloved. We're going to the city of God.

⁶ Zion is one of the hills on which Jerusalem was built. Here it's symbolic as the place where God's people live.

3. *We are going to see a joyful assembly of angels.* “To thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,” says verse 22. The party isn’t on Mount Sinai. It’s on Mount Zion. We may not hear the angels celebrating yet, but we will!

4. *We are the church.* You have come, says verse 23, “to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.” When God rescued you from your sins, my fellow pilgrims, here’s where He brought you. *To the church.* He put you into the assembly of His called out ones, those whose names He recorded in heaven (which again speaks of the believer’s eternal security).

I hope you love the church, for it’s where you have come, where you’ve received your corporate identity.

Here’s something else that’s true of us on Mount Zion. “You have come to God,” says verse 23, “the judge of all men.” Let that truth sink in...

5. *We know God the Judge personally.* And unlike the folks at Mount Sinai, we’re not terrified in the presence of this Judge any longer. Why not? Because we’re not in our sins any longer.

6. *We’re part of a righteous people.* “You have come...to the spirits of righteous men made perfect.” The writer seems to be pointing out that we now have joined the company of the Old Testament saints, Abraham, Moses, and the rest. That’s our identity, brothers and sisters. We belong with those people, not with this world, but with *righteous people*, with people who were *made perfect* by the grace of God.

And how did that happen? It’s all because of the One who is the guest of honor on Mount Zion. “To Jesus,” says verse 24. “You have come...to Jesus the Mediator of a new covenant.” Yes...

7. *We belong to Jesus and His new covenant.* That’s why we don’t live on Mount Sinai under the old covenant. We’ve come to Him who fulfilled the old covenant and mediated the new!⁷ And how did He mediate the new? The writer reminds us, “We have come to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” Abel was killed by his brother and Abel’s blood cried out from the ground for justice. Jesus’ blood speaks a better word, for it offers forgiveness for rebels like Cain if they’ll but come to Him. And we have! Furthermore...

8. *We have experienced the power of His blood.* Again, not on Mount Sinai. We’ve experienced it because we’ve come to Mount Zion.

So we have corporate responsibilities. And that because we have a corporate identity.

Take Inventory: Two responses...

1. *Let’s celebrate who we are.* We are His people. We are a people who, though once condemned by Mount Sinai, have by His grace have been invited to Mount Zion. That’s our identity. It’s mine. It’s yours. And it’s cause to celebrate!

It’s also cause for this.

2. *Let’s do life together.* Yes, let’s do all we can to help each other along the journey, pursuing peace and holiness together, and getting rid of sin together. We are pilgrims in progress *together*.

Communion

⁷ Leon Morris points out that the word for “new” is applied to the covenant only here. “It refers to what is recent,” says Morris (p. 143).