

Heb. 12:14-17 Duties and Pitfalls of the Gospel Life (part 2) A Picture of Apostasy

From last week (v. 14). As we run the race of the gospel of faith, as our covenant says, *“having been brought by divine grace to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ,”* we must pursue peace with all men. AND, we must strive for holiness. God is holy and those who will “see” God will be holy. These two truths are not negotiable. A Christian seeks peace with all men (horizontal relationship). And, a Christian will only “see” God through holiness (vertical relationship). As we saw last week, this exhortation to holiness is not speaking of the righteousness of Christ that belongs to us as: justification. But instead, the author is speaking of the doctrine of sanctification. We must pursue holiness. And those who do not pursue holiness are not Christians. You will know a Christian by his/her fruits.

Today, as we continue through this passage we will see the great sin of apostasy, particularly in the example of Esau. Throughout this letter, the author warns against apostasy. Look back at 6:4: **“For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance . . .”** Look over at 10:26: **“For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.”** Today, we will see that Esau did not strive for peace with all men. Nor did he pursue holiness. We see the opposite. And in the end, we have a shocking story of apostasy. Therefore, we need these words as words of warning to us. And if you are a Christian, these are precious words as they are one of God’s means of grace to keep us. With this in mind, I would like to use this passage as a template for the sin of apostasy as seen in the life of Esau. I have 4 truths about the character of an apostate with a applications at the end. The apostate: 1) falls short of the grace of God, 2) allows a root of bitterness to spring up in the heart, 3) becomes more and more ungodly, and 4) is a profane person.

1. The apostate falls short of the grace of God. (v. 15a). The warning here is not to *“fall from”* the grace of God as some use this verse to say one can lose salvation. In other places the word *“fail to obtain”* is translated as *“to want”* or to *“be deficient”* or *“to come behind”* or even *“be destitute.”* So, really it means to *“fall short”* of something. The picture is like knowing you have a goal to attain. And the power lies with you to get to the goal. But along the way you are negligent. Let’s say you want to save up your money to buy something (maybe a bicycle, car, xbox, horse, etc.) at the end of the year. And if you are diligent at saving you will be able to buy it. But along the way, you use your money unwisely. Maybe you are lazy and don’t work hard enough to make the money needed. Maybe instead of sacrificing certain “wants” you spend your money on lesser things. Whatever. And at the end of the year you don’t have enough. You fall short of what you need and you aren’t able to buy what you wanted. And if this were to happen, whose fault would it be? You know what is required to buy what you want. You know what is required to finish the race. But, you “fail to obtain it.”

The meaning here is to have EVERYTHING for life and godliness in front of you and then neglect it and therefore fall short. Think of Esau. He was the firstborn of Isaac. He was circumcised, set apart in the family of Abraham, the father of “faith.” He was instructed in the

true worship of the living God. He was the son of Isaac, through whom God renewed his covenant. Like a prince in the household of the greatest king he was privy to the best instruction and heir to the blessings of his office. Yet, he sold his birthright and as we will see, did not pursue the great blessing of God by faith.

In Rom. 9-11 Paul speaks of Israel falling short of salvation because they did not pursue it by faith, but instead by works. In this way, they fell short of the goal. In the same kind of way, those who commit apostasy know what the gospel is. They hear it every week, every month, every year. They know what the Scriptures say. But, through sloth, negligence, formality, unbelief, or other sins, they fall short of the grace of God. In “failing to obtain the grace of God” we see the beginning of apostasy: hearing, knowing, being around the truth all the time, and then to fall short at the end. May it not be so with us!

2. The apostate allows a root of bitterness to spring up in the heart. (v. 15b) So what does this look like? The context for this truth comes from Moses and the Hebrews, particularly their rebellion in the desert. In Deut. 29:18 where warns the people **“Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the LORD our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit.”** Here the emphasis is on the heart and what springs from the heart as it is compared to a root. Fruit eventually comes forth from what is below, from the ROOT, which cannot be seen. This year in my garden I had multiple volunteers (leftovers from last year), what I thought were butternut squash. So, I dug them up and replanted them in the right spot, waiting on Kristen’s beloved gourd. But, to my dismay, they turned out to be spaghetti squash (which we still like). Their roots and even the early plants look just like butternut squash, but when they came up I discovered the truth. This is the picture of the heart. As Jesus says, *“It is not what goes into a man that defiles him, but what comes out.”* **“But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.”** (Matt. 15:18-20). This is why we always speak of the HEART. If you want to fix your marriage, start with the heart. If you want to fix your problem with anger, search the heart. If you want to kick a sinful habit go to the heart. If you want to love your neighbor and obey the commands of Christ, begin with the heart. Guard your heart. Search your heart. Ask God to keep your heart.

Now, when I first read these words, and what I’ve always thought on the surface, is that this is about being bitter toward someone (which is CERTAINLY true, and is VERY unhealthy for our souls and our spiritual health . . . AND which can be described as a sin in the Bible). We certainly must not be bitter towards anyone. It is unhealthy and will affect every part of you! But, this verse is not primarily about being bitter toward another person. It is about apostasy. It is about a poisonous heart of unbelief. This is the clear context of the words of Moses, and the context of this letter to the Hebrews. Look back at 3:12-14: **“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.”** The context is still a “falling away” or apostasy from the living God. And this begins in the heart.

This is what happened with Israel in the desert. And this is what happened to Esau. And this is what happens to the one who commits apostasy.

3. The apostate progressively becomes more sinful. (v. 16). Here, the author singles out a particular area of sin (sexual immorality). I am sure he could have named other sins. But, this sin seems to picture the DEPTHS to which an apostate eventually lands. It seems to me those who “*fail to obtain the grace of God*” and have a “*heart of bitterness*” and unbelief will grow more and more ungodly, and eventually end up committing the most grievous of sins. I know all sin is sin against God. But, sins related to “sexuality” are especially damaging and display how far those opposed to God are willing to go. The ESV translates the word as “sexually immoral.” The word is “*porneia*” where we get our word “pornography.” The KJV translates it as “fornicator.” The sin of “*porneia*” is not merely to watch something on your computer or your phone that you know you shouldn’t watch. The sin of “*porneia*” includes ALL sexual sins.

Let me read from a statement we have adopted here at Grace back in 2015 (found in our constitution). “*We believe that any form of sexual immorality (including adultery, fornication, homosexual behavior, bisexual conduct, bestiality, incest, and use of pornography) is sinful and offensive to God.* (Matt 15:18-20; 1 Cor. 6:9-10.)” Let me be clear! Sexual relations are designed for marriage only, between a husband (man) and a wife (woman). This means any form of sexual relations outside of marriage. I would also include the reading of “soft” porn which can be found in the many books that find their way onto our shelves. If we want to take these types of sins to the heart, we must say with Jesus, “*If a man looks at a woman with lust, he has committed adultery in his heart.*” Look over at Heb. 13:4: “**Let the marriage bed be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.**”

So, what does this sin have to do with apostasy? Again, it seems to me that this sin goes to the depths of where a “root of bitterness” will take a person in ungodliness. John Owen says “*those who forsake the profession of holiness usually fall into this experience*” (my translation). He also says about this sin “*when men are habitually given up to, they are never, or very rarely recovered from it.*” Also, it seems to me that this sin is one that God eventually gives sinners what they want and allows them to continue in it. He “*turns them over to it.*” Listen to Rom. 1:26-28: “**For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.**” Now, I am not sure we see this particular example with Esau, though he did marry foreign women against his parent’s wishes. We are not told. But, here in the NT, in the new covenant, we are warned of its dangers and its association with apostasy. And this is merely an example of the ungodliness in the life of an apostate.

4. The apostate is a profane person. (v. 16). The word in the ESV is translated as “unholy.” Of course, an apostate is unholy. But this does not capture the meaning of the word. A better translation is “profane.” An apostate is a profane person. So, what does this mean? When I hear

the word “profane” I think of profanity. And I associate this word with bad language. But, the meaning goes much deeper. Profane is the opposite of holy. And in this context to be profane is take the things of God and treat them as common, to treat them lightly. Our example is Esau. Let me read the story from Gen. 25:29-34: **“Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted. And Esau said to Jacob, ‘Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!’ (Therefore his name was called Edom.) Jacob said, ‘Sell me your birthright now.’ Esau said, ‘I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?’ Jacob said, ‘Swear to me now.’ So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.”** There are so many things in this story that picture the profanity of Esau, particularly how he did not value the blessings of being the firstborn. He didn’t try and bargain and get more. The KJV says **“for one morsel of meat he sold his birthright.”** He only cared about himself. Yes, he was a young man. But still, he did not consider the great blessings of faith that the birthright represented. And notice how easily he parted with his birthright. So quickly did he give it up. And then afterward he didn’t even think much about it, but instead: **“he ate and drank and rose up and went his way”** (Gen. 25:34). In these pictures, we see what it means to be profane, to take the greatest of HOLY blessings and make them common. This is the epitome of idolatry. With these truths before us I want to move our attention to application for the rest of our time.

Application: Those who are the closest to apostasy are the ones who are privy to the most truth. Such was the case with Esau. Such was the case with the religious leaders of Jesus’ day. And such is the case with those who sit in churches week after week and year after year. Therefore, do not fall short of the grace of God by not taking every effort to obey, to improve upon all that God has give us in the church. Do not let a root of “bitterness” and unbelief come up in your heart. Look at your life. Are you practicing godliness and seeking godliness. Or, do you see a departure of in your soul. And finally, do you take the things of God lightly and treat them as common. May it never be!

Application: The blessing of God comes down to us through the proper means. So, what are the proper means? You know what they are: Faith and Repentance. I do not believe Esau pursued the great blessing of God with faith and repentance. You might say, *“Wait a moment, Jon. He did seek repentance. But God not grant it to him.”* Look at v. 17: **“For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, though he sought it with tears.”** Some say the “it” he sought was repentance. But, I believe the context (which also fits the grammar) is that the “it” he sought was not true repentance, but instead the blessing. This is the pinnacle of what it means to be a profane person: To see the things of God apart from the proper means God has prescribed. I believe Esau wanted the birthright; he wanted the blessing. But, he didn’t want the God who gave the blessing. And it followed that he didn’t want the blessing through the proper means. Esau forfeited the birthright when he was young. And we have no indication that he was ever a man of faith and repentance.

In fact, it was probably 40 or 50 years after he sold his birthright when Isaac blessed Jacob. He lived for many years without faith and repentance. ONLY when he realized he had lost it did he cry out in tears (and this in great anger). For all those years, he had it great. He acquired some wealth. He lived in the “household of faith.” Yet, he counted those things as common. He was a

profane man. And in the Book of Hebrews, Esau is a type of the unbelieving Jews of Jesus day. Like Esau, they looked to the outward blessings of God and not the essence of it, which was the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, we must not prefer the “morsels” of this world over the “birthright” privileges found in the Church of Christ. Brothers and sisters, we must value Christ and the gospel and godliness. We must seek the Word of God and what He has for us in Christ! And the means God has always used is still FAITH and REPENTANCE.

Application: There comes a time when grace cannot be found. Esau sought the blessing and the time for repentance was past. This is why it is so important for us to listen to the words of Paul **“Today is the day of salvation”** (2 Cor. 6:2) Remember the words of Heb. 3:12-13: **“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”** This is a great mystery to me, but I do believe the Bible teaches this truth.

Application: Godliness is a community affair. All of these exhortations are in the plural. *“Am I my brother’s keeper?”* Yes you are. If we will attain to godliness, we need one another. This means we should ask one another specific questions and inquire into one another’s lives. I believe a great part of the reason we meet together in home groups is to grow in godliness.

Application: In the church, sin does not spring up over night. It takes time. But the end is unbelief and eventual apostasy. V. 15 says, *“See to it that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble and by it many become defiled.”* This “bitterness” is pictured as a root. This means we cannot see its effects until it comes forth (like my spaghetti squash). This is why the author says deal with sin quickly. If we allow sin to continue, we are in danger of great trouble and eventual defilement. As Barney Fife says, “Nip it in the bud.” (pornography, marriage, anger, love for entertainment, etc.)

Apostasy doesn’t happen quickly. Notice the general progression of apostasy. 1) Fail to obtain the grace of God; 2) Root of bitterness; 3) the rise of great sin (porneia); and 4) Profane. May it not be so with myself or anyone who hears my voice! (At the end of the day, if you are looking to Christ by faith with a heart of repentance, you are in a good place. You have not committed the unpardonable sin. You are not an apostate. If you believe the Lord Jesus died for your sins and NOW you are trusting Him, this is the best place to be. At the same time, this passage today and the warnings in Hebrews are directed to Christians. If you hear these words and put them into practice, they are serving the most gracious purposes of God in your life.