

Introduction:

- A. Illus.: I saw this poster that reads, “*Pressure: It can turn a lump of coal into a flawless diamond—or an average person into a perfect basketcase.*” I talk often to Christians who are under pressure. All different kinds of pressure. Sometimes you just want someone to pray with you—a great privilege for me. Quite often, you ask, “*Why is this happening to me?*” And you tell me you’re not sure you can bear this hard thing. And now on top of everything else is the frightening economic situation. It can feel like one of those lead vests they put on you at the dentist’s office when they take X-rays. One friend told me, “*Things are bad at my church. There are big lay-offs at work. And then I get all the forms from the IRS and the end-of-the-year bank statements reminding me of just how much I’ve lost. This isn’t my favorite time to be me.*”
- B. Do you know what I often tell people who are hurting or pressured? I’ll say, “*I don’t know what God is up to or what is going to happen in your situation, but for now, while you endure this, do not sin! One day at a time, do what is right!*” That’s where our text of Scripture starts, too. Turn to **Hebrews 12:14-29**. The Christians to whom this letter was written were under extreme pressure—persecution, prison, even death. The writer eloquently reminds them and us what a treasure we have in Christ and then urges us again and again to **persevere**. Don’t go back, don’t give up, don’t lose heart. This passage is the climax of his appeal. **Vv.14-17...**

I. THE LORD EXPECTS US TO BE GOOD AND GODLY PEOPLE EVEN WHEN WE’RE UNDER PRESSURE (12:14-17)

- A. The verse begins, “*Make every effort*”. Another translation is “*pursue aggressively,*” “*go hard after.*” We are to pursue two great virtues when we are under pressure: “*peace with everyone and holiness.*” The problem, of course, is that when the pressure is on those two things are especially hard to do. We’re more inclined to lash out at people and also to duck into dark corners of sin for a fix of some quick feel-good. But here is where we show our faith. This is what Christian perseverance looks like.
- B. The first of those pursuits—“*peace with everyone*”—is a duffel bag command into which are stuffed all commands like “*love one another*” and “*do to others as you would have them do to you.*” Here, too is Jesus’ basin and the towel, giving to those in need, and all our prayers for others. This command has a way of clearing its throat for attention when we start thinking about how we’re not going to put up with someone else’s behavior any more, or when we starting planning to give someone a piece of our minds. “*Pursue peace with everyone.*”
- C. The second urgent pursuit—*holiness*—is also a duffel bag full of commands and examples. Being holy means we love Jesus more than the world around us and we show it. It is the dos and don’ts of godliness, the mind of Christ, a love for the lost but an aversion to the world. Holy people know how to pray and worship, they are humble and thoughtful about the inner life with Christ. The pursuit of holiness is urgent work, especially given that last phrase of **v.14**: “*without holiness no one will see the Lord.*”
- D. **A. W. Tozer** said, “*Whatever is holy is healthy.*” Vv.15-17 underscore that by detailing the terrible consequences when Christians *don’t* pursue peaceful relationships and holiness. **V.15** actually continues the sentence before, “*Seeing to it*”—seeing to that dual pursuit—“*lest*” we experience three terrible consequences. In the Greek, there are three “*lests*” here. So where holiness is *not* pursued spiritual sickness is sure to follow. *Three* sicknesses, actually:
1. **V.15 says to pursue love and holiness *lest we miss the grace of God.*** We don’t get God’s grace in a big storage bin. We get it more like those football players who gulp in pure oxygen on the sidelines when they especially need it. An old song says, “*He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater.*” But if we stop loving others, if we stop pursuing holiness in our everyday lives, the flow of grace dries up. God isn’t going to give us grace for living *without* him, for *ignoring* his commands!

And think where that leaves us! What could be more out of character for a Christian or a church than to be graceless! A church without God's grace is like a field without spring rains, like a land where it is *"always winter and never Christmas."*

2. And it gets worse, for **v. 15** continues, *"lest some root of bitterness sprout up to trouble you."* When Christians refuse to pursue loving relationships and holiness we become spiritually poisonous. This verse is often applied to the danger of being angry, grudge-holding, bitter people. Bitterness is dangerous and contagious, but that's not the meaning here. The writer is thinking of **Deut. 29:18**, *"Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the LORD our God to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison."* What he is saying is that when we don't pursue peaceful relationships and holiness, we will find or make a god we can live with, a god who accommodates us, a false god. And when a god-makers like that are in a congregation they are like poison ivy, making a church miserable with spiritual itches they can't scratch and rashes without a balm.
3. And there's more bad news in **vv.16-17...** Here in v.16, *"godlessness"* doesn't mean someone who doesn't believe in God. It means someone who *doesn't care.* The sexually immoral and the godless are birds of a feather. They are feel-good people, people who never live by faith, whose motto is, *"If it feels good, do it,"* and whose **patron sinner is Esau**, who willingly and without a thought gave up his holy birthright for the immediate gratification of a bowl of stew. The especially sober lesson from Esau was that when he realized what he had lost, he cried like a baby, but what he *didn't* do—what he *couldn't* do—was actually repent. A literal translation here is, *"for a place of repentance he did not find."* There was no repentance place left in his own God-empty heart.

SUMMARY: Without holiness our lives and our church will be graceless, poisonous and cut off from the blessings of God. So we must aggressively pursue loving relationships and holy living—*especially* when we're under pressure. And if we do we will live in the grace of God, we will be healthy and safe, and we will experience God's matchless blessings.

Illus.: When I was a little boy dad would take me to basketball games. He was always the official scorer so we'd go early. I loved that because I could run up and down the gym floor. Running there wasn't like running anywhere else. I felt like when I ran in there I could almost fly. The floor was faster, the air was better, it was where real athletes ran. Being loving and holy is like that.

II. NOW GOD HAS GIVEN US A HOME WHERE LOVE AND HOLINESS COME NATURALLY (12:18-24)

- A. God's people got their first real lesson in holiness when God came down to meet them at Mt. Sinai in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land. That part of the world is dry, rugged and remote, like those places where they test nuclear bombs. **Vv.18-21... Here Israel discovered that God spoke with a voice they couldn't bear to hear and was beyond a line they didn't dare to cross.** We need to know this story, we need to visit this scene, so we realize what it is like for the holy God to come undisguised and uninsulated to earth, so we take God seriously when he tells us how lethal sin is. Here we see that guilt is serious business. It is not a bad thing for us to smell that holy smoke, to see a man as good as Moses trembling with fear before God. But while you can see the awesome holiness of God at Sinai, the problem is that no one ever *becomes* holy there. An old poem says:

*To run and work the law commands
Yet gives me neither feet nor hands.*

- B. We will only be loving and holy if we make Mt. Zion our home, because that is where holiness comes to life (vv.22-24). Geographically speaking, Mt. Zion is the mountain around which Jerusalem is built and where the Temple was erected. But here God is speaking of the Mt. Zion more real than the one in old Jerusalem. Mt. Zion is where Christians live now. It is where we must be if we hope to be loving and

holy people under pressure in this world. I love these verses! There is no other description like this of our home in all the Bible.

1. "You have come to Mt. Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God." For so long, God's people were pilgrims who left the false security of this world for an unseen city with foundations whose builder and maker is God. In one sense, of course, we are still pilgrims, but while we must use eyes of faith, we are also home already, secure in God's holy mountain fortress, safe in God's city of peace, already citizens of that place where God is its light and where life grows on trees.
2. "You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly." The word means a special celebration, a festal occasion. We find ourselves in a bright city where innumerable angels rejoice. "Why are you singing," we ask. "What is the occasion?" And with laughter and voices like thundering waterfalls they tell us they rejoice because the Lamb has conquered sin, death and the devil, that sinners can be forgiven, the earth made new, and because God has shown his brightest glory. Living in a world where we'd often like to hang up our harps, **we come here to remember why we sing.**
3. "To the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven." We are called "the church of the firstborn," not because we were born first, but because every Christian possesses the rights of the firstborn Son of God; "heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ." When we fret over mortgages and Medicare we can forget how rich we are. It's hard when we work for companies that think they owe us nothing to remember that we are heirs of God, each as rich as God's own firstborn Son. We may often be only a *number* here, but in heaven our *names* are recorded in the Lamb's Book of Life. **We come here to remember that we are rich.**
4. "You have come to God, the Judge of all." Could there be any place in heaven or earth more dangerous to sinners!? Any place more dangerous than the courtroom of the Judge of all the earth? But we come here *gratefully*. Once we stood here condemned with no excuse or alibi while Satan, our relentless and ruthless Accuser, made his air-tight case against us. But here, too, a Lamb stood in our place, taking our punishment and death so that this holy "Judge of all" could in some incomprehensible miracle of both justice and grace, look at us and declare us "Not guilty." **We come here to remember that we're forgiven.**
5. "You have come to the spirits of righteous ones made perfect." This speaks of our Old Testament mothers and fathers who lived righteously and trusted God while they waited patiently for their Redeemer. When Jesus died and rose again, he made those righteous people perfect, complete. Now they are the "great cloud of witnesses" who urge us to persevere. **We come here to remember not to give up.**
6. "To Jesus the mediator of a new covenant." We would not be here if it were not for Jesus who said: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." Here in this new covenant are all God's promises to us stamped "Yes!" by Jesus. Here is God's word written on our hearts rather than on stones. Here is our great High Priest, interceding for us, and the Holy Spirit who lives within us and who carries our deepest groans to the Father. Here is Jesus our Bridegroom and the promise of a great wedding feast yet to come. **We come here to remember that we are the Christ's bride bound to him by unbreakable vows.**
7. "And to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." From the beginning of our history, beginning with Abel, the world's first innocent victim, innocent bloodshed has cried out for justice. *Who will set this right?!* But there was one man whose *innocent* blood did *not* cry for justice when it was shed, but preached mercy instead. We come to the blood of Jesus that invites, "Come, ye sinners, poor and needy." Blood that preaches peace, blood that bleaches hearts, blood that infuses dead men and women with immortality.

- C. This is where we must live if we are ever to be holy people. These are the things we believe as if we could see them. This is where we put down our roots. Here we make our home, where holiness comes to life and where loving one another becomes second nature.

So that brings us back to where we started in v.14.

III. SINCE MT. ZION IS OUR HOME, LET US OBEY GOD THANKFULLY EVEN WHEN WE'RE UNDER PRESSURE (12:25-29)

- A. **V.25** says, "See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks." It is still the God of Mt. Sinai who speaks to us. We do not dread to hear him as those Israelites did, because he has equipped us by grace so that it is now possible for us to be holy people. But we must listen to God and obey what he tells us. Are you reading your Bible? Are you listening to God's voice within you? Are you persevering in your faith even under pressure?
- B. **V.28-29** says, "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire.'" The worship of Mt. Sinai was trembling and terrified. The worship of the citizens of Mt. Zion is no less awe-inspired, for God remains "a consuming fire," but we come thankful, for loving relationships and holiness are now within our grasp. We Thank God that we can not only *pursue* peaceful relationships and holiness, we can *reach* them. We *can* be good and godly people by the grace of God. It is all in where we live. **Raymond Brown** writes about "an elderly friend of mine who had these words written in the front of her Bible: 'I absolutely refuse to gratify the devil by being downhearted.'"

Remember that little couplet I mentioned earlier? Let me tell you how it ends:

*To run and work the law commands,
Yet gives me neither feet nor hands;
But better news the gospel brings;
It bids me fly, and gives me wings.* [in K. Hughes]