

**Introduction:**

- A. Illus.: **Charles Conn** related this story: When I lived in Atlanta, several years ago, I noticed in the Yellow Pages, in the listing of restaurants, an entry for a place called Church of God Grill. The peculiar name aroused my curiosity and I dialed the number. A man answered with a cheery, *“Hello! Church of God Grill!”* I asked how his restaurant had been given such an unusual name, and he told me: *“Well, we had a little mission down here, and we started selling chicken dinners after church on Sunday to help pay the bills. Well, people liked the chicken, and we did such a good business, that eventually we cut back on the church service. After a while we just closed down the church altogether and kept on serving the chicken dinners. We kept the name that we started with, and that’s Church of God Grill.”*<sup>i</sup>
- B. You know, that story comes back to me again and again. It came back to me again this week as I studied. On our church’s 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary we ought to think again about what we’re here in Lincolnshire to do.

Throughout the fall we reoriented ourselves once again to the good news of the gospel and our privilege in being lighthouses of that good news; ambassadors, agents of God’s grace, witnesses.

Last Sunday we turned to **Heb 12** where **v.2** says, *“We must run with perseverance the race marked out for us;”* meaning, the life of faith in Christ. Today we move down a few verses in Heb. 12. A literal translation of **v.14** is *“Pursue peace with everyone and [pursue] holiness.”* The course of the Christian life laid out by the Lord for each of us is different, but the goal is the same: *“Pursue peace with everyone and pursue holiness, for without holiness no one will see the Lord.”* Open your Bibles to **Heb. 12:14-16...**

**I. WE ARE HERE TO PURSUE PEACEFUL RELATIONSHIPS AND HOLINESS (12:14-17)**

**Holiness doesn’t come naturally to any of us.** Illus.: In a classic *Leadership* cartoon by Mary Chambers, two couples are

seated in a living room engaged in Bible study. One of the women is speaking. "Well," she says, "I haven't actually died to sin, but I did feel kind of faint once." [PT.com] We have a lot in common with her so the text sets before us these twin pursuits:

- A. Our church's mission must include the pursuit of "peace with everyone and holiness." The first of those pursuits—**"peace with everyone"**—is a duffel bag command into which are stuffed all the 'love one another's', the basin and the towel, speaking truth in love, and all our intercessory prayers. Here, too, is the responsibility to share our faith for nothing so brings people together as sharing our faith in Christ. This pursuit also requires us find ways to get along in a Christlike way. When you're all ready to give someone at church a piece of your mind, this verse clears its throat, and whispers in your ear, "*Pursue peace with everyone.*"
- B. The second key pursuit—holiness—is the more sweeping command. 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 their inner life with Christ. And they are never at home in this world.
- The pursuit of holiness is urgent work, given that last phrase of v.14: "*without holiness no one will see the Lord.*" How many church-y people will not see the Lord—not now; not ever?
- C. **V.15** begins, literally, "*Seeing to it* [seeing to holiness, and then three times the same word appears], *lest... lest... lest...* In other words, if we do not "make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy," there will be three terrible consequences.

Illus.: Some years ago there was a crazy mix-up at the hospitals in Raleigh and Durham, NC. Some maintenance workers drained hydraulic fluid from the elevators into empty detergent drums, but they didn't dispose of the drums of dirty fluid. Somehow the instrument cleaning people came across these drums marked "Detergent" so they started using them to clean surgical instruments. Last I

heard, they were trying to figure out what kind of damage they'd done to the patients. "*We care about our patients,*" the administrator assured the public in his statement, and I believe him. But if their instruments weren't *disinfected*, they were a threat to their patients nonetheless. **A church careless about holiness is like that!** I don't know what happened to those patients in North Carolina, but **our text tells us what happens to churches who are careless about holiness. Vv.15-17...**

1. **V.15** says that the church that does not pursue holiness **will miss the grace of God**. Think of that! We can't bank God's grace. We get it as we need it. An old song says, "*He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater.*" **So if we stop loving others, if we stop pursuing holiness in our everyday lives, the flow of grace dries up.** God gives us grace so that we might be righteous. Grace, like manna, doesn't keep till tomorrow. He gives us what we need today. **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 Christian or a church with no fragrance of forgiveness, no 'love covering a multitude of sins.' 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** says **such a church is not only graceless but poisonous**. 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.*" A church that doesn't attend to holiness may keep singing the same songs but they've abandoned the true God and they toxic.
3. And there's more bad news in **vv.16-17**, for churches who do not pursue holiness will take on the unfaithful

‘tomcat’ nature of Esau, **devaluing covenant relationships with other people and with God.** And we’ll face what Esau faced: **we will mindlessly forfeit the richest blessings and promises of God, and we won’t get them back.**

SUMMARY: By pursuing peace with everyone and holiness we ensure the flow of God’s grace, health instead of poison, and every benefit of the God-blessed life. A. W. Tozer wrote, “*Whatever is holy is healthy.*” That’s our goal.

**So the question then is, how do we create an environment conducive to holiness?** The Bible gives us an answer. Remember when Israel came out of Egypt on their way to the Promised Land? They weren’t a very holy people so God brought them to Mt. Sinai where he came down from heaven to meet with them and to deliver to them the Law, beginning with the Ten Commandments. So if we want to be holy, it stands to reason we need to get back to Mt. Sinai—we need to tremble again before God. We need to hear the Lord lay down the Law and feel the shiver of foreboding when he says, *But if you do not do this you will fall into the hands of your enemies.* We need to be scared straight! Let’s read on: **12:18-21...**

So even though God’s people, Israel, were taught about holiness at that mountain that’s not where we have come. Make no mistake—we need to visit that mountain. That is why the Bible tells us about it so vividly. We learn about Mt. Sinai so we know what it is like for the holy God to come undisguised and uninsulated to earth. It is not a bad thing for God’s people to smell 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.** We got to Mt. Sinai to look but never to stay. “*You have not come*” to that mountain. Good place to visit, but no place to live!

Read on: **vv.22-24...**

## **II. OUR CHURCH MUST BE AT HOME WHERE HOLINESS COMES TO LIFE (12:18-24)**

A. Illus.: Here’s another story I think of again and again.

Several years ago there was a story in the *Chicago Tribune* with the headline, “*City tries to pump up its crews down*

***under.***” It was a story about a pep rally for the men and women of the Chicago Sewers Department. The new head of the department, John A. Roberson, tried to rally all those people who spend a fair amount of time looking up at manholes. You'd have thought he was Joel Osteen: “*Winning is not a sometimes thing,*” he shouted, quoting Vince Lombardi. “*It's an all-the-time thing!*” And most of the 800 people in the Plumbers Union Hall cheered enthusiastically. There was an even big banner on the wall behind him that said in huge letters, “*Bringing Sewers Above Ground.*” [7/20/01]

Sometimes I look out on Sunday morning and think about the dirty, difficult places where some of you must work every week. Some offices, of course, are filthier than sewers. Some schools are darker than underground tunnels. A lot of you spend your week trying to keep the gunk off your hearts, trying to keep your souls from smelling like a cesspool. When we're together with our brothers and sisters in Christ, one of our jobs is to remember that sewers are just where they work; Mt. Zion is their home.

Vv.22-24 are perhaps the most comprehensive and succinct checklist in Scripture of where Christians must live now as well as forever if we are to be a holy people. He begins...

1. “*You have come to Mt. Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.*” We must constantly remember that we've never seen our homeland. When you feel like you live in dangerous dark alleys, we here take you again to Mt. Zion, God's own “stronghold.” When your world is shaking we go again to *the heavenly Jerusalem* whose foundation is peace. And when you feel as though you live and work in a kind of war zone, a land of the doomed and dead, we come together to remember that our home is *the city of the living God* where light is like oxygen and life grows on trees.
2. “*You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly.*” It is hard sometimes to sing the

songs of Zion in this dry and weary land where there is no water, but here we remember and join the unseen company of the shining ones all around us, angels who never tire of heaven's festival, who sang for joy when we were found and who will help us sing now. We learn the repertoire of glory: "Holy, Holy, Holy," "Worthy is the Lamb," and the Hallelujahs of heaven.

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. When you're fretting over the cost of tuition or health insurance it is hard to remember how rich you are, that you're the royalty of God's kingdom, "heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ." Here you remember that your riches are stored safely in heaven's vaults. In this world you may often be only a *number* here but in heaven your *names* are recorded in the Book of Life.
4. *"You have come to God, the Judge of all."* Let us stand quietly in the Courtroom of the Almighty and remember the life-or-death drama there—your relentless and eloquent Accuser with his air-tight case against you. The Almighty Judge's unbending justice, and sin's certain death sentence. But then, again and again we remember that we are justified by faith, that Christ died for our sins, that this God, this Judge of all, satisfied his own nearly impossible righteous demands by doing the unimaginable—rendering sinners righteous without violating justice. In this congregation we remember again and again that now we need not tremble before this Judge, nor cower before this bar, but we are to come boldly to his throne where we *"will receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need."*
5. *"You have come to the spirits of righteous ones made perfect."* We open our Bibles and meet that great cloud of B.C. witnesses who were *sure of what they hoped for and certain of what they did not see*, testifying of their

long-yearning for a City with foundations and a Savior to be their Lamb. We look over the shoulders of the prophet-sleuths trying in vain to see the future that now lays open before us in the New Testament; of men and women who trusted the Lord even though they were unable to unwrap the mystery of God, which is so plain now to us—“Christ in you the hope of glory!”

6. “*To Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*” Again and again, we go to Jesus. We would not be here were it not for Jesus. We take Communion and hear, “*This cup is the new covenant in my blood.*” When you are muddied with guilt and failure, or when you think that God has slammed the door on you, when you are sure you’ve heard the bolting and double-bolting on the other side, we hear again of Jesus the Mediator, the Guarantor of God’s love and never-failing presence; that nothing can “*separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

From the beginning of our history, beginning with Abel, innocent bloodshed has cried out for justice, but there was one man whose innocent blood did *not* cry for justice but preached mercy. So again and again Christ’s blood summons us: “*Come, ye sinners, poor and needy.*” Here we sing of blood so eloquent that no other argument or plea is needed. Of blood that preaches peace, blood that bleaches hearts, blood that infuses dead men with life.

## Conclusion

Here at Village Church we emphasize that our church is *home*. And we try to underscore that with our logo, with warm welcomes, homey decorating, coffee and goodies, and the like. But ultimately, our church is home to the extent that we dwell in the privileges of *Mount Zion, our heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God* right here and now. To live in this city *now*, to remember every

time we gather who we are and what the Lord has given us, will produce a holiness in us nurtured in grace.

Never forget why we are here.

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<sup>i</sup>Charles R. Swindoll, *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart and 1,501 Other Stories*, (Nashville: Word Publishing) 2000, c1998. (Under 'Focus')