

HEBREWS
Grace-Filled Choices
Hebrews 12:12-17

Children's Ministry needs

Greeting

Would you agree with this statement – “You are a product of your own choices,”? Scripture would, indeed, agree with such a statement, in one sense. Don't get me wrong. If you grow up in the inner city instead of an upper-class private school kind of a world, the options from which you have to choose may be limited, but choices still matter, no matter what. Most people would agree with such a statement without insisting that it is nothing more than a faith claim. Everyone understands that the choices we make play a significant role in the trajectory of our lives.

The Bible supports the idea that your choices have a profound impact on the quality of your life. “Whatever a man sows, that will he also reap.” When a person says that the secret to his or her long life is little to no exercise and smoking two packs of cigarettes a day, we know that such results constitute an anomaly.

One of the reasons we recognize the importance of choices is that the law of God is written on our hearts, according to Romans 2 and we also know according to experience. Deep down we know about right and wrong even if we have not previously encountered the particular choice with which we may be faced on any given day. With the law of God written on our hearts, we feel that we must make good choices so that when we die we will go to heaven. The problem is, according to Scripture, that one bad choice – one – condemns us and keeps us from heaven. Bad choices are inevitable because we are sinners by nature. Our only hope of heaven is to

trust the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross as payment for our sins. In repentance and faith, we are saved and counted as righteous before the Lord.

So, if good works cannot make us worthy of heaven, do they really matter after we are saved? YES! Good works always matter! It is *never* okay to think that because I am saved, the way that I live is not important. Remember, even though the Law cannot save us, it expresses the character of God and his requirement for our lives. We are made in his image and should always want to live according to our Creator's design. But, we cannot accomplish that in our own strength. Only in our union with Jesus can we live in a way that pleases him, and that by the power of the Holy Spirit. That is why the title of the message is "Grace-Filled Choices." Obey God – absolutely! Remember, though, we do not obey in order to be accepted by God, but, rather, we obey Scripture because Jesus loves us and has redeemed us, filling our hearts with gratitude and a desire to live for him.

Is this confusing to you? Hopefully, as we work through the text, Hebrews 12:12-17, it will become clearer. In order to make sense of today's text, though, we have to realize that verse 12 is building on the first few verses of Hebrews 12, so in order to get a fuller understanding, we will read Hebrews 12:1-3, then today's text, verses 12-17. It is our custom to stand for the reading of God's Word, so if you will please stand, I will be reading from the ESV.

1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. 3

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

12 Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. 14 Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. 15 See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; 16 that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. 17 For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

For those of you who are only getting here over the last few weeks or months, we are nearing the end of a study on the profound NT book of Hebrews, which is equivalent to a sermon on paper. Hebrews was written to a small group of mostly, if not entirely, Jewish believers, who were giving serious thought to walking away from Jesus and going back to the keeping of the Law for their hope of salvation. It was likely the prospect of severe persecution of Christians that provoked the consideration of many to hang with God, just not with Jesus. One of the prominent themes of Hebrews is a stern warning about the consequences of walking away from Jesus. Next week we will encounter the last of five warning passages in Hebrews.

It is important to consider the larger context of the warnings as we come to this passage about proper choices and holiness. Time and again in Hebrews I have thought surely the author was saying, “You had better watch your conduct if you want to be saved in the end,” but, rather, time and again what he was actually saying was, “You had better trust Jesus and not your good works for salvation.”

At the same time, it is abundantly clear from Scripture that when Jesus unites himself with an individual, his or her life should reflect the Lord's heart for his people, which is why we find, not only 613 OT laws, but, also, 1,050 commands in the NT, many of which are restating the OT laws. In other words, it is expected that believers will make good choices. It would not be too strong to say that if you live a life that is totally inconsistent with the ways of God, you cannot have assurance that you will live eternally with the Lord. So, good works do not secure a spot for you in heaven, but the recipients of grace will live as though they belong to Jesus. That does not mean you will live a perfect life. My goodness – this life can be a struggle! It does mean, however, that you will care deeply about following the Lord and obeying his commands. It is highly unlikely that a true believer will abandon his faith.

In verse 12, the author of Hebrews encourages his readers to – well, to be encouraged. Imminent persecution has a way of focusing all of your senses, and when it occurs over a long period of time, you can imagine that it is quite draining. Remember, verse 12 is tied to the opening of chapter 12 where believers are exhorted to run the race, well. In a long-distance race, it is almost inevitable that the runners will tire and maybe even think, “I can't do this.” It is always helpful when teammates and coaches and supporters shout encouragement to endure. “Hang in there! You can do this!” That is the exhortation of verses 12-13. But, there is so much more being said than simply, “Hang in there!” As is the case with a great number of the verses in Hebrews, if an OT verse is not being quoted directly, there is certainly an allusion to the verse. Whenever a NT author quotes an OT verse, he expects his readers to know the context surrounding the verse he quotes. Verse 12 recalls Isaiah 35 and verse 13 comes from Proverbs 4:26.

We are going to spend a few minutes in Isaiah 35 to see exactly how the author was using it and how relevant it is for us in our time, but

since it is unlikely that any of us will be dragged out of our homes in the middle of the night tonight and executed tomorrow, it would be good for us to think about ways that the truth from Isaiah might encourage us. It may be that you are facing persecution on a lower level, such as being by-passed for a promotion at work, or ostracized by friends, neighbors or families. That can be quite discouraging. So can a protracted illness or a broken relationship or having a parent, child, or sibling who walks away from Jesus. Maybe you are discouraged in your marriage. Your marriage may be failing, or it could be you are committed to God's design until death do you part and your marriage is far from great and yet, here you are. For the rest of your life. Maybe you desperately want your marriage to be a beautiful picture of Christ and the church, as Ephesians 5 tells us it is, but your spouse doesn't have the same level of commitment. Maybe your roommate or suitemate is not an easy person. Maybe you did not get into the school you desired. Maybe dealing with your aging parents is more difficult than you could have imagined – on many levels. In other words, this text applies to you. Isaiah 35:1-8:

**1 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;
the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus;
2 it shall blossom abundantly
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.
3 Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
4 Say to those who have an anxious heart,
“Be strong; fear not!
Behold, your God
will come with vengeance,
with the recompense of God.**

He will come and save you.”
5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
6 then shall the lame man leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.
For waters break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
7 the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.
8 And a highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Way of Holiness;
the unclean shall not pass over it.
It shall belong to those who walk on the way;
even if they are fools, they shall not go astray.

Back in Hebrews 12:14, the author will say that without holiness, no one will see the Lord. I am sure it is related to Isaiah 35:8, but we will focus on Isaiah 35:3-4 for a moment. As we saw from the first two verses, the context for this passage is the restoration of all things, which, in these NT days, we understand will happen at Jesus’ Second Coming. God’s promise to his covenant people in verses 3-4 was, and, is, “Though you are suffering now, you can trust the God who will come for you. He will come with vengeance against the enemies of his people, against those who persecute you. He will come to save you.”

To the troubled believers who first heard the sermon we know as Hebrews, the encouragement from Isaiah must have been especially meaningful. Though the enemies of God’s people seem to have total control and power over the church, the day will come when God will deliver his people and will judge their enemies, as well.

Now, you may be thinking, “I would feel guilty to be happy that God is going to avenge my enemies.” No wonder you would feel that way – believers are called to forgive their enemies in the same way Jesus did. Our time is not a time to wish ill for anyone, but it *is* a time to trust God to do the right thing – always. Even as we are called to pursue justice in our day, we understand that only when Jesus returns will justice fully be obtained. That is the promise of the resurrection. When you get past your squeamishness about God exacting vengeance against his enemies, who often also oppose his people, you will recognize the importance and benefit of trust.

It is right that we call for justice in our day. It is equally important to recognize that there can be no complete justice apart from the cross and resurrection of Jesus. When someone does something to hurt you, that wrong can never be undone. You can never go back to before it happened. There can be confession and repentance, and there can be some level of compensation for what has been done to you, and, truly, you can forgive and be free from bitterness, but the wrong cannot be undone. Until the resurrection of our bodies, that is. Jesus’ resurrection is the promise of our resurrection to eternal life. Do not despair in these uncertain days. Trust God to make all things right in his time and in his sovereign wisdom.

In Hebrews 12, verse 14, you will discover that when you trust God to take care of inequities in this life, you will find yourself in a better place to strive for peace with everyone. The peace is first and foremost, here on earth with other believers, but it can surely be applied to all of humankind. We are also called to strive for holiness, because without holiness, we will not be allowed into heaven. The emphasis, here, is that we are to help one another strive for holiness and to keep a gospel perspective with regard to a world that has come unhinged.

At first blush, verse 14 sounds exactly like, “You better watch your step or you will not be saved,” but before that thought can form in our minds, verse 15 reminds us that holiness comes as the result of God’s grace, not human effort. When you base your life on the standard of good works, it is easy to become bitter when life doesn’t go according to how you think it should go. And, since you are basing your life on Law instead of grace, like Esau, you build a Law that will work for you. It is predictable that when the consequences of your choices are painful, you will react with whining and bitterness. It is not that Esau was sorry for what he had done – he was sorry about the consequences of his choices. Let’s look at verses 16-17 a little more closely:

16 (See to it) that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. 17 For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

You remember the story of Jacob and Esau, how Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew because he was hungry. Later, Jacob tricked his father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing that should have gone to the eldest. It is interesting that there is no NT rebuke of Jacob for his deceit, but Esau is said to have been sexually immoral. The OT does not tell us that Esau was sexually immoral, but Jewish tradition says so. There are a lot of scholars, though, that think the author of Hebrews was indicating that Esau was spiritually unfaithful, that he despised God’s blessing to him as the firstborn, and that he threw away a relationship with God. It was akin to spiritual adultery. All because he was hungry. Choices matter. When Hebrews tells us he sought a place of repentance, but found none, it simply means that he sought to reverse Isaac’s blessing of Jacob, but it was too late. The point the author was making to his readers was clear to them – do not walk away from God’s offer of salvation to you in Jesus. More about this next week.

So, let's finish our time this morning with a few points of application from our text, beginning with:

1. Choices matter – and the most important choice is Jesus

This is the whole point of the book of Hebrews. I hope your only confidence of heaven is in Jesus and not in your own ability to keep the Law. How you live your life is absolutely important, but, remember, it is only by God's grace through Jesus and the Holy Spirit that our obedience has any meaning whatsoever. Second:

2. You may not be as weary as you think you are – find strength in the promises of God

The recipients of the letter of Hebrews were pretty discouraged, wondering if they had been wrong about Jesus. Maybe you are not questioning your relationship with Jesus, but maybe an unexpected illness or the shock of a broken relationship has you weary. Or, the relentless pace of your life may have you exhausted. Your heart is heavy and your arms and hands are drooping. Let the Lord bring healing to your soul as he reminds you in his Word that at the resurrection, all will be restored to perfection on the basis of Jesus' death and resurrection. Pursue justice, but, remember that justice is ultimately only found at the cross. As you find strength from the Lord in his word, be careful to:

3. Take seriously the responsibility to help your brothers and sisters walk in holiness

According to our text, we are to help one another maintain unity in the body, to help one another pursue holiness by pursuing Jesus, and we are to help one another deal with life's disappointments, fighting bitterness by trusting God's good promises to his children.

Trying to live this life on your own is like trying to win a baseball game against another team when your team consists only of you. Impossible! The Christian life is not designed to be lived on its own, so quit trying to do that. Join the church, if this is where you think God is leading you, connect with a home group, invest in a ministry. Get connected! But also remember, the main focus of this point is not about connecting with others so that they can help you, but it is a command to help other believers to persevere in their pursuit of holiness. If you are going to obey this charge, then you will need to:

4. Keep short accounts with God

Esau made one decision that cost him everything. One! Esau's problem was that he was all about Esau. That seems to so quickly become our problem as well, even as his children when our hope of eternal life is only in Jesus. Esau didn't really repent, he simply regretted the way his life had gone, even though he was responsible for much of the disappointments he endured. The lesson for us is to repent quickly and often as we are aware of our sinful thoughts, desires, and behavior. Furthermore, trust God in all things. If you are bitter about the way things are in your life, it is likely because you are following Esau's pattern of a self-absorbed life. Believe me, I am preaching to myself as much as I am to you! That is why we need to repent, often. When our accounts with God are short, we are in a position to apply this text in this last manner:

5. Obey God's commands by his grace

Since our obedience to God's Word is only meaningful in Jesus, let the grace of God fill your heart and mind every day, working in you a spirit of obedience. Hebrews has told us that our great high priest endured the weaknesses of human flesh and did so without sin. Because of the access we have to God's throne as a result of his sacrifice, we can find help from the one who lived perfectly, even

though he was tempted by sin. Is it a big deal whether I sin or not as a believer? YES! It is a big deal! If you belong to Jesus, you will want to obey him. You will also know in your heart that it is not a one and done choice you make to follow him – it is a day-in and day-out life. As you look to the Lord, let his grace wash over you, causing his holiness to be your passionate pursuit. Let's pray.

As you come to pray, confess your sins to the Lord. I will give you a moment. Now, focus on the Trinity. Worship God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. If you have trusted Jesus as your Savior, he adores you and wouldn't take anything for you – you are the apple of his eye! Furthermore, every good thing in your life? It's from him! You may be miserable in your sin, wondering how you will ever get out. John Piper, quoting his friend, said, we worshiped our way into sin, we must worship our way out of sin. We can begin right now. Would you please stand?