

## DARK BREWED HEBREWS PART 6



### (Heb 12:1-17)

Like a good dark brew (of either coffee or beer), this portion of the book of Hebrews delivers the kind of “kick in the pants” that is always appreciated when the pressures and temptations of this life have got us feeling like compromise is the only option. This was the situation of Jewish (i.e. Hebrew) Christians living in the first century – the original audience of the letter. Scholars believe it to have been written sometime in the early to mid-sixties—the same time as the Neronian persecution. Per the edict of Caesar, all those claiming to be Christian w/in the Roman empire were open game to be tortured or killed. As a result, great temptation was placed upon the covenant community to temporarily turn away from the Faith – or at least hide their Faith, until things got better. For the Jewish Christians, that meant going back to their former religion (Judaism). In their minds, this was both an acceptable alternative to Christianity and an accessible safe-haven from the raging Roman storm. The author of Hebrews however knew that such compromise was not only eternally dangerous, but largely due to wrong perspective. In other words, how these Jewish Christians were interpreting their Faith and current situation was very different from the view or vantage point of God. It is here then that the author expects us to feel the jolt back to reality. If you are beginning to feel like the Christian life is too hard, or that the preservation of God’s people will (at times) require a little “letting off the gas”, now is the time to take a sip of the following dark-brewed truths:

#### 1. Countless saints have run the Christian race w/faithful endurance until the end (1).

The overwhelming evidence (“so great cloud of witnesses”) proves we can do it (“run w/endurance the race set before us”) if we put away ghetto thinking (“lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely”) (Deu 30:11).

#### 2. Jesus is the One Who establishes the standard/definition of faithful endurance expected of us (2-4).

We are to be continually “looking to Jesus” (or His life) as the definition of faithfulness – and more importantly, what God is expecting of us if we are to be identified as those winning our Christian race. As such, when asking the question, “Am I being faithful?” It is not others in the church we are to be comparing ourselves to – but (again), Jesus.

#### 3. One of the biggest reasons we fail to faithfully endure is b/c we have the wrong perspective on trials.

According to the author of Hebrews, trials – or more importantly, our successful response to them, is incredibly vital to our Christian growth and salvation.

#### 4. Faithful endurance requires a church with the right focus.

What does God say the church should be most concerned w/? Where should she spend the majority of her time? What must be the essentials of her ministry? What things should she preoccupy herself w/as the things that matter most? That is what is meant by “right focus”. And that is what the author of Hebrews reveals in this last section of verses (14-17). They represent God’s prescriptive focus for the church; those areas vital to faithful endurance in the Christian Faith; those areas (then) which must be the “majors” (versus the minors) in the pursuit, practice, preaching, promotion and prevention of the church, if her people are to (Verse 1), “run w/endurance the race set before” them - or (Verse 4), “resist to the point of shedding (their) blood” – or (Verse 5) “not regard lightly the discipline (or training) of the Lord”. That the author is indeed drawing our attention to the responsibility of the church is apparent based on the corporate/communal nature of his commands - i.e. their fulfillment requires others or the oversight of the community (Verse 14 – “Strive for peace w/everyone” w/Verse 15 – “See to it that no one fails to obtain...”, and Verse 16 – “[See to it] that no one is sexually immoral...”). This is additionally confirmed by the fact that the church is the contextual setting of his instruction before and after what is said (here) (e.g. 3:6, 10:21, 12:22, 13:7, 17, 24). That being said, these verses (in 12:14-17) also become a powerful tool for answering a priceless question, “What should I look for when shopping for the right church - one that won’t lead me astray but will keep me on the narrow way?” (since that once more is the end goal our faithful endurance – is it not?). With that (also) in mind (then) consider what the author reveals not only from the perspective of faithful endurance but also what identifies a true (or right) church versus a false (wrong) church *and* (w/o manipulation of the text or any attempt to drive a personal agenda) how what is taught is *exactly the focus of Denver Reformed Church*:

##### 4.1. The Pursuit Of Justice For All People.

**(14) “Strive** (Literally, “You – plural, strive”) **for peace with everyone”** = Given to our imaginations this command becomes something along the lines of, “don’t be argumentative, divisive. Don’t fight w/or provoke people” or even, “don’t say bad things about people (since that leads to fighting, division – or an unpeaceful situation)”. If (however) any of that was what the author of Hebrews had in mind then not only would Jesus be considered to have failed miserably during His earthly life but also to have incurred its accompanying consequence (“strive for peace...**without which no one will see the Lord**” = you will not spend eternity in heaven w/God – Mat 5:8; as it re: to Jesus being argumentative, fighting or saying mean things to people – e.g. Luk 11:38-54, 12:51-56). The author (of Hebrews) himself speaks division-causing, provocative words (see 13:10 = The Jewish leaders/priests are going to Hell if they do not turn away from Judaism to Christ since until then, they cannot partake of His saving sacrifice). The right/correct interpretation of this portion of verse 14 is not (then) a call to avoiding controversy or confrontation w/others. Like the rest of the NT, his words find their meaning in OT (In re: to interpreting the NT thru the OT – see Eph 1:10 – “unite” [ESV -horrible translation], “summed up” [NAS] = recapitulated – i.e. to repeat in a different form/application – Rom 13:9; Col 2:11-12; the repeat of the Creation account in Gen 1 and 2; the repeat of the events surrounding 70 AD and God’s divorce from OC Israel in Rev 6-11 and 15-16 w/the seven seals and bowls). Important also to our understanding of the author’s command, is the distinction between peace itself and striving for it. One is a state the other an action. It is obvious that the author’s concern is the latter of the two – meaning that what he is actually calling for is that which produces – or is the result of peace. Putting all of this together reveals a concern for justice – or the practice of justice, since this (according to the OT) is the way one goes about seeking or “striving for peace w/everyone (or all people – not just our Christian brothers and sisters)”. IOW: To have peace w/others requires the pursuit of justice for all people (Num 25:3-13; Isa 32:1-17, 48:18-20, 54:10-14, 59:8-15; Jer 6:13; Mal 2:1-9 w/17; This is what Jesus and His kingdom w/b characterized by – Jer 33:15-16; Isa 42:1-3 “nations” = everyone; Isa 53:1-5 w/1Pe 2:24). These passages reveal something else necessary to a proper understanding of the Hebrews text. And that is the kind of peace. The concern is not absence of strife (once more, how our imaginative mind tends to view the word), but rather (the absence of) danger. It is the peace associated with feeling safe or secure from harm (see again, Jer 33:16). Such a connection between peace (as safety or security) and justice should not be foreign to us. Both are the assumptions which make up familiar statements like, “Back in the day nobody locked their doors or worried about walking home alone” (i.e. in the past, society was more just, giving us the peace that our homes and travels were safe from harm or danger).

This (then) is the message being communicated by the author of Hebrews when he says “strive for peace w/ everyone”. This is what he is exhorting the church to see as an essential part of her overall mission or focus: the peace, safety or security that is afforded to all people when they are a part of a community/society committed to the pursuit of justice since in that kind of a place/community, the innocent are protected and the guilty punished; equity is enforced and partiality (favoritism) overthrown; the righteous are empowered and the wicked enslaved/burdened. In equal dose of contrast, when a community does not pursue justice as one of her foci, the wicked become the empowered ones - and fear, danger and oppression - the plight of everyone (Ecc 8:11)<sup>1</sup>. IOW: There is no peace! Hence the saying, “no peace for the wicked.” Justice (then) is the way of peace (or again, striving for peace w/everyone). Justice is also (btw) how we love and forgive others, show grace to others - as well as demonstrate our repentance to God (As it re: to love [treating others justly or according to what justice demands] = Lev 19:15-18 w/Rom 13:8-10; As it re: to forgiveness [justice w/mercy - i.e. the removal of moral or material shortages versus justice w/o mercy or the removal of moral or material shortages] = Num 14:19-23 w/Deu 29:18-20; As it re: to grace [affording to others the opportunity to serve justice and receive mercy] = Zec 12:10-13:9; Rom 3:23-31; Heb 12:15 w/Deu 29:18-20; As it re: to repentance [serving justice or seeing justice served in re: to self] = Luk 3:8-14). A church (then) devoted to pursuing justice will not only be a church striving for (and realizing) real peace (or security) among its members, but also a place characterized by biblical love, forgiveness, grace and repentance. However, what this looks like in practice is often what confuses people since it means showing no partiality - i.e. everybody is treated/receives the same thing or operates by the same rules no matter who they are in the church (Exo 23:3; Deu 16:19-20; Lev 19:15; 1Ti 5:21; Jam 2:1, 9). It means also, no toleration (or pity) for those who practice sin and punishing people according to what God’s law requires when they do (Deu 19:21). What ultimately causes people to not understand (or accept) such measures of justice is their heart (Pro 28:5).

#### 4.2. The Practice Of Careful Obedience To All Of God’s Laws.

**(14) “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness”** = Like the prior point, the concept of holiness also falls prey to imaginative ideas that has no basis in Scripture. For example, it is not uncommon for people to understand the term more according to the heretical movement known as “pietism” than its biblical roots<sup>2</sup>. As such those in this camp, would view anyone given more to the experiential as the true holy-men/women among us – especially if the experience is foreign/different from our culture since anything exotic is considered more “spiritual”, “filled w/the spirit” or “holy” (e.g. Pentecostals/Charismatics infatuation w/those who claim to have visions, prophecy, do miracles, or are passionate about foreigners and foreign missions. Hence why their ministries seem to always include the title, “international” or “worldwide”). There are also those who equate holiness w/being soft-spoken, polite, very ascetic and all-around boring. For these people, holiness is found in monasteries or nunneries. As discussed however, biblical holiness is defined very differently. And the people the Bible identifies among its most holy, were not feeling-based, anti-intellectuals nor a bunch of polite, soft-spoken, ascetics/monks (e.g. Jesus = Joh 7:19-24 w/Luk 7:31-35). The word instead (as we saw) refers to one whose priority in life is to please God (1Co 7:32-34). To be even more specific, it refers to one whose priority is strict/careful obedience to all that God has said – i.e. His law (Num 15:40; e.g. Num 27:12-14 w/20:8-13 w/Neh 1:8). No doubt this is also why the author calls it “*the holiness*” (versus simply holiness). He is attempting to distinguish the holiness he is speaking about from all the run-of-the-mill versions in existence; to make it clear that not just any form of holiness will do (or be accepted by God). That this indeed would have been necessary even among Jews instructed in the Bible (like his original audience) can be demonstrated given their past history – which in many respects, is simply a reflection of all humanity (Num 15:37-16:35 = Though instructed as to the proper definition of holiness -most specifically, careful obedience to God’s Laws, they still deceived themselves into believing false ideas about holiness/that it was something that could be possessed w/o the need for careful obedience. Is this not why the author of Hebrews says what he does in 3:12-16? Is not the deceit of Korah and co. the version of holiness being embraced by Evangelical church today – i.e. “We are all holy regardless of if we obey”?) So then, to “strive” for this (or “for...holiness”) means - in respect to the church, one whose priority is to teach people all of God’s Law (every jot and tittle); and to see that they are obedient to it (every jot and tittle).<sup>3</sup> Therefore what we should also expect to find in a church whose focus is God’s Law (and as a result are making obedience to God’s Law their priority), is constant conversation about those two subjects: obedience and God’s Law (since these are again- the essential ingredients of holiness). On the flip-side, what we should not expect (and what would most certainly be a sign that we are in the wrong church), are pastors/congregation who always seem to shy away from such conversations or warn (or even condemn) too much talk about the Law or obedience - i.e. who say that such things are “legalism” or promoting a “works-based salvation.” The Bible never condones either legalism or a works-based salvation – but it does demand a holiness-based salvation! This then is why (once more) the author of Hebrews warns “**without which** (i.e. w/o this “holiness”) **no one will see the Lord.**” Biblical salvation is very much dependent on holiness. IOW: If you want to get to heaven, then you will live a life that practices holiness (And don’t forget the point of verse 1 since it most certainly applies here – you can do it! Countless others already have). What else depends on holiness (or careful obedience to God’s Law as our priority and practice) is justice (our prior discussion). Without the Law, there can be no justice; which means the purpose of God’s Law is that as well (i.e. to create a system by which justice and all of its benefits can become a reality for people in the world/church). As such, where there is no law (or a rejection of God’s Law), there is no justice (Hab 1:1-4).

#### 4.3. Additional practical application (based on what we have already learned):

4.3.1. Pursuing justice (and subsequently loving others – esp. our bros and sis’) requires that we not turn a blind eye to their sin (Ecc 8:1-5; Pro 24:12, 28:4; Mat 18:15; Jam 5:19-20).

4.3.2. Practicing careful obedience to all of God’s Law requires loving God w/all of your heart and your neighbor as yourself (since there is a lot to learn and w/o such love, no one would take the time).

<sup>1</sup> Protection of the innocent, enforcing of equitable standards and empowering of the righteous are the biblical components necessary for defining or identifying a just society or a community where justice is pursued (Deu 25:1 w/Job 4:7; Job 34:10-12; Exo 23:7 w/Psa 18:16-20). As such, it can be deduced that many of the laws/philosophies of our American society are unjust – since they function to destroy these things (e.g. The establishment of sanctuary policies and cities – Denver being one such city; Churches passing out food to bums or Christians giving money to street-corner beggars). Each is a kindness which creates inequality (since each creates a double standard and empowers the rebellious and lazy). In the spirit of Milton Friedman, “Mercy before justice will end in neither; Justice before mercy will afford both in great measure”.

<sup>2</sup> Pietism, whose influence spans from the time of the Reformation to even now, views experience or feelings over reason or thinking. In the words of 18<sup>th</sup> century Pietist leader Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf, “religion can be grasped without the conclusions of reason ... religion must be a matter which is able to be grasped through experience alone without any concept ... there is less at stake in the concepts than the truth of experience; errors in doctrine are not as bad as errors in [experience] ... reason weakens experience”.

<sup>3</sup> This (btw) is what I mean by “careful obedience”. It means that everything in God’s Law is incredibly important to understand and obey- even the stuff we deem “minor”. This was the view of Jesus (Mat 5:17-20) and the criteria by which Paul could claim himself to be a pastor free from condemnation of the coming stricter judgment (Act 20:26-27 w/Jam 3:1).