

Persevere in the faith with right living (Hebrews 12:14–17)

From chapter 1 onward the author of Hebrews has exalted Jesus Christ and encouraged his audience to remain firm in their faith. He exhorts them to hold fast their confession, encourage one another, and endure. Following the examples of faith in chapter 11 he again exhorts them to persevere, accepting trials as Fatherly discipline intended to produce “the peaceful fruit of righteousness”. The exhortations continue in verse 14, showing that perseverance in the faith is not only right belief but also right living, including the right goals and the right concern for other believers.

I. *Perseverance pursues the right goals (12:14).*

1. *Pursue peace with all.*

‘Pursue’ implies an intensity and haste, much like fleeing from danger (2 Tim 2:22). Peace is being in harmony with others, not merely a lack of hostility, though it may not be possible despite all your efforts (Rom 12:18). Believers can pursue peace even with their enemies (cf. Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27–28), but how much more with fellow believers. Therefore, seek reconciliation (Matt 5:23–24) and grant forgiveness freely (Eph 4:32).

2. *Pursue holiness.*

Peace is not pursued at the cost of holiness. The holiness or sanctification in this verse is most likely the present work of God shaping us into the image of Christ, “that we may share in His holiness” (12:10; cf. Rom 8:28–29). When trials come, ‘make every effort’ to respond to them in a holy, God-pleasing fashion. The lack of holiness means a lack of the discipline which produces the holiness, and a lack of discipline means that that person is not a child of God (12:8; cf. Matt 5:8).

The Christian life is neither legalism nor license. The true child of God has been saved by grace and lives by grace, but now desires to do what pleases our heavenly Father. The true believer will put out every effort to pursue peace and holiness.

II. *Perseverance has the right concern for other believers (12:15–17).*

1. *We are all responsible to help our brothers and sisters in Christ.*

“See to it” continues the previous sentence (lit., “seeing to it”), developing what it means to pursue peace and holiness. It is to “look after each other” (NLT; cf. 1 Pet 5:2 “exercise oversight”). It is the responsibility of each believer, not merely elders.

2. *Help others guard against becoming these three types of people.*

a. One who misses the grace of God (v.15a)

A believer can “come short” of God’s grace to live the Christian life by, for example, failing to take advantage of God’s provision in temptation (1 Cor 10:13).

b. One who is a root of bitterness (v.15b)

If Deuteronomy 29:18–19 is in mind, then this refers to a person who bears bitter or poisonous fruit, thinking he is safe because he is part of God’s people but persisting in his own way. Such a person will affect others. Defilement is the opposite of the holiness believers should pursue. The warning is like that of Paul in 1 Corinthians 5. Correction is needed for the sake of the “root” and the congregation.

c. One who is sexually immoral or godless (v.16)

Sexual intimacy outside of God’s design for marriage of a man and a woman is immoral. “Godless” (“unholy”, “worldly”, or “profane”) is a focus on the temporal and material rather than the spiritual and eternal. Esau illustrates clearly the latter, by selling his birthright (the double portion inheritance of the firstborn) for a single meal (Gen 25:29–34). He also illustrates the danger of which the author has already warned (6:1–8): a point may come when a person finds “no place for repentance.”

We may not share all the trials which the audience of this letter endured, but as children of God we are guaranteed the hardships of discipline and therefore need this challenge to persevere. Perseverance is not passive, but active; it is not merely individual, but a community task. Pursue peace and holiness, helping others to do the same, and receiving help from others as we together look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith and the model of faithful endurance.

Questions for further thought and discussion:

- How have you actively pursued peace with others? Where is it a struggle? What could help?
- In what ways can you better pursue holiness? Is it a problem if you don’t see the need? Why/why not?
- Why do many Christians hesitate to “look out for each other” in the manner described in these verses? How would you like to be “looked out for”?
- When do we go to another person? Why do we go? How should we go?