

A Firm Resolve
Hebrews 12:12-17
10/28/2018
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This morning it is Hebrews 12:12-17, A Firm Resolve. Last week we looked together at Never Give Up, the call to run in the midst of persecution and to not give up. But that cannot happen without the aid and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ strengthening us by His Spirit through the gift of His Scriptures and the blessing and gift of prayer. But we are called to a firm resolve. And that firm resolve is something we have to renew again and again, indeed, even daily. Hear now God's Word, Hebrews 12.

Therefore, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees and make straight paths for your feet so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. 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. That no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau who sold his birthright for a single meal. 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. [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please pray with me.

Now, Lord, we ask that you would open our hearts, strengthen our minds, and strengthen our wills that we might have a firm resolve to follow you. Help us, O Lord, because you have given those who call upon your name, who are saved by grace through faith, that we can have new wills, new hearts to say yes to godliness and no to unrighteousness. And to do so, aided and strengthened by your Spirit to persevere, to obtain the grace that is ours in Christ Jesus. Help us, we pray. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

So, I'm sorry not sorry, but today you're going to hear almost exclusively quotes from one of my favorite books from one of my favorite authors who passed this last week, Eugene Peterson, who was a pastor here in Maryland for 25 years and then spent the rest of his life devoting himself to writing and to mentoring young pastors. Though I didn't learn from him in person, I learned from him through his books while in seminary and throughout ministry. But the book that is one of my greatest encouragements is *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. It is a great assistance to the passage here illustrating what we're called to this morning. So, to make you aware, yes, I'm quoting from that book almost exclusively other than the Scriptures. So, there you go. So, get the book, how about that. It's good for everyone.

So, let's turn together. As you see this passage that I have read, I want you to note that I've given in the outline three verbs: Strengthen, Strive, and Guard. So, let's look together to these three imperatives, which I believe these verses call us to both literally and then, in so many words, strengthen, strive, and guard.

So, as we were talking last week, he was encouraging the body of Christ and these house churches to be willing and to understand that if it is Christ who had to suffer the insults and persecution of those around Him, so, too, would those who call on His name by faith. And so, he's encouraging them that the trials and tribulations and persecution which they face, even though they have not yet faced them to the point of shedding their own blood, they may very well face that. And so, he's calling them to not give up because it is Christ who went before them, it is Christ who is with them, and as Augustine says in his confessions, it is Christ who will carry us at the end to the end.

So, he then makes a pivot that even though he calls us to not give up, it still requires that we exercise our spiritual muscles. And he uses it through talking about our physical muscles not because our physical bodies are secondary. No, no, no. As you will see throughout this passage, it requires the discipline of our physical bodies. It is a mere metaphor. But it is our spirit, soul, and body which are kept

by God's grace blameless until He comes again. But we must still continue to exercise these muscles. And so, this is what we are called to in this firm resolve.

And he begins in verse 12 by simply saying, "Strengthen, lift up your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees. Make straight paths for your feet so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather healed." He is acknowledging now here, specifically, in these house churches are those who call upon the name of the Lord. And if you are a person here this morning who professes Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, we recognize that depending on the day, our hands and knees are strong or they are weak. But he's calling us to the reality that because there are days where we are strong and days where we are weak, there are days when indeed our muscles and our joints are completely out of place and they require healing. And he gives this imperative to strengthen.

But what does it mean? He's calling us yet again into this real reality. And here, I want us to embrace this, that there is learning. That the walk with Jesus Christ in this life – that we must face the harsh, mundane, and yet beautiful truths of following Christ in this life requires getting up every day and by God's grace renewing to walk by strength. Strength that is not our own, but nonetheless, requires our strength. In other words, we are not the source of the strength, but His grace and Word is. And so, therefore, as we seek to give ourselves to the Lord in prayer and in the Word, we're strengthened. We then exercise it. But we're still the ones who have to make the choice to give ourselves to Him.

As we've been walking through this letter, this sermon of the Hebrews, if you are a professing Christian, you are no longer enslaved to sin. It is no longer your master. Because those who do not believe, the Scriptures teach us, are enslaved to sin, therefore, not able to choose and walk in obedience. But those who profess faith are freed from enslavement to sin and are enabled to choose righteousness, to walk in obedience, not perfectly because sin is still present which is why he's talking about it. But nonetheless, we're not just waiting around to suddenly become strong again. We choose to go to the source of strength.

This was Eugene Peterson's whole point behind *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* when he says,

"For perseverance is not resignation, putting up with things the way they are or staying in the same old rut year after year or being a doormat for people to wipe their feet on. Endurance is not a desperate hanging on, but a traveling from strength to strength. The central reality for Christians is the personal, unalterable, persevering commitment God makes to us."

The only way we can endure is to begin with the fact of God the Father's unalterable, personal, persevering commitment to us. And because of His faithfulness and His grace, we can choose by His Word to go from strength to strength. Perseverance, then, is not the result of our determination. It is the result of God's faithfulness. We survive in the way of faith not because we have extraordinary stamina, but because God is righteous and because God sticks with us.

So, how does this work itself out? The whole backdrop of the book *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* was that Peterson took a series of Psalms, Psalm 120 to Psalm 134, as the backdrop of calling us to endurance and perseverance founded first on God's faithfulness to us. And I want to read this to you as the preacher says, "Lift up your drooping hands, strengthen your weak knees," he wants us to remember these promises just like this, Psalm 121:

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made Heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved. He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold! He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper. The Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night.

The Lord will keep you from all evil. He will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

So, what does this mean for us? It means I need to be reminded of these promises and of the source of our perseverance every single day. But that is hard. It is hard not because what the Lord says is unclear or not accessible. It's because, frankly, the tyranny of the urgent crowds out the most important things.

I want to encourage you to think about just one practice – which I have practiced in my own walk and faith with the Lord. And there are seasons where I'm firing on all cylinders, and there are days where it's like, ugh. So, I'm right there with you. Do you know that if you took the Psalms and read two in the morning, one at noon, and two at night you would make it through the entire book of Psalms in one month? Five a day. Or if you want to, simply begin with Psalms 120 to 134. Read one a day and read it over and over again throughout that day. Because we are reminded it is the Lord who is with us. It is the Lord who strengthens us and not ourselves.

But when we realize that, our response to those promises means that as we pick up that Word and we're reminded of His promises, we are strengthened. It changes our minds. It strengthens our weak knees. It calls us to perseverance. It reminds us that we are His, the sheep of His pasture. Strengthen your weak knees.

This is not only the verb that he says to us, which is to strengthen these elements of our bodies, but also to strive. When he says to us in verse 14, "Strive for peace with everyone for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." He says strive for peace and for holiness. So, this idea here of striving is very much like the strength. In other words, it is a whole-hearted pursuit. It becomes a priority. So, the priority is, again, as we seek holiness, what we seek is to be filled – as the psalmist says – to be filled with the promises of God so, therefore, we meditate on His Word day and night.

But this idea of striving for peace, what does he mean by "peace" here? It's something pretty interesting. Here, he's not talking about seeking reconciliation with those with whom you have a broken relationship, though that is within the semantic range and it may call for you to do that. But that's not first and foremost what he has in view. What he has in view here of striving for peace, in other words, it means striving for unity or in another word solidarity. The idea here of striving for peace or solidarity or unity in Christ with those who believe means that we're not in this alone. It is a recognition that we run with endurance, that we are filled with strength, our knees are strengthened because we're not on our own. We need the encouragement, we need the solidarity, that there are others with us in this walk, which is a call to love one another, to encourage one another, to speak truth in love to one another.

Have you had someone come to you and say to you: I'm concerned about you, this is what I have heard. Or: this is what you said to me, I am concerned about you; are you concerned about me? Have you had someone do that? How have you responded?

This is not tip-toeing around the things that you're concerned about in your friend's life. No. It's speaking into, or it's asking them to speak into yours. Now, that's when community and solidarity become uncomfortable. Do you have someone in your life, in this body, with whom you can say the following: do you recognize me this year as being more loving, more forgiving, more merciful than I was last year? Or to your spouse: do you recognize me as someone who is less defensive, more gracious in speech this year than I was last year?

This striving for peace is a community activity because walking the life of faith is not a solo attempt. It is aided by the triune God who Himself is a community. He calls us into a body of faith that is a community. And we seek to strive together in solidarity to strive for holiness, to be more loving, to be more forgiving, to be more gracious in our speech this year than we were last all for the glory of Him who has saved us. And it means and requires repentance. But it doesn't mean you're calling for someone else to repent. It means you lead with repentance.

Consider these words.

“Repentance is not an emotion. It is not a feeling of sorry for your sins. It is a decision. Repentance is a realization that what God wants from you and what you want from God are not going to be achieved by doing the same old things, thinking the same old thoughts. Repentance is a decision to follow Jesus Christ and to become His pilgrim in the path of peace.”

We lead not by waiting for the other to repent first. We walk by being the first repenters. My knees are weak. My hands are drooping, and I’m stuck in this rut. I am not praying. I am not in the Word. I am quick to be defensive and quick to accuse. Forgive me and help me.

This is the inconvenient truth about community in the Christian life. It’s not about how the sports are. It’s not about how the weather is. It’s not about how our children are doing. It’s the iron sharpening iron of recognizing: I need Jesus, you need Jesus; can we do this together? Which is why we have community groups. Which is why we have adult discipleship and children’s ministry. Which is why we’re not just playing spiritual bumper cars on Sunday morning. We are called together to strive for peace and holiness.

And finally, he says guard. Where does he say guard? Look together with me, verse 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. That no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau who sold his birthright for a single meal.

First, we must understand this whole call here of “no one who fails to obtain the grace,” he’s saying: be careful, be aware, be on your guard. Be on our guard for what? Be on our guard for the reality that so many times Satan needs no help in the field of temptation. We do a pretty good job on our own because of what wells up within us. So, he calls us to a sincere examination because to guard our hearts and to guard our lives for what is taking place inside us and within us, to be careful that we do not fail to obtain the grace – well what is meant there? What’s meant there is not that, yes, we receive grace and mercy, grace upon grace, super abounding grace every day. But the grace that is talked about here is eschatological sense that you would not fail to run and finish the race to obtain the grace that the Lord gives when He returns.

So, again, it’s a call to, this is a long race, a long obedience in the same direction. And so, what is he telling us to guard here? First, notice what he says, “that no root of bitterness springs up.” Now that’s interesting. The word “bitterness” there isn’t just mere complaining, though it involves that. The root of bitterness that is being spoken of here in the original language is this idea that no root of stubbornness set its place in your life. What do we mean by stubbornness? This idea of stubbornness is are you unwilling to fight the good fight, to be truthful and honest with yourself and others around you about the sin that so easily entangles? Are you stubborn about coming to the Lord and asking for forgiveness? Are you stubborn about going to his Word and remembering the promises that are ours?

And let me say this as a Presbyterian Church, and I say this as a full confessing Presbycostal. The Holy Spirit is still working, y’all. And the Word of God is not merely here for us to study and to dissect and to memorize. It is not ink on a page, praise be to God. The Word of God is living and active. So, I’m not just saying: here, go to our closets and have a quiet time, and oh, isn’t that good? No, it’s because I believe I need this Word that is living and active. And the Holy Spirit, who is present in your life and in mine, takes this Word and it gives us strength. And it will cause us to see ugliness and stubbornness and bitterness and complaining and selfishness that is rooted in us. And we must be honest with it and walk in repentance.

This is what it means to embrace the reality of being a Christian. It means that we embrace what we confess, that we are broken and desperately in need of mercy. And we lead with that not just with

ourselves but with our loved ones, with our children. Are we asking forgiveness when we hurt and wound our children?

Over the last several weeks, as I'm preparing Caroline to finish her applications for college, I recognize that when I do that, I've had to go to her – and she will tell you – I've had to go to her two or three times to ask her for forgiveness because I get frustrated. And I begin to project on her how she should be doing things because that's how I would do things, right? And I'm the dad and I justify that, and then I go away, and I send her a text and I come back.

This is the reality. Are we on guard for the stubbornness that is in us? So, the Holy Spirit who is at work in these things, we must also be aware that it is not just the root of bitterness that causes trouble and also defiles, for when we are stubborn, it is like a toxin in the bloodstream of the church of Jesus Christ. And I know I'm past my time, but we're going to keep going. It is a toxin in the bloodstream. And apathy and complaining does not become a solo sport. It infects us, which is why we need one another for encouragement.

But then he goes on and he says, "that no one is sexually immoral and unholy like Esau." Esau took his birthright and exchanged it for a meal because he was hungry, because he was unsuccessful in hunting. The whole idea there, Esau is us. Esau chooses in that moment to exchange the promises of God's covenant faithfulness, his birthright, his eternal promises, and exchanges them for an immediate momentary physical pleasure. This is the comparison. And he's saying, be careful that you are not like Esau. So, that we recognize that working in us is the same pattern.

But when he says "sexually immoral," here I want to draw your attention to a paper that has been published by the session of this church as we have sought to wrestle with this whole idea of sexuality and the Christian. I'm just going to quote a couple of different points of it.

"First and foremost, we remind all Christians of this church and all Christians everywhere that this is about a call to holiness. We believe that God has called us to live holy lives. The Christian believer's body is a temple of God's Spirit. Therefore, rather than stealing sexual privileges from one another outside of marriage, we are called to edify one another in multiple ways that we may all become more like Christ.

"Those who are married must avoid every temptation that would diminish loving faithfulness that they vowed in their marriage covenant. Those who are unmarried, regardless of sexual attraction, must seek to honor God through diligently avoiding temptation, restraining ungodly sexual impulses, focusing their energies on serving Christ and neighbor and all eagerly anticipating the new heavens and the new earth when all things will be restored and every godly human longing beautifully fulfilled."

But that is the calling to sexual faithfulness under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, married or single. But more than that, it is also a call of recovering from sexual brokenness. That because of universal human corruption emanating from the fall of Adam and Eve, we are all broken sexually in one or more ways and to varying degrees. We have all sinned. While we call upon fellow sinners everywhere to repent of their sins, as followers of Christ, we are also committed not to condemn others for their brokenness – their sexual attractions, sexual dysfunctions, or sexual addictions. Since we are all disoriented by one sin in one form or another, it is right and good for us to live in continual personal and corporate repentance humbly seeking God's help for ourselves and for our neighbor.

And then this, through repentance and faith in the crucified and resurrected Jesus we are forgiven of all of our sexual sins, washed from their impurity, and given the power of the Holy Spirit to live lives worthy of the Gospel setting an example for the watching world and inviting them to join in walking with Jesus. My friends who profess faith in Jesus Christ, we are called not to judge the world but to rather put

ourselves under the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ in humble reliance upon His grace to acknowledge our brokenness and to ask for forgiveness and to ask for grace to say yes to godliness and no to unrighteousness.

It will not just happen on a Tuesday afternoon. We must choose by all the grace which He has given us to say no, and to put ourselves in community with others that would enable us to be accountable. We are not victims of our own sinful choices. Rather in Christ, we can say yes to new obedience and be made whole and recover and to be renewed sexually, spiritually, physically, mentally, all of it. It is a work of grace and it is over a long period of time. But we begin by starting with house of Jesus Christ. This is what he is calling us to be aware of, to be on guard for. How goes it with your soul? Are you guarding?

I call you, brothers and sisters, for us to be reminded that we do not fall prey of exchanging eternal promises for momentary gratification which is here in one moment and gone the next and does not satisfy. And so, he says, "that we would not be like Esau who did not walk in repentance but turned his back on the Lord that even when he sought to repent, even in tears, he was turned away." This is a reality of what it looks like to persevere until the end. It's not that we struggle. Yes, we struggle and sin. But we are called to repent and walk in new obedience.

Here is what we are called to a firm resolve. And so, as such, we come to this. Feelings are important in many areas but completely unreliable to matters of faith. We live in what one writer has called "an age of sensation." We think that if we don't feel something, there can be no authenticity in doing it. But wisdom of God says something different. That we can act ourselves into a new way of feeling much quicker than we can feel ourselves into a new way of acting.

Let me repeat, that we can act ourselves into a new way of feeling quicker than we can feel ourselves into a new way of acting. That when we seek by God's grace to walk with a firm resolve it will often be without the attending support of our emotions. But as we give ourselves to Him strengthening, striving, and guarding, slowly but surely our emotions catch up with our new way of living. And when He returns, praise be to God, all will be made whole, mind, body, and spirit. But until that day, run and do not faint with a firm resolve by God's grace. Let's walk with Him. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this Word. I pray, Father, for your grace to heal where it needs to heal, cover for its need to cover. Strengthen us because we are weak. Enable us to walk with you as our brother Eugene Peterson did *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, that he is now part of the great cloud of witnesses that have gone before us. We now say to you, O Lord, by this Word, by your Holy Spirit, strengthen us that we may walk with you with a firm resolve. In Jesus's name. Amen.