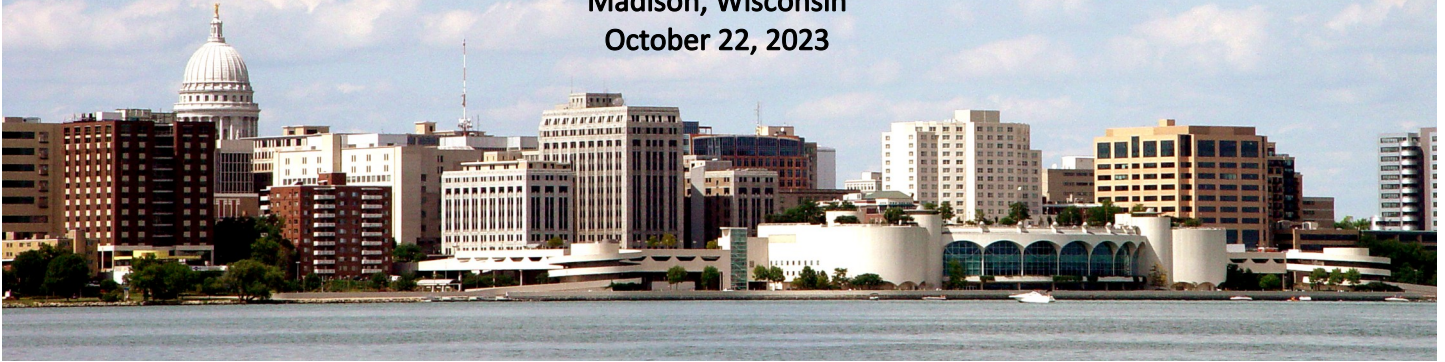


# Learning from Esau

Hebrews 12:14-17

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Good morning, and welcome to the Four Lakes congregation! If you are visiting this morning, we are glad to have you with us. We'd like to ask that you fill out a visitor card online if you can, or you can use one of the cards from the pew in front of you. Whatever works for you, we would love to hear from you, and we invite you to pass along any questions or prayer concerns.

Before we return to our study of Hebrews 12, we'd like to give just a brief overview of what God has done to save us. He sent his only Son to die in our place, to shed his blood for our forgiveness. He died on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up alive on the first day of the week. We respond to this good news through faith, repentance, confession, and baptism (a burial in water for the forgiveness of sins). And we have several examples to share this morning, with the first one coming to us from the Ninth Street congregation down in Paducah, Kentucky. They posted a few days ago, and they say that, "Heaven is rejoicing! Congratulations to Laken Hill and Solomon McIntyre who just put the Lord on in baptism this afternoon. Pray for them and their new walk with God!" And I don't know whether you can see this, but the young man on the right is wearing a shirt from Rend Lake College. Seeing that brought back some "dad memories" for me. Rend Lake is about an hour and a half north of Paducah on I-57, and if you've ever driven through there, then you might remember that heading south, Rend Lake College is on the right, and there is a prison on the left (complete with guard towers and razor wire, the Big Muddy River Correctional Institution). And every time I would drive through there with my kids, the dad in me would come out, and I would always say, "Kids, we have choices in life! College on the right or prison on the left!" Now, I wasn't saying that going to college will necessarily keep you out of prison, but as a dad I was suggesting that as we grow up, the choices we make may land us on different sides of that interstate. Anyway, I saw this young man's t-shirt this week, and I thought back to those long drives with the kids. But we are thankful that the young man in the picture definitely seems to be making some good choices!

In terms of obeying the gospel, we also have an update from the Lord's church down in Pineville, Louisiana. They say that, "This morning after services, Lilly Snock, age 13, and her uncle George Snock, put Christ on in baptism (Galatians 3:27)." This is all we know, but we rejoice that this uncle and his niece are now brother and sister in the Lord!

We also have an update from Jason Hilburn, from somewhere in India. He posted online a few days ago, and he says that,

Recently nine preachers from various denominational churches realized that they had not done what God said to be saved, and that they had not been teaching the Truth. They repented and obeyed the true Gospel of Christ to be added to Christ's church that He promised to build in Matthew 16:18. Some are pictured below. This was after months of studying, both online and in person, with brother Vandan Kumar teaching them in person or translating. The Word of God's grace (Acts 20:32) is still as powerful today as it ever was, and when hearts are honest and humble, it takes root and bears fruit! "But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience" (Luke 8:15).

So good to see this, and we hope to meet these men someday – if not in this life, then the next!

And we have saved the best for last this morning! This past Sunday evening, our own Jane Busse was baptized for the forgiveness of her sins. As many of you know, Jane was baptized when she was only 9 years old, but looking back on it, she's had some concerns through the years – concerned that she did it for the wrong reason, merely following the example of a friend. And although that can be a good motivator sometimes, we certainly know from scripture that having a proper understanding of baptism is critical. Baptism is not some magic or empty ritual; the power is not in the water itself, but the power is in our obedience to the gospel, knowing that baptism saves us, knowing that baptism is our appeal to God for a good conscience (according to 1 Peter 3:21). The question of when a person is accountable can be a difficult question sometimes, but several years ago, a friend in the Twin Cities had some good advice in the form of a question: As a parent, would you let your 9-year old sign a 30-year mortgage? Why or why not? And the answer to that question may help shed some light on when a young person is ready to obey the gospel. We asked if we could share these pictures with all of you, and Jane called a few days ago and said, "Yes, if you think it might help." And her advice to all of you is not to wait 72 years to make things right! And so, whether you were sprinkled as a baby, or whether you were immersed for some reason other than for the forgiveness of your sins, we would love to open the word of God with you immediately. Do not wait. Pull me aside after worship today, give me a call (as Jane did last Sunday afternoon), and let's make it right. But we share this today as encouragement to those of you who have not yet obeyed the gospel. This is what it looks like, and if we can help in some way, we would love to help in any way possible, and we invite you to get in touch.

This morning, we return to our study of Hebrews, a book written to encourage the early Christians (and all of us as God's people) to live by faith and to ***"run with endurance the race that is set before us."*** We are in the practical part of this book, and today we come to a brief passage where the author gives us some do's and don't's, and then he appeals to the example of Esau to drive it home. With the do's and the don't's in this passage, I was almost thinking about gardening. I've been gardening for most of my life, and I've learned over the past 50 years or so that it's important to plant and to add certain things to the garden, but it is almost just as important to remove what doesn't need to be there! And so, we may add seeds, and compost, and maybe fertilizer, but the other very important aspect of gardening is pulling weeds! Because, if we don't pull weeds, anything we've added will have been added for nothing. So also with the Christian faith, and so also in today's passage from Hebrews 12, where the author gives us a few things to PURSUE, but then he also gives us several things to AVOID.

With this in mind, let's look together this morning at Hebrews 12:14-17,

***<sup>14</sup> Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. <sup>15</sup> See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; <sup>16</sup> that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. <sup>17</sup> For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.***

This morning, as we open our hearts and minds to the word of God, let's take a look at what we're told to PURSUE, followed by what we need to AVOID.

I. And we'll start this morning by taking a look at what we are told to PURSUE in this passage.

To "*pursue*" is to chase, to move rapidly and decisively toward an objective. And it certainly seems as if the author is continuing this idea of running a race with endurance (going back to verse 1 in this chapter).

A. And the first instruction is to PURSUE PEACE WITH ALL MEN (or with EVERYONE, as it should really be translated). **\*\*PPT\*\***

So, we are to "*pursue peace with everybody*." In this case, "*peace*" is not just an absence of conflict, but "*peace*" is a state of harmony in relationships, the idea of "being okay" other people. And the author of Hebrews tells us to "*pursue*" this, to run after it, to move rapidly in that direction. Perhaps we need to repent of wrongs that we've done to others, taking the first step, showing patience, trying to understand another person. And if I decide to abandon the relationship if I haven't made every effort to fix it, then I'm not pursuing peace as I should, and I need to reevaluate my attitude and my behavior. There are times, of course, when peace is not possible. Paul recognizes this in Romans 12:18, when he says, "*If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all people*." But still, it's on us to pursue it.

Living in peace with everyone doesn't mean that I don't have some strong opinions on things. Living in peace with everyone doesn't mean that I agree with everyone on everything. Living in peace with everyone doesn't mean that I necessarily avoid certain people. But for my part, I have to make every effort. We deal with conflict early instead of ignoring it and letting it fester. We are careful with what we say. It's fine to have strong opinions, but that doesn't mean I always need to share those opinions. Perhaps we need to realize that we are in this for the long haul. Sometimes peace takes time, but it's up to us to take the first step. Again, in Romans 12, as Paul says (in verse 20), "*BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD*." Do something, even something as simple as sharing a meal. We leave revenge to God. We may hope for an apology, but if that apology never comes, we leave it to God. In speaking of Jesus, Peter says (in 1 Peter 2:23), "*and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously*."

You know, one thing I've discovered by experience is that just smiling has a way of disarming people. The world can be pretty grumpy sometimes, and I am not a grumpy person. I like smiling at people. I smile when I mow the grass. I smile when I'm blowing snow. When I'm out running, I smile and I say "Good morning!" to people. Apparently, that's not a thing among joggers! I remember my dad telling me many years ago that the day he saw a jogger smiling would be the day that he started jogging. He never started jogging! I aim to change that! When COVID started, I was the official grocery shopper for several people, and I remember

walking the aisles of Woodman's and thinking, "Everybody seems angry!" And I remember thinking, "I'm smiling, but nobody can see it." I hated that I was coming across as being angry, even though I wasn't. It bothered me, and so, as some of you know, I took a picture of my face and used it to make a mask. Now I could be completely creepy! Anyway, I abandoned this very quickly, but I had to try something. And besides the lack of death and disease, one of the best things about the end of the pandemic has been getting back to smiling at people. It's not enough to not make conflict, but God wants us to actually be at peace with everyone. Pray for opportunities, and work to create peace with everyone.

**B. The second instruction in this passage is that in addition to pursuing peace, we are also to PURSUE THE SANCTIFICATION, WITHOUT WHICH NO ONE WILL SEE THE LORD.**

And it's almost as if this qualifies the pursuit of peace. Yes, you are to pursue peace, however, you must also pursue "*sanctification,*" or "*holiness.*" And the idea is, peace is important, but we are not to pursue peace at the expense of holiness. To be holy is to be set apart; it's the idea of being different, or separate from the world around us. And so, if someone demands that we give up our holiness for the sake of peace, that's not a compromise we can make. And the author makes it very clear that without sanctification it is impossible to see the Lord; so, this is important.

Well, how do we pursue holiness? In the context of Hebrews 12, we pursue holiness by running the race with endurance as we submit to the Lord's discipline. We live as God wants us to live, and it's a process. We study the word of God, we pray, we realize that there's something we're doing or some way we're thinking that's out of line with scripture, and we make a change; we repent, we have a change of heart, and we change the way we're living. We become more holy today than we were yesterday. Sanctification is a pursuit, a lifestyle of becoming more and more like the Lord, with the goal of seeing him someday. We allow the word of God to cut through our excuses and justifications, perhaps we find a Christian friend to help us, and we pursue holiness.

**C. The third positive instruction in this passage is to SEE TO IT THAT NO ONE COMES SHORT OF THE GRACE OF GOD.**

And not perfectly parallel, but I've thrown it in here with things to "*pursue,*" because the author uses an interesting word that refers to "looking at something carefully," translated here as "*see to it.*" It's actually very close to the word for "overseer," referring to the elders or shepherds of a congregation. But here, all of us are to "*see to it that no one comes short of the grace of God.*" He doesn't say, "Make sure YOU don't come short of the grace of God," but he says that this is a group effort. We aren't busybodies, we don't need every little detail of everybody's lives to do this, but all of us play a part in making sure that none of us come up short of God's grace. So he's saying, "Look around! Keep an eye out for each other. Be intentional with your encouragement."

**II. As we come to the second half of this passage, we come to some things to AVOID, and this is where we really start to learn something from ESAU.**

Earlier in our service today, Josh read that account of Jacob and Esau and the birthright in Genesis 25. And we don't think in these terms today, but birth order was really important back in those days, and the oldest son would get twice the inheritance of any younger children. So, as the firstborn of two sons, Esau would have been entitled to 2/3 of the family inheritance and Jacob would have been left with only 1/3. But the other part of that was that the oldest son would normally become something of a spiritual leader in the family when the father passed away. The oldest son would inherit the blessing, a spiritual blessing.

Well, Esau, the oldest son, is a manly man, a hunter, an outdoorsman, a ladies man (he would go on to marry two pagan women at the same time just to make his parents mad). Jacob, on the other hand, is more like his mom. He likes cooking. He likes hanging out in the tent. And there's no problem with that, but one day Esau comes in from hunting, and he thinks he's starving to death. Was he starving to death? No! He might have had a bad day hunting, but if you are actually walking, you are probably not on the verge of actual starvation. But when we're hungry we don't always think straight, do we? So he asks his brother for some soup, and it's vegetable soup (it doesn't even have any meat in it)! But Jacob, the brother with perhaps more brains than brawn, strikes up a deal: I will give you this bowl of soup, but in exchange, I get the bigger blessing when dad dies. And the deal is made. But looking back on it later, it's a terrible deal, isn't it? Esau, though, was living in the moment and had no real concept of the future, let alone spiritual things.

Well, the author of Hebrews wants his audience (wants his first readers, and wants us today) to learn something from Esau here. So, as opposed to pursuing peace, sanctification, and grace, Esau pretty much embodied the opposite of those things. And so, Esau, then, is something of a case study in what NOT to pursue.

#### A. And the first warning here is that we are to **AVOID THE ROOT OF BITTERNESS**.

By pursuing peace, sanctification, and grace, the goal is ***“that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.”*** He's painting a picture for us, isn't he? Bitterness is pictured as some kind of plant that has roots that work their way deep into our hearts. And the root is bitter, perhaps poisonous. And it may start small, but it grows. We may even replay the episode in our head, over and over again. And it's hard to diagnose. It's hard to see this for what it is. In fact, it's been said that bitterness is one of the most difficult sins to see in the mirror. In other words, somebody may do something or say something to us that offends us, and we feel this righteous indignation, “How dare this person offend me!” And then it eats away at us over time, sometimes for years, and it's poison. Regardless of what this person may or may not have said or done, everything they say or do from this point forward is now tainted with the poison root of bitterness. Everything they say or do is filtered through this bitter root that's now growing inside us, and it only gets worse unless we make a decisive effort to pull it like a weed from the garden.

And this bitter root truly will ***“cause trouble”*** (as the author describes it in verse 15). We might think of Paul's warning in Galatians 5:15 where he said, ***“But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.”*** Bitterness has the power to destroy a congregation. It spreads. Here's this bitter person over here who's always mad about something, and he or she snaps at somebody, and now this other person has a reason to be mad at the world.

So how do we avoid this? We control our anger. We're careful with what we say. We resist the urge to retaliate. We encourage. We're patient with each other. We give others the space to make a mistake without us immediately pouncing on that. We extend grace. We treat people the way we ourselves would like to be treated. We forgive.

So, this may be part of it (bitterness between people, just as there was that ongoing bitterness between Jacob and Esau). But there may be more to it, because the author seems to perhaps be referring to a warning from God in Deuteronomy 29:18. In Deuteronomy 29, God is giving the Israelites some final instructions before the cross over the Jordan into the Promised Land. He describes how they've left Egypt and how they've passed through many lands and how they've seen all kinds of false idols and gods made out of silver and gold and stone, and then he says that he's making this covenant with the people, ***“so that there will not be among you a man or woman, or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the LORD our God, to go and serve***

*the gods of those nations; that there will not be among you a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood.”*

Do we see the comparison here? It’s not a case of being bitter toward one another, but it’s even worse – it’s a case of becoming bitter toward God. And this seems to be the case with Esau, as we will get back to in just a moment. But we are to avoid the *“root of bitterness.”*

#### **B. The second warning here is that we are to AVOID SEXUAL IMMORALITY.**

The NASB95 totally misses it here, but just about every other translation gets it, with either *“fornicator”* or *“sexually immoral person.”* And the word refers to unlawful sexual intercourse – any sex before or outside of a God-approved marriage, a married person having relationship with someone other than their spouse (also known as adultery), homosexual relations, or even sex with an animal. That’s what this word means. And we certainly see examples of sexual sin all around us. Paul addressed it in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, when he said,

*Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.*

Sexual sin will keep us out of God’s eternal kingdom, but as Paul says, forgiveness is available, *“such were some of you,”* he says. Today, though, many continue in these sins, thinking they have God’s blessing. Adulterous affairs, followed by divorce, followed by a remarriage, and the sin continues with no repentance. Church attendance doesn’t save a person from this. Crying bitter tears doesn’t save a person from this. Buying a case of soup for a children’s home won’t save a person from this. Only repentance will save. That’s the *“such were some of you,”* that’s the washing, the sanctification, and the justification in that quote from Paul. Fornication is not the unforgivable sin, but it can be if we refuse to repent, if we harden our hearts to it and continue in it.

I wonder: What does this have to do with Esau giving up his birthright? I think there are some similarities. Esau gave up something of enormous and precious value for a brief moment of satisfaction. Isn’t that what happens with sexual sin? With sex before or outside of a God-approved marriage? And we may end up with deep regret, but sometimes there’s no going back – not that we can never be forgiven by God, but sometimes the consequences may last a lifetime. Just like Esau, even though he might have wept bitterly, the birthright was gone forever. Some things we do simply cannot be undone. Sexual sin, in fact, seems to be pictured here trading a life of purity for something as insignificant as a bowl of soup.

#### **C. The final warning in this passage is a warning against GODLESSNESS.**

Some translations refer to Esau as being *“profane,” “irreverent,”* or *“unholy.”* And it goes back to word originally tied to the word “threshold,” as in the threshold of a door, that little strip of weatherstripping we walk over all the time. It’s the idea that Esau really didn’t care about spiritual things. He was godless. God really meant nothing to this man. He didn’t really care about the promise God made to his grandfather Abraham. Back in that passage Josh read for us, we learned that Esau *“despised”* his birthright. He didn’t care about it, “I want that bowl of soup,” “I’ll sell it to you for your birthright,” “Okay,” and that was it. No big deal.

Later, of course, he has regrets. But in my opinion, the regret was for the inheritance, not the promise. But by that time, it was too late. This man was completely irreverent, unholy, unconcerned about spiritual things. Remember: He went out and married two Hittite women, irritating his parents in the process, who wanted

him to marry someone with similar faith. He didn't care. And then, for most of his life, he wanted to murder his brother. Eventually, they work things out, but God is never an important part of Esau's life. He's been described as a "nice pagan." As far as I can tell, we have no record of Esau ever building an altar to God, no record of offering a sacrifice, no record of ever praying or asking for God's advice on anything. God was completely unimportant to this man. Esau was worldly.

And this godlessness caused him to trade the blessings of his birthright for a bowl of soup. He traded God's blessings for a Happy Meal, as we might say today. He traded eternal blessings for brief moment of satisfaction. Esau did the opposite of what Moses did: He gave up God's blessing so that he could ***"...enjoy the passing pleasures of sin."*** Esau didn't care about the reward. He wanted soup, and he got it.

And this is the temptation facing those who heard this message the very first time. It's the temptation we face today: Do we run with endurance, or do we give in to the passing pleasures of sin? The author of Hebrews wants us to learn from Esau, and he wants us to ask ourselves: What have we chosen over God? Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 7:10, that ***"...the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death."*** Esau was sorry he lost the inheritance, but he never had sorrow ***"according to the will of God."*** Esau was godless.

### **Conclusion:**

This morning, we've learned from Esau, and the real danger is godlessness – living as if God really doesn't matter. To fight this, we pursue peace, sanctification, and grace. But we must also avoid this root of bitterness, sexual immorality, and above all, godlessness (living as if God is nothing to us). Because, if we don't avoid this, we very well may get to the point where it's too late. Like the foolish bridesmaids who got left in the dark, and like the rich man who had a change of heart in torment, there's a danger in not caring about spiritual things. We'll regret it eventually, but it may be too late. Let's learn from Esau.

Let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the everlasting and all-knowing God, and this morning we ask for the wisdom and courage to treat you with the utmost of respect by pursuing grace and turning away from sin before it's too late. We love you, Father, and we pray for the joy and peace that comes from living in the light of your word.

Thank you, Father, for Jesus. We come to you in his name. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: [foullakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:foullakeschurch@gmail.com)