

A Winning Combination, A Winning Team

A message from Hebrews 12:14-15
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June 17, 2018

Introduction

The battle had been quick, decisive, and altogether unexpected. A young, migrant people with only two generals, more horns than weapons, and no military training had taken on a seasoned army entrenched in an impenetrable fortress – and wiped them out. Killed every man, woman, and child. Slaughtered all the livestock. Leveled the city, swearing it would never be rebuilt.

Fresh off that victory, the commander set his eyes on the next target, a much smaller city, and sent scouts to spy it out. They returned brimming with confidence. “We only need a small force,” they said. So the general dispatched 3,000 men ... who were quickly routed in a defeat as unexpected as had been the previous victory.

Why was Israel embarrassed at Ai so soon after their divine victory over the walled fortress of Jericho? In a word, sin.

You see, at Jericho, God had said that all the silver and gold, iron and bronze were to be brought into his treasury. The victory was his; the spoils were to be his, as well. But one man decided a few things wouldn't be missed, so when he saw a beautiful robe, a few pounds of silver, and a pound-and-a-quarter of gold, he took them and hid them under his tent.

Wouldn't be missed? How wrong he was. The lives of three dozen men were snuffed out, the army defeated, and God's name made a laughingstock.

When Achan's sin was discovered, God dealt with it as decisively as he had dealt with Jericho: all Achan's family, all his animals, his tent, and the items he stole were taken out, stoned, and burned, and then they were buried under a mound of rocks.

Friends, holiness matters. Sin has a dreadful cost. And though only one man in the nation stole the devoted things, God said, “*Israel* has sinned; *they* have violated my covenant” – *the whole nation* bore responsibility and consequence.

***My holiness is essential
to our health.***

Where We've Been – Where We're Going

We've been in Hebrews chapter 12, talking about the race of faith. We learned first that we have to stay in the race, because **the finish line doesn't matter if you're sitting down on the course.**

Then we talked about discipline—both the punishment for wrongdoing *and* the ongoing training in how to live—and we said that **when the going gets tough, the trained get going.**

Last week we looked at the first half of a winning combination: **peace**, and we left with the question, **am I a peacemaker?**

This morning we're looking at the other half of that winning combination: **holiness.**

You see, we're still in this ultra-marathon relay race, and if we want to be part of the winning team, we need to have this winning combination of **peace and holiness.**

Let's look again at Hebrews chapter 12, verses 14 & 15.

Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and holiness; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. (Hebrews 12:14–15)

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV), 1984 edition.

Why is Holiness Important?

“Without holiness, no one will see the Lord.”

Why is holiness so important?

***Holiness is important
because God is holy.***

Habakkuk—the prophet with the funny name, wrote, *“Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong”* (Habakkuk 1:13a).

David—shepherd, warrior, king; poet, lover, singer—wrote this:

*“LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary?
Who may live on your holy hill?
He whose walk is blameless
and who does what is righteous,
who speaks the truth from his heart....”*
(Psalm 15:1–2)

So God is holy, and because God is holy, he calls us to be holy.

When God gave Moses the Law, he said, *“I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.”* (Leviticus 11:44) Peter repeats that in the first of his two letters:

“But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’” (1 Peter 1:15–16)

***Holiness is important because
he calls us to be holy.***

Howard Snyder put it this way in his book, *Radical Renewal*:

Holiness is a sharing of the divine nature. It is a fruit of the Spirit dwelling and acting, not only within each believer, but within the redeemed community.²

But if holiness is so important, what is it? And how do we become holy?

What is holiness?

There are two answers to that:

First, to be holy is to be *morally blameless – to live without sin*. That doesn't mean we will never sin, but it does mean we work hard *not* to sin, and when we *do* sin, we confess readily, repent sincerely—turn away from the sin—and keep striving to live for Jesus.

Now, I know that's hard, because to fight against sin, to put sin to death as Paul says, is unnatural. Our very nature is steeped in sin. But the real problem for Christians isn't that sin nature, it's how we think about sin; and there are *three problems with our thinking*:

First, we see sin as only a problem for ourselves, rather than as an offense against a holy God; we're more concerned for our own reputation than for God's; we're more afraid of getting caught than of offending God.

Second, we mistakenly think holiness comes *only* by faith, so we *don't have to* fight it ourselves – we put it all on God. "And if I sin," we say, "it's only because God hasn't finished sanctifying me yet." In other words, *it's God's fault!*

And the third problem with our thinking is that *we don't take sin seriously*. We speak of little white lies and fudging on our tax returns, not believing that those are as offensive to God as murder.³

Maybe we need to take a field trip to that pile of rocks outside ancient Jericho and ask Achan's dead bones how seriously God takes sin.

² Snyder, Howard A. *Radical Renewal: the Problem of Wineskins Today*. Touch Publications. 1996.

³ Adapted from Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness*. NavPress: Colorado Springs, CO. 1996.

Now, before you object and say, “But that was the Old Testament. We live under the covenant of grace now!” let me ask you: do the names Ananias and Sapphira mean anything to you? Here’s their story, from Acts 5:

Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife’s full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles’ feet.

Then Peter said, “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God.”

When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, “Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?”

“Yes,” she said, “that is the price.”

Peter said to her, “How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.”

At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

Acts 5:1–10

Yes, even in the age of grace, sin has consequences.

It is, perhaps, precisely because of grace that we need to take sin far more seriously than we do.

So to be holy is to be *morally blameless*, but it is also to be set apart, separate – like your wedding china that you only bring out at Thanksgiving and Christmas. And you don’t eat hot dogs on it! You eat turkey and ham and mashed potatoes and gravy and stuffing and all that good stuff!

Holiness is to be *separate from sin* and *separate for God*.

And here, too, we struggle. And the struggle is real, because even when we *want to be separate*, we don't know what it really means. Every generation has struggled with the mistaken belief that being separate means **having nothing to do with "sinners"**:

*"Don't drink, don't smoke, don't chew.
Don't go with girls who do."*

One of the many accusations leveled against Jesus was that he was "a friend of sinners." It was a label he wore as a badge of honor! Because, as he said, "the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10).

And that's our task, too: to be around people who *don't* know Jesus so that they can *meet him*.

The harder separation is the separation from *fellow believers* who are living in active and open rebellion against God – which doesn't always look like rebellion.

- It looks like the Christian guy who gets drunk most Saturday nights, then comes to church on Sunday morning singing about God's grace.
- It's the unmarried couple in the Bible study who share a home and a bed.
- It looks like the gossip passing along confidential information under the guise of "prayer requests."
- It looks like the person who constantly talks bad about the pastor or the Board; the self-appointed "watchdog" who writes letters and creates websites and posts on Facebook about all the things the church's leaders are doing that "aren't Biblical."

The Bible has strong words about people like this:

"I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—¹⁰ not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world.

*But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone **who claims to be a brother or sister** but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. Do not even eat with such people."* (1 Corinthians 5:9–11, emphasis added)

Writing to his friend Titus, Paul says:

"Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them. You may be sure that such people are warped and sinful; they are self-condemned." (Titus 3:10-11)

So what do we do when we see fellow believers acting like unbelievers, living in persistent sin? Before anything else, we humbly pray.

See to it...

The writer of Hebrews said to “See to it that no one misses the grace of God.”

That word “see to it” is an *oversight* word; it means we have to watch out for others, to help them, to point them back to grace. In other words, we need each other, but we need *heaps of grace* and *loads of gentleness*.

Condemnation is not my job. Romans 8:1-2 – *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.*

Conviction is not my job. John 16:8 – *When [the Counselor, the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment:*

What do we do instead of condemn and convict?

- **Look up** (God) – First and foremost, I need to look to God. Pray. Humble myself before him. Ask the Holy Spirit to give me wisdom and guidance before I do anything else.
- **Look in** (me) – Am I in right relationship with God? Have I dealt with any sin in my own life? Jesus said I can’t see to take the speck out of someone else’s eye until I’ve taken the 2x4 out of my own. So I need to examine myself.
- **Look out** (others) – There’s a double meaning to this. First off, “look out” means to tread very cautiously. If I have any doubt, then I need to go right back to God and my own self-examination. Then, and only then, if God is clearly leading me, should I step into another’s life and challenge them about sin I see. But that begins—as I said earlier—with *heaps of grace* and *loads of gentleness*, not to mention a couple *truckloads of humility*.

And in all of this, keep in mind that the Bible says it is “God’s kindness that leads to repentance” (Ro 2:4). It’s not force or persuasive argument, but kindness.

We started out this morning with the story of Achan after the battle of Jericho. What if Achan had humbly confessed his sin *before* being discovered? Or what if one person had seen and known and challenged Achan’s theft? How might the story have changed?

Make every effort to live in peace with everyone, and holiness. Because *my holiness is essential to our health*.

Benediction

*Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence **holy and** without fault—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.*

(from Jude 24-25)