

Title: Brothers' (and Sisters') Keepers
Date: February 4, 2018
Subject: Responsibilities of our connections in the family of God
Scripture: Hebrews 12:14-17

Sometimes people don't listen to the Lord when they're discouraged and suffering through hardship. They kind of tune him out. He's talking and telling them how much he loves them and that he's with them andbut it's in one ear and out the other. They may not or probably don't feel like reading the Word or hearing it. They may think "What good has it done? What has God done for me lately?"

Moses told the Israelites the Lord remembered them in their suffering and would bring them out of Egypt to the Promised Land. He performed miraculous signs as proof. He threw his staff on the ground. It turned into a snake. He picked it up by the tail and it turned back into a staff. He put his hand into his cloak. It turned leprous. He reversed the process by putting his hand in again. Initially, the people were excited. "They believed. And when they heard that the Lord was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped" (Exodus 4:31). It was a spasm of belief. When the foremen were beaten for not meeting Pharaoh's daily brick quota though they had to get their own straw, they took out their anger on Moses and Aaron. "May the Lord look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us" (Exodus 5:21). Moses got reaffirmation from the Lord about his intent to deliver them and gave the good news to the people. However, "They did not listen to him because of their discouragement and harsh labor" (Exodus 6:9).

Moses and Aaron were trying to encourage the people but some didn't want to be. The same is true today. Some don't want to be encouraged. However, discouragement can give birth to disharmony, suspicion, bitterness and a host of other problems.

Times of discouragement are the precise times we need God's Word more than ever. We keep eating physically though we may not feel like it. It's important to not wait until hardship comes and then start getting into the Word. It's like waiting until the teacher passes out the test to start studying. We need to build a backlog of connection with the Lord. The way to get the Lord's guidance, wisdom, or encouragement is to be in the Word consistently. Encouragement and discouragement are always present in God's Word since it's "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). When we're aligned with God and his Word, it encourages us. If we aren't, it discourages us.

READ Hebrews 12:14-17.

We're often called to live in peace and harmony in our human relationships (Romans 12:17-21; 14:19; 2 Timothy 2:22; 1 Peter 3:11) including those who are our persecutors and unbelievers. The main concern here would be to seek unity and fellowship with other members of Christ's family and especially with those who are going through hardship. We need to work to build the relationships not separate. We have a responsibility and the privilege of helping others in the family of God. These things aren't accomplished at arm's length or isolation. They take place up close and personal. Just as build connection with the Lord, we do that with others believers. Means we need to allow other people in. Because it's not about me but about us.

Be holy. God views us, and we need to view ourselves, as holy, set apart, sanctified to him for his intended purpose. It's not a command about the positional aspect of our relationship with the Lord as that command is totally unnecessary as it's already a completed reality and we can't get ourselves into that position. It's a command, a call to live in holiness, to live according to God's intended use for us -- the experiential, progressive or practical aspect of sanctification.

"Many believers emphasize one aspect to the exclusion of the other...Believers' relationship with God begins at a point in time, a point of conviction, culminating in repentance and faith, but it must also move through time to a culmination at death or the Second Coming; faithfulness, righteousness, perseverance are important, crucial evidences of a true salvation" (Bob Utley, Hebrews 12, bible.org).

We are to worship, serve, obey, and live by faith. There are numerous commands for us to be holy, to express it in our lives (1 Peter 1:13-17; Titus 2:11-14; romans 6:11-14; 1 John 3:3). We are to not let sin rule and reign in us so that we obey sinful desires. We shouldn't offer ourselves to wickedness but offer ourselves to God. We are to say "No" to ungodliness and "yes" to things that please Him. Don't conform to evil desires but be holy in all you do. We turn from sin, repent of it.

Make every effort. Put some energy into it (2 Peter 1:5, 10; 3:14). Don't sit on our hands. Don't think that can coast through life.

Don't miss the grace of God. Grace is often defined as God's unmerited favor. God's Riches at Christ's Expense. A. W. Tozer expanded: "Grace is the good pleasure of God that inclines him to bestow benefits on the undeserving." John MacArthur, "the free and benevolent influence of a holy God operating sovereignly in the lives of undeserving sinners."

At the root of the word for grace is the idea of stooping down like Princess Kate did to help a boy who looked pale and might throw up. God fully expressed grace when Jesus stooped down from the grandeur of heaven, was made in human likeness, took the nature of a servant, and humbled himself to be obedient to die on the cross.

Imagine the one who is God in all his fullness, all his brilliance, his magnificent majesty, his unparalleled power. He moved heaven and earth to come to earth so we could know him. He opened wide his arms so that with his incredible welcoming love the repentant sinner can come to him. Someone at youth group asked if God loved the North Korean dictator. Had to say “yes” since God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.

The wandering prodigal can safely return without fear of retribution. There won't be the initial warm welcome with the Lord waiting and then at the opportune moment, pull the switcheroo to let the hammer fall, when he'll make us sit in the corner or smack us around. The needy can go to him to get what they need. He is big enough to forgive millions of people at one time (Nineveh).

No one of us comprehends the enormity, the expansiveness of God's grace. No group of Christ followers, this church family or other group, past, present or future, has the ability to perceive its vastness. Until we get to heaven. Then we shall see the grace of God in its fullness.

To put it in (lame?) terms: it's better than winning the Super Bowl 20 years in a row, it's better than being able to eat chocolate and only chocolate and never gain weight, it's better than having a river of gold flowing through your house.

A person can still miss the grace of God for all the talk about it. We can miss the grace of God if we don't repent. If we harden our hearts like Pharaoh. He heard the Lord's desire and refused to give in, hardening his heart numerous times before the Lord hardened the ruler's heart. Even in the middle of the plagues there was grace for those who listened to the Lord. He told Moses to tell Pharaoh that a plague of hail was coming the next day along with the promise that anyone and anything in a place of shelter would not be harmed (Exodus 9:18-21). Some of Pharaoh's officials brought their slaves and animals in to shelter. They were saved from the hail. And with the plagues of flies and death of livestock Pharaoh was given time as each was announced to take place “tomorrow.” He could've repented and received God's grace.

Earlier the book of Hebrews warns us to not harden ourselves like the people of Israel did when they rebelled against the Lord for 40 years (3:7-9). The KJV uses provocation. The people provoked the Lord as if they were poking a dog with a sharp stick. Why? Why not seek God's grace?

“Grace never means we're free to live any way we wish, whatever the consequences. Grace does not mean God will smile on me, regardless. It means I'm free to choose righteousness or disobedience. If I choose the latter I will have to take the consequences: mental anguish, a guilty conscience, hurting and offending others in the Christian community, and bring reproach to the name of Christ. If righteousness is spurned, sin can

multiply much the same way as it did in our unsaved days. The Christian can be temporally addicted to sin” (Chuck Swindoll, *Grace Awakening*, p. 139).

Skipped past the opening part of that command at the beginning of v. 15. “See to it.” I almost focused more on the command to see to it than the grace itself. There’s a group responsibility to try to prevent others from missing the grace of God by dropping out. We are charged to exhibit spiritual concern for one another, for the health and well-being of the person and the whole. Be actively involved in helping others to maintain faith in God and not turn away and slip away but to hold unswervingly (or any other phrases used in Hebrews).

Illustration of African prayer hut.

Don’t allow a bitter root to grow. Hardship and the resulting discouragement can cause bitterness. Bitterness has a way of spreading. Just like the roots from our flowering crab that we used to have in front of our house. The roots would send up shoots for new trees in the flower bed and the lawn. Still get some though we cut down the tree several years ago. Bitterness pops up and causes trouble as it spreads its poison to those touched by the one who is bitter. It seems to rub off quickly or causes others to respond inappropriately to it.

This illustration might make you squeamish but it gets the point across. During the VietNam War, the Viet Cong wanted to devote minimal manpower as guards when they moved prisoners through the jungle. To ensure prisoners wouldn’t escape they ran a needle and heavy string through the prisoners’ hands. When one fell out of line or grew too distant from those he was connected to, tension in the string inflicted pain on the others and himself. Bitterness causes the strings of our connection to hurt others and ourselves.

Verse 16 presents two more responsibilities in the Christian life. Sexual immorality will be included in a later message from chapter 13. See that no one is godless. This doubles down on not missing the grace of God which could be that we aren’t getting all the Lord has in store. Godless has to do with living against the life the Lord intends. One writer feels this is the unbeliever who connects with the church and may even have professed Christ but there’s no reality, no evidence of a relationship with the Lord.

Esau is a classic example of being godless. He lacked spiritual sensitivity because he was a lover of earthly pleasures. One day he came in from hunting not having any success. He was starving to death and wanted some of brother Jacob’s food. He was willing to trade his rights as the firstborn with the accompanying inheritance for some food. Later he wanted to get the position and blessings back. He cried and pleaded in an attempt to change his dad’s mind. The tears didn’t represent a change of his mind. He regretted the loss of blessing, merely wanted the good stuff but was unwilling to repent.

Esau represents people who could care less about seeking God so they can know him. They want God for the benefits that will make their life enjoyable -- happy family, good health, comfortable lifestyle. If they get that, great. Then God will get their allegiance. But if life takes a downward turn, they look elsewhere.

NIV text note, "The readers were thinking of compromising their faith in order to gain relief from persecution. But to trade their spiritual birthright for temporary ease in this world would deprive them of Christ's blessing." It's about leaving Christ.

We need the grace of God more than we need air and food. Let's not miss it by pursuing anything else.