

Teaching Series: Saved for Eternity

Title: Session 4 – The Pursuit of Sanctification

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Chapter 2: Objections against Eternal Salvation

Hebrews 3:12–14 (Falling Away from God)

Hebrews 3:12–14 (NASB95)

¹² *Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that **falls away from the living God.***

¹³ *But encourage one another day after day, as long as it's still called "Today," so that none of you will be **hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.***

¹⁴ *For we have become partakers of Christ, **if we hold fast** the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.*

Some Christians interpret “falls away from the living God” in this passage as the loss of salvation. However, here we have the same explanation as before. Falling away from God or departing from the living God means beginning to profess faith in Christ but still leaning back to the old system of the Law that God has abolished and not believing fully in Christ (i.e., having an evil heart of unbelief). The “deceitfulness of sin” referred to here is the deceit of the sin of unbelief in Christ. That is the context. The following verse talks about holding fast the beginning of our assurance in Christ and not sliding back into unbelief. Also notice that in Verse 14, holding fast to the beginning of your assurance, firm until the end, is not a condition to remain in relationship with Christ, but a result of having already become a partaker of Him. The verse doesn't say you remain this way as long as you hold fast, but it says you know those who really have become partakers of Christ (past tense) by seeing them hold firm to their conviction of salvation until the end. The same idea is expressed in Hebrews 3:5–6:

Hebrews 3:5–6 (NKJV)

⁵ *And Moses indeed was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward,*

⁶ *but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house **we are if we hold fast** the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.*

Some preachers render from this passage that believers remain the house of God as long as they hold fast and firm to the end the confidence and the rejoicing in hope. However, the verse doesn't say that. It instead says believers already are the house of God, and the proof lies in the fact that they will hold

fast the confidence to the end as a result of their faith. In other words, you know your house is connected to the electric grid if the lights stay on. You don't keep the lights on to make sure you remain connected to the power grid.

Hebrews 12:14 (The Pursuit of Sanctification)

Hebrews 12:11–17 (NASB95)

- ¹¹ *All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.*
- ¹² *Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble,*
- ¹³ *and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.*
- ¹⁴ *Pursue peace with all men, and **the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.***
- ¹⁵ *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;*
- ¹⁶ *that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal.*
- ¹⁷ *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.*

Many Christians take Hebrews 12:14 out of context and conclude that genuine born-again believers need to pursue practical sanctification (i.e., performing good works and omitting evil deeds) while they live on earth, to maintain their salvation. Otherwise, they will not get to see the Lord, meaning they can lose their salvation any moment. I admit this is a difficult verse to interpret in the right way by itself or isolated from its context, and I will explain why is so.

The sanctification referred to in Hebrews 12:14 can be only one of two types. The first type is behavioral and practical sanctification at the level of body and soul. This is progressive and consists of a process of transformation that begins after the new birth and can last a lifetime. The second type is the sanctification or righteousness given by Jesus at the time of being born again at the spirit level. This is no longer progressive but given once and for all. It is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 6:11 where Paul tells the Corinthians in the past tense that they were sanctified. As a general rule, there is much confusion in the Christian community about the work already finished in us and about what is still in the process of completion, precisely because the authors of the books of the Bible alternate the discourse of the body and soul with that of the spirit without announcing the audience. And then it falls on to us and to the Holy Spirit to make this distinction, which is not always simple. But if we have a sincere heart and desire to get to the root of pure truth, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we will succeed.

Let's suppose Hebrews 12:14 refers to the progressive sanctification of behavior. Seeking such sanctification is a good and desirable thing and it is a process in which we must be constantly involved as

Christians, because God is holy and we know that He very much wants us to be holy in our conduct as well, as the apostle Peter mentions in 1 Peter 1:15–16. The fact that the text exhorts us to pursue this sanctification may be an indication that here it is not about justification received only once at the time of salvation. And if the verse had stopped there, perhaps this would have been the best interpretation that would have instilled in us an even greater desire to sanctify ourselves. But when the verse ends with the fact that no one will see the Lord without this sanctification, there can no longer be a question of practical sanctification. Why? Because God is perfect and He only demands perfection, according to Matthew 5:48. He doesn't accept half measures or progressive quests. Are we ever perfect, after salvation, in all our conduct? Of course not. This means that progressive sanctification, which is always imperfect, cannot be a factor in determining whether we see the face of God or not. In this situation, no one will even see His face. I can guarantee it. With God, it is not as if there is a threshold of holiness that only He knows in His mind and keeps it secret, which may be 60% or 90%, and if your effort exceeds that threshold, you will succeed in seeing His face, otherwise, you won't. Unfortunately, from what I've seen so far, practically too many Christians believe this without, perhaps, even being aware of it. Generally, the conclusion the audience is left with, after a sermon on Hebrews 12:14, is that they must do their best to live as holy as possible to increase their chances of being above God's secret threshold of sanctification and reaching to the end in a satisfying state. But besides the fact that God would not accept such deficient sanctification as a condition of seeing His face, if the maintenance of salvation depends on our good works, then it is no longer by grace and faith alone, which contradicts other powerful scriptures about salvation. Moreover, the threat of not seeing the Lord if we do not do well enough would bring fear to the forefront as the primary motivator for holiness rather than God's unconditional love.

That is why we need to take a closer look both at the immediate context of this passage and the larger context of the whole book of Hebrews. As I mentioned before, the book of Hebrews is written mainly to Hebrew Christians—both genuine and just professing—who were suffering and struggling because of their identification with Jesus Christ and the new way of justification by faith alone. These Christians committed to following Christ, but what that looked like for them was not a glorious road or a journey through Disneyland. Their identification with Jesus has brought them more pain and persecution than they previously had experienced. Up to Chapter 10, the author of Hebrews explains to these people in detail what Jesus did on the cross, the implications of that act, and His superiority to the Law of Moses. Then in Chapter 11, the author enumerates a list of people from the Old Testament who had to fight for their faith in God and endure persecution. In Chapter 12, the author shifts gears from teaching mode and begins to encourage these believers to stay strong through persecution and to fight for faith, as their predecessors did, because that suffering works as their training in righteousness. The discipline described in Chapter 12 is not one in the sense of God's punishment toward His children, but a discipline in terms of training like military training. Military preparation and instruction is difficult and painful but necessary for success in battle. When someone works out at the gym, the exercises may not be comfortable or easy, but they build the muscles and help make the person fit. Similarly, persecution and suffering for the sake of the faith yield the fruit of righteousness (Hebrews 12:11).

Many of these Christians were weary and tired, spiritually exhausted, and the writer tries to encourage them in Verse 12 by saying, “therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble.” This phrase is quoted from Isaiah 35:3. In Isaiah 34, God announces the righteous judgment and vengeance against all enemies of Israel, represented by Edom. Then in Chapter 35, God shows what salvation will look like and reveals He hasn’t forgotten them. The glory of the Lord was going to be revealed again, but the people of Israel were still in the wilderness and on dry land at that moment, as Isaiah 35:1 illustrates. Isaiah says to that community, “While you are in this hard season, think about all the good things God is going to do for you and in the meantime help each other, strengthen the hands of your brothers who are weak and the knees that are feeble.” Now, coming back to our text in Hebrews, in the same way, in the middle of all kinds of tensions between those of the Law and those in Christ, the writer says to that community of believers to support each other and continue in faith. Then, in Verse 14, he encourages them to try to pursue peace as much as possible with all those who are fighting against them, but without compromise in terms of the truth and sanctification they received from Jesus by faith. In other words, “When your family and relatives come against you because of the Gospel message of grace, don’t get angry. Try to pursue peace but keep firm in your minds the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”

The sanctification Verse 14 talks about is the pursuit of the holiness and righteousness of Jesus received once at the time of salvation. The writer tells these believers to not give up on the righteousness they received through faith and so go back to the one received through the Law, just to make things easier for them. And we have a few substantial clues in the context which show that this is what the writer is talking about. First, Hebrews 12:10 says those who go through this training share in Jesus’s holiness. This is given to them. Second, the word “sanctification” or “holiness” in Verse 14 is preceded by the definite article: pursue “THE” sanctification, not just a sanctification, but that type without which no one will see the Lord. That means there was another type of holiness—the one by the works of the Law—that was preventing them from being saved and seeing the Lord at the end. Third, Verses 15 to 17 provide more details of what the writer meant when he told them to pursue that sanctification. He intended to make sure no one comes short of the grace of God and falls away back into the Law. It meant to not allow any root of bitterness and frustration because of the new way to spring up between them and defile each other.

Furthermore, it meant to make sure no one was godless like Esau, who had the birthright that came with many blessings, but he gave it all up quickly just for the comfort of a single meal. Then, when he wanted to get back the blessings, he couldn’t anymore. In the same way, Verse 17 emboldens the Hebrew people, who appeared to have decided for Christ, to not put aside so quickly the new way of salvation through faith for the sake of temporary earthly peace with their Jewish brothers, who were still following the Law of Moses and persecuting them. If they don’t choose Christ and the new birth through faith, they will remain unsaved and not see the Lord.

1 Corinthians 6:9–11 (The Unrighteous and the Kingdom)

1 Corinthians 6:9–11 (NKJV)

- ⁹ *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 homosexuals, nor sodomites,*
- ¹⁰ *nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the Kingdom of God.*
- ¹¹ *And **such were some of you**. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.*

The objection from this passage to the believer's security of salvation is the following: "If you are a born-again believer, but continue to be a fornicator, an adulterer, a thief, or a drunkard, you will not inherit the Kingdom of God, and you will lose your salvation." First, let's establish that inheriting the Kingdom is equivalent to being in the Kingdom or being saved in Christ. Some people contend that "inheriting" is different from "entering" the Kingdom. While I agree that there are different degrees of possessing the Kingdom of God here on earth and that sinful deeds decrease our capacity to believe and manifest more of all He has given us, I argue that inheriting the Kingdom of God is the same thing as eternal salvation. Galatians 3:29 and 4:7 show that, once you are a son or a daughter of God, you are also an heir:

Galatians 3:29 (NKJV)

- ²⁹ *And **if you are Christ's**, then you are Abraham's seed, and **heirs** according to the promise.*

Galatians 4:7 (NKJV)

- ⁷ *Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and **if a son, then an heir** of God through Christ.*

Moreover, according to Ephesians 1:11–14, people who believe in Jesus receive the seal of the Holy Spirit at the time of salvation. That seal is a guarantee of their inheritance:

Ephesians 1:11–14 (NKJV)

- ¹¹ ***In Him also we have obtained an inheritance**, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will,*
- ¹² *that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.*
- ¹³ *In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, **you were sealed** with the Holy Spirit of promise,*
- ¹⁴ *who is **the guarantee of our inheritance** until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.*

Finally, I will prove that inheriting the Kingdom is equal to entering it by also using the account of the rich young ruler coming to Christ, which is recorded in the first three Gospels: Matthew 19:16–29, Mark 10:17–31, and Luke 18:18–30. All three accounts refer to the same incident and the subject is very clear: ETERNAL LIFE. That is the opening question, which is what each account concludes with. Matthew 19:16 tells us the young ruler asked, “how may I ‘HAVE’ eternal life,” but Mark 10:17 and Luke 18:18 both tell us he asked, “how may I ‘INHERIT’ eternal life.” In response to the man’s question, Jesus Christ talked about ENTERING life in Matthew 19:17. He equated “having” and “inheriting” eternal life with entering it.

Coming back to 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, although Paul addresses believers from the church of Corinth, and although it might seem he suggests some genuine believers will not inherit the Kingdom, he makes a clear distinction between the unrighteous and the saints. Verse 1 of that chapter says: “Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before *the unrighteous*, and not before *the saints*?” Then in Verses 2 and 3, he continues by saying the *saints* will judge the world and angels. Furthermore, in Verse 10, he affirms that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God, and, in Verse 11, he concludes: “And such *were some of you*. But you *were washed*, you *were sanctified*, and you *were justified* in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.” Clearly, he doesn’t say Christians will not inherit the Kingdom of God if they still do sinful things. Still, he compares between the behavior of those who are not born again (and have no part in the Kingdom) and the saints. There needs to be a distinction in behavior, and the saints should contrast the unrighteous in their way of life. He is only making a comparison for educational and motivational purposes. Moreover, notice he doesn’t say those people will be disinherited. They will simply never inherit the Kingdom. Finally, almost everywhere in the New Testament, God calls believers in Christ saints, and He relates to them according to their spiritual identity and not according to their deeds that might still be sinful. He never classifies Christians as fornicators, drunkards, adulterers, or thieves, but with the terms righteous, saints, sons, heirs, etc. In conclusion, 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 cannot be used as a valid argument that born-again believers can be disinherited at any moment due to their persistence in unholy living.