

**OUR TEXT**

*Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, 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.*

*Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. 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; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. 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.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Today's sermon title comes from a thought-provoking phrase from today's passage "For A Single Meal." It refers to the story told in Genesis 25 when Esau made a momentary decision that charted his life's course and showed his "true colors" as caring more about his temporary comfort than the long-term legacy of his life. He foolishly sold his birthright for a meal.

**Genesis 25:29-34** *When Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished; and Esau said to Jacob, "Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished." Therefore his name was called Edom [meaning "red"]. But Jacob said, "first sell me your birthright." Esau said, "Behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?" And Jacob said, "First swear to me"; so he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.*

This was more than just a foolish choice – it was a choice to disrespect God's best for him. He "despised his birthright", turning his back on a legacy of righteousness for a momentary choice of convenience and comfort. Throughout the ages this has been a call to all who would follow God to choose long term blessings over short term convenience.

**CONTEXT RECAP & PASSAGE EMPHASIS**

The author of Hebrews has been teaching us in Chapter 12 about the life race that each of us is to run. He has given us the three basic "rules" of running the race successfully: (1) get rid of the sin that weighs you down ("shed the lead"), (2) run with endurance ("pace the race"), and (3) fix eyes always on Jesus ("eyes on the prize"). He then reminded us that the struggles we encounter in our race are allowed by God as disciplines. We are not to see these struggles as punishments, but as a discipling to make us more like Jesus – His ultimate goal for each of us.

Based upon this understanding ("therefore") he now gives us further coaching instruction. In the race metaphor, we are to understand that the race is not a sprint to be won, but a marathon to be completed. And in addition to our completing the race, we are to help all the others around us complete the race as well. In that sense, it is not who "gets there first" or "who gets there best" but who completes the race to receive the prize. & O In the words of John, the writer of Revelation, it is "he who overcomes."

So – today's passage focuses on how we can best help others complete the marathon life-race with us. If we see the passage in this light, we will find its interpretation come alive with meaning. And specifically, the example of Esau's foolish decision will cap our understanding.

**HELPING OTHERS IN THE RACE**

Clearly some will struggle in their spiritual race more than others. And all will be stronger at one

point in the race and weaker at another point. When we determine ourselves as being stronger, we are to willingly offer help to the weaker. And when we determine ourselves as being weaker, we are to willingly receive help from the stronger. There should be no pride in giving help, nor no shame in receiving help.

***Galatians 6:10*** So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.

***Titus 3:14*** Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful.

***1 John 3:16*** We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

Ever since our Lord God asked the murdering Cain “Where is Abel your brother?” and his response was “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9), we have understood that indeed, we are our brother’s keeper. I do have responsibility to care for those around me, and especially for those closest to me. It is the point of the writer of Hebrews that in our life race we are also responsible, at least partially, for the successful finish of those in the race around us.

Today’s passage finds the author moving from coaching each of us in our own race, to coaching us in how to help others in their race. As we observe “weak knees”, “lack of peace” or “bitterness” we are to put our arms of encouragement around and be a “brother’s keeper.” The author uses a variety of metaphors to share these coaching principles. I observe four.

#### **4 COACHING STRATEGIES**

1. Spiritual “therapy”:

**STRENGTHEN and STRAIGHTEN** (v. 12-13) for healing

2. Spiritual “hobby”:

**PURSUE PEACE and SANCTIFICATION** (v.14) to see God working

3. Spiritual “gardening”:

**“FERTILIZE” GRACE and “ROOT OUT” BITTERNESS** (v.15) to avoid trouble and defilement

4. Spiritual “shopping”:

**CHOOSE FOR LONG TERM BENEFIT** (v. 16-17) for blessing, not regret

Let’s take each in turn.

#### **1. Spiritual “therapy”:**

**STRENGTHEN and STRAIGHTEN** (v. 12-13) for healing

The use of “the hands” and “the knees” implies that it is others’ hands and knees to which we are to attend. And it is not literally “hands” and “knees” that we are to attend, but these words continue the race metaphor, where in a race the hands can begin to droop as the energy wanes and knees can begin to tire as the race grows difficult. Likewise as the race moves along, one’s “path” can become inconsistent and less than straight, especially if one limb or foot becomes lame.

All three of these examples in the racing metaphor point to the fact that in the spiritual race of life those around us can become weak, tired and “out of step.” (as can we). The coaching challenge is to “strengthen” and “make straight” so as to spiritually heal and keep the racer in the race.

We are told to “strengthen” and “straighten”, but how we are to do that spiritually is left to individual application. Spiritual encouragement and healing can come in many forms – any and all of which can be valuable.

1. **Prayer** would be at the top of the list – specific, persistent, intercessory prayer

2. Words of **encouragement** (“a word fitly spoken” – Proverbs 25:11) and council
3. Often a **visit** in the hospital or home can help strengthen. The gift of “touch” and “showing up”, even if it’s by email or text can mean much. A hand on the shoulder or hug at the right time can be spiritually therapeutic.
4. Just being a **listening** and caring ear can be a huge encouragement and strengthening
5. **Including** someone – an invitation to spend time – can be “just what the doctor ordered.” Sharing a meal and conversation together, or sharing an event, or sharing a cup of coffee are all ways to “strengthen hands and knees”

Bottom line, the coaching challenge is to be available. As we note those around us who are fading and struggling it is our privilege and responsibility as fellow “racers” to make ourselves available. It may not be convenient, but it is our calling as shepherds to one another.

## **2. Spiritual “hobby”:**

### **PURSUE PEACE and SANCTIFICATION (v.14) to see God working**

We are all involved in a multitude of pursuits – work, hobbies, sports, organizations, charities and the like. But here we are called to the two most important pursuits of all: loving God and loving others. These are also the two great commandments (Matthew 22:35-40) rephrased. Pursuing SANCTIFICATION is the pursuit of God and His holiness. Pursuing PEACE is the pursuit of others in healthy relationship.

And in context, this challenge is to be in our coaching of others – to help them pursue peace and sanctification. As we see others in the race compromising their holiness or neglecting peacemaking we are to hold them accountable.

***Matthew 5:9*** *Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God.*

To “pursue peace with all men” means to go out of our way to be “in the world” without being “of the world” and its ways. It means going out of our way to keep relationships healthy and transparent. It means being a “people person” even if that is not our natural inclination. It means being quick to apologize when appropriate and quick to forgive always. It means keeping the lines of communication open and fluid and initiating conversation when there is a “tiff.” And this is what we are to help others in the race to pursue.

To be “sanctified” literally means to be “separate” or different from the world, set apart for God. It is keeping oneself separated from any influence or input that would not be of God. Often that means alienation from the things of the world.

***1 Thessalonians 4:3*** *For this is the will of God, your sanctification ...*

And this is what we are ever to coach others to pursue. We are never to “judge” but we are always to be “fruit inspectors.” A true friend and life coach is always willing to call others to holiness.

And for both pursuits, the result and goal is to see God working in your life and relationships. Often we see those “lagging” in the race who are failing to “see God” in their life. Good coaching is instructing that SANCTIFICATION and PEACEMAKING will always bring about a greater vision of God’s working.

## **3. Spiritual “gardening”:**

### **“FERTILIZE” GRACE and “ROOT OUT” BITTERNESS (v.15) to avoid trouble and defilement**

Just as a flower can come “short” of blooming due to lack of watering, fertilizing or sufficient sunshine – so an “almost Christian” can come short of experiencing and redeeming the grace of God and becoming a born-again follower of Christ. And the author’s coaching challenge is that we be ever on the lookout for one who is attempting to race alongside us as “almost Christians” who just need the spiritual “fertilization” of the grace of God. That might translate into me being willing to

ask if I can help lead them to salvation. Or it might mean I need to ask what is keeping them from making the commitment to Christ.

The words “see to it” means that it is my specific responsibility to be bold and alert to those who are “close” but not yet “committed.” And I need to be available to lovingly point such a one to the saving grace of God. Keep your eyes open to a spiritual need!

I like the author’s gardening metaphor of the “root of bitterness” that might spring up to be a real problem, just like a weed can appear almost “overnight.” As a spiritual coach to other runners, I must always watch for “roots of bitterness” that might quickly grow to envy, jealousy or anger. If I observe such, I am called to squirt it with the equivalent of “spiritual Roundup.” This might mean getting two together to work out a problem, or just talk through the issue so as to quell the bitterness.

Grace unrealized and bitterness unchecked is the recipe for trouble that can breed defilement. As a coach to others we must do all we can to “fertilize grace” and “root out bitterness.”

#### 4. Spiritual “shopping”:

**CHOOSE FOR LONG TERM BENEFIT** (v. 16-17) for blessing, not regret

We have already noted how Esau chose for temporary comfort and convenience and lost the long-term blessing. A good racing coach will always urge to carefully weigh each choice for its long-term spiritual consequence.

We are so bound up in the moment that we can easily lose sight of the eternal. Personal comfort and convenience can easily push aside the call to obedience and obligation. “Tasty meals” can easily be chosen over godly ministry.

Here in our church there are always those around us who need the spiritual help and encouragement of we who are stronger at any given moment. Let us commit ourselves to be fervent in intercessory prayer, quick to say an encouraging word, bold to keep accountable, alert to watch for a “root of bitterness”, and wise to differentiate between a healthy spiritual “banquet” and a spiritually fast-food “happy meal.”

Dear God, help us along our race to be caring spiritual coaches and “brothers’ keepers.”

And Dear God, help me from missing a long term spiritual blessing “for a single meal.” ...

AMEN.