2016 New Year’s Message (II)

**THE HOLY LIVING IN AN UNSHAKABLE KINGDOM**

Hebrews 12:14-29

Key Verse: 12:28-29

“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”

In last week’s passage, Hebrews 12:1-13, we learned that our life in this world is like a long-distance race. Those who want to be winners of this race should throw off everything that hinders and the sin that easily entangles (12:1). They must also run the race with perseverance, fixing their eyes on Jesus (12:2-4) and enduring hardship as God’s loving discipline (12:5-11). There will be a glorious award ceremony in heaven for those who complete the race successfully. So our present sufferings shouldn’t discourage us from running the race. Rather, we should all the more run this race, longing for our glorious future. In today’s passage, the author reassures his audience about this glorious future saying that they are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken and therefore they should be thankful and worship God acceptably with reverence and awe. Let’s think about what glorious future in Christ we have and how we should live day-to-day until this final and glorious day.

**First, make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy (14-17).** Look at verse 14. “Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” According to the Myer-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), there are 16 different types of people. Each type is unique and has great potential (Pic-1 & 2). But a unique personality doesn’t necessarily contribute to the unity of a couple, family or organization. Because of our sinful human nature and different personality traits and values, it’s hard to get along with everyone. In fact, we just don’t like certain types of people. Conflicts are almost unavoidable and can be even worsened by many factors, including generational and cultural differences. Christian fellowships are not immune to conflicts. Since it’s so difficult to resolve conflicts, we might just try to mind our own business and get along only with those whom we like.

As a matter of fact, 1 Thessalonians 4:11 states “Make it your goal to live a quiet life, minding your own business and working with your hands, just as we instructed you before.” (NLT) Here we see that the Bible does not demand from us perfectly peaceful relationships with others due to our human limitation. Yet, we are strongly encouraged to make every effort to live in peace with everyone. To what extent should we try to resolve our conflicts?

Romans 12:18 states “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” For example, Jesus said in Matthew 5:23-24 that if we are offering our gift at the altar and there remember that our brother or sister has something against us, we should leave our gift in front of the altar, and then go and be reconciled to them; then come back to the altar and offer our gift. Offering our gift at the altar is an act of our worship. Yet, Jesus said that we should first go and be reconciled to our angry brothers or sisters. It’s not because worshipping God is unimportant. It’s because living in peace with our brothers and sisters is an essential part of our Christian worship. At the same time, God wouldn’t be happy with our worship if we ignore our unresolved relationships. But it’s not easy to live in peace with everyone. We might have to apologize by saying “I am so sorry.” Yet, the offended brother or sister might not accept our apology at the moment. Of course, not all conflicts can be resolved by our own effort. But if it depends on us, we should not hesitate to resolve it. It means that we should do our best to always seek peaceful relationships. From time to time, we might want to live alone and stay away from all annoying people. But God didn’t call us to live by ourselves. He called us to live in relationship.

It also reminds us of what Jesus said in Matthew 5:9, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” Here, we learn that we, as Christians, are called to live as peacemakers. One of the main reasons we might not want to seek a peaceful relationship is pride or self-righteousness. In order to seek peace with others, we need humility, honesty, courage and patience. Why would God want us to make every effort to live in peace with everyone? It’s because God wants to sanctify us, transforming us into the image of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are also called to make every effort to be holy. Look at verse 14 again. “Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” Only God is holy. When someone says to us “Hey, you are *so* holy”, they might not necessarily mean that we’re truly holy. But what they are actually saying is that we’re so arrogant and self-righteous that we disgust them. So we don’t want to hear that we are holy. But when we say that God is holy, we don’t mean that God is arrogant or proud. God is holy because he is completely sinless and above all creation. He is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. Yet, he is so humble and compassionate that he is connected with us. God is holy because He is completely just and full of love. There is no darkness in Him. He is perfect and wholesome. Holiness is God’s central character. He is worthy of our desire and praise forever and ever. And we are called to be holy. In today’s passage, we are told to make every effort to be holy, which means that pursuing the holiness of God should be our ultimate life goal because without holiness no one will see the Lord. In other words, without holiness, we can neither have intimate fellowship with the Lord nor have true happiness.

How can we obtain the holiness of God? Many people try very hard. Some people fast excessively and try to commit themselves to live an ascetic life. But we cannot obtain the holiness of God by following rigorous religious rituals or by having supernatural experiences. We can obtain the holiness of God through Jesus Christ who shed his precious blood for us once and for all, so that we may be sanctified through him. Jesus said in John 6:53-54, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.” In fact, anybody who is in Christ Jesus can become holy, wholesome and healthy (2 Cor. 5:17). This is an amazing blessing from God through Jesus Christ. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, who shed his precious blood once and for all, we can enter the heavenly sanctuary, obtain the holiness of God and have intimate fellowship with God our Father. Therefore, we should not lose our confidence in Jesus our Lord. We should fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith (12:2-3).

In verses 15-17, the author of Hebrews warns his audience with practical instructions so that they might continue to pursue holiness in their Christian life. Several things are mentioned in verses 15-17. But the main point is that they should make sure that no one falls short of the grace of God. Look at verses 15-17. “See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.”

First of all, we are warned that we should not fall short of the grace of God. What does it mean that we fall short of the grace of God or fall from God’s grace? Can Christians lose their salvation? It’s one of the most controversial questions. In fact, the phrase “see to it that no one falls short of the grace of God” seems to tell us that we can lose our salvation. But it may not necessarily mean that Christians can lose their salvation. Yet, it’s surely possible for some Christians to become disgraceful believers by falling from God’s grace.

Look at verse 15 again. “See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.” This verse clearly shows that it’s possible for us to become troublemakers due to our bitterness, whether it is visible or hidden. Why would some believers fall from God’s grace? In the previous passage, we learned that we should endure hardship as God’s discipline because God disciplines the one He loves (12:7-9). But when we don’t endure hardship as God’s discipline and don’t accept God’s sovereignty, it’s easy for us to become bitter rather than better. Instead of seeing God’s sovereignty, it’s easy to only see people and become bitter toward those who offend and hurt us. People tend to repress their hidden bitterness for years. But those who have unresolved life issues and bitterroots eventually become troublemakers rather than peacemakers. So we should make sure that no bitter root grows up in our hearts.

We fall from God’s grace because we don’t let God’s grace take deep root in us and that’s because we take God’s grace for granted. One of the best ways to let God’s grace take deep root in us is to study God’s words. Hebrews 4:12-13 states “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” Some people read and study the word of God all the time, and yet for some reason the word of God cannot penetrate their minds and thoughts. As a result, they still remain unchanged and become disgraceful believers. We should cultivate the soil of our hearts through sincere repentance so that God’s grace may take deep root in us and bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Look at verses 16-17. “See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.” Esau’s example is a little confusing because we know that both Jacob and Esau were sinners who needed to repent. It seems to teach us that Christians should not be sexually immoral or godless because anyone who is sexually immoral or godless is falling from God’s grace. We often read about the scandalous accounts of some pastors, priests, and other Christians who were enticed by their greed and adulterous behaviors. We hear a lot about conflicts in the church. It’s very disgraceful to hear. However, instead of pointing the finger at them, we should make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy because without holiness no one will see the Lord.

**Second, the Mountain of Fear and the Mountain of Joy (18-27**): In verses 18-24, before giving the final warning, the author of Hebrews introduces the glorious hope for Christians by contrasting the old covenant, made by Moses on Mount Sinai (18-21) to the new covenant, made by Jesus on Mount Zion (22-24). Read verses 18-21. “You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: ‘If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.’ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, ‘I am trembling with fear.’” Mount Sinai is the mountain of fear. Read verses 22-24. “ But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” Mount Zion is the mountain of joy (Pic-4).

Mount Sinai is filled with fear, darkness and gloom. But Mount Zion is filled with the joyful assembly of a myriad of angels who are in the company of believers from throughout history. There is light, beauty, freedom and joy rather than darkness, fear and terrifying thunder. It is the place of holiness, love, freedom, joy, beauty, righteousness and peace. Our Lord Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, is far superior to all things. His blood speaks better words than that of the blood of Abel. The message through Jesus is complete, and his salvation is perfect.

In verses 25-27, the author of Hebrews gives final warning. Look at verses 25. “See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?” At that time, some Jewish Christians wanted to go back to their Jewish religion. But going back to the old covenant would be the most foolish and dangerous thing that would invite God’s severe judgment.

Look at verses 26-27. “At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, ‘Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’ The words “once more” indicate the removing of what can be shaken- that is, created things – so that what cannot be shaken may remain.” Here, shaking is a metaphor for God’s judgment. At Mount Sinai, only the earth shook and the people of Israel trembled in fear. But when Jesus comes again, not only will the earth but also the heavens be shaken. At the time of God’s final judgment, everything will be shaken and destroyed, including the stars in the sky. People who had depended on something else rather than God will not be able to stand. They will be terrified because what they depended on will be shaken and destroyed. But the day of God’s final judgment is the day of glory and victory for those who trusted in God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. And on that day our redemption will be completed and we will be transformed into new, immortal and glorious bodies. And a new heaven and new earth will appear. And the New Jerusalem, the city of the living God and our eternal dwelling place, will come down out of heaven from God, and God will dwell with His people and wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away (Rev. 21:2-4).

Let me close my sermon. Look at verses 28 and 29. “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.” Those who believe in Jesus Christ have already received an unshakable and everlasting kingdom as their inheritance in their hearts. And it’s only a matter of time that they will enter God’s kingdom physically, being transformed into immortal bodies. In view of all these things – the amazing gift of an unshakable kingdom--we should be thankful and worship God with reverence and awe, remembering that our God is a consuming fire. Even though we face hardships on earth, we don’t have to fear anything. Instead of complaining or whining habitually, we should be thankful in all circumstances, for we know that God who is sovereign over all things and began his good work in us will accomplish it. Let us make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy. Let us be grateful, deeply acknowledging God’s sovereignty over all things and be thankful and worship God with reverence and awe.