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Hebrews #38

The Commandments of God are Not Burdensome!

Hebrews 12:12-17

I've always been both intrigued and encouraged by something John the Apostle wrote in the fifth chapter of his first epistle: "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And *his commandments are not burdensome*" (1 John 5:3). Jesus said something almost identical in Matthew 11. In making his appeal for people to follow him, he gave this reason: "For *my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*" (Matt. 11:30).

The reason why these two statements are so important for us to understand is that we can easily be overwhelmed by the many commands and exhortations and ethical imperatives in the Bible. Do this, don't do that; go here, but stay away from there; say this, but don't say that; avoid these, but pursue those; etc., etc., etc. In fact, these many commands in the Bible are often cited as one of the primary reasons why people who don't know Christ stay away from him. When you ask them about Christianity, their conception is that it's just a collection of rules, a long list of prohibitions and taboos and "thou-shalt-not's" all of which serve only to rob us of happiness and to make life miserable.

But what do you think would happen if we explained the Christian life to people in the terms of 1 John 5:3 and Matthew 11:30. Do you think it would make a significant difference if people were told that the commandments God gives us in the Bible are "*not burdensome*" and that the "yoke" or "burden" of obedience for which Jesus calls is "*easy*" and "*light*"? Yes, I think it would make a huge difference!

And what difference would it make to you who are already Christians to know that when you read a string of exhortations and imperatives like those here in Hebrews 12 that God wants you first to understand that these are "not burdensome," but in fact are "easy" and "light"? Would that infuse a bit more excitement into your relationship with Christ? Would it increase your joy in reading the Bible and your confidence that perhaps following Christ is not the dry, lifeless drudgery that so many think it is? The obvious and only answer is, Yes!

So what is it about being exhorted or commanded or encouraged to do something that we find so unappealing? Why do we tend to bristle at being told what to do or what not to do? I think there are **three** reasons for this.

The **first** is that often times ***we simply don't want to do it.*** Or we want very much to do something that we are told is off limits or out of bounds. So, for example, when our author here in v. 16 exhorts us not to be “sexually immoral” some people recoil. They say, “But I *want* to be sexually immoral. I enjoy it. It feels good.” In other words, when you want to engage in sexual immorality and God says, “Don't do it,” suddenly his command feels burdensome, hard, and heavy.

The **second** reason why we so often react this way is that ***we lack the power or strength to do what we are told to do, or we are told not to do something and find ourselves overwhelmed by the urge to do it anyway.*** So, in the first case, the problem is that there is something in our nature as men and women that causes us to desire things that God forbids. In the second case, the problem is that we lack the power or strength of will to do what we know we ought to do, or we lack the power to resist doing what we know we shouldn't do.

The **third** reason why we might find God's commandments burdensome, hard, and heavy, is when ***we doubt the motivation of God himself.*** In other words, we are skeptical of God's intentions. We begin to think that he doesn't genuinely care for us and our welfare, that he's out to rob us of what little happiness we might find in life, that he is a stern and mean-spirited ogre who loves nothing more than to make his people miserable by declaring off-limits all the things that otherwise might make life worth living.

Now, there's a reason why I took time to identify these three factors that often seem to make God's commandments hard, heavy, and burdensome. The reason is that ***for those who've been born again by the Spirit of God and have put their faith in Christ as Lord and Savior, none of those three factors need ever again play a role in our lives.*** Let me explain.

Let's start with the first reason why some people find God's commandments, hard, heavy, and burdensome: the fact that our nature is such that ***we don't want to obey;*** we enjoy the things God forbids. But for the person who is born again, ***the Holy Spirit has re-created you!*** You are not the same person you used to be. You do not have the same desires you used to have. Your heart and mind and spirit and soul have been renewed and you are gradually being changed internally so that what you like and dislike, what you enjoy or despise, is becoming more and more like what Jesus himself experienced.

So, when God forbids some activity, like sexual immorality, you find yourself increasingly saying: “You’re right, God. The appeal of sexual immorality is losing its grip on my heart. I know it offers me an immediate physical sensation, but I have come to discover that the pleasures of obedience and fellowship with you are far, far greater and more satisfying.”

The second reason was *our lack of strength or power*. When God commands or prohibits something, feeling weak and inadequate to respond makes those commandments feel hard, heavy, and burdensome. But for the born-again believer in Jesus, *the Holy Spirit lives within us to supply us with whatever energy or power or incentive is needed to do what God has called us to do*. This is what the Apostle Paul was talking about in Philippians 2:12-13 when he said,

“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13).

If all he had said was, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” I suspect that most of us would say, “Good-bye, God; that sounds horribly burdensome and impossibly difficult.” But with the command to obey comes the promise of all the power we need. God is already at work in and through us to supply us with the will and energy to do what he has said. We’ll see this same truth again when we get to Hebrews 13:20-21. There our author prays this remarkable prayer:

“Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (Heb. 13:20-21).

Could anything be clearer than that? Whatever God requires **from** us, he provides **to** us. We will never lack for the power or strength to obey any of God’s commands because God himself has promised to work and to will and to equip us so that we will have the spiritual energy to do what he requires.

Finally, the third reason God’s commands sometimes seem burdensome and overwhelming is that *we question God’s character. We doubt whether he has our best interests at heart*. We think of him as unloving and overly strict and as something of a cosmic killjoy. And how do we

know this *isn't* true? We know it, among countless other reasons, from what we've just seen in the immediately preceding paragraph here in Hebrews 12.

Let's not overlook why our author wrote what he did in vv. 3-11. He knows that Christian men and women are confused by adversity and sickness and persecution and trials of all sorts. He knows that people are asking, "Why doesn't God do something? How can he let this go on in the lives of his children?" He knows that this kind of confusion can easily lead to discouragement and perhaps despair. In v. 3 he expressed concern lest some "grow weary or fainthearted." In v. 12 he said it again, this time using the imagery of a runner whose hands have dropped to his side and whose knees are beginning to weaken.

And his answer to that ever-pressing problem is to remind them and us that struggles like this, whether physical pain or relational frustrations or financial strain or opposition from non-believers *are not due to God's anger or to his neglect of us. They are the tools he uses to chisel away anything in our lives that doesn't look like Jesus.* Such adversity, which he calls discipline, is the expression of God's fatherly love and care and concern.

In other words, in Hebrews 12:3-11 the point was that whatever struggles we encounter, whatever pain we endure, whatever discipline may come our way, we can rest assured that it is motivated by God's passionate love for us as his children. It's not because he's disappointed and irritated but because he's overwhelmingly in love with and devoted to the welfare of his children. As v. 6 said, he "loves" those whom he disciplines. That is to say, if God commands you to do something or forbids you from participating, it's his way of showing his love. *He's training you. He's disciplining you. He's educating you to live in such a way that your joy and happiness and satisfaction will grow and expand and intensify.* He "receives" (12:6) those whom he chastises. He's treating you as his beloved sons and daughters.

So, don't ever think that the sort of commandments and prohibitions that we find, for example, here in Hebrews 12:12-17 are motivated by God's disapproval of you or his lack of love for you. It's precisely the opposite!

I hope it's obvious why I took so much time this morning to clear the air, so to speak, when it comes to the commands and moral imperatives that come to us from God. *Everything he says to you and me in this passage and other biblical texts like it is not burdensome. Such imperatives and moral exhortations are not heavy, but light. They are not hard, but easy.* And the reason I can say that with confidence is because God has re-created you through the new birth and given you a new nature, new dispositions, and new desires. And together with making you his child, he has supplied you with the indwelling Holy Spirit to give you whatever power and incentive you

need. And all this is because he loves you with a love everlasting, a love that will never let you go, a love that wouldn't dream of asking you to do anything that would diminish one iota the joy and satisfaction that he has created you to experience.

Let me tell you when you can know you are making good progress in the Christian life. Let me tell you when you can know that you are growing in your understanding and appreciation of the love of God. It's when you read a passage like Hebrews 12:12-17 and your immediate response is: "Yes! I love it! This is really good news! More God! Give me more! These exhortations aren't burdensome. These commands aren't heavy, but light. They aren't hard, but easy. Wow! I never realized how much God really loves me until I read this passage."

"Therefore"

But before we look at these we need to take note of the word "therefore" with which this paragraph begins. This word clearly directs our attention back to what has just been said in vv. 3-11. It is ***because*** we know God to be a loving father who always disciplines us for our good that we should respond to these commands with excitement and gratitude. We should never approach moral imperatives like these and think that if we do them well God will be induced to embrace and adopt us as his children. No! It is because we ***already are*** his children and because he already loves us that we should do the things he asks of us.

If I may return for a moment to what we saw in Hebrews 12:1-2, God is reminding us of his love for us and exhorting us to certain kinds of behavior because ***he's trying to help us run!*** In 12:1 our author spoke of certain kinds of "weight" that slow us down and certain "sins" that cling so closely (12:1) and impede our running the race set before us. ***Here in Hebrews 12:12-17 he mentions no fewer than seven of them.***

(1) "Lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather healed" (v. 12).

He's speaking here of spiritual discouragement and emotional weariness and mental fatigue. But the language he employs is obviously figurative. The athletic metaphor of 12:1 is still with us. There he exhorted us to run the race set before us all the while keeping our eyes on Jesus. His fear is that because of the length of the race (remember: it is a marathon) and because of the strain that it can put on the human heart, some might allow their hands to fall to their sides (that's a disaster for a runner). Perhaps others are beginning to experience a debilitating weakness in

their knees; or it may even be that some, from sheer exhaustion, are starting to veer off course. His concern is that some are looking less like Olympic athletes and more like half-hearted participants in the exercise class at an old-folks home!

In other words, the language of v. 12 points to the same thing he had in mind back in v. 3 where he said that many were becoming “weary” and “fainthearted”. Is that you today? Are you spiritually exhausted, emotionally frazzled, and as a result perhaps somewhat tempted to drop out of the race? If so, you need to hear what he says here in vv. 12-17.

This isn’t just a call to us as individuals to be careful about how we run. It’s also an appeal to everyone in the local church to help out our fellow runners, to aid them, to encourage them, to pray for them, to instruct them, to remind them of God’s love and of Christ’s sacrifice on their behalf. If I may be allowed to make this application, what he’s calling for here in v. 12 is precisely what we aim to accomplish every time we ask our ministry team to come to the front and pray for people. This is what we want to see you pursue in your community groups. Ask people if they are suffering from “drooping hands” and “weak knees”. Help them find strength from the Spirit. Pray for them! Love them! Get them back in the race.

(2) “Strive for peace with everyone” or more accurately, “Pursue peace” (v. 14a).

It isn’t enough merely to “keep” the peace; we must strive to create it, to make it, to sustain it, and to preserve it. It’s not enough simply to avoid getting into stupid arguments with each other; it’s not enough merely to steer clear of divisive circumstances. We must strive to make peace where it doesn’t exist. Restore relations that have been damaged. Become the instrument of reconciliation.

Of course, we have to be realistic and honest about it: sometimes peace isn’t possible. In Romans 12:18, Paul said: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” Sometimes, says Paul, peace isn’t possible. But be sure it isn’t your fault! As far as it depends on you, put aside the cause of division and hatred. If others refuse to do so, that’s their problem. Just make sure it isn’t yours!

(3) “Strive for” or “pursue the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (v. 14b).

That sounds scary. It almost sounds as if he's saying that if we don't pursue holiness we won't end up in heaven. That's right. That's precisely what he's saying! It is similar to what Jesus said in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8).

"But Sam, doesn't that make salvation dependent on works? If we must pursue holiness to see God it sounds like you're advocating salvation by works rather than by grace and through faith alone."

Make no mistake: the "holiness" about which he's talking here is practical, daily conformity to the will of God. OK. So how do we reconcile this statement with passages such as Ephesians 2:8 that says we are saved by "grace . . . through faith" and "not [as] a result of works" (Eph. 2:8b-9a).

To understand what he's saying, you must get straight in your thinking two critically important truths. This isn't a mere quibbling about words. Eternal life hangs suspended upon it!

First, there is an eternity of difference between saying that salvation is *based* on works and saying that works are the *evidence* of salvation. Listen again: *I'm talking about the difference between "basis" and "evidence"*. When I say that works are not the "basis" of salvation I'm saying that you must never think that by doing good works now you will one day, on the basis of those good works, be saved. He's not saying that your pursuit of holiness is the cause or ground of your salvation. He's saying that the pursuit of good works, the pursuit of practical holiness, is the "evidence" or "fruit" of your salvation. You have already been saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and *the evidence of it is that you pursue holiness*.

This is what Paul said in the verse immediately following his declaration that we are saved by grace through faith and not as a result of works (Eph. 2:8-9). In Ephesians 2:10 he goes on to say: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

Second, we must never forget that although we are saved by faith alone, we are not saved by the sort of faith which is alone. Or again, *faith alone saves, but not the faith that is alone*. Saving faith is a working faith. Saving faith is of such a nature and energy that it will, invariably, lead us to pursue and practice holiness. If there is no fruit of holiness in one's life, it doesn't mean that a person was once saved but is now lost. It most likely means they were never saved in the first

place. The “faith” that is the product of the new birth, the faith that embraces Jesus as Lord and Savior, is active and fruitful and energizes a life of love and obedience and worship.

Thus, to say that good works are the expression or evidence of faith does not mean that good works are the essence of faith. Saving faith, like a living seed that is planted in the ground, will sprout and bear fruit. Our author doesn’t say that seeing God hangs suspended on the “perfection” of holiness but on its “pursuit”. Nowhere does the NT teach that Christians can’t sin. But it does teach that they can’t live peacefully in it. ***Christian are not people who are sinless. They are people who, by God’s grace, sin less.***

So, yes, Christians still sin; sometimes seriously. But they suffer for it. God will discipline them. Part of what it means for God to love his children is that he will never allow them to remain complacent or content with their sin. The Christian will sin, but it will make him miserable!

So, if you claim to be a Christian but feel no impulse to pursue holiness in your life, examine yourself! Pursuing holiness does not merit or win or obtain for us the salvation that leads to the joy of seeing God. Rather, the pursuit of holiness is the evidence that we have already experienced the salvation that will consummate in the glorious blessing of seeing God and enjoying his loving presence forever.

(4) Do not fail “to obtain the grace of God” (v. 15a).

The first thing to observe here is that ***you and I are responsible for the spiritual welfare of others in this local church.*** He doesn’t say, “See to it that ***you*** don’t fail to obtain the grace of God,” but “See to it that ***no one*** fails.” We have a responsibility for one another. We are more than a bunch of isolated bowling pins who look out only for number one. We must look out for each other. If you see a brother or sister wavering or wandering or growing weak, rush to their side; go to their aid; assist them; speak to them; pray for them; warn them.

So what does he mean by the “***grace***” of God? Could it be that the “grace” of God in v. 15 is simply another way of referring to the experience of “seeing” God in v. 14? In other words, it may be that by “grace” he’s referring to the final consummation of our salvation when we “see” God and enjoy his presence forever. Or again, it may be that he has the same idea in mind that we read about in Hebrews 4:11. There he exhorted us, “Let us therefore strive to enter that ***rest***, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience” (Heb. 4:11). “Rest” was his way of

describing the final peace and joy and freedom in Christ that God's people will experience in the age to come. So, strive to enter that "rest" and do not fail "to obtain that grace."

But there's another possibility. The word "grace" is often used in the NT to describe the present, sustaining power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. When Paul asked that the thorn in the flesh be removed, Jesus responded by saying: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). In James 4:5 we read that God "gives more grace. Therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'" So it may be that he's not talking about the "grace" by which we are saved. He's not saying that we must strive for holiness and pursue peace lest we come short of experiencing God's saving or justifying grace. He's talking about the sustaining, strengthening grace of God by which we are empowered to live in accordance with his will. Avail yourself of that grace! Seize it! Pursue it! Pray for it!

(5) Do not be "defiled" by allowing a "root of bitterness" to spring up within you (v. 15b).

How does "bitterness" spring up in the heart? It happens when we do not understand and embrace God's sovereign and loving orchestration of suffering and hardship and discipline in our lives. If you fail to see and acknowledge and give thanks for God having trained and educated you with various trials and difficulties you will eventually grow bitter at him. If you think you deserve only prosperity and ease and comfort and there is no need for you to be refined by rigorous tribulations, your heart will become bitter and from that root will spring up all sorts of doubt and anger and resentment toward God.

Notice also that ***bitterness is contagious***. If one person is overtaken with it he/she can infect or defile others with their poisonous attitude. He's talking about that man or woman who has a sour spirit. They have a way of inciting discontent and dissatisfaction. They grumble and incite others to do the same.

(6) Avoid sexual immorality (v. 16a).

I'm not going to say anything today about this warning regarding sexual immorality, because it will come up again in Hebrews 13:4 and I plan on saying a lot when we get to that text.

(7) Avoid the unholiness or ungodliness of Esau (vv. 16b-17).

What's he talking about? In what way was Esau unholy or ungodly? Clearly, he is referring to the incident described in Genesis 25:29-34 where Esau exchanged his inheritance as the firstborn for a bowl of stew! As the eldest son, he was entitled to a double share of the family fortune when Isaac died (see Gen. 43:33; Deut. 21:17).

If you don't remember the story, Esau and Jacob were the sons of Isaac. One day Esau came in from working in the field utterly exhausted and extremely hungry. He asked his younger brother Jacob for some red stew. Sure, said Jacob, but only if you sell me your birthright. Esau responded by saying: "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Now, was Jacob a jerk in not freely giving his brother food to eat? Yes, but that is for another time. ***But if Jacob was a jerk, Esau was a fool. He is the consummate illustration of a person who, for the sake of immediate gratification, forfeits something of immeasurably greater value, in this case, his inheritance.***

But the story takes an even more sordid twist. Esau, as the firstborn son, still hoped to receive Isaac's blessing, who by this time was very old and very blind. So Jacob put on Esau's clothing and covered himself with the smell of goats. He tricked his father into thinking he was Esau and thus received the blessing that should have gone to his older brother. When Esau discovered what had happened, he begged Isaac to withdraw the blessing he had pronounced on Jacob and to give it to him. But the decision was final and irrevocable. There was nothing Isaac could do about it.

Esau was devastated by his loss of the birthright and the blessing, but his efforts to repent for having stupidly exchanged his birthright for a "single meal" (v. 16) were a failure. This isn't to say that God will ever turn away anyone who genuinely repents. Rather the point is that it is possible to so harden one's heart that true repentance becomes impossible. A person can cross a line, as evidently Esau did, from which there is no return.

But doesn't the fact that Esau "sought it with tears" mean his repentance was real and sincere? No. Paul spoke of two different kinds of repentance in 2 Corinthians. ***"For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death"*** (2 Cor. 7:10). Esau evidently experienced grief, even weeping, but it was "worldly" grief that was due more to the loss of his birthright than to any regret or remorse that he had sinned so selfishly and stupidly.

Let's not lose sight of the most important point. Our author is warning us against ***the foolishness of so many who for the sake of some momentary, fleeting pleasure, turn their backs on what is of eternal value.*** In the case of Esau it was the immediate gratification of eating to overcome his

hunger. But in the case of others, it may be a one-night adulterous fling which results in the destruction of a marriage and the loss of a job and the soiling of one's reputation. It may be a drinking binge that happens only once but results in a DUI or the death of someone in an accident caused by your intoxication.

Whatever the case, as one of my former professors in seminary once said, don't be so stupid as to sell your soul for a mess of pottage!

Conclusion

So what have we learned today? If nothing else, I pray this single truth is clear: the commandments of God are not burdensome for the children of God. Whether it is the appeal to avoid sexual immorality or the exhortation to pursue holiness or the warning against bitterness or the temptation to give up everything of value to gain instant gratification, remember this: God has regenerated and renewed your heart so that you would love to do what he tells you to do, he has given you his Spirit so that you would be empowered to do what he tells you to do, and he loves you beyond anything you can imagine, so never think that your suffering or his commands are anything other than expressions of his fatherly affection for you, his son or daughter.