

New Covenant Worship Part I

Purity in the Temple

- ¹⁴ Strive for **peace with everyone**, and for the **holiness** without which no one will see the Lord.
- ¹⁵ See to it that no one fails to **obtain the grace of God**; that **no "root of bitterness"** springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled;
- ¹⁶ that **no one is sexually immoral** or **unholy** like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.
- ¹⁷ For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.
- ¹⁸ **For** you have not come to what may be touched, **a blazing fire and darkness** and gloom and a tempest
- ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.
- ²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, **"If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned."**
- ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, **"I tremble with fear."**
- ²² But you have come to **Mount Zion** and to **the city of the living God**, the **heavenly Jerusalem**, and to **innumerable angels in festal gathering**,
- ²³ and to the **assembly of the firstborn** who are enrolled in heaven, and **to God**, the judge of all, and to **the spirits of the**

- righteous** made perfect,
24 and **to Jesus**, the mediator of a new covenant, and **to the sprinkled blood** that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.
- 25 See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.
- 26 At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "**Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.**"
- 27 This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken-- that is, things that have been made-- in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.
- 28 Therefore **let us be grateful** for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus **let us offer to God acceptable worship**, with reverence and awe,
29 **for our God is a consuming fire.**"

Hebrews 12:14-29

Israel at Sinai

THEY SET OUT FROM REPHIDIM, after a great victory against the Rephaim Amalekites. Moses had held out his arms in the shape of the cross and Jehovah-Nissi—"the Lord is my Banner" gave a giant victory (if you know what I

mean) to the little Jewish upstarts in the desert who then promptly relaxed (Rephidim means “to relax/weaken”) as they encamped at Sinai before the mountain of God. Then Moses went up the mountain.

“Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob,” the LORD told Moses, “If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for the earth is mine. You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Moses came down and gathered the elders and told them all the words that God had spoken.

And the people so brave and sure of themselves said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do.” And Moses went back up the mountain and told the LORD.

So God said, “Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever.” It was to be a sign to the people that God was with them.

Then Moses went back down and told the people, “Consecrate yourselves today and tomorrow. Wash your garments. Do not go near your wives. Set limits around the mountain. Take care not to go up into it or touch even the

edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death, even if it is an animal.” As the morning of the third day came, the sound of a trumpet blasted throughout the valley, growing louder and louder. A dark, brooding cloud descended and darkness covered the mountaintop. Then the peak was engulfed in smoke and quaked, until finally, the LORD came as he said to the top of the mountain in fire with thousands upon thousands of his holy angels (see **Dt 33:2**).

He spoke loudly and all the people heard it. “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt and the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make yourself a carved image or bow down and serve them, you shall not take the name of the LORD in vain.” Ten Commandments he gave and they were written on stone by the finger of God.

Suddenly, their knees weakened and their feet went down crooked paths. They saw the lightening and heard the thunder. They perceived the trumpet and smelled the smoking mountain. All their senses tingled and they were afraid and trembled and stood far off and yelled at Moses through the tempest, “You speak to us, and

we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.” While not rejecting the word of God (his words and laws), they were rejecting the Word of God (the Son) who came and spoke directly to them. Demanding a mediator, they did not realize that He was already the Mediator, and so cast of the heavenly intercessor off because he was too frightening.

Moses tried to reassure them, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you. He means to train his firstborn child and discipline you so that you may have straight paths for your feet and that your dropping arms might be raised. He is here in peace that your may fear Him only and serve Him. Obey him now that you may not sin.” Clearly, the once brave soldiers had fallen into dismay, and Moses went back up the mountain to hear from God.

“Go back and tell the people, ‘You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven. Now worship me. Do not make gods of silver to be with me. Sacrifice burnt and peace offerings everyplace where I cause my name to be remembered and I will come and bless you. Be careful not to make your altars like the pagans. Put no tool to those rocks. Do not hewn then smooth. Do not go up by steps even as you have not come up the mountain.’”

God gave to Moses many more laws on that day: Law for slaves, laws against murder and injuries, laws against theft and property loss, laws about marriage and virgins, laws for foreigners and the poor. They were to be a holy people.

“You will be men of holiness for me,” God said. So he gave them more laws: How to be just people with their tongues and their courts; how to worship properly with the Sabbath and God ordained festivals; and how they should regard the Angel who was in their midst talking to them, covenanting with them, commanding them, fighting for them. They blew it at the mountain. Please don’t let it happen again.

At this moment, Moses came down and told these words to the people. Astonishingly, they again answered with one voice, “All the words that Yahweh has spoken we will do.” So Moses made twelve pillars as a marker and sacrificed burnt and peace offerings at the foot of the mountain and threw the blood on the people saying, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.” Then he arose taking his brother Aaron, his nephews, and the seventy elders of Israel and they went up the mountain together. Here, God ratified

the covenant and they ate and drank and saw the God of Israel with sapphire stone under his feet like the very heaven for clearness.

Moses stayed up on the mountain for forty more days, talking to the LORD and beholding his form as a man does face to face (Num 12:8). He received more instructions about the tabernacle, the holy mobile sanctuary of God on earth, and about the priesthood. But before he even came off the mountain of God, the people below were busying themselves with idolatry and fornication. Their fear was too much, and they once more reverted to their wobbling ways. There was revelry in the camp. Their worship was laughter and lightness and lewdness. The people had broken covenant before they could even begin to obey. And Moses trembled greatly at the thought of going back up the mountain to face the LORD.

Such was the way of it under the Old Covenant. God was in his holy place. The people were to remain at bay. These sacred space between them must be kept absolutely pure. “You shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst” (Lev 15:31). If they have an

infectious disease or an unclean discharge or come in contact with the dead, “You shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell” (Num 5:3). “The man who is unclean ... shall be cut off from the midst of the assembly, since he has defiled the sanctuary of the LORD” (Num 19:20). “You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I the LORD dwell in the midst of the people of Israel” (Num 35:34). There could be no uncleanness, no defilement, no profane thing in the temple, the tabernacle, the holy mountain, the Promised Land, or the holy city. Wars among the chosen clans, uncleanness, bitter rivalries, sexual immorality, thanklessness, and unholiness was all strictly forbidden, lest they fail to obtain the grace of God, become defiled, and God reject them and turn his face away. These are acts of [anti-worship](#) and have no place in the old covenant.

The Law and Continuity

But we are under the new covenant. Hebrews calls it a “[better covenant](#)” (Heb 7:22; 8:6). It says the old one is

“obsolete” (8:13). And we are the NT people of God. Hebrews tells us that we Christians are Christ’s “brothers” and that he is our worship leader in the congregation (2:12). Ours is the true inheritance, ours is the eternal city, the heavenly temple. Therefore, what?

How are you to think about this great disjunction between old and new, worse and better, first and last, type and antitype, earthly and heavenly? Some today, indeed a great many today want this absolute separation between them. **Some want it with the people.** Some call Christians Plan B and the age of the gospel the “Great Parenthesis” in the heavenly timetable. God still has his covenant with the nation and it always just about the nation anyway. The church is God’s grace to others, but in his mercy God decided to let the Gentiles in on a little of the fun.

Some want it with God: *That* God who put such demands on *those* people; *that* God who was deliberately scary and mean; *that* God who was so jealous that he murdered millions of innocent peoples through holy wars. That God is gone. In now comes Jesus the Nice, Jesus the Meek, Jesus the Humble. Jesus-The-Never-Judging. Gone is that God of hate and intolerance and bigotry. In is the God

of love and acceptance and letting you do whatever you want.

Some want it with the law. Gone are those old people with their old Neanderthal ways of thinking, their antiquated culture, their brutish unevolved ways. In has come the modern Christian with his free-thinking sensibilities, his progressive values, his love of democracy. Equality for all. Don't judge me. We aren't under law, but under grace.

When you combine the radical disconnect between God, his people, and his rules, you are begging for **the perfect storm of anti-worship**. And this is not how we are to worship God in the new covenant. This is a storm where everyone can say they are Christians but no actual definition of that word exists, where everyone does what is right in their own eyes, where all restraint is cast off, where people walk about smugly confident in their own self-righteousness, or utterly undone by their own reckless depravity.

We may very well be situated in the eye of a monster tempest that is developing all around us. Today is feels calm. Those storms outside don't really seem all that bad. But

radical forms of these divides are developing hurricane winds outside the eye. And the eye is moving. This storm is not God coming in grace. Rather, this is a storm that will result in the utter ruin and devastation of anyone caught in its grip. It prevents you from obtaining the grace of God by defiling you with thoughts and theologies that keep you from being holy in actions, thereby forfeiting the right to enter the temple of God. And outside the temple, there are only dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

Our passage deals with **two things** in this regard. They are interconnected. First, it gives **several commands** (at least in English). Second, these **commands are directly related to entering the temple**. Hence, the recap of Israel around the Holy Mountain-Temple of God. There is continuity here, and yet discontinuity. How are we to think about new covenant worship?

First, the commands. These show us that law still matters. It never went away. They appear in pairs in the first three verses of our passage.

1. Strive for peace with everyone (**Heb 12:14**).
2. [Strive] for holiness (**14**).
3. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God (**15**).
4. [See to it] that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble (**15**).
5. [See to it] that no one is sexually immoral (**16**).
6. [See to it] that no one is unholy (**16**).

In these commands, there is actually only **one imperative verb** (i.e. the verb of command). “**Strive**.” It modifies “**peace**” and “**holiness**.” Strive for peace and holiness. There is **one other verb** that modifies the last four thoughts. It is a present, active participle: “see to it,” or more literally “seeing to it...” It implies present, ongoing work with regard to **obtaining grace** and **rooting out bitterness, sexual immorality, and unholiness**.

Now, these rules were preceded by the commands **to lift your drooping hands, strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet (12-13)**. In other words, here are **six ways you do that**. They are in turn followed by **the reason and motivation** for doing them: the temple we have come to in the new covenant. They are summarized at

the end of the chapter with two more commands that teach us what it really is to do these things (see vs. 28). And they involve the idea of **worship**, because this is the temple after all. Hence, today we are looking at new covenant worship.

Strive for Peace

Let's think about the rules or laws. Is it accidental that he begins to tell you **how to make your paths** straight by commanding you to **strive for peace** with everyone? The Proverb says that “**the paths of wisdom are peace**” (Pr 3:17). To strive for peace is wisdom itself. And since Wisdom is a way of talking about Christ in Proverbs, he must be the God of Peace. Therefore, to seek its opposites—**disagreement, discord, being upset, hate, agitation, fighting, hostility, war**—this is not wisdom.

Nor does it belong in the kingdom of Christ. For this is the **Kingdom of Peace**. “**Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom**” (Isa 9:7). “**Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river**” (Isa 66:12), is the prophecy. **Peace** is the “**good news**” (Isa 52:7) that is announced throughout

this kingdom. The declaration would go out to the nations through Messiah, “speak peace to the nations” (Zech 9:10). This takes place, “Upon the mountains,” the high places where dark forces reside, and through the ambassadors to the people, “the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace” (Nah 1:15). The covenant that makes it all valid, which we are now under, this covenant is called a “covenant of peace” (Ezek 37:26; our passage talks about the covenant, but we will not get to it today; Heb 12:24). In this kingdom is the sanctuary in the midst of God’s people forever. It was predicted, “The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former ... and in this place I will give peace” (Hag 2:9). This all bring peace with God to those who believe: God who is Jehovah-Shalom, The LORD is Peace (Jdg 6:24).

Therefore, two questions present themselves immediately. First, are you at peace with God through Jesus Christ? His offering has made peace with God on your behalf. He is the Peace-Offering. Have you turned to him in allegiance? Second, If God has made peace with you, how can you do anything less to your neighbor?

Therefore it says “strive to be at peace with all.” At the

very least, this means your own brothers in Christ. IT probably means, literally, everyone. Christians are to be peacemakers, people of peace. Too much of our time is spent doing the exact opposite thing.

Why would this be his first command? Maybe because as we have said, the kingdom is one of peace. Maybe also because **it is so hard**. But why is that so hard, to strive for peace? It is because we are unholy people who sin against one another. When I'm sinned against, my natural reaction is to fight back. When someone gets angry at me, I want to defend myself. When I know I'm right and you are wrong, I need to make sure you know about it. But why do I have to do that? Is that how God treats me in Christ? Is that how the Lord acted when they put him to death?

“But Jesus came to bring the sword, not peace,” you say. We must fight for what is right. Yes, there are times to fight for what's right. But why would our first impulse not be to agree with the Lord here, but rather to find a way to justify not being at peace by using a verse like this? Jesus came to bring a sword, he does not say he gives you that responsibility with your neighbor or brother. What is it about us that is so very different from the martyrs we have

just read about in the Hall of Faith? Christianity is no longer known for peace, and we need to take steps to see this change.

The Root of Bitterness

But what is peace? Is it just the opposite of hostility? If there are no current wars going on, does that mean there is peace? It might. But it might not. I can easily easily not be at war with someone I haven't seen for 20 years. But I may not be at peace with them. Here, my mind turns to the fourth of our commands: **The root of bitterness**. I wonder if they aren't related in the author's mind in some way? Perhaps the bitterness comes because of your circumstances in suffering.¹ But maybe those circumstances bleed over into your heart towards others.

The tribes of the Israelites were constantly at war, even with one another. It started with Joseph's brothers who

¹ For example, "They will 'pursue peace' and not be bitter when they do not experience material blessings in the present, even when what they own in this world is wrongly taken away from them. The author of Hebrews comforted his readers with the knowledge that they had 'accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one' (Heb 10:34)." G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, ed. D. A. Carson, vol. 17, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL; England: InterVarsity Press; Apollos, 2004), 307.

grew jealous and bitter. It never really came to an end anywhere in the OT. See to it that “no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble,” Hebrews says. He is probably getting the idea from **Deut 29:18**. The LXX reads, “Lest there be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe, whose heart has turned aside from the Lord your God, having gone to serve the gods of these nations; lest there be in you a root springing up with gall and bitterness.” Bitterness therefore sometimes has roots in **the violation of the first commandment**. We start to worship other gods, even if they are of our own making. They can be literal gods—like Islam which worships Allah, who is not Yahweh. The bitterness in Islam is nothing short of epic. They can be non-literal. I can erect gods out of anything, and if you start to attack my god, I get bitter, because it has become my idol. Don’t tell me my idol is wrong!

Notice that it is a **bitter root**. The root of bitterness. Bitterness is not just something that comes upon you out of the blue, like anger or lust, passions that arise easily in the heat of the moment. No. Bitterness grows deep within a person over a long period of time. Those roots go down, deep down into the soul of a person. They poison the heart

of one person against another (the other person may not even know about it. Or they may).

Its roots grow at a microscopic speed, but they grow and grow and grow while you are completely oblivious. Because it is there all the time, the person may not even realize it and may even seek to justify why they aren't really bitter at all. Only a sped-up spiritual camera can even show you that it has grown. That camera is the anti-fruit of things like lashing out in ways that are totally unpeaceful: rage, anger, worry, or other things all because of a circumstance or a person. Bitterness causes “trouble,” as it says. Trouble is the opposite of peace.

I've seen **bitterness consume people**. They can't think of anything else. Or, even if they stop thinking about it for a while, the second that event or person comes back into their conscious mind, it consumes them all over again. If 20, 30, and even 40 years can go by and the moment you think of a person you get bitter, beloved, root it out now. You have a bitter human-eating plant growing in your soul. If you find yourself quick to judge the same person, quick to retaliate against one person consistently when you wouldn't think of acting like that towards your best friend, root the bitterness

out now. Strive to be at peace, not only outwardly, but in your heart. If God is the God of peace, then he can give his people the ability to obey this commandment. If you have experienced his forgiveness and realize that he is not bitter towards you, then the Holy Spirit he has put in your heart can pull out that bitter root instantaneously, and you will be free. Ask Him and know the peace that comes from within. Then strive for peace as far as it is up to you.

Obtain the Grace of God

Why should you do that? The rest of our time is taken up with this answer. In part, because it relates to **obtaining the grace of God**. “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up...” Perhaps this is not so much two things as it is two parts of one thing. We can obtain the grace of God. But this is **not talking about becoming saved**. No, we already have salvation. He is talking to Christians. He isn’t talking about using freewill to justify yourself or anything like that. God alone grants this justifying grace when we aren’t even looking for it.

But he is talking to Christians about making their paths straight by the law. Only a Christian even wants to do that. So the grace of God here relates to **sanctification**. Sanctification is the holiness, the setting-apartness that comes in an ongoing way. This is why the verb here is a *present active participle*. Literally it is “**seeing to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God.**” It is expected that you, Christian, are doing this. But it is something you must strive for each and every day. You may forget. You may grow slack. You may not like how hard it is and so you quit. You may not like how it is an every-day entire lifetime thing and grow tired. If you are bitter, then you are not striving to obtain the grace of God in that bitterness. Instead, you are striving to become **defiled**. That is Hebrews’ word, not mine. You are not going to the Holy Spirit and seeking forgiveness for your bitterness and lack of peace. That’s the point of the command.

Strive and Seek Holiness

Now, “**defilement**” is a temple word, just as sanctification is. “**O God, the nations have come into your**

inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple; they have laid Jerusalem in ruins” (Ps 79:1). “If the man who is unclean does not cleanse himself, that person shall be cut off from the midst of the assembly, since he has defiled the sanctuary of the LORD” (Num 19:20). He who does not cleanse himself “defiles the tabernacle of the LORD” (Num 19:13). Defilement profanes that which is holy, it makes it unclean, it is no longer separate and set-apart, but one with the world.

Another word for it is unholiness. “See to it that no one [is] ... unholy like Esau” (Heb 12:16). To use Esau as an example of our unholiness is not exactly flattering. And it portends a possible terrible warning. The word the ESV translates as “unholy” (*bebelos*) is a different word from the one used in vs. 14 for “holiness” (*hagiasmos*). The NAS translates the latter word as “sanctification.” “Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.” It translates the former word as “godless.” “That there be no immoral or godless person like Esau...”

The word for Esau literally means “profane” or “worldly.” This is the person who is not thinking of God-things, but of his own things. He recognizes nothing higher

than the earth, for whom there is nothing sacred.² John Lennon's *Imagine*. Esau had the covenant promise by birthright, and Isaac wanted to give it to him. Of course, God had other plans so that we might learn what **the true firstborn** is in his economy. But the focus here is on what Esau *did*. He **sold his birthright** for a single meal. **Afterward, when he desired the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears (Heb 12:16-17).**

Again, the focus here is on **sanctification**. The warning is not against losing your salvation, because that is impossible. It is against walking down crooked paths, and becoming dull of hearing (remember **Heb 5:11** and how these Christians had become like this). If continued to the end where a person fails to make it because they give up, this person was never saved to begin with.³

² Brooke Foss Westcott, ed., *The Epistle to the Hebrews the Greek Text with Notes and Essays*, 3d ed., Classic Commentaries on the Greek New Testament (London: Macmillan, 1903), 410.

³ **Going Deeper:** This naturally gives rise to the question of Esau and his own salvation. Because of this context, some (Allan, *NAC*; Westcott, *CCGNT*) want to come to Esau's rescue and say that he could have been an OT Christian (though maybe not at this moment), but one who was an example at this moment in time of profane actions. It is true that he always remained Isaac's son. Isaac never disowned him. It is also true that he was reconciled to Jacob, after the root of bitterness caught him up for many years. It is even true that God blessed him after he gave up his birthright. In fact, **Hebrews 11:20** says that Isaac blessed him, and this is counted as an act of faith. These should be taken seriously, as God deals personally with Esau in a very gracious way after this event in his life.

But what concerns us here is not that. It is how his **act at this moment** was unholy, godless, worldly. Esau cared more about a pot of porridge than the covenant of Messiah going through his line. That is what worldly thinking does. It is profoundly unholy. So the covenant line went through Jacob, because that was God's choice. And Esau, for his part, got what he deserved. The promised Seed and the blessing of the Promised Land would not come to Esau. (He was instead given the adjacent land of Edom, even as Lot was given Moab and Ammon. Cousins to the promises and to God's people, but needing to become united with the covenant people in order to receive those blessings).

The application here is obvious. When God tells you to be holy, to be sanctified, to strive for peace, to obtain grace, and to weed out bitterness, to not do this, to fall back and

We might deduce from some texts that he was reprobate. We know from other places that God set his love upon Jacob, not Esau (**Mal 1:3**; **Rom 9:13**), and the Romans example is used for the doctrine of election. The difficult word often translated as "hated Esau" could mean "loved less," just as it is used for Jacob's love of Leah (**Gen 29:31**), whom he loved less than Rachel. But it can also mean "hate" as when Joseph's brothers hated him (**Gen 37:4**). Some may want to do that here because it says he tried to repent but couldn't. But the context in Genesis in this story is not repenting of all sin to become a Christian. It is repenting of his foolishness in giving up the covenant promise. I really don't know about Esau's eternal destiny, though I know a lot of people who think they know. I tend to think he wasn't saved. Romans 9 is probably making that point. Some some disagree, in part based on other things said and done to Esau. If he turns up in heaven, I won't complain. I'll know God was very gracious indeed.

not think about it, to not strive for those things is to become like Esau. Dear Christian, don't be like Esau. His name alone should be warning enough.

Strive for Purity

The final command is just as related to the covenant and to the temple. See to it that **no one is sexually immoral**. The word used here is *pornos* . It can be used literally of sexual **immorality** or of **idolatry** and worshiping other gods, which is considered whoring and adultery in the spiritual world. Neither thought can be ruled out here. In a world fueled by sexual immorality of any and all kinds, we have finally returned to the days of the NT where the same was rampant everywhere. Adultery, bestiality, fornication, homosexuality, incest, lust, pedophilia, pornography, prostitution, rape, and the list goes on. Nothing is off limits.

Pastors around the world are now going to jail for daring to say that any of these are wrong. That is part of the complete disjunction we are seeing between the law of the Old and the ways of the New that so many have in mind today. Different god, no laws, no continuity. Anti-worship.

Curiously, these things are [closely related to the spirit world](#), and make no mistake if you think they are not triggering a return to paganism and the abandonment of the True God in exchange for a host of other spiritual entities out there. The two go together like a hand in a glove. God's people must beware. We have to see that the NT takes these things just as seriously as the Old did, even to the point of citing OT examples in their NT lists. The new covenant does not get rid of the law. But we need to see this in another way, so thinks the author of Hebrews.

Some of the previous examples are external and against other bodies. Some are internal and take place in the mind. All reap destruction of one form or another. But here is the true harm. [“Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body”](#) (1Co 6:18), says Paul. He goes on, [“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you.”](#) Suddenly, we return to the idea of defilement that we saw with bitterness. It makes us think of holiness and sanctification. And our minds start thinking about the sanctuary again. These commands are about worshiping God.

The Church at Mt. Zion in Heaven

The idea of worship suddenly changes to a different form. This is the form of **motivation and reason** for obeying God. **The reason** we are given for following these instructions begins in **vs. 18**, “For.” For gives you the reason. “For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages can be spoken to them” (**18-19**). Hebrews takes us back to Sinai. All those laws that they were given to protect them from his wrath that comes when you defile yourself and his temple, they were given at the site of a temple, Mt. Sinai. That is why they couldn’t touch it. That is why they had to wash their clothes. That is why they had to be invited up the mountain. This was where God dwelt, and he dwelt on this mountain. It was his mountain. The cosmic mountain where heaven meets earth. It was the OT temple in the desert.

Why were they unable to keep those laws? “**For they could not endure the order that was given**” (**20**). “**Order**”

here refers to the way of a thing. In the OT, when God came it was a **terrifying experience**, because he was not clothed in human flesh. All that could express who he was to the minds of the people terrified them. It showed them how separate he truly was from them. Even a beast could not touch the holy place lest it be stoned to death (20). Even Moses trembled with fear (21, cf. Deut 9:19). This order was the old covenant. It was heaven come straight down to earth, mediated only by the elements themselves, by heavenly beings, and by a man whose face shined when coming into contact with the LORD of Glory.

We don't come to this. And now continues not only the reason, but begins the motivation. **We come to something totally different.** Unfortunately, when you don't understand what you have come to properly, it can actually create the very complacency we are warned against here. The motivation can turn to incomprehensible drudgery. Given the difference of the new order which is seen with eyes of faith and not physical miracles, sometimes it is tempting to long for a return to the rumblings of Mt. Horeb. Someone might think, **"If God came to me like that, surely I would obey. How could they be so stupid?"** Yet, the

rumblings are precisely why they did not obey. They were terrified and in their terror all they could do was try to tame God to make themselves feel secure. This is a root of sin. It is what they did with the Golden Calf. All sin is ultimately a trying to forget the holiness of the God who is Wholly Other. It is a suppressing of truth in unrighteousness. It is a forgetting of his ways for one reason or another, be it terror or forgetfulness because of his grace. The new order in Christ can actually tempt you into this very complacency, because you no longer need to tame God. He already *feels* tame. But that is because of his grace in the incarnation, and not because he is tame. **You don't try to feed Aslan.**

Therefore, you must understand rightly where it is you are now, who it is that you are, where you have come this moment in worship, what you have become in Christ. It all relates to that temple thing again.

“But you have come to Mount Zion” (Heb 12:22). Zion is contrasted with Sinai. Both are mountains. One is the mount of terror. The other is the mount of David and his kingdom and glory. One is thunder. One is peace. One is outside the Promised Land. The other is its very center. One is before the conquest. The other is the achievement of it.

Both are God's holy hills.

The second figure is of “the city of the living God.” This is Jerusalem. Jerusalem is on Mt. Zion. It is the city of Zion. It is the place where the temple of God was placed on earth. It was the place where God set his name. It was the City of David.

But we have not come to the physical Mt. Zion over the sea and so far away. No, this is “heavenly Jerusalem” (22). This is a spiritual reality, a heavenly one, and that is why you can't tell it with your senses. Smell, feel, taste, touch, hear ... these can't show you heaven. But faith can. Abraham came to Mt. Zion (essentially called Mt. Moriah). He surely knew of a settlement there. But he was looking forward to a city with foundations whose architect and builder is God (Heb 11:10). Abraham knew of this city. This city on a hill is not America. It is not Jerusalem. It is the heavenly place to which we belong. Revelation says it is “Prepared as a bride for her husband” (Rev 21:2). The city is the people of God. Faith understands this.

It has twelve foundations, which are the twelve apostles of the Lamb (Rev 21:14). It has twelve jewels, the twelve tribes of Israel (19-20). Its walls are jasper and its streets are

gold like clear glass, the same image the 70 saw on Mt. Sinai when they beheld God’s form (18). Its glory is the Lamb. He is its light and by him people walk. And nothing unclean ever enters it (27). It is the place of eternal peace and rest. This is why we must seek peace and why we must not defile that which God has made holy by his word. We are purified by Christ’s blood. Therefore, we are to act like it.

Hebrews continues that we have come “to innumerable angels in festal gathering.” “Myriads of angels” “recalls descriptions of divine theophanies (Dt 33:2; Ps 68:17-18) and visions of the heavenly court (Dan 7:10; Rev 5:11)”.⁴ We have come into the divine council itself where the books are opened and the thrones are seated around the Ancient of Days and ten thousand times ten thousands sing stand before him.

At Sinai it was said, “The LORD came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us; he shone forth from Mount Paran; he came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand” (Deut 33:2). “The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands; the

⁴ Harold W. Attridge and Helmut Koester, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 374–375.

Lord is among them; Sinai is now in the sanctuary” (Ps 68:17). Now, that which was so terrifying can be seen with the eyes of faith through Jesus Christ who has entered heaven itself and has the power to take us directly into the throne room of grace by his blood.

We are there, seated with him in heavenly places. We are there, with the host of heaven praising him. It is a festal gathering it says. And we are there with the “assembly of the firstborn.” This very important phrase takes us back to Hebrews 2:12 where Christ leads us in worship in the NT church. Ekklesia is the word for “assembly.” We are the church of the firstborn. This is one of the few times in the NT where “church” refers to the totality of all God’s people past, present, and future. Sometimes called the invisible church, all of God’s sons and daughters in Christ share the blessings of the Only Begotten Son. We are considered his firstborn, which Esau gave up, which Jacob received by election.

The Dead Sea Scroll has a remarkable passage connecting all of these things together, though still under the old covenant. “No man, defiled by any of the impurities of a man, shall enter the assembly of these; and no-one who

is defiled by these should be established in his office amongst the congregation: everyone who is defiled in his flesh, paralyzed in his feet or in his hands, lame, blind, deaf, dumb or defiled in his flesh with a blemish visible to the eyes, or the tottering old man who cannot keep upright in the midst of the assembly; these shall not enter to take their place among the congregation of the men of renown, for the angels of holiness are among their congregation. And if one of these has something to say to the holy council, they shall question him in private, but the man shall not enter in the midst of the congregation because he is defiled” (1QS 2:4-10).

Understanding the severity of it all back then, and seeing that now in Christ Eunuchs, women, Gentiles, slaves, and others are allowed in by his work, then do you see why it is so important for you to behave in a such a way that you do what is commanded here? Defilement is still important. It can't go into the holy places. God has cleansed you. Therefore, act like who you are. If you refuse to, if your life's pattern is to reject these things, then what place have you in the kingdom of God? What actual cleansing have you received? Turn to Jesus and bow you knee to him. Be

washed by the Holy Spirit and baptized into the Name of Christ. Come and know what it means to be cleaned once-for-all.

There is much more to be said in Hebrews 12 which we do not have time for today. But in anticipation of next time and conclusion of our time together today, take to heart the summary of what your obedience in Christ is seen as at the end of the chapter. “Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:28-29). This is the summary of our laws and of the reasons and motivation of our worship. It is all about the same thing. God is still the same from OT to NT. His laws which we have looked at today are how we worship him. We are his covenant people. So let us be thankful for who we have become by faith alone through grace alone because of Christ alone. And let us do what he tells us to do. This is our new covenant worship.