

# ***“All of That”***

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***Polarities are often the devil's delight.***

***Hebrews 12:14-24***

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## ***Polarities and paradox***

One of my pre-retirement passions is to host, coordinate, or participate in multiple opportunities for local churches to display “the visible unity of the church.” I can take no credit for the event this past week, except for responding to Brock and Mandi Long’s initiative. The school and safety summit in Bost Memorial Hall assembled outside experts, four police chiefs and many other law enforcement personnel, the superintendent of Hickory city schools and dozens of other administrators and teachers from public and private schools, and church leaders from all over the community.

For the church/pastor side of this, the most moving and motivating part of the two-day event was the testimony of Frank and Sherri Pomeroy. Frank is the pastor of First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, which until five years ago was a small, rural, unknown congregation where everyone is family. Frank and Sherri themselves have produced, adopted, or fostered nine children.

About 50 people were in church November 5, 2017, but Frank and Sherri happened to be out of town when a gunman killed 26 and wounded most of the rest in a congregation of 50. The youngest of Frank and Sherri’s children, Annabelle, age 14, whom they adopted at 2, was shot and killed. Frank and Sherri insist, “Evil did not win that day.” Evil never ultimately wins.

The primary takeaway for me from that two-day summit was this question: do we want our church to be safe or friendly? All of that. We don’t have to choose. A safe church is a friendly church. Safety measures are largely invisible so we can focus on worship and welcome.

The Christian faith is an “all of that” faith. I don’t mean that we embrace every idea. I only mean that paradox is the norm when you’re a believer.

Polarities are often the devil’s delight. As a parent, should you be kind or firm? All of that. In your personal life, should you be disciplined or flexible? All of that.

Our faith is full of “all of that” options – it is a paradox faith. Is faith in Jesus based on logic or mystery? Is it about what’s visible or invisible? Is it simple or complex? Is faith a matter of free will or predestination? Are we pessimistic or optimistic about the world? All of that.

Our Scripture text today illustrates this. We’ve been looking at the New Testament book called Hebrews since Easter. Somebody said this week, “I’m tired of Hebrews.” Someone else said, “I’m loving Hebrews.” I’m all of that. There’s something else some of you love and others are tired of – my nickname for the anonymous writer. Barney is short for Barnabas, which means “Son of encouragement.” Is encouragement compassionate or confrontational? All of that. We’ll find both in today’s text.

### ***Peace or pursuit***

I notice the paradoxes immediately as I read verse 14: “Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.”

The verse reminds me of the song we just sang. Verse 2: “Lord, I want to be more loving in my heart.” Verse 3: “Lord I want to be more holy in my heart.” Are we to strive for more holiness or love? All of that.

To be “holy” means to be different, separate, set apart. “Peace” is tranquility, harmony, the lack of conflict – more loving in my heart. Can you be both? It’s certainly a goal.

There’s a paradox of effort and grace here as well. “Without holiness no one will see the Lord,” Barney says. That’s true, but to claim that any one of us is holy apart from grace is pride. The only holiness we have is through the blood of Christ. Yet he says to “make every effort...to be holy.” Which is it? Work harder at holiness or trust deeper that his holiness is enough? All of that.

Barney then turns to our relationships with others. “See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God, that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many...that no one is sexually immoral or godless.” That first phrase itself is a paradox. How can anyone “fall short of the grace of God”? Is getting grace like jumping the Grand Canyon – that you try real hard to leap across but “Oh, too bad! You fell just short of the north rim.”

Even if that were the case, are we supposed to be checking everyone else around us to be sure they successfully make the leap as well? “See to it,” he says,

seemingly for you and for them. Are we to be constantly vigilant about everyone else's bitterness and immorality? How would that be good for "peace" in the church?

Is holiness something for which you have responsibility for just you or for everyone else? All of that.

His example is Esau, the twin brother of Isaac, "who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son." There's no record in the Old Testament of Esau's sexual immorality, although he was a bigamist – but so were many spiritual heroes of the Old Testament. Tradition outside the Bible, however, enlarged his immoral character in every way – a man of unbridled passion and an undisciplined life. Barney doesn't need all that tradition – his illustration is that Esau made an impulsive decision at great cost to himself and his family. Barney is telling us that we do have a responsibility to confront others when they are doing the same thing.

Why? Because the potential consequences are great. In Esau's case, "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." Literally, "He did not find the place of repentance." It's not that we have the right to tell anyone, "It's too late." But you and I both know people who have gone so deeply into their addictive sins that they can't turn around.

What is required for holiness? Repentance or faith? All of that.

### ***Fear or joy***

The next section contrasts two mountains. Remember, Barney's theme of the entire sermon we call Hebrews is that Jesus is better, the new covenant is better. These verses dramatically illustrate the betterness.

Barney doesn't name the first mountain, but it's obviously Mt. Sinai, where the first covenant was ratified. What Barney writes about it is drawn from Exodus 19 and Deuteronomy 4, just before God gave the Ten Commandments. The people of Israel had just emerged from centuries of slavery in Egypt. They had witnessed the ten plagues, had crossed the Red Sea, and had been supernaturally provided with bread and potable water. They had also won their first war against the Amalekites. Now they camped in the desert at Mt. Sinai where God first called Moses and then the elders into a dense cloud. The people were told not to touch the mountain.

The seven characteristics of Mt. Sinai that Barney mentions are (1) untouchable, (2) burning with fire, (3) darkness, (4) gloom, (5) storm, (6) trumpet blast, and (7) a terrifying voice. Barney's version of this story includes paradox and irony. Mt. Sinai was a touchable place they weren't allowed to touch. It was a highly sensory experience of sight and sound and smell designed not for their eyes and ears and nose but for their hearts. We would say for their limbic brain.

Barney doesn't mention the Ten Commandments or the priests and elders, or even Moses. He simply captures the terror of that moment. Even Moses, he says, was "filled with fear and trembling." Recalling that scene, Barney reminds his readers that its greatest enduring impact was a palpable terror, a touchable fear.

What a contrast with now, he continues, as he describes a different mountain with seven characteristics: (1) to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, (2) to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, (3) to church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven, (4) to God, the Judge of all, (5) to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, (6) to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and (7) to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

It seems strange to identify this new covenant with "Mount Zion." Mount Zion was the city of David, where the king had first brought the ark of the covenant, the symbol of God's presence. Later it was moved to the temple Solomon built, and over time Mount Zion became synonymous with Jerusalem. For a thousand years Mount Zion was identified with the blood of goats and bulls, a system Barney has said has been replaced.

But this is a different point of comparison. Mount Zion was the place where Israel met for its annual festivals. It was a city of gathering and celebration. The contrast Barney is pointing out is between gathering before one mountain to be terrified and another to party with myriads of angels and the saints who have died and still live by faith in what they cannot see.

It's a scene that pictures judgment. The center of the seven images is, literally, "to a Judge who is God of all." All these angels and the church triumphant and present, are the "great cloud of witnesses" to our final accountability. That's terrifying again, until you get to the Jesus part where you remember this is not a scene of terror and judgment but of vindication and celebration!

Are you living on the mountain of fear or of joy? That's what Barney is placing before you.

We vacillated several times on where to begin and end the reading from Hebrews 12 this week. Although Barney wants us to focus on the joy awaiting us, he once more returns to a warning as he ends the chapter. "See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks" (25). "Once more I will shake not only the earth but the heavens" (26).

So what's our response? "Let us be thankful and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire.' (28-29)"

Make up your mind, Barney! Which is it? Fear or joy? Thanks or awe? Assurance or accountability? All of that!

### ***Comforted or afflicted***

I've heard it said that a sermon should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. It's the challenge of the pastor every Sunday to communicate all of that. It's hard to pull off.

Did you come to church too comfortable today? Have you become lazy in your faith and obedience? Have you decided repentance is for someone else, that God will just overlook your arrogance and persistent sin? I hope you leave afflicted, because our God is a consuming fire.

Did you come afflicted, beat down, struggling with hope, trying to overcome doubt? I hope you leave comforted, assured, joyful, stronger.

Are you thinking too much of other people's sins and failures, wondering if they deserve condemnation or exclusion? I hope you leave thinking more about you and your next steps of faith.

Or are you so self-assured and self-focused that you feel no sense of responsibility for the body? You don't care if others are missing God's grace, if we're leaving anyone behind. For you, church is about what you get out of it, not how you can help someone else. I hope God brings to mind someone whom you can encourage.

Have you been too passive in your life of faith? Set some goals. Move ahead. Do something new. Plan this summer and fall to re-engage in worship and small groups and serving, in the community.

Have you been too driven, too busy, thinking you need to be the world's superhero to solve every problem? Let it go. God's in charge, not you.

Does that sound like a series of mixed messages? It is, in part because I don't know where you are at this moment. But also because our faith is all of that. It's faith that works. It's effort that rests. It's trust that obeys. It's freedom that restrains.

If you want a simple faith, try atheism. Everything's easy – there's no God, so do the best you can because you're on your own. Or try pantheism. Gods are all around, some good, some bad. Try to work with the good ones.

But if you realize that God is a mystery but makes so much sense, that he loves you to the cross and back but can't be taken for granted, that he is fully engaged with you alone but also the people all around you need you to fully engage with them, if you realize all of that, then take your next step toward and with Jesus. Amen.