

**Must We Attain Some Level of Holiness  
To Enter the Kingdom?  
Hebrews 12:14 Reconsidered**

By John Niemelä

Assumptions can interfere with the ability to understand the text. Most people read Hebrews 12:14 as if it said:

*[You] pursue peace with all, and holiness, without which you will not see the Lord.*

In other words, most interpret this narrowly—merely instructing the readers how to live so that they themselves would see the Lord. However, the flow of Hebrews favors understanding it as, *Pursue holiness, so that others (as well as you) will see the Lord.*

Three issues directly impact our understanding of this verse: the identity of the person(s) who will see the Lord; the time when the Lord will be seen; and what it means to see the Lord.

Three assumptions are often imposed on this text: first, that only genuine believers who persevere in faith and good works till death will see the Lord; second, that the time of seeing the Lord is only in His future kingdom; and third, that seeing the Lord is limited to physically seeing Him in His kingdom. What the text actually says makes all three assumptions suspect. Remarkably, some commentators actually question each of the assumptions.

Note what William Lane speaks of others being influenced by their holiness:

They are to participate in the process of being made holy by cultivating a life-style that is pleasing to God. When the preacher [the writer of Hebrews] instructs his friends to “pursue the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” he is urging them to reflect the essential quality of the Father so that *a pagan society will recognize in them the family likeness!*<sup>1</sup>

Lane is on the right track, but his idea requires some refinement. What he properly understands is that personal holiness will affect others. It is true that it can even have an impact on unbelievers. The author of Hebrews would not deny that. However, the effect on outsiders is not the focal point of Hebrews. The focus is to affect fellow-believers in the congregation that are vulnerable to dropping out. Consider the following:

*[You] beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but [you] exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin (Heb 3:12–13).*

As an illustration, assume that the congregation which Hebrews addresses has fifty members. The words *brethren* and *you* speak to all fifty, but *any of you* would refer to a smaller number who had serious spiritual problems that (unchecked) could lead to defecting from the Lord. The author wants believers to minister to each other, especially to those who might fall away.

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<sup>1</sup> William L. Lane, *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), 167, emphasis mine.

*And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching (Heb 10:24–25).*

Once again, context focuses upon ministering to other believers within the congregation.

*Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright (Heb 12:14–16).*

In Hebrews 12, the author urges those in the congregation to minister to their fellow believers. Lane properly notes that personal holiness not only benefits the individual, but also those who know him. It is not incidental that the writer said *no one*, rather than *you will not*. *Pursue peace with all, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.*

Interestingly, John MacArthur expresses the same view as Lane. Unfortunately, he also thinks that it is ministry to unbelievers outside, rather than to fellow-believers. However, he is right in seeing the effect of holiness upon others.

The most difficult part of the verse is to interpret *without which no one will see the Lord*. I believe the reference is to unbelievers who observe our pursuit of peace and holiness, without which they would not be drawn to accept Christ themselves. The passage does not read “without which *you* will not see the Lord,” but *without which no one will see the Lord*. In other words, when unbelievers see a Christian’s peacefulness and holiness, they are attracted to the Lord. Jesus said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). And He prayed to His Father that “they may all be one, even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me” (John 17:21). Our love for each other is a testimony to the Father and to the Son. It is a means of drawing people to Christ, apart from whom *no one will see the Lord*. As we run the race, leaving a straight path, showing love to men by peacemaking, and showing love to God by holiness, people will see the Lord.<sup>2</sup>

Other than insisting that Hebrews focuses on holiness as a way to minister to unbelievers, he is on the right track. Otherwise, this is a fine quote.

Let us make another observation. When is it that MacArthur says that people will see the Lord? He maintains that this occurs during life (when unbelievers respond to holiness in a Christian’s life by believing in Christ). Thus, MacArthur agrees that the timing of people seeing the Lord is during their lifetime on earth. He also agrees that other people—in addition to those responding to this challenge to manifest holiness—will come to see the Lord.

Holiness in the life of one believer can draw other believers to a closer walk with the Lord (e.g., spiritual vision of the Lord) in time.

Eric Liddell refused to run his best event—the 100 meter race—at the 1924 Paris Olympics, because it was on a Sunday. He may not have understood liberty and may not have

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<sup>2</sup> John F. MacArthur, *Hebrews*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 405–406, emphasis his.

understood that the Church is not under Israel's rules, but he conducted his life to please the Lord. As consolation for not running the 100 meter dash, he was allowed to run the 400 meter race, for which he had not trained. He ran, clutching a piece of paper with 1 Sam 2:30 on it: "Them that honour Me I will honour" (KJV). He not only won, but set a world record. Eric Liddell's courage and desire to please the Lord has motivated many believers to seek a closer walk with the Lord. The message is powerful enough that the movie *Chariots of Fire* was produced and received wide acclaim. Living as unto the Lord can help other believers see Him more clearly.