

Hebrews

Finishing the Race Together

Hebrews 12:15-17

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CONCLUSION:

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INTRODUCTION:

Let me begin this morning by saying that the scriptures were written to real people living in a real place and in a real time experiencing real problems. The message is universal. Not just for them, but for all that come after them as well. Scripture is not just doctrine. We place great emphasis on doctrine because it is basic to everything. Before we can effectively serve the Lord, it is very important that we really know what the Word of God teaches.

Yet doctrine is not all there is to Christianity. There is also the practical side or the living action that must occur due to the doctrine. The two always go together. In fact, they are designed together. The first eleven chapters were mostly filled with doctrine.

- We have been told that Jesus is superior to the angels.
- He is superior to Moses.
- He is the perfect high priest and is thus superior to the Old Testament priests.
- He has instituted a new covenant that is superior to the old covenant.
- His sacrifice was superior to the Old Testament sacrifices because He offered His own **sinless** body as a perfect and permanent sacrifice for our sins.
- When Jesus died, the veil to the Holy of Holies was ripped from top to bottom to symbolize that His sacrifice was a sufficient atonement for sins and that now the way into the Holy of Holies was open for all people, for all time, both Jew and Gentile.

Now, starting in chapter 12, we are being told how to apply this doctrine to our lives.

God's method for instruction is simple; it is this: after teaching the moral and spiritual principles, then show him how to apply those rules in his life. And then it even goes a step beyond that: motivate him to want to apply those principles. So, it starts with information, then it tells you how to apply that information, and then it gives motivation on how to help apply it in their life. So, the teaching of the Word of God is not just knowledge; it is knowledge that is practical, and then it is knowledge that motivates.

There are a lot of people who have an intellectual grasp of the doctrines of the Scriptures, but they really do not know anything about the practical life. It is one thing to believe that God's Word is inspired and inerrant; it is something else to live under the authority of the Scripture with joy. It is one thing to believe Jesus Christ is Lord; yet it is quite another to surrender to His lordship and enjoy it. It is one thing to believe that God is omnipotent; it is another thing, in the midst of trial, to recognize His discipline in our lives and learn how to lean on His mighty arm.

So, there is information, then there is application, and then there is exhortation.

Hebrews was written to the Hebrews to tell the Hebrews they were no longer to be Hebrews.” Hebrews was written to exhort them to go all the way to Christ. And you remember what happened? When they made a profession of faith in Christ, and they established a little community of Jewish believers, they began to be persecuted by their Jewish friends. And they began to miss the temple, and they began to miss the priesthood, and they began to miss all of the things that had been so much a part of their lives. They were trying very hard to give their undivided attention to Christ, but there was persecution, and there was problems, and there was hassles, and their family was cutting them off, and their friends were turning on them, and there were real problems, and they had begun to show signs of falling back to Judaism.

Every culture has its strengths, but often those strengths have corresponding weaknesses. Americans are strongly individualistic and competitive. We admire the person who can “go it alone.” We compete at everything, even at the most trivial of games! But our fiercely competitive spirit means that often we are weak in the area of cooperation. We do not see our need for each other, and as a result, we are weak. This is especially true in the church.

ILLUSTRATION:

At a Special Olympics, some mentally handicapped boys were running a 220-yard race. One boy, Andrew, was much faster than the others. He was 50 yards ahead, nearing the finish line, when out of the corner of his eye, he saw his friend fall. Even though everyone at the finish line was yelling for Andrew to keep running toward the finish, he stopped, went back, and helped his friend get up. Together they finished in last place. If poor Andrew had just been as smart as us “normal” runners, he would have known that he was supposed to **win**, not help his friend!

The author of Hebrews began our chapter by **exhorting** his readers to run with endurance the race that is set before them. They needed to endure God’s loving discipline, rather than get discouraged and drop out of the race. But before he leaves the subject, he shows them (and us) that we are not running as individuals, competing against each other, but as a team. We have a responsibility toward one another, to help the entire team to finish the race. As a body of Christ, we are responsible to help each other overcome the hindrances that could cause us to drop out of the race.

All Stand and Read Scripture

Hebrews 12:15-17 (NASB95)

¹⁵ See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; ¹⁶ that *there be* no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a *single* meal. ¹⁷ For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.

Prayer

I. The Ministry of Oversight Belongs to the Entire Church.

Hebrews 12:15a (NASB95)

¹⁵ See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled;

“**See to it**” means, “to exercise oversight.” The noun is used of a bishop (or overseer) in the church. It points to a responsibility that all the members of the body of Christ have toward one another. We need to make sure that no one drops out of the race. If someone seems to be lagging or has fallen, the one who sees it should do as the boy in the Special Olympics did. He should go back and help him get up and finish the race.

Of course, we need to remember the warning that Jesus gave us.

Matthew 7:3-5 (NASB95)

³ Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Probably one of the main reasons that we do not help others with spiritual struggles is, we know that there are things in our own lives that are not right. We are afraid that if we try to help someone else, they will point out our faults.

But you do not need to be spiritually perfect before you help your brother deal with some sin or spiritual danger that you see in his life. If you had to be perfect, no one could ever help anyone else. The requirement is, you need to be walking with the Lord and confronting the sins that crop up in your life. Then, if you see a fellow believer heading for spiritual trouble, come alongside and help him get up and keep running the race.

That is what Paul meant in Galatians 6:1-2:

Galatians 6:1-2 (NASB95)

⁶ Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; *each one* looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.

It is significant that Paul did not direct that verse exclusively to the leaders of the flock, but to “**you who are spiritual**”. He is referring to those who walk by the Spirit, not by the flesh. They have crucified the flesh and have developed, not perfectly, but to a substantial degree, the character qualities described as the fruit of the Spirit:

Galatians 5:22-26 (NASB95)

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.

Christians are **spiritual**, but they are not **super-spiritual!** They are aware of their own proneness to sin which allows them to approach with a spirit of gentleness and humility. They do not condemn the one who has fallen, but seek to restore him. Their aim is to help the other person get back into the race and finish.

This church will only be healthy to the degree that every member who is "**spiritual**" helps restore those who are weak so that they stay in the race. You are responsible to help

anyone you know or whom God puts in front of you. If you do not know how to help the one who is in spiritual trouble, ask one of the leaders for assistance.

But probably it is you, not one of the leaders, who needs to come alongside your brother or sister, because you have the relationship with them. Spiritual help almost always is most effective when it flows through existing loving relationships. So, “**see to it**” is directed to **you!** It means that **you** are in the ministry! You have a responsibility to come alongside to encourage and strengthen other members of the team who may be in jeopardy of dropping out of the race.

II. Five Hindrances that can Cause Christians to Drop Out of the Race.

Last week, in verse 14, we discovered how all of our spiritual troubles are caused by our failure to keep the two great commandments: Failure to love God or Failure to love your neighbor. We identified these two commandments in the exhortation to pursue peace with our neighbor (the second commandment) and the exhortation to not sacrifice purity or godliness with God when in pursuit of peace (the first commandment). The items mentioned here are not exhaustive. The author is especially concerned that his readers not abandon the faith and return to Judaism under the threat of persecution. So he lists five common hindrances that can cause people to drop out. We need to watch for them in our own hearts as well as in our brothers’ and sisters’ hearts.

The first hindrance listed that can cause Christians to drop out of the race is falling short of the grace of God. The second hindrance listed that can cause Christians to drop out of the race is becoming bitter over of trials and poisoning others.

Time did not allow me to expound on these subjects this morning, so I decided to cut this portion out and use it for next week's sermon.

The third hindrance listed that can cause Christians to drop out of the race is...

C. Indulging in Sexual Immorality.

Hebrews 12:16a (NASB95)

¹⁶ that *there be no immoral* or godless person like Esau,

“Immoral” is a general word in Greek " *pornos* ", from which we get our word "pornography". It refers to any kind of sinful sexual activity. Sexual sin is **not** a recent discovery! We have Biblical accounts of it as far back as the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. They had become so immoral that God wiped out the cities with brimstone and fire!

The Bible teaches that sex between a husband and a wife is God’s good gift within the confines of marriage. One reason that God gave us marriage was to prevent sexual immorality.

1 Corinthians 7:2-3 (NASAB95)

² But because of **immoralities**, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband. ³ The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband.

Within marriage, the sexual relationship **pictures** the union between Christ and His church.

Ephesians 5:25-27 (NASB95)

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, ²⁶ so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.

But outside of marriage, sexual relationships defile not only those involved, but, if it is flaunted and it encourages others to do it, then it can defile some in the church also if left unchecked. The first attempt should always be to restore those who have sinned through genuine repentance. Thus the author here instructs the entire church, “**See to it... that there be no immoral ... person**” in the church.

Thus, some drop out of the race because they fall short of God’s grace. Some drop out because they become bitter towards God because of trials. Others drop out because of sexual sin.

The fourth hindrance listed that can cause Christians to drop out of the race is...

D. Developing a Godless Outlook on Life.

Hebrews 12:16 (NASB95)

¹⁶ that *there be no immoral or **godless** person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal.*

Esau is described as a “**godless person ... who sold his own birthright for a single meal.**” The Bible portrays Esau as a man who succeeded admirably in everything that the world has to offer, but he failed miserably in the things of God. Esau was a likeable “man’s man.” He was a skilled hunter and outdoorsman. He was a natural leader, who raised up a band of over 400 men who followed him. He had beautiful women as his wives and fathered sons who became leaders of tribes in their own right. His fame continued after him for centuries. So he succeeded in his family life, he succeeded financially and materially, and he succeeded by becoming politically powerful. But he failed where it matters most: He failed with God.

The birthright and blessing conveyed certain inheritance rights to the firstborn son. With Abraham’s descendants, these rights and blessings especially referred to God’s covenant promises.

Genesis 12:1-3 (NASB95)

¹² Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father’s house, To the land which I will show you; ² And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; ³ And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in **you** all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

By the time of Jacob and Esau, none of these promises had been realized. They were not even on the horizon. Esau’s attitude was, “Hey, I’m hungry. What good is some vague future blessing if I starve to death?” He wasn’t interested in the future promises of God. He lived for the here and now. So he sold his birthright for a bowl of stew, wiped his mouth, and went his way without a thought of regret at the time.

Later, Jacob conned their father, Isaac, out of the blessing. At that time Esau probably saw a connection between selling his birthright and losing the blessing, and he felt bad about it. He wept and entreated his father for the blessing, but it was too late. Esau got angry and wanted to kill his brother for his treachery, but he eventually got over it and moved on to become a success in life. The problem was, he succeeded in worldly things, but he failed in spiritual things. In this sense, he was a godless or profane man.

The author wants us to see that if we gain the whole world, but lose our souls, we have made a bad investment. Satan tempts us to go for all that the world offers in this life, to the neglect of our souls and eternity. If you go that route, you will drop out of the race.

The fifth hindrance listed that can cause Christians to drop out of the race is...

E. Seeking Blessings Without Desiring God Himself as the Blessing.

Hebrews 12:17 (NASB95)

17 For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.

The word “*Afterwards*” should send shivers down your spine! Some decisions have irrevocable consequences! God will forgive all of our sins if we truly repent, but you cannot undo some consequences from former sins. Some sins have a searing effect on our consciences. When Esau lost the blessing, at first he felt bad. He wept about it.

The phrase “*sought for it*” refers to the blessing, not to repentance. Esau was not seeking repentance with tears; he was seeking the blessing with tears.

Genesis 27:38 (NASB95)

38 Esau said to his father, “Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father.” So Esau lifted his voice and wept.

In other words, he was not sorry about his sin of despising God. He was sorry that he did not get the blessing. In other words, he could not care less about seeking God for the joy of knowing God. He only wanted what God could give him to make this life more enjoyable.

There are many today who are Christians for the benefits. If God will give them a happy marriage and family life, good health, and a comfortable lifestyle, they will pay their dues to God and the church. But if life becomes difficult, if severe trials hit, they start shopping elsewhere for whatever works. Their allegiance is not to God, but to themselves! If they can “use” God to get what they want, they will do it. But if God is not satisfying their desires they move on. They are just like Esau. They desire the blessing, but they really are not interested in the joy that the psalmist knew when he wrote...

Psalms 73:25-26 (NASB95)

25 Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. 26 My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

We also saw many followers of Jesus withdraw from Christ when His words began to seem too difficult for them to follow. Listen to what Jesus asked the disciples and to Peter's proper response.

John 6:67-69 (NASB95)

⁶⁷ So Jesus said to the twelve, “You do not want to go away also, do you?” ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered Him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God.”

CONCLUSION:

All of us first should check our own hearts against these five hindrances that can lead to dropping out of the Christian race.

- Do I know through personal experience God’s grace through the gospel?
- Am I discarding from my heart all bitterness toward God because of the discipline that He has brought into my life?
- Am I avoiding temptation to sexual immorality, including the thought level?
- Am I focused on the blessings of eternity instead of the things of this world?
- Am I seeking God for the joy of Him alone instead of the blessings that He gives?

Then, we should look around at those we know in this church. If your brother or sister has fallen in the race, or is in danger of straying off course, be like that boy in the Special Olympics: go back and help your brother get up and continue in the race. God calls us to help one another finish the race together!

What a Day That Will Be!