

Hebrews

Falling From Grace

Hebrews 12:15

INTRODUCTION:

Hebrews 12:15 (NASB95)

Hebrews 12:16-17 (NASB95)

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

A. Falling Short of the Grace of God.

Hebrews 12:15a (NASB95)

Romans 3:23 (NASB95)

Romans 6:1-2 (NASB95)

Galatians 5:16-17 (NASB95)

Ephesians 2:8-10 (NASB95)

Colossians 1:21-22 (NASB95)

Romans 5:10-11 (NASB95)

Romans 8:38-39 (NASB95)

Colossians 1:21-23 (NASB95)

2 John 1:8 (NASB95)

1 Timothy 4:1 (NASB95)

B. Becoming Bitter Over of Trials and Poisoning Others.

Hebrews 12:15b

Proverbs 4:23 (NASB95)

CONCLUSION:

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INTRODUCTION:

The message this morning is a continuation of last week's sermon. So I will be using some of the same introduction as last week.

Let me begin this morning by repeating 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. Therefore, in order to serve the Lord effectively, 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. The first eleven chapters were mostly filled with doctrine. 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 to others then we must show them how to apply those rules in their life. And then it even goes a step beyond that: motivate them 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 find enjoyment in surrendering to His lordship. 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.

Following is an illustration that I used last week...

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!

In our passage this morning the author shows them (and us) that we are not running as individuals, competing against each other, but as a team.

All Stand and Read Scripture

Hebrews 12:15 (NASAB95)

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;

Prayer

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. The ministry of oversight belongs to the entire church.

I also presented three of five different hindrances that can cause Christians to drop out of the race from verses 16 and 17.

- Indulging in Sexual Immorality.
- Developing a Godless Outlook on Life.
- Seeking Blessings Without Desiring God Himself as the Blessing.

Hebrews 12:16-17 (NASB95)

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.

This morning we will look at the first two hindrances found in verse 15 that we bypassed last week.

I. 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 brother's and sister's hearts.

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

A. Falling Short of the Grace of God.

Hebrews 12:15a (NASB95)

¹⁵ See to it that no one **comes short** of the grace of God;

The verb used here means “to fall behind to the extent of cutting oneself off from the contest”. It is the same verb used in...

Romans 3:23 (NASB95)

²³ for all have sinned and **fall short** of the glory of God,

The author is warning those in the Hebrew church, who were tempted to abandon Christianity, **not** to return to Judaism. That would cause them to "fall short" of God's grace in the gospel.

It is here that I want to spend some time looking at the doctrine of "once saved always saved" that many churches promote. They believe that if a person falls away, it is because they were never saved to begin with. Except for the radicals, who suggest that they are "saved" so they can now do whatever they want, both sides of the fence would agree with the obvious messages from the following verses.

Romans 6:1-2 (NASB95)

6 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? ² May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?

Galatians 5:16-17 (NASB95)

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so **that you may not do the things that you please.**

So it obvious that, as long as we are truly saved, we will live a new life in Christ avoiding the desires of the flesh.

Ephesians 2:8-10 (NASB95)

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is the gift of God*; ⁹ not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Both sides agree that we are saved by faith and that our salvation is a gift of God. We can never "**earn**" our way to heaven by our works. But Paul, the grace teacher, writes that while we are not saved by good works we **are saved** to **do** good works.

¹⁰ For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

Unfortunately many people believe that if they live a good life and do good things, then God surely will **not** condemn them. Just live a moral life, offer help to your neighbors, go to church, keep the rules, and you are approved. This appeals to the flesh, because we like to think that we are good enough to commend ourselves to God by what we do. And, we like to pat ourselves on the back thinking that we are better than those that do not keep our religious rules and rituals.

But God's grace cuts down our pride by saying, "No one can ever be good enough to earn God's favor, because all have sinned." While some may be able to keep external rules and rituals, God looks on the heart. The only way of salvation is to receive God's grace (which is a favor that none of us deserve) offered at the cross, where Jesus paid the penalty that **we** deserved and then live the **active** faith that Christ has set before us during our lifetime. Remember: faith without works is dead!

One of the verses that I believe is very clear about being able to fall away is found in Colossians.

Colossians 1:21-22 (NASB95)

²¹ And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, *engaged* in evil deeds, ²² yet He has now **reconciled** you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach—

I want to stop here and define the word "reconciled" as described in the scriptures.

Romans 5:10-11 (NASB95)

¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. ¹¹ And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

When Christ died on the cross, He satisfied God's judgment and made it possible for God's enemies, us, to find peace with Him. Our "**reconciliation**" to God, then, involves the exercise of His grace and the forgiveness of our sins. This gift of righteousness restores our good standing with God. So if we have been "**reconciled**" according to Romans, then "**we shall be saved by His life**".

Another point is made by the "always saved" group from Romans.

Romans 8:38-39 (NASB95)

³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the **love of God**, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I truly believe that none of things can separate us from our faith, but at the same time I also believe that the scriptures are clear that...**we...can** separate ourselves from grace by our own free will.

Now let's go back to Colossians. Remember verses 21 and 22?

Colossians 1:21-23 (NASB95)

²¹ And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, *engaged* in evil deeds, ²² yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach—

Then notice the next word in verse 23..."**IF**".

²³ **if** indeed **you** continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.

Some people willingly decide to depart from the faith, which is why Paul addressed the conditional phrase "if", following the truth about our reconciliation by Christ's "**fleshly body through death**".

In my mind, one of the tallest hurdles to cross, when it comes to the doctrine of "once saved always saved", is the subject of free will. There is plenty of evidence in the scriptures that suggest that it is possible for believers to willfully turn away from their faith in Jesus Christ. If it were not possible to fall away then why all the exhortations to

beware of false teachers, to avoid apostasy, to **not** neglect so great a salvation, to avoid willful sin, and to remain faithful to the end and overcome?

2 John 1:8 (NASB95)

⁸ Watch yourselves, that you do not **lose** what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward.

How can we lose something that we have never found?

God gave us the choice to accept Him or reject Him. John 3:16 tells us that "**whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life**". We do not lose our free will once we surrender to Christ and are saved. **Our free will remains within us!** We do not become robots. Since we live in a sinful world and we all continue to sin despite our efforts to remain faithful, our free will can allow us to fall away. God gave us free will because he does not want robots in His kingdom! So I believe that salvation can be a reversible decision! Giving your life to Christ is **not** like joining the mafia with no chance of getting out. You are not in a situation where you do not have the option to bow out! If that were true why wouldn't God just make it impossible to sin any longer and let us just live out the rest of our life? God's desire is that we **choose** to follow Him!

1 Timothy 4:1 (NASB95)

4 But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some **will fall away** from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons,

How can you "**fall away from the faith**" if you were never in the faith? Consider the many Christians who served God for a period of time only to leave the faith, then renounced their belief in Jesus Christ, and became atheists due to some adverse events in their lives. To say they were never believers would be a huge stretch and to say that they are still saved after disclaiming their faith would be even a greater stretch.

There are many more passages of scripture that we could look at. **But...here is what I want you to understand!** Regardless of which side of the fence we find ourselves on, we can both agree on the essential truth of the scriptures. **Only God knows for sure** if the person that fell away was ever saved to begin with. He is the perfect judge who knows the heart. We cannot ascertain someone else's heart! It is **our** responsibility to make sure that neither **you...nor...anyone you know** falls short of God's grace by trusting in their own works or "goodness". As a Christian, we **must** trust in God's grace in Jesus Christ as his or her **only** hope for heaven. And then there is an unconditional requirement on our end: (the "if" word). **We MUST remain faithful to the end and overcome!**

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

B. Becoming Bitter Over of Trials and Poisoning Others.

Hebrews 12:15b

...that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled;

The last part of verse 15 refers to a passage in Deuteronomy where Moses is warning Israel about the danger of idolatry. The "root of bitterness" refers primarily to a bitter person in the church who has turned away from God and will cause trouble and defile many if he goes unchecked.

This person probably does not like the way that the true God has treated him. He is going through severe trials, and God does not seem to be delivering him through them. Rather than submitting to God's discipline in the trial, he is growing bitter against God, thinking, "I do not deserve this kind of treatment!"

Along comes someone else who says, "I tried this other god, and it worked for me." So the suffering person thinks, "What have I got to lose?" He tries the other god to see if it will work for him. That is the sin of idolatry, and it will spread poison in a church if the sinning person does not repent or is not put out of the church. As a member of the church, you are responsible to make sure that no "bitter root" spring up and defile others by turning them away from God, especially in a time of trial.

A root is hidden beneath the ground, but it feeds the entire plant. This points to the deceptive nature of sin in the heart. The heart in Scripture refers to the inner person, especially how we think.

Proverbs 4:23 (NASB95)

²³ Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life.

This is especially important when you are going through trials. Are you grumbling against God, thinking inwardly, "**If this is the way God treats me then I am going to quit following Him**"!

If you are raging at God in this manner then you are allowing yourself to become "a **bitter root**" in the midst of the church! Examine your heart, especially when you are suffering, to make sure that you are in submission to God's hand of discipline.

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!