

EXPOSITION OF HEBREWS

Message #34

Hebrews 12:12-17

Years ago a world-class marathon runner, who had won many marathons, was asked about winning a marathon. He said something I have never forgotten. He said “to finish the marathon is to win the marathon.” He understood that in order to run 26.2 miles and finish it was a daunting and difficult task.

The first marathon I ever ran was a marathon in Atlanta on Thanksgiving Day that was put on by the Atlanta Track Club. Myself and two other men from our church went to my brother Tim’s and stayed the night and then got up and drove downtown Atlanta to run the race. We had trained to run that marathon for about five months. We would get together just about every Saturday and go for long runs of up to twenty-plus miles. My average pace per mile for that race was 7:36. I remember vividly the final four miles of that first marathon. I was no longer looking up, but I was looking down at the ground. My breathing was not as easy as it had been. My feet hurt, my legs hurt, every muscle in my body was aching and I felt like stopping with every step. At the final turn, there were about 200 yards left to go and a member of the Atlanta Track Club said, “Congratulations, marathoner, you made it.” The moment you crossed the finish line, a medal was hung on your neck; and at that moment, all of the pain I had experienced in those final miles was gone.

Now when it comes to preparing to run a marathon there is one principle that determines the outcome; finishing a marathon is completely determined by your training. The outcome on the day of the race is determined by what you did weeks before. No amount of cheerleaders or psychological-hype will get you to the finish line. If you are going to finish a marathon, you will have to do your preparatory work.

The writer of Hebrews compares the Christian life to a long, hard and tough marathon. To get to the finish line requires training and preparation. It means we will lay aside anything that could hinder us from finishing and lay aside any sin that could keep us from finishing well. We will need to fix our eyes on Jesus Christ from start to finish. We will also need years and years of training and discipline from the Word of God. How we respond to this training will determine how we will finish. In order to run and finish a marathon, there is no question that focused, disciplined training is required. This is exactly what the writer of Hebrews wants to stress.

Last time we saw that God disciplines His children. He wants us all running our race to the end, and He takes a Divine Personal interest in our training. He monitors our progress.

GOD WANTS US RUNNING A VICTORIOUS RACE TO THE FINISH SO WE MAY GAIN OUR ETERNAL INHERITANCE; AND IN ORDER TO DO THAT, WE NEED TO STAY FOCUSED ON OURSELVES AND THE WAY WE RELATE TO OTHERS.

One of the contextual things this means is that we will need to conform ourselves and learn the lessons of training discipline that comes to us from the hand of God. We will need to properly respond to God’s training manual which is the Word of God. How we respond to the discipline of the Word of God is key to our development.

RESPONSE #1 – Strengthen what is weak . **12:12**

If you have ever watched an endurance competition like a marathon or a triathlon, you have seen participants coming to the finish line with knees wobbling and hands hanging. The competitors are exhausted and some of them actually collapse when they cross the line. That is the picture here.

The idea behind “hands that are weak” (παρημι) is the idea hands that are tired and exhausted and weakened because of the long endurance race. Weak hands and feeble knees describe one who is discouraged and exhausted. Strength is low, morale is low. What is needed is a good shot in the arm. There needs to be a replenishing of strength. A few years ago, a sports drink was invented that was designed to instantly replace lost electrolytes and give competing athletes the boost they needed. It was called “Gatorade.”

God says, I have a drink you need to take in that will get your strength back. It is a spiritual drink that comes from My Word and it is a drink that will strengthen you. The actual word “strengthen” is one that means we are to set things upright and straight again. We are to restore ourselves to an upright condition (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 40).

I like something Ray Stedman said, the first thing we must do when we find ourselves being disciplined or trained by the Lord is to go to work on ourselves (*Hebrews*, p. 140). We need to toughen up and get stronger. We need to get things back in line. **The discipline of God is not designed to crush us but to help us.** It will show us an area of weakness so we can turn those areas into becoming areas of strength. **As we take in God’s Word and line things up with the Word of God, we will find ourselves getting stronger and stronger.**

Discipline is not designed to destroy us or annihilate us, but to strengthen us. When you find yourself weakened by failure or by sin or by setback, instead of quitting and giving up, regroup and strengthen the weak area. Get things back in line. Get back to the Word. Learn the lesson and draw close to the Lord.

More and more we need to understand the fact that “when we are weak, then we are strong.” The reason for this is because the more we recognize how weak we are, the more dependent we will be on the Lord. We will look more to Him and away from ourselves.

RESPONSE #2 – Straighten your path . **12:13**

We need a straight forward, God-honoring conduct that squares with the Word of God. We must make certain that we are living our lives in a straight way which conforms to the inspired Word of God. God wants us looking straight at Scripture and He wants us to apply those Scriptures to our own lives.

Notice what this verse says; we need to walk straight so there may be a healing. This is true for us and this is true before others. We help ourselves when we are lame and we help others when they are lame by straightening things out.

In other words, when we are broken or when others are broken, the best thing we can do is “straighten our path” in view of God’s Word. That will keep us whole and complete.

The key to helping ourselves and others is a straight walk that lines up with the Word of God. If you are broken and bruised by the discipline of God, get back on track. Straighten your path. Get things back in line and there will be healing to your soul.

RESPONSE #3 – Pursue peace with all men. **12:14a**

Now we need to immediately admit that we will never be at total peace with this world, especially if we are proclaiming God’s Word to this world. As we proclaim truth and expose evil, we will not be at peace with many people; we will be in war. Jesus said that He did not come the first time to bring peace but to bring a sword. But as we relate to people in this world, like Paul said “as far as it depends on us,” we need to pursue peace with all men or all types of people (Romans 12:8).

The moment we believe on Jesus Christ and are justified, we have peace with God (Romans 5:1). However, having peace with the character and quality of all kinds of people is a different matter. The reference to “all men” refers to all kinds of people, both saved and unsaved. The verb “pursue” (διώκετε) speaks of an aggressive chasing or pursuit.

If we are to run a good race, we need to chase after peaceful relationships with all kinds of people. We need to be at peace with those who are believers and those who are not. We need to be at peace with those who are lovely and those who are not. We need to try to be at peace with those who are moral and those who are not. We need to reach out to all kinds of people if we are to run a good race for God.

There is nothing that will ruin us faster than conflict. Satan does not want peace in any relationship. He does not want peace in the home, on the job, or in the church; he wants war. When God’s people fail to pursue peace, they are making a fatal mistake that could actually cost them their race.

We must always be certain that our warfare squares with God’s Word. If it doesn’t, we need to change our course because we are running the wrong race.

RESPONSE #4 – Pursue sanctification before the Lord. **12:14b**

Not only must we pursue peace with all men, but also we must pursue holiness before the Lord. Notice, ladies and gentlemen, who it is who truly sees and assesses our holiness, the Lord. We are on display before the Lord.

There are three main “without” statements in this book of Hebrews that are, as W. H. Griffith-Thomas said, “indispensable” (*Let Us Go On*, p. 163).

- 1) Without the “shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” 9:22
- 2) Without faith “it is impossible to please God.” 11:6
- 3) Without sanctification “no one will see the Lord.” **12:14**

Now the qualifying point “without which no one will see the Lord,” has been interpreted in different ways:

(Possibility #1) - It could mean that if we are not interested in living our life in a holy way before God, then we have just cause to wonder whether or not we are saved; and if we are not saved, we will not see the Lord in eternity.

As we said in Hebrews, “sanctification” is often a reference to positional sanctification that occurs at the moment of justification. A couple of problems with this position are salvation is not contingent upon pursuing sanctification, but by having a positional sanctification that comes by believing on Jesus Christ. Furthermore, even the unsaved will see the Lord if at no other time than the Great White Throne Judgment.

(Possibility #2) - It could mean that if we are not pursuing holiness, we will not see God do much of anything with us, through us, and for us.

The immediate context is make our paths straight so that we don’t pull up lame, but run to the finish line. If we don’t make our paths straight, we will just limp along and won’t accomplish much at all.

(Possibility #3) - It could mean that if we expect people to actually see the Lord through us, we must pursue righteousness and holiness.

As we pursue peace and holiness, people will see the grace of God through us and in us. Dr. S. Lewis Johnson said that often you will hear someone say, “Well I know some people who have made some profession of faith, but there doesn’t seem to be much evidence of it.” Dr. Johnson said the first question we should all ask ourselves is, “Can God’s holiness be seen in us?” (*Hebrews 12:12-17*, p. 4)

(Possibility #4) - It also could mean that if we expect to be able to have access to Jesus Christ when He reigns on this earth and actually get in to see Him, we need to run our race to the finish line pursuing righteousness.

Jesus Christ will not eternally honor one who does not pursue a true holy life. When Jesus Christ reigns on this earth, those who will have direct access to Him will have been those who were pursuing a Biblical holiness and righteousness.

The point is, without a pursuit of holiness, one will not see God in the same way as if one did pursue holiness.

RESPONSE #5 – Do not ever fall short in the grace of God. **12:15a**

The first thing we must always guard against is gracelessness. In pursuing righteousness, we must never forget grace. If all we do is pursue righteousness and forget grace, we are likely to become a rigid, legalistic Pharisee. God never wants us to lose sight of grace.

Now the participle “fall short” is present tense, which means God never wants any one of His people continually falling short when it comes to understanding, communicating, and living in view of the grace of God. The actual verb “fall short” (ὕστερον) is one that means to come up short or fail or to be in want of the grace of God (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 464).

God wants each of us continually knowing, believing, and reflecting His grace. Now contextually the way we would fall short of the grace of God would be by not helping others understand God’s grace and by not helping them get to their finish line.

We need to try to come alongside lame, limping people and point them to the grace of God.

RESPONSE #6 – Do not be defiled by a bitterness that causes trouble. **12:15b**

One sure way to become bitter is by neglecting a focus on the grace of God. Harmony in a church can be wrecked by bitter people. Kent Hughes said that “virtually every church has such bitter roots” (*Hebrews*, Vol. 2, p. 183). It is so easy for people who go to church to become hostile troublemakers through murmuring and bitterness.

Here is what you and I can know. If we are defiled by bitterness, we are not sanctified and we are not holy and we do not demonstrate grace.

RESPONSE #7 – Do not become immoral like Esau. **12:16-17**

It is very clear from this that we are not to permit some godless immoral person like Esau to be us or to be part of us.

Esau was a lust-driven man who would toss away his great sonship honor to fulfill his fleshly lusts. He thought more of his own personal physical gratification than he did the eternal program of God.

It is interesting that Esau is called here in Hebrews as being a fornicator. We do not have any stories about this in the Bible; however, there are some outside traditions that say he was. The Palestinian Targum is one such document which informs us that Esau was one given to sexual immorality. One story of Esau is that he had bragged that he had been out and was involved in adulterous relationships with a variety of individuals.

Now notice how **verse 17** ends; after Esau had succumbed to his lusts he wanted to inherit blessings and he was even sorry that he had done the things he did. But here is the point - he lost his inheritance. Our tears will never be able to undo our sins.

Any believer, who devotes his life to fulfilling his own lusts, will ruin his race and will not finish an honored saint. There is no question that it is possible to toss away rewards if we do not stay focused on running a good, God-honoring race to the finish.

This text tells us all that we each must run our own race. We need to search ourselves to see how we are running.