

Hebrews 12:1-14
(Psalm 24:1-6; Matthew 16:24-26)
“Looking to Jesus”

Introduction

We have been asking over the past few months why it is that most professing Christians in America aren't living any differently than our neighbors who make no profession of faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christianity is increasingly rejected in our culture, not because of the so-called new atheism. The new atheism is simply a rehashing of old arguments that have been answered eloquently in the past by Christian thinkers. No, those attacks on the faith are now getting traction precisely because most professing Christians are not Christ-followers. The apostle Paul once wrote, “For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power” (1 Corinthians 4:20). But in America, truth be told, it is mostly talk, because it is not really the gospel of Christ at all, but a religion built around the language of the Bible but lacking the power of God's transforming presence.

In those places where the gospel of Christ is vibrant, life transforming and culture reforming, its greatest argument is the transformed lives of those who don't just talk about Jesus, but who actually follow him with joy and power. The verses that we have read were a challenge to a first-century church that was growing weary and powerless to wake up and get back to the heart of things before it was too late, eternally too late. And the words speak directly to our culture, our town and our community, challenging us not to throw away our lives by running the wrong race, fighting the wrong battle, or simply sleeping through salvation history.

Body

1. The life of faith seen as a race (12:1-2):

The author uses the Greek word *agon*, from which we get the English word “agony,” to describe the race we are to run. He had in mind a grueling race that caused physical agony, probably a marathon. The life of faith is not a stroll, not a walk-in-the-park, not something that should be approached casually, not something that can be undertaken half-heartedly. It is hard and it is costly. But it leads to life! Here we have three keys to running this race:

“Lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely” (12:1a). Clearly, we cannot run this race if we are embracing things that God's Word calls sin. You can't run this race as one who scorns the law of God, those pictures of what it means to love God and to love one another. But many other things must be cast aside as well, what our author describes as “every weight.” What is holding you back? What means more to you than running this race?

“Let us run with endurance the race set before us” (12:1b). We must run with endurance, with perseverance, not stopping, not going back, not getting off course and pursuing a life inconsistent with the life of a follower of Jesus. We also are not free to design our own racecourse. It is “the race set before us.” How do we recognize the racecourse? How do we know where and how to run?

“Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (12:2). Why do people run marathons? Why do they endure the cross, the daily death, of training their bodies, of eating only what will benefit them when they are running, of scheduling their day around their training? Unless they are masochists, they do it for the joy – the joy of becoming fit and strong, the joy of being a part of the community of runners, the joy of finishing the race, the joy of accomplishing what most are not willing to accomplish. How much more, in the most important thing, the only thing of eternal consequence, should we set our eyes upon the prize of “the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14). And the only way that we will recognize the course and understand how it must be run is by following Jesus. He sets the pace and we get behind him and, keeping our eyes fixed on him, simply follow, submitting at every twist and turn to his leading. He is the founder and designer of the course, and the only one who runs it perfectly. By staying close, we are sure to run the right race, to run it well, and to finish strongly, all in the strength his grace provides.

2. The life of faith seen as a fight (12:3-4):

Now, the author changes metaphors, and describes the life of faith as a “struggle” or “fight.” The Greek word he uses is *antagonitsomai*, from which we get the English word “antagonist.” Now he has in view, not a race, but a fight, and he calls us to not to “grow weary or fainthearted.” He reminds us that in our “struggle against sin” we “have not yet resisted to the point of blood.”

Just as no one strolls into a marathon, no one decides one day to enter the octagon and engage an MMA contest. It requires vigorous, at times painful training. There will be blood, sweat and tears on the path just to qualify to fight, and much more of the same if one would win a prize.

Whenever I read this I feel a deep and profound shame. If we see “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye and the pride of life” (1 John 2:16) as attractive things that are being kept from us, we don’t yet get it at all. Sin is the enemy of our soul, it is the antagonist, seeking our spiritual death and we seldom resist even to the point of sweat, much less blood. The call here is to struggle against it, to be antagonists of sin and rebellion, enemies of everything that

would lure us from the life of faith, from the loving intimacy that God offers us in Christ.

Most Christians in the free world simply talk about what they believe and about the joy of being forgiven. We don't seem to get it at all! The biblical call is to enter the ranks, to train for the marathon, to prepare for the fight, to recognize that true Christianity is not a set of principles we claim to believe that have little or no influence on the way we live. It is rather a new life, "old things passed away, all things become new." Are you ready to fight? Do you realize that your eternal destiny depends upon it? This is the Bible's picture of normal Christianity, not super-spirituality. The transformation grace works is deep and profound, and those who know nothing of that change have no ground for confidence that God's Spirit is living in them.

3. The life of faith seen as a family (12:5-11):

Once more, the author changes metaphors, this time viewing the life of faith as life within a loving family where the father cares enough about his children to discipline them when they engage in self-destructive behavior. He quotes from the book of Proverbs, reminding us that any loving parent disciplines his children in order to teach them to obey. To refuse discipline to an unruly, disobedient child is to fail to love that child wisely and well. It is for the child's good that he must learn to obey.

How much more, the author writes, does our loving heavenly Father discipline us when we actively rebel against him, or simply passively neglect to engage the race, the fight, the life of faith. If we live apart from his grace and enjoy life without intimacy with him, it simply means that we are not his children at all. This is crucial for understanding the biblical grounds for assurance that we are the Lord's.

A friend asked me this past week, "How can we ever know for certain that we are the Lord's, if the evidence is a Spirit-transformed life, but we are still painfully aware of our brokenness and sin?" I answered by simply asking him, "Which do you really enjoy: doing what is right or doing what is wrong?" What did I mean? Well, I know that there was a time in my life when I really enjoyed doing what I knew to be wrong – as a child of the 60s, I can best summarize it as sex, drugs, rock and roll. I only regretted such behavior if I was caught and made to look bad, or if I suffered physical discomfort because of my sin. But, in the main, I enjoyed myself. Doing what was right was a chore, done to get something I wanted or to avoid punishment. When God got a hold of my life, there was no longer any joy in the things that I knew displeased him and wounded my relationship with him. His Spirit now convicted me of sin, and brought me the greatest pleasure when I did the things that I knew were pleasing to him. When I walked with him, my heart

was filled with joy. When I walked away from him, my heart was filled with grief.

Why? Because he had shown himself to be my loving and gracious Father, who had sent his Son to find me in the pig sty of this world and to bring me home to the feast he had prepared for me. My greatest joy was now to please him, to enjoy being his son and sharing in the family business of finding other lost sons and daughters. The life of faith is life as a well-loved child of our heavenly Father.

4. The goal: “that we might share his holiness” (12:10, cf. 11, 14):

Here we come round at last to God’s purpose in creating us in his image: so that we might share in his life, that we might be bearers of his nature, that through us he might walk the earth, enjoying and tending his creation. He created us to be holy, as he is holy, that is, to be like him – like Jesus! There is no false piety, no churchy, holier-than-thou picture here. Look at Jesus, who loved those whom no one else loved, and laid down his life for his enemies.

We have made Christianity simply a matter of praying a prayer, believing certain things to be true, and deciding whether, if ever, to get serious about following Jesus. ***We are not saved by following Jesus, but rather by God’s Spirit coming making us new. But if he does that, we will begin to follow Jesus, or our Father will lovingly, but firmly, discipline us.*** The church in America needs to hear these words: “Strive for peace with everyone, ***and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord***” (12:14). He is not speaking here about the righteousness of Christ that is ours through faith by which we are justified. He is speaking here of the holiness of life that is the sure mark of those who have been born anew by God’s Spirit.

Conclusion

What are we to do? Where do we begin? Here the author of this letter:

“Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed” (12:12:12-13). Get up. Get going. Get in the race! Get in the fight! Stop standing on the sidelines. Your life, your eternal life is at stake.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (12:1-2).

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