

Hebrews 12:1-14
(Matthew 16:24-26)
“The Goal of Holiness”

Introduction

Where Christianity is rejected, it is 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 get traction precisely in places where a culture’s professing Christians are not Christ-followers. The apostle Paul wrote, “For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power” (1 Corinthians 4:20). But in our cultural context, truth be told, it is mostly talk, because it is too often not the gospel of Christ at all, but a religion built around the language of the Bible while 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, that needed to wake up and get back to the heart of things before it was too late. And the words speak directly to our culture, challenging us not to throw away our lives by running the wrong race, fighting the wrong battle, or simply sleeping through salvation history.

Hebrews eleven serves as a kind of picture gallery of lives lived by faith: not perfect lives, but lives lived in the right direction, faces turned toward the city of God, trusting God’s promises, following his lead, seeking his presence. Chapter twelve, our text, warns us, challenges us, and ultimately reminds us, of the prize that awaits those who persevere and endure to the end: “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). The goal of the journey, the aim of the Christian life, is to “share his holiness” (12:10) and “see the Lord” (12:14). Thus, in the words of the catechism, we “glorify God and enjoy him forever.” Everything else turns at last to dust, all earthly pleasure, wealth and power.

So, how do we pursue the goal of holiness so as to win the prize? How do we live so as not to have run in vain, to have fought all the wrong battles, to have given our precious lives for what does not finally matter? The author of Hebrews demonstrates the sacramental nature of life: that the people we encounter, the things we do and taste and handle, the very stuff of our lives, are meant to reveal to us a reality that transcends, yet participates in and through, the world around us, revealing to us the things that matter, that last, that finally count for eternity. Our text challenges us to four crucial recognitions.

Body

1. We are in 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 sprint or a dash, not a stroll or 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, a law that pictures 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 running and finishing the race, the joy of accomplishing what most are not even willing to endeavor.

How much more, in the most important matter of all, 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.

How do we follow him? In brief, by following him daily in our gospel reading, meditating on the way he lived and loved, noting the things that made him rejoice and the things that made him grieve, the things he taught, the way he graciously gave himself away in life and death. And by following him as a member of his body, the church, worshiping, growing and serving together. We should not call ourselves his followers (which is what Christian means) unless we are seeking to follow him.

2. We are in 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 *antagonistsomai*, from which we get the English word “antagonist.” Here 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 unprepared, no one decides one day to enter the ring or the octagon and engage an MMA contest. It requires vigorous, at times painful training. There will be blood, sweat and tears on the path merely 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 still 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 west simply talk about what we believe to be true 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. We are in 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.

You may ask, "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?" Ask yourself this, "Which do I most deeply desire and enjoy: doing what is right or doing what is wrong?" What do I mean? 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 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.

But when God got a hold of my life, there was no longer any joy in the things that wounded my relationship with him, however physically pleasurable they still might have been. His Spirit now convicted me of sin, and brought me the greatest joy and 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 sadness.

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 in pleasing him, in enjoying 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. We are on a journey that ends in glory (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 too often misconceive Christianity as being simply a matter of praying a prayer, believing certain things to be true, and see following Jesus as an option. We are not saved by following Jesus, but rather by trusting him. But if we trust him, we will follow him, 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? Hear 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 destiny, 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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