

Running the Right Race for A Real Reward (Hebrews 12:1-4)

Introduction:

- I. The New Testament often employs the analogy between the life of a Christian and running a race. The race began when we obeyed the gospel of Christ and it will end when either death overcomes us or Christ returns, whichever transpires first.
- II. The Hebrews writer makes some significant observations about this race in Hebrews 12:1. If you have your Bibles, turn to that passage of scripture for it shall be our text for this lesson (Read). I want to call your attention to three points taken from this verse in regard to “Running the Right Race for A Real Reward.”

Lesson:

I. **We Must Lay Aside Every Weight.**

Those who run professionally will often train by wearing weights around their ankles and wrists. However, when the practice is over and the real race is about to begin, you will not see any runner still hindered by those weights. The fact is the runner removes the weights long before the race begins. Furthermore, the weights are not the only thing that the runner removes. By race time, the runners will strip themselves down to the bare essentials. There will be no sweats on to slow them down. There will be no long sleeve shirts to hinder them. Everything that would impede their progress in any way will be laid aside. This is the thought of the Hebrews writer in our text. In the race that we have entered as Christians, we must lay aside any thing that is going to hinder us or slow us down in any way.

“The army of Alexander the Great was advancing on Persia. At one critical point, it appeared that his troops might be defeated. The soldiers had taken so much plunder from their previous campaigns that they had become weighted down and were losing their effectiveness in combat. Alexander immediately commanded that all the spoils be thrown into a heap and burned. Someone wrote, “It was as if wings had been given to them—they walked lightly again.” Victory was assured”
(Our Daily Bread, July 3, 1991)

There are some things in our life that we need to throw into a heap and burn so that we can run this race of Christianity effectively. Listen to me: anything that dims your desire for Christ or curbs your craving to serve Him needs to be laid aside. Anything that prevents you from praying to God productively or praising God persistently needs to be laid aside. Anything that stops you from studying God’s Word steadfastly or conforming to God’s will consistently needs to be laid aside. Anything that

frustrates your faith or blocks your belief needs to be laid aside. Anything that curtails your courage or cheapens your conviction needs to be laid aside. Do you get the picture? We should not let anything prevent us from running the right race for a real reward in heaven. Now, we don't have time to look at every weight that might weigh us down, but here's three:

1. **Worrying too much.**

There is no way you can run the race as swiftly as necessary with this weight hanging around your neck. You just can't. Why? Because there is always something to worry about if you allow yourself to be worried (*Failing health, job security, finances, aging parents, future, children, neighbor-hood violence, terrorism, etc.*). These are just a few of the thousands of things that people can worry about if they choose to. The problem is worrying is like putting your car in neutral and revving the engine. It burns oil and gas and is hard on the engine, but it doesn't get you anywhere. No one knew this more than Jesus (**Matt. 6:25-34**).

1. **Worry ignores the logic of life (v. 25)**
 2. **Worry ignores the value of life (v. 26)**
 3. **Worry ignores its own limitations (v. 27)**
 4. **Worry ignores God's faithfulness (vv. 28-30)**
 5. **Worry ignores the love of God (vv. 31-33)**
 6. **Worry ignores the present (v. 34)**
- Today in the Word, July, 1990, p. 33*

2. **Working too much.**

Now certainly there's nothing wrong with working for a living, especially if you have a household to support. We all know what Paul said about this, don't we.

2 Thess 3:10

For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat.

1 Tim 5:8

But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.

And so working is not only necessarily from a physical standpoint, it is commanded by God. But listen to me: a man can go overboard with work to the point where he doesn't have time for God. In fact, there are too many members of the body of Christ who place a higher premium on their secular work than they do working for God. This problem isn't anything new. When the people of God returned

to Jerusalem from captivity in 536 BC under the leadership of Zerubbabel and the directive of Cyrus, they were under instruction to rebuild God's house, i.e., the temple of God.

2 Chron 36:23

Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him an house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? The Lord his God be with him, and let him go up.

Isa 44:28

Who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd, And he shall perform all My pleasure, Saying to Jerusalem, "You shall be built," And to the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid."'

Sixteen years later we find that the temple had not been rebuilt and the Jews were not even working on it. Why? The book of Haggai tells us (**Hag. 1:1-10**). The Israelites mixed up their priorities and put physical work before the work of the Lord. What they needed to do, and the same thing we must do today, is put God first (**Matt. 6:33**). When we put work, or anything else before God, it becomes a weight that slows us down or stops us altogether from running the right race towards the real reward of heaven.

3. Whining too much.

To whine literally means "a prolonged, high-pitched cry used to express distress." Figuratively we often use the term to denote the constant complaining of those who are unhappy about something. There are those who are always unhappy and complaining about something. They complain about the weather. They complain about their job. They complain about their health. They complain about other people. It seems never to stop. And we have some church complainers too, don't we? They complain about the times of services. They complain about the length of the services. They complain about the elders. They complain about the preacher. They complain about the preaching. They complain about problems the local church is having and when there are no problems, they complain about the peace. They are always complaining about something.

The Complaining Monk

A man joined a monastery where the monks were only allowed to speak two words a year, and those to the abbot. At the end of each year they were given an audience and said their two words. Naturally they were expected to be something along the lines of 'Jesus loves' or some other eternal verity. However at the end of his first year the novice offered, 'Bed hard'

and at the end of the second year, 'Food bad' and at the end of the third year his two words were, 'I quit'. 'I'm not surprised,' said the abbot, 'you've done nothing but whine ever since you came here'

Maya Angelou tells of the words her grandmother would speak to her in regard to those who would constantly whine about the heat of a summer day or the cold of a winter day. Her grandmother would call Maya before here and say,

"...there are people who went to sleep all over the world last night, poor and rich and white and black, but they will never wake again. And those dead folks would give anything, anything at all for just five minutes of this weather that person was grumbling about. So you watch yourself about complaining. What you're supposed to do when you don't like a thing is change it. If you can't change it, change the way you think about it. Don't complain" (Maya Angelou, *Condensed Chicken Soup for the Soul*).

Complaining proceeds from a heart of discontentment. Discontentment proceeds from a heart of ingratitude, and ingratitude proceeds from a heart of forgetfulness. So the one who complains all the time is the one who hasn't spent enough time counting the many blessings bestowed upon him by God. Can you not see how this disposition might prevent one from running a good race for Christ? We must lay that weight aside. "But you don't know," someone says, "how bad I have it." No, you don't know how good you have it, that's the problem. Generally speaking, those who complain a lot are experts at making mountains out of mole hills. Everything to them is worse than it really is, especially their own problems and difficulties in life. Do you what the Hebrews writer solution is? Look unto Jesus (**vers. 2-4**). If you are a constant complainer, you need to rid yourself of that weight so that you can run the way you ought.

Now, while some weights might not be sinful in themselves and therefore just slow us down, other things weigh us down because they are inherently sinful, and sin, ladies and gentlemen, doesn't just slow us down, it stops us in our tracks. Notice that the Hebrews writer speaks of a specific sin in this verse. We are not told exactly what it was, but it looks to me to be the sin of unbelief. Nevertheless, the besetting sin in your life might be something different. Whatever it is, though, you must put it off (**Eph. 4:22-31**).

Make no mistake about it, sin personified is your greatest adversary. There is nothing in this world that is more deceiving and devastating; more dangerous and destructive than sin. You see, sin stops you from having a personal prayer life. Sin stops you from experiencing God's providential provisions. Sin stops you from enjoying the benefits of God's blessings and reaping the rewards of God's riches. Can you not see the devastating

effects of sin? When you begin to shack up with sin, it may be pleasurable for awhile, but in the end it will cause you to plummet into the abyss of spiritual darkness and it will leave your soul as an open carcass for Satan to devour as he pleases. Sin, ladies and gentlemen, will chew you up and spit you out. Sin will chomp on you like a dog chomps on a bone and then it will take you out and bury you under a great heap of devastation and despair. What am I saying to you? I'm saying that sin will ruin your soul and might even wreck your life and somehow convince you that you like it. So, we must lay sin aside if we want to run the right race towards the real reward of heaven.

II. We Must Run with Endurance.

The Greek word translated endurance in our text is ὑπομονή (hupomone – hoo-po-mo-nay) and is for all practical purposes a great word that characterizes well the true Christian. Thayer says it describes *“the characteristic of a man who is unswerved from his deliberate purpose and his loyalty to faith and piety by even the greatest trials and sufferings”* (Thayer's Greek Lexicon).

The Hebrews writer tells us that we need this in order to finish our race. Why? Because this is not a race that is run on a brand new track with all of the modern technologies built into the surface. This is a race that is run on treacherous terrain and a precarious pavement. This race involves a course with potholes and pitfalls. This race involves many curves and zigzags and winding roads that are long and laborious. There are many uphill climbs and downhill collisions on this course of Christianity. There are many bumps and bruises, crashes and smashes that must be sustained in this race. In other words, when it comes to running this race, excuse the English, but it ain't easy. What we have to have is hupomone. We need patience.

Listen to me: when the bills get high and the money gets low, you're going to need endurance to keep on running. When friends seem to be scarce and enemies seem to be surrounding you, you're going to need endurance to keep on running. When your children disobey you or your parents disappoint you, when your wife lets you down or your husband is nowhere to be found, when your co-workers irritate you and your boss infuriates you, you're going to need endurance to keep running this race. Do you understand what I'm saying to you? When real life problems and persecutions, trials and tribulations invade your life, you can do one of two things—you can drop out of the race or you can run with endurance. Which one will you do?

But now, let me get back to this word *endurance* for a moment. Why did I say it's a great word? It is not just because it denotes endurance. It's

because of how it describes that endurance. Strong's Greek-Hebrew Dictionary says it is not just endurance, but "*cheerful endurance.*" In other words, this word endurance gives us a picture, not of someone who grits his teeth and bears the problems of life, but rather someone who conquers those problems joyfully. I like the way William Barclay put it.

"Hupomone is not simply the ability to bear things; it is the ability to turn them to greatness and to glory. The thing which amazed the heathen in the centuries of persecution was that the martyrs did not die grimly, they died singing."

This, ladies and gentlemen, is a historical fact. It is what Jesus expected, and still expects and it what Christians of the first century did (**Matt. 5:10-12; Acts 5:41; Acts 16:23-25**).

III. We Must Run the Race.

There are two words of significance here. First there is the word *RUN*. Have you ever seen a race with hurdles? The hurdles in these kind of races are pretty high. They are high enough so that unless you are running, you can't get over the hurdles and therefore will be disqualified. In order to jump the hurdles, you have to run. Now, we have already seen that there are many hurdles in this race of Christianity. You can get past each and every hurdle that's placed on the track of life, but you have to run. The Hebrews writer didn't say walk the race, he said run the race. He didn't say jog the race, he said run the race. We have to run and that suggest putting forth maximum effort. Listen to me: there are too many in the body of Christ who are just jogging around the track. There are some who are just walking. You're never make it like that.

Do you study your Bible every three or four weeks? Your jogging!

Do you pray once a week? You're jogging!

Do you attend worship services sporadically? Your jogging!

Do you give to the cause of Christ sparingly? Your jogging!

Do you pick and choose which commands of God your going to obey and which ones you will ignore? Your jogging!

Do you attend worship services on Sunday and ignore God the rest of the week? Your jogging!

You get the picture. We need to be giving maximum effort in this race. We need to **run** the race because being a Christian means living a life of diligence, i.e., a life where our service to God is characterized by energetic application. Doing something diligently involves doing our best. What is expected of any runner in any race? One would expect the runner to simply do his or her best. When you have done your absolute best, you have done all you can do. You have given your all to the race and with

that God is pleased. Let's turn to a familiar passage and see what Paul says about it (**1 Cor. 9:24-27**). Is this the way you are running the race?

Now, one more point. The second word of importance in our sub-point is *THE*. We must not only run, but we must run the race. Listen to me: we must not just run any race, we must run the race. The definite article points to a specific race. Notice the title to this sermon. "Running the **RIGHT** Race Toward A Real Reward." Listen to me closely before we close this lesson. There is only one right race that will get you to heaven. There are many religious people running in races, but only a few are running the **RIGHT** race. In order to run the right race, you have to be on the right track and that track is found in Christ. You can run all you want to on the track of world religions but that won't get you the real reward of heaven. If you are involved in the Islamic religion, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Spiritualism, etc., you are on the wrong track, running the wrong race. You can run all you want to on the track of denominationalism but that won't get you the real reward of heaven. If you are involved with Catholicism, Protestantism, Pentecostalism, Evangelicalism, Mormonism, etc., you are on the wrong track, running the wrong race. You can run on the track of atheism, agnosticism, humanism, or Gnosticism, but that won't get you the real reward of heaven because you are on the wrong track, running the wrong race. You can run on the track of political correctness, or the track of social acceptance, or the track of moral subjectivism, but that won't get you the real reward of heaven because you are on the wrong track, running the wrong race. Listen to me: there is only one right track and that track is found in Christ (**Eph. 1:3; Rom. 8:1; 2 Tim. 2:10; Rev. 14:13**). And the only way to get into Christ is by obeying the gospel!

Conclusion:

Do you want the reward? Then start running the right race. Obey the gospel of Christ and you will be on the right track running toward a real reward.