

A Study of Hebrews

"Jesus Is Better"

Sermon # 24

"The Do's and Don't For Finishing Well"

Hebrews 12:12-17

The consuming passion of the Apostle Paul beyond that of reaching his fellow Jews with the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ was the desire to finish well. He understood that it was not only possible but a great danger that having started well, not to finishing well. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:27 that he feared that after having "...preached to others, I myself should become disqualified." Paul is not talking about a fear of missing heaven but a fear of finishing badly!

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews also understood this and Hebrew's chapter twelve is primarily instruction about running the race. You will remember that verse one contained that admonition, "...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...." Verse two instructs us to remember to keep our focus on Jesus the author and finisher of our faith. Verse four through eleven spoke of the God's training program. Now in verses fourteen through seventeen the author's desire is that each Christian finish well.

Every runner understands that there is a point in every race when the runner reaches the point that he believes that he cannot run one step more. For many of us that is about thirty seconds after we start, but even the true marathon runner experiences this phenomena that they refer to as "hitting the wall." "The Wall" evades

easy definition, but to borrow from Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous definition of obscenity, you know it when you see it - or rather, hit it. Any athlete who has experienced this extreme muscle fatigue knows that it can make crossing the finish line a difficult - if not seemingly impossible - goal to achieve.

The writer of Hebrews wants his readers to understand that there are some factors for finishing well, first he some things we must do and secondly he tells some things we must not do or avoid, if we want to finish well.

The Do's For Finishing Well. (vv. 12-14)

First, Do Strengthen The Weary (v. 12)

"Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees."

The word translated "strengthen" or literally "lift up" (anorthosate) is a plural imperative and implies a joint effort by many. When I read this verse I immediately thought of the incident recorded in Exodus 17:10-12. The Israelites are doing battle with Amalek, and as long as Moses lifted his hands the Israelites were winning, but when he became weary and let his arms fall down the enemy won. A man name Hur saw the situation and immediate took action. He could have given a report that the leader was failing to do his job and because of this Israel was losing. But what he did was he became a team player. Hur made steady the hands of the man of God in an unsteady situation.

There is really no room in the church for a "Lone Ranger Mentality." We were never intended to have to live out our lives of

faith alone. The letter to the Hebrews is full of the idea of helping each other to make it. "But exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." (3:13)

The Apostle Paul was himself struggling with discouragement in 2 Corinthians 7:6. I want to read to you from the translation called "The Message." Paul says, "Then the God who lifts up the downcast lifted our heads and our hearts with the arrival of Titus." I want to you to notice that God's encouragement for Paul came in the form a person, Titus. In next verse (2 Cor 7:7) we read of the affect, "We were glad just to see him, but the true reassurance came in what he told us about you: how much you cared, how much you grieved, how concerned you were for me. I went from worry to tranquility in no time!" We all understand the need to receive affirmation and encouragement. Yet, it is also something we must do!

When we practice the ministry of encouragement, our words need not be polished or flowery, it is better if it is from the heart. A note of encouragement does not even have be lengthy, just a brief note on small card. The most important thing is that we ask God who needs our encouragement and then take the time to do it!

Do Strengthen The Weary and also...

Second, Do Straighten Your Path (v. 13)

"...and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed."

Commentator John McArthur says of this verse, "And make straight the path for your feet refers to staying in your own lane in

the race. When you get out of your lane, you not only disqualify yourself but often interfere with other runners.” [John MacArthur. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Hebrews. (Chicago: Moody, 1983) p. 402]

Thus when we are cautioned “to make straight the path” it is a reminder to watch our influence on others. Take care that you are not a stumbling block to those who travel along life’s road with you. “Dislocated” carries the thought of having thrown something out of joint.

Interestingly the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Septuagint) uses the same word used here translated “lame” to describe the people who were looking on as Elijah took on the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18. The people who spiritually crippled who came to see what was happening but could not come to point of making a commitment for God. Those in the most danger of being tripped up, if we allow our lives to get out of line are those on the sidelines watching who have not committed themselves to Christ.

Do Straighten your Path and ...

Third, Do Pursue Peace (v. 14)

“Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.”

Unfortunately, peace is two-way street. It is not always possible to live if someone is determined to be belligerent toward you. Paul clarified this when he wrote in Romans 12:18, “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.” We are only responsible for our side of the relationship, but we can never use the quarrelsomeness of others to justify responding in kind.

So as we live in this world we can expect conflict, but how disheartening it is when that conflict is encountered with those inside the church. "There is a passage in J.R. Tolkien's "Fellowship of the Rings" in which the God fearing elves join with the God-fearing dwarves to oppose the Dark Lord. Immediately they begin to quarrel, calling down plagues on each other's necks. Then one of the wiser of the company, Haldir, remarks, "Indeed in nothing is the power of the Dark Lord more clearly shown than in the estrangement that divides those who still oppose him." [As quoted by R. Kent Hughes. Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul. Vol II. (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993) p. 180]

Do Pursue Peace and now we look at the Negative side.

The Don'ts of Finishing Well (12:15-17)

First, Don't Fall Short of the Grace of God. (v. 15a)

"looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God..."

The writer of Hebrews uses an interesting word (a form of episkopos) that is here translated as "looking carefully" but it is sometimes translated "see to it." This word which is applied to church leader's elsewhere, is here plural and addressed to all the members of the congregation. Everyone has the responsibility to "see to it" that others in the family do not fall short of the grace of God.

To fall short of the grace of God may mean one or both of two things; either to fall short of accepting the grace of God's forgive-ness or falling short of granting forgiveness to others.

Don't Fall Short of the Grace of God and...

Second, Don't Let A Root of Bitterness Develop (v. 15b) "... lest any root of bitter-ness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled."

Bitterness has been described as an odorless, colorless and tasteless poison that you administer to yourself and it kills you. Bitterness is never a private matter. It always spills over into the lives of other people... children, family members, friends, church members. It is behind much of the trouble experienced in the church; false reports, gossiping and false accusations. When bitterness enters a church, unity, love and loyalty exit. Usually people, take sides and the contamination spreads and the resentment grows. Every church and ministry has been damaged in one way or another by this poison. When people share this poison with you, it's hard not to take up their offense and not believe their interpretation of the circumstances. But the carriers of the poison are also damaged and ultimately destroyed for bitterness never produces anything good. Perhaps we should take the advise of comedian Buddy Hackett when he states, "I've had a few arguments with people, but I never carry a grudge. You know why? While you're carrying a grudge, they're out dancing."

Don't Let A Root of Bitterness Develop and...

Third, Don't Despise the Things of God (vv. 16-17)

"lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright."

Esau is the living epitome of modern beer commercial, "live life with gusto, because you only go around once!" Big Red (which is what his nickname Edom meant) was the classic "good old boy" he was big, hairy and focused on "fun (hunting) food and females."

Esau is describes as "profane" (v. 16)

(bebelos) sometimes translated "godless" means "open and accessible to all or worldly." Worldly is the man or woman who has little or no time for worship or service but is intent on material gain and earthly advantage. Professing Christian who lives no differently than the non-Christians are merely repeating the sins of Esau.

Our nation is in a crisis of morality, and this crisis partially due to the fact that Christians are not what they should be! Addressing a national seminar of Southern Baptist leaders, George Gallup said, "We find there is very little difference in ethical behavior between churchgoers and those who are not active religiously...The levels of lying, cheating, and stealing are remarkable similar in both groups"

[Erwin Lutzer, Pastor to Pastor, p. 76] When there is so little difference between the church and the world is it any wonder that our nation is in a moral crisis.

"Worldliness, then, is a preoccupation with ease and affluence. It elevates creature comfort to the point of idolatry; large salaries and comfortable life-styles become necessities of life. Worldliness is reading magazines about people who live hedonistic lives and spend too much money on them-selves and wanting to be like them. But more importantly, worldliness is simply pride and selfishness in disguises. It's being resentful when someone snubs us or patronizes us or shows off. It means smarting under every slight, challenging every word spoken against us, cringing when another is preferred before us. Worldliness is harboring grudges, nursing grievance, and wallowing in self-pity. These are the ways in which we are most like the world." [Dave Roper, The Strength of a Man, quoted in Family Survival in the American Jungle, Steve Farrar, 1991,

Verse seventeen continues with, "For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears."

This does not mean that Esau was unable to repent of his sins. The meaning, is, rather, that Esau had live with the consequences of his actions. If Esau sought God's forgiveness (and I hope that he did) God would have given it to him. But no amount of tears, will change the past, he cannot undo the decision he had made. He had to live with the consequences.

Don't Despise the Things of God

Conclusion

You too can end well. To do so, you must first make sure that you are a member of God's family. If you have not done this, you can by acknowledging your sin, admitting your need for God's forgiveness, by believing what the Bible says about Jesus dying for you and by receiving Him as your personal Savior. This puts you on the right path but it is only the beginning of the journey!