

September 1, 2019

FIXING OUR EYES ON JESUS
Hebrews 12:1-3
(23 of 30 in a series through Hebrews)

In Matthew 13 Jesus tells a parable of a sower who went about casting seed on the ground around him. Some fell on a path, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, and some on good soil. Thankfully, this is one of those parables that Jesus explicitly interprets for us, so we don't have to wonder if we're understanding it correctly. Jesus tells us that the seed pictures the Word of God being spread, as we take the gospel and evangelize. The soils represents people who are either receptive to the gospel or aren't receptive. Well, actually that's a bit too simplistic, to say some receive and some don't. Rather, Jesus pictures four soils, three of which look like they have received the word, give signs of life, and grow up, while only one actually bears fruit.

Jesus tells us that some who hear the Word will receive it with joy. Yet, there is no root and so it only endures for a while. Eventually tribulation or persecution arises, and this person falls away, showing himself never to have truly known Christ. Others, likewise will give signs that they've received the Word only for "the cares of the world and their deceitfulness of riches" (Matt 13:23) to come along and choke it out so that they too show themselves never to have been born again. And what this teaches us is that when it comes to evangelism and the gospel, there aren't simply those who reject the Word and those who accept the Word. There are also those who give every indication that they're among those who accept the Word in their immediate response to the gospel. They have stories of walking the aisle, getting baptized, and maybe even doing good works in Jesus' name. But they don't endure. It may be persecution that causes them to back away from Jesus. It may simply be the cares of this world and the temptation of riches that cause them to back away from Jesus. But ultimately, this group doesn't endure, and they are among those to whom Jesus will say on the day of judgment, "I never knew you."

With that in mind, we need to recognize that the letter to the Hebrews is written to a group who has given signs of acceptance to the gospel. Someone came along, preached the good news to them that Jesus lived, died for our sins, and rose from the dead on the third day. They were told to repent and confess their faith in the crucified and risen Lord. And their answer was, "Yes!" They were baptized. They were part of the church. Things looked great. And now something has happened. It appears from the author's reference to sufferings in chapter 10 that they began to face the threat of persecution. No doubt they also faced the normal but often weighty cares of this world. And they began to feel the strong pull to walk away from Jesus. After all, in the Roman empire during this time it is likely that if they quit following Jesus then at least the threat of persecution would go away. And so this letter is written to tell them that walking away from Jesus isn't an option.

The author has lured them toward Jesus by reminding them of his supremacy to everything you would put alongside of him. He's warned them from abandoning Christ by strong warnings,

telling them, for example, that if they walk away from Jesus, what awaits them is a “fearful expectation of judgment” on that day when we will stand before the throne of God. But everything has been toward this end of reminding them to endure in faith and in their faithful commitment to Christ. That’s what this letter to the Hebrews is about.

Most recently in our study, in Hebrews 11, we’ve seen the author provide for his readers reminders of many saints who faced the same kinds of struggles we face and these Jewish Christians faced—opposition, danger, discouragement, tragedies, and the like—and they trusted and obeyed their Lord by faith. And what he reveals to us in our text this morning (12:1-3) is that this reminder of all of these people over those forty verses that make up chapter 11 was also aimed at what this whole book is aimed at. It was written as an encouragement to his readers to endure in faith and in their faithful commitment to Christ.

And perhaps this goes without saying, but the reason the Holy Spirit inspired the author to write this letter was because these Jewish Christians to whom he writes aren’t the only ones who feel the draw to turn away from Christ when they feel persecution. And they certainly are no exceptions to facing the cares of this world or the deceitfulness of riches, both of which Jesus warns us can lead us to not to endure in the faith. So, this morning, let’s take one more look at the way the author pictures the importance of enduring faith and the tools he gives us so that we might press on in the faith.

The first thing the author does is provide a metaphor for the Christian life. He pictures the Christian life as an endurance race, and since we can’t be wiser than God, we should do the same.

We should think of the Christian life as an endurance race

Now, this is not the first thing that is said in the text, but it provides the context for every other thing the author says. So, that’s where I want to start. We can see it at the end of verse 1 where the author exhorts us, saying, “Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” Since we can look at all of these who have run the race before us – this “great cloud of witnesses” as the author says—let us also run with endurance.

The Christian life is not a sprint. It’s not just about getting all excited when we hear the gospel and even following through with baptism. This is the point that is made in Jesus’ parable where the seed springs up with life only not to endure. The Christian life is a race of endurance. It’s about repenting and believing and then persevering in repentance and faith. As Jesus says in Matthew 24:13, it is the “one who endures to the end [who] will be saved.” Or think about how this was said earlier in this book. In 3:14 the author wrote, “We have come to share in Christ, *if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.*” Christians, by definition, persevere in the faith. All those who are ever truly justified will be preserved by our God so that they will most definitely persevere, and it is only those who persevere who will show themselves to have

ever been justified before God.¹ Therefore, the author pictures the Christian life as an endurance race that the believer must run to the finish line. And this is why he gives the exhortation, “Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (v. 1).

But this naturally raises the question, “How?” And this is what I want to spend the rest of our time talking about from these verses. The author notes two things we do in order to aid us in running this race of endurance. First, we need to get rid of anything that hinders us from running (especially sin).

Get rid of anything that hinders you from running (especially sin)

The author writes in verse 1, “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.”

The picture, of course, makes sense if you think of running a race. You wouldn’t set out to run a marathon with a lot of baggy clothing, or long and dragging shoe strings, or the like clinging to you. You would get rid of them. You would want nothing to impede you in running this endurance race. Well, the author tells us, we need to think about living the Christian life the same way. Is there anything that hinders you in running the race in the Christian life? Then get rid of it.

Now, let’s think about this by first listing the obvious reality of sin because the author says “every weight *and sin*.” And it’s why I said “especially sin” for this sermon point. Sin needs to be treated as a non-negotiable in our lives. If there is a sin that keeps tripping you up, then you need to deal with it. That’s what repentance is. We recognize our sin, are convicted over our sin, confess our sin, and then turn from it. I think this is the difference between what Paul terms “godly grief” versus “worldly grief” in 2 Corinthians 7:10. “Godly grief,” Paul tells us, “produces . . . repentance.” In other words, there have many believers and unbelievers alike who have expressed grief at their sin. But the difference between godly grief and worldly grief is that godly grief does not stop at expressing sorrow for sin but goes on to ask and answer the question, “How can I keep from this happening again in my life?” That’s the question meaningful and genuine repentance asks.

That’s what the author is saying here. Get rid of the sin that keeps tripping you up in the race. Ask how you can throw it off, like a runner who throws off his sweats or jacket before the race begins. And then deal with it. Develop an approach or approaches to tackling sin that don’t aim at being seventy-five or eighty percent successful in your fight with sin. Plan to put it behind you or to lay it aside, as the author says.

¹Wayne Grudem has similarly stated, “The perseverance of the saints means that all those who are truly born again will be kept by God’s power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again.” *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 788.

You know your sin, what triggers it, and your schemes for sinning better than others know these things about you. So make a plan in your life to kill sin, as Owen has said. Ask and answer the question, “What will aid me most in this fight against sin and help me see this sin not as an option?” Then employ that answer. Next week as we look at the Lord’s discipline in the following verses in this chapter, I’ll dive in to looking at one way I’ve found quite helpful in my own life. We must lay aside sin.

But he also mentions more than the obvious need to lay aside sin, which clings so closely. He also tells us to lay aside every weight, in addition to the sin that clings to us. In other words, there may be things that aren’t necessarily sin in and of themselves, but they keep tripping you up.

Several years ago I went to meet a brother for some early morning tennis. We met about six thirty, played for about an hour, and had a good match. At the end of the match it is customary to walk toward the net, shake hands, and then be on your way. So, the match ended, and I was near the back of the court, meaning that I had a decent distance to walk in order to meet this brother at the net and shake his hand. And as I was walking I was thinking to myself, “I could make this a regular thing, maybe two or even three mornings a week. I don’t get much exercise, I enjoy tennis, so this would be good for me. I felt like we played a close match. I’m so thankful I did this.” And then as we were right about to shake hands, this brother said, “I really don’t need to do this ever again.” Needless to say, I wasn’t anticipating that response, and I wanted to say, “I could play better . . . or worse. What do you need me to do?” But then he told me why. He mentioned that his morning routine involved him reading the Scriptures and praying each morning at 6:30. No other time really worked for him. And if we continued to meet at 6:30, that would be a day that he’d be missing that time before the Lord, which wasn’t worth it in his mind.

I think that’s the kind of response that Hebrews 12:1 is calling for. There’s nothing wrong with tennis. It’s a fantastic sport. But if tennis hinders you from exposure to the Bible and prayer, then set it aside. That’s what my friend did that day—at least, early morning tennis, as I trust he still plays some. And for us there could be any number of things that we may need to lay aside. If social media causes you to sin, then set it aside. I used to follow politics a bit more closely, and I always found myself walking into our home at the end of the day frustrated with all kinds of people I didn’t even know who disagreed with me about ways to help the economy or education—which, by the way, I may have been wrong about. And eventually my wife subtly and respectfully suggested that I lay my interest in politics aside. And not only did I do that, but I now find myself generally less frustrated and hopefully a less sinful husband and father.

I don’t know what it is, but it is worth examining our lives to see if there is any obstacle that hinders us in running the race of faith with endurance, with obedience to our Lord. Jesus illustrated this by saying that we should pluck out our eyes or cut off our hands if they cause us to sin. Now, Jesus didn’t mean that literally (after all, you could pluck out your eyes and cut off your hands and still sin), but he is saying that we need to take radical measures to keep from sinning. So, maybe you need to spend a little time before the Lord today, asking him to identify

if there is any obstacle that hinders your holiness that you need to lay aside. Lay aside every obstacle and every sin that hinders us in running the race of faith with endurance. That's where the author starts. Next, he tell us to keep our eyes on Jesus.

Keep your eyes on Jesus

I may be wrong on this, but I bet if I were to ask you to think of individuals in the Bible who faced similar struggles to what you face but pressed on in faith and endured in the midst of these struggles, you may well mention some if not all of the names in Hebrews 11. Moses faced opposition like you may feel. Abraham faced situations that could have tempted him to discouragement that perhaps you know so well. Noah had to press on without seeing the reason why obedience was so important, and maybe that describes you perfectly. But I imagine that we may well leave Jesus off of this list. In fact, it may be that when you think of Jesus, you don't think of him as someone who walked the path you're walking, faced the struggles you're facing, and endured in faith. But that's exactly what he did, and he ends up being the supreme example of that list that began in Hebrews 11.

The author writes, "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. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted" (vv. 1b-3).

So, let's work through this a bit at a time. He first identifies one aspect of who Jesus is, noting that he is the founder and perfecter of our faith. In other words, Jesus is the one whose life, death, and resurrection made your faith possible. He is the source of your faith, but he is also the one who will complete it, perfect it, and preserve you in it. He is the one who called you to himself and will preserve you as his own. Therefore, he is a fitting object of our focus as we think about running this race and persevering in the faith.

However, Jesus not only qualifies as a fitting object of our focus because he, as God, gives us salvation but also because as a man he walked the road of difficult obedience and painful trials that we encounter in life as well. Obedience for Jesus meant enduring the cross, and yet he obeyed, all the way to the point of death. He is the supreme model of persevering obedient faith.

Now we don't think about crucifixion that much in our day, thankfully. But it was designed to be a shameful way to die. This means of execution wasn't designed to uphold the dignity of the human being who is killed. It was meant to shame him. This is why Jesus had "King of the Jews" written above his head (i.e. the charge against him) and was publicly exposed in this shameful and horrendous manner of being nailed to a cross as he painfully and violently fought against suffocation, until he could fight no more. It was intended to bring shame just as surely as it was intended to bring death. And yet, Jesus obeyed, enduring the cross, showing disregard for the

shame that was meant to be hoisted upon him when at any minute he had the might and ability to put a stop to it.

Not only that, but he endured great hostility from sinners, not only in his trial and death but throughout his life. In other words, Jesus not only ran a race of endurance in faith as we're called to run and thus can identify with us, but he ran a more difficult race. When we deal with the hostility of sinners against us—in all the ways that others can sin against us—we endure it as one who is likewise a sinner. Jesus, on the other hand, endured hostility from sinners as one who had no sin, no sinful impulses at all. He would face the hostility of those around him who were mired in selfishness as one who never had a sinful selfish impulse. As the pure and holy God-man, he was constantly enduring hostility from sinners. That was simply part of his life.

So, how did he endure in faith and keep running the race of obedience to his Father? The text tells us that he set his focus on joy set before him. That is, he went to the cross, knowing what was coming on the other side of the cross. He knew he'd be raised and seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Just as those mentioned in Hebrews 11 looked to the promise and reward, so did Jesus.

And so, the author tells us, we need to look to him and consider him that we might not grow weary or fainthearted as we endure in faith. How does this practically work? Well, it means that when you are tempted to grow weak and weary and feel that you can't press on, you look to Jesus and turn to him, knowing that you're turning to one who knows what it's like to walk in your shoes. He knows what it's like to obey when no one is applauding him or worse when they're against him. He knows what it's like to obey even though those close to you don't understand what you're going through or even have betrayed you. He knows what it's like when obedience means walking through such painful circumstances that it causes sorrow so deep you feel like it's going to kill you. He's the one, after all, who told his disciples that he was sorrowful to the point of death. We're looking to one who can see the difficulty you're facing as you seek to run this endurance race of faith and says, "I understand."

But you're also turning to one whose obedience meant a perfect life, sin-bearing death, and justifying resurrection so that you might be saved. You're looking to one who says, "I've done everything not only so that you might have faith but persevere in it." His enduring obedient faith means that you and I can look with certainty to the coming promise of resurrection and eternal life and set our eyes on that joy to come, even in our darkest day.

So, let me encourage you this week to spend time before the Lord. Consider his persevering obedience amidst hostility and weakness as you face your own. Ask him to help expose all the areas of sin and every obstacle which hinders you from walking well and lay them aside. May our response to the examples of Hebrews 11 and the chief example of Jesus in these verses be to mimic the faith of those who have come before us and walk forward in persevering faith and faithful obedience to our glorious Lord. Amen.