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FINISHING THE RACE TOGETHER

Hebrews 12:15-17

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Finishing the Race Together
Hebrews 12:15-17

Every culture has its strengths, but often those strengths have corresponding weaknesses. Americans are strongly individualistic and competitive. We admire the person who can “go it alone.” We compete at everything, even at the games at church picnics! But our fiercely competitive spirit means that often we are weak in the area of cooperation. We don’t see our need for each other, and as a result, we are weak. This is especially true in the church.

At a Special Olympics, some mentally handicapped boys were running a 220-yard race. One boy, Andrew, was much faster than the others. He was 50 yards ahead, nearing the finish line, when out of the corner of his eye, he saw his friend fall. Even though everyone at the finish line was yelling for Andrew to keep running toward the finish, he stopped, went back, and helped his friend get up. Together they finished in last place. If poor Andrew had just been as smart as us “normal” folks, he would have known that he was supposed to *win*, not help his friend!

The author of Hebrews has been exhorting his readers to run with endurance the race that is set before them (12:1). They needed to endure God’s loving discipline, rather than get discouraged and drop out of the race. But before he leaves the subject, he shows them (and us) that we are not running as individuals, competing against each other, but as a team. We have a responsibility toward one another, to help the entire team to finish the race. He’s saying,

In the church we’re responsible to help each other overcome the hindrances that could cause us to drop out of the race.

1. The ministry of oversight belongs to the entire church.

“See to it” (12:15) is used only here (and in a variant of 1 Pet. 5:2, referring to elders). It means, “to exercise oversight.” The noun is used of a bishop (overseer) in the church (we get “Episcopal” from it). Charles Williams captures the sense of it: “Continue to look after one another, that no one fails to gain God’s spiritual blessing” (*The New Testament* [Moody Press], p. 503). It points to a

responsibility that all the members of the body of Christ have toward one another. We need to make sure that no one drops out of the race. If someone seems to be lagging or has fallen, the one who sees it should do as the boy in the Special Olympics did. He should go back and help him get up and finish the race.

Of course, we need to remember what Jesus said, that before we help our brother with the speck that is in his eye, we need to take the log out of our own eye (Matt. 7:1-5). Probably one of the main reasons that we don't help others with spiritual struggles is, we know that there are things in our own lives that aren't right. We're afraid that if we try to help someone else, they will point out our faults.

But you don't need to be spiritually perfect before you help your brother deal with some sin or spiritual danger that you see in his life. If you had to be perfect, no one (including the pastors) could help anyone else. The requirement is, you need to be walking with the Lord, confronting the sins that crop up in your life. Then, if you see a fellow believer heading for spiritual trouble, come alongside and help him get up and keep running the race.

That's what Paul meant in Galatians 6:1-2: "Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ."

It's significant that Paul did not direct that verse exclusively to the leaders of the flock, but to "you who are spiritual." He has just described (in Gal. 5:16-26) what that means. It refers to those who walk by the Spirit, not by the flesh. They have developed, not perfectly, but to a substantial degree, the character qualities described as the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). They have crucified the flesh, so that they are not "boastful, challenging one another, envying one another" (Gal. 5:26).

They are *spiritual*, but they are not *super-spiritual!* They are aware of their own propensity toward sin ("looking to yourself"), so that they come alongside with a spirit of gentleness and humility. They don't condemn the one who has fallen, but seek to restore

him. That word is used of putting out-of-joint bones back into place. Their aim is to help the other person get back into the race and finish.

This church will only be healthy to the degree that every member who is spiritual helps restore those who are weak so that they stay in the race. While the elders and pastors seek to shepherd the flock, we cannot possibly do it by ourselves. For one thing we don't know all of the people in this church. But, probably among the whole church there are relational connections to every person. You are responsible to help anyone you know. If you don't know how to help the one who is in spiritual trouble, ask one of the elders for assistance.

But probably it is you, not one of the elders, who needs to come alongside your brother, because you have the relationship with him. Spiritual help almost always is most effective when it flows through existing loving relationships. So, "see to it" is directed to you! It means that *you* are in the ministry! You have a responsibility to come alongside to encourage and strengthen other members of the team who may be in jeopardy of dropping out of the race.

2. There are several common hindrances that can cause Christians to drop out of the race.

All spiritual troubles fall under failure to keep the two great commandments: failure to love God or failure to love your neighbor. We saw last week that these are implicit in the two commands of 12:14, to pursue peace (second commandment) and sanctification (first commandment). The items mentioned in 12:15-17 are not exhaustive. The author is especially concerned that his readers not abandon the faith and return to Judaism under the threat of persecution. He uses Esau as a negative example of a man who abandoned his spiritual heritage for a single meal. These verses contain five common hindrances that can cause people to drop out. We need to watch for them in our own hearts, as well as in our brothers' and sisters' hearts.

A. We may drop out of the race because we come short of the grace of God.

The verb used here means “to fall behind to the extent of cutting oneself off from the contest” (Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 538, note 142). It is the same verb used in Romans 3:23, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The author is “not speaking of some relatively serious deficiency in the Christian life, but of the absolutely disastrous eventuality of cutting oneself off from the grace of God” (*ibid.*). In other words, it is a warning to those in the Hebrew church who were tempted to abandon Christianity and return to Judaism. They would come short of God’s grace in the gospel.

Those who believe that Christians can lose their salvation use this verse to support their case. But, as we saw last week, many verses in Scripture teach that God keeps all whom He saves (Phil. 1:6; John 10:27-30; Rom. 8:29-36). Salvation is not a matter of a human decision, but rather of God’s imparting spiritual life to those that were dead in their sins (Eph. 2:1-5; James 1:18). Just as those who have been born physically cannot be “unborn,” the same is true spiritually. If you are a new creature through faith in Christ, God’s power will keep you unto heaven.

But there is always the danger that some in the church profess to be born again, but God has never changed their hearts. It is not that they have received the grace of God in the gospel and then lose it. Rather, they fall short of attaining it in the first place. The author has warned this church of being like Israel in the wilderness. Although they had all come out of bondage in Egypt, not all were saved, and they fell in the wilderness (Heb. 3:16-18). In chapters 6:4-6 and 10:26-31, he issued strong warnings to those in the church who seemed to be believers, but in their hearts they were not truly believing and obedient.

Invariably, such people are trusting in a works-oriented religion, not in God’s grace in Christ. All religions, apart from the gospel, are based on works and do not deal with the heart. Go through the prescribed rituals, offer the necessary sacrifices, keep the rules, and you’re approved. This appeals to the flesh, because we like to think that we’re good enough to commend ourselves to God by what we do. And, we like to congratulate ourselves that we’re better than those that don’t keep our religious rules and rituals.

But God's grace cuts down our pride by saying, "No one can ever be good enough to earn God's favor, because all have sinned." While some may be able to keep external rules and rituals, God looks on the heart. The only way of salvation is to receive God's grace (unmerited favor) offered at the cross, where Jesus paid the penalty that we deserved.

The point is, make sure that neither you nor anyone you know fall short of God's grace by trusting in their own works or "goodness." We want every person in this church to trust in God's grace in Jesus Christ as his or her *only* hope for heaven.

- B. We may drop out of the race because we become bitter because of trials, poisoning others around us.

The last part of 12:15 refers to Deuteronomy 29:18. In the context, Moses is warning Israel about the danger of idolatry. He doesn't want there to be any in Israel "whose heart turns away today from the Lord our God, to go and serve the gods of those nations; that there will not be among you a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood." So the "root of bitterness" refers primarily to a bitter person in the church who has turned away from God and will cause trouble and defile many if he goes unchecked.

This person has probably doesn't like the way that the true God has treated him. He is going through severe trials, and God doesn't seem to be delivering him. Rather than submitting to God's discipline in the trial, he is growing bitter against God, thinking, "I don't deserve this kind of treatment!"

Along comes someone else who says, "I tried this other god, and it worked for me." So the suffering person thinks, "What have I got to lose?" He tries the other god to see if it will work for him. Years ago, a couple that had started attending my church in California had dropped out. When I saw them, I found out that they had been attending a Science of Mind type of cult. When I warned them about the beliefs of this cult, the husband snapped, "Look, my wife was in chronic back pain. This group helped her relieve her pain. We're going there!" I never saw them again.

That's the sin of idolatry, and it will spread poison in a church if the sinning person does not repent or is not put out of the church. He will cause trouble and many will be defiled. As a mem-

ber of the church, you are responsible to make sure that no “bitter root” spring up and defile others by turning them away from God, especially in a time of trial.

A root is hidden beneath the ground, but it feeds the entire plant. This points to the deceptive nature of sin in the heart. The heart in Scripture refers to the inner person, especially how we think. Proverbs 4:23 says, “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.” This is especially important when you’re going through trials. Are you grumbling against God, thinking inwardly, “If this is the way God treats me, I’m not going to follow Him”? If you’re raging at God in this manner (and many so-called Christian psychologists encourage believers to do this very thing!), then you are allowing yourself to become “a bitter root” in the midst of the church! Examine your heart, especially when you’re suffering, to make sure that you are in submission to God’s hand of discipline.

C. We may drop out of the race because we indulge in sexual immorality.

At first glance, the text indicates that Esau was immoral and Jewish tradition supports that contention. But the Bible never says that he was immoral, unless marrying three pagan women qualifies (Gen. 26:34-35; 28:8-9). Since Scripture never says that Esau was immoral, it is probably best to understand “immoral” in our text to stand alone, and to understand “godless” as describing Esau.

“Immoral” is a general word (Greek = *pornos*) referring to any kind of sinful sexual activity. Sexual sin is *not* a recent discovery! As far as I know, the earliest reference to sexual immorality in the Bible occurs in the story of Sodom, where the men of Sodom sought to have homosexual relations with the angels that visited Lot (Gen. 19:5). (The earlier story [Gen. 6:1-4] of the “sons of God” going in to the “daughters of men” does not say that it was done outside of marriage.) The first reference to heterosexual immorality is that of Lot’s daughters committing incest with their father (Gen. 19:30-38). Genesis also reports the rape of Jacob’s daughter Dinah (34:2), Reuben’s unlawful intercourse with his father’s concubine, Bilhah (35:22), Judah’s sin with Tamar (38:12-19), and Potiphar’s wife’s attempt to seduce Joseph (39:7-15). Ever since the human race fell into sin, sexual sin has been a powerful source of temptation.

The Bible teaches that sex between a husband and a wife is God's good gift within the confines of marriage. One reason that God gave us marriage was to prevent sexual immorality (1 Cor. 7:1-5). Within marriage, the sexual relationship pictures the union between Christ and His church (Eph. 5:25-33). But outside of marriage, sexual relationships defile not only those involved, but also the entire church if left unchecked. The first attempt should always be to restore those who have sinned through genuine repentance (Matt. 18:15-18). But, those who resist attempts to restore them and refuse to repent must be removed from the church (1 Cor. 5:1-13). Thus the author here instructs the entire church, "See to it... that there be no immoral ... person" in the church.

Thus, some drop out of the race because they fall short of God's grace. Some drop out because they become bitter towards God because of trials. Others drop out because of sexual sin.

D. We may drop out of the race because we develop a godless outlook on life.

Esau is described as a "godless person ... who sold his own birthright for a single meal." The Bible portrays Esau as a man who succeeded admirably in everything that the world has to offer, but he failed miserably in the things of God. Esau was a likeable "man's man." He was a skilled hunter and outdoorsman. He was a natural leader, who raised up a band of over 400 men who followed him. He had beautiful women as his wives and fathered sons who became leaders of tribes in their own right. His fame continued after him for centuries. So he succeeded in his family life, he succeeded financially and materially, and he succeeded by becoming politically powerful. But he failed where it matters most: He failed with God.

The birthright and blessing conveyed certain inheritance rights to the firstborn son. With Abraham's descendants, these rights and blessings especially referred to God's covenant promises (Gen. 12:1-3). By the time of Jacob and Esau, none of these promises had been realized. They were not even on the horizon. Esau's attitude was, "Hey, I'm hungry. What good is some vague future blessing if I starve to death?" He wasn't interested in the future promises of God. He lived for the here and now. So he sold his birthright for a

bowl of stew, wiped his mouth, and went his way without a thought of regret at the time (Gen. 25:34).

Later, Jacob conned their father, Isaac, out of the blessing. At that time Esau probably saw a connection between selling his birthright and losing the blessing, and he felt bad about it. He wept and entreated his father for the blessing, but it was too late. Esau got angry and wanted to kill his brother for his treachery, but he eventually got over it and moved on to become a success in life. The problem was, he succeeded in worldly things, but he failed in spiritual things. In this sense, he was a godless or profane man.

The contrast between Moses, who considered "the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward" (11:26), and Esau, could not be greater. The author wants us to see that if we gain the whole world, but lose our souls (Mark 8:36), we have made a bad investment. Satan tempts us to go for all that the world offers in this life, to the neglect of our souls and eternity. If you go that route, you'll drop out of the race.

E. We may drop out of the race because we seek the blessings, but we don't desire God Himself as the blessing.

"Afterwards" (12:17) should send shivers down your spine! Some decisions have irrevocable consequences! God will forgive all of our sins if we truly repent, but you cannot undo some consequences from former sins. Some sins have a searing effect on our consciences. When Esau lost the blessing, at first he felt bad. He wept about it. But, he got over it. He moved on in life and became successful. In later years, he probably thought, "At the time, I thought that losing the blessing was a tragedy, but, I recovered. Life is good now."

Probably "sought for it" refers to the blessing, not to repentance. Esau was not seeking repentance with tears; he was seeking the blessing with tears (Gen. 27:38). In other words, he wasn't sorry about his sin of despising God. He was sorry that he didn't get the blessing. In other words, he couldn't care less about seeking God for the joy of knowing God. He only wanted what God could give him to make this life more enjoyable.

There are many today who are Christians for the benefits. If God will give them a happy marriage and family life, good health,

and a comfortable lifestyle, they'll pay their dues to God and the church. But if life becomes difficult, if severe trials hit, they start shopping elsewhere for whatever works. Their allegiance is not to God, but to themselves! If they can "use" God to get what they want, they'll do it. But if God isn't "working," they move on. They are just like Esau. They desire the blessing, but they really aren't interested in the joy that the psalmist knew when he wrote, "Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Ps. 73:25-26).

Conclusion

All of us first should check our own hearts against these five hindrances that can lead to dropping out of the Christian race.

- ü Do I know through personal experience God's grace through the gospel?
- ü Am I rooting out of my heart all bitterness toward God because of the discipline that He has brought into my life?
- ü Am I avoiding temptation to sexual immorality, beginning on the thought level?
- ü Am I focused on the blessings of eternity, not on the things of this world?
- ü Am I seeking God for the joy of Him alone, not for the blessings that He gives?

Then, we should look around at those we know in this church. If your brother or sister has fallen in the race, or is in danger of straying off course, be like that boy in the Special Olympics: go back and help your brother get up and continue in the race. God calls us to help one another finish the race together!

Discussion Questions

1. How can we know when just to pray, or when to talk to someone that we sense is in spiritual danger?
2. Did Esau commit the unpardonable sin when he sold his birthright? How would you counsel someone who was worried that he had committed the unpardonable sin?
3. What is genuine repentance? How does it differ from sorrow over past sins (see 2 Cor. 7:9-11).
4. What is the problem with seeking God's blessings, but not seeking God Himself? How can we make sure that our focus is right?

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