

Welcome

Good morning, ladies! I hope everyone ... I got up this morning and ran 14 miles.... Just kidding.

Warning: Exhortation Ahead (Importance of literary context, 13:22)

I'm excited to jump back into Hebrews 12 with you this morning. As I was writing these messages, I started to fear that they were getting a little... intense. That there was kind of a lot of serious application showing up. And I wondered if maybe I was going to freak you all out and scare you away from the book of Hebrews forever. But as I continued studying, I came to the end of the book of Hebrews, and I found something interesting in chapter 13. Remember last night how we talked about getting the flow of the entire book and how that can help keep our interpretation on the rails? Well, look with me this morning at Hebrews 13:22, won't you? Right at the end of the book, the author offers a plea to his original audience:

He says, **22** I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation...

It sounds to me like he's admitting that the message he's sent them could be a little hard to hear. Bear with me, he says. Bear with my word of exhortation. An exhortation is an emphatic urging of someone to DO SOMETHING. And perhaps like portions of the gospels or the book of James, these exhortations will fall on our gospel-centered ears with a bit of dissonance. But I appeal to you, sisters, to bear with my word of exhortation this weekend. We will keep our feet firmly planted on the finished work of Jesus, as does the author of Hebrews. And we will at the same time consider the high calling to which we are called as God's beloved daughters. Yielding to the Lord is not the natural bent of our sinful nature. It requires adjustment. Yielding does, actually, require us to DO SOMETHING. But the promises of God are sure, as well, that this yielding of our hearts and minds and bodies to his will *will* YIELD MUCH FRUIT, now and in eternity.

So lace up your running shoes with me, won't you? Let's dig in.

[Pray]

Title and Outline

I've titled this morning's talk, The ABCs of Yielding to the Lord.

We'll take the first 17 verses of Hebrews 12 in three sections. Verses 1-4, Accept the reality of the race. Verses 5-13, Bear the discipline of the Lord. And verses 14-17, Continue in Community

1. Accept the reality of the race (1-4)

2. Bear the discipline of the Lord (5-13)

3. Continue in community (14-17)

Accept the reality of the race

Verses 1-4, Accept the reality of the race.

Let's go ahead and read those verses together:

12 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, **2** 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.

3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. **4** In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

We talked a bit last night about running races. About how running can be exhilarating, but that it's fundamentally about endurance. I think there's a lot here that we could talk about, but I want to focus this morning on what this race really IS so that you and I can yield ourselves to the exhortation these verses provide. If we are to live a life yielded to

the Lord, we must accept the reality that there is a race to be run, and we must understand the nature of that race.

What is the race?

So what, then, did the author of Hebrews have in mind when he talked about “the race”? I think there are a couple of aspects to it.

Enduring persecution

One aspect of running the race is enduring direct persecution. There are several places in Hebrews that expressly deal with the fact that believers in that time and place were being persecuted for their faith. And the example in this text is Jesus himself, the one we are to look to and follow and verse 3 describes him as one who endured the hostility of sinful men. So part of what running the race must mean is remaining faithful to the Lord through whatever persecution may come as a result of following his will.

There are probably some in this room who are experiencing some measure of persecution. Maybe you have an unbelieving husband who really doesn't appreciate you spending so much time at church. Maybe your boss expects you to behave in ways that are unethical and you aren't getting promoted because you are maintaining integrity. Maybe you've lost friends because of your unpopular opinions on issues of truth and righteousness. But honestly, most of us here are probably not in any sort of physical danger because of our faith. We're not being arrested or tortured or deported because we're Christians. But if we are, or if we ever find ourselves in that situation, the Bible speaks clearly to that reality. Persecution is to be expected. For many believers, both now and throughout the past couple of millennia, persecution was “the race” that was set before them. And the author of Hebrews speaks to them: “Do not grow weary or fainthearted!” We'll talk more about that in a minute.

Perhaps, though you and I aren't suffering direct persecution for our faith in Christ, we may be choosing a more difficult path than we would be if we weren't following Jesus. If you really want to be married, but you're choosing to remain single rather than seeking

a marriage outside God's will, you are sacrificing something for the sake of the gospel. If you stay in a hard job because of your desire to be a witness and blessing for Christ there, you are suffering for righteousness' sake. If you choose to forgive someone who has hurt you, even though she's never apologized, you are taking up your cross to follow Jesus. Even though these kinds of actions don't fall under the strict definition of "persecution," choosing obedience to Jesus and suffering for it is part of the definition of "running the race that is set before you."

Struggling against sin

Another part of what it means to "run the race" is what the author alludes to in verse 4: "In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood."

Five years ago, my husband and I adopted our four children. The youngest was two, and the oldest was six. As you might imagine, that was a fairly big adjustment. We were used to sleeping all night, having quiet morning devotions with a cup of coffee, enjoying a clean and tidy house, and eating healthy and interesting food. Suddenly, there was stuff everywhere. Someone was always crying (I mean, other than me!). My coffee mug was forever in danger of being spilled. Nobody ever liked what I made for dinner. You might be thinking, yep. That sounds like a race all right! But if you listen more closely, you'll hear my idolatry and selfishness speaking loudly and clearly through this litany of challenges. It was MY sleep being disturbed, MY house being trashed, MY meals being chaotic... In the midst of that first crazy year, what was actually the most challenging was attempting to parent without constantly sinning against my children. The biggest problem was - and, let's be real, IS - me. Sin was clinging closely. Anger was always just below the surface. I don't want to overstate it - adopting our kids was an amazing privilege. From day one, they were affectionate and creative and funny. But it was hard. Mostly because of my sin.

Even now, five years in, with a whole lot less daily drama, the biggest challenge that I face in parenting is the war against sin that rages in my heart and mind and will.

The race, according to the author of Hebrews, involves the struggle against sin that is - or at least ought to be - a dominant motif in a believer's life. Let's ask ourselves this morning if we are in that race. When we think about the struggles that exist in our lives, is our own sin somewhere near the top of the list? Often, my "struggle" is a desperate attempt to change my circumstances, to get things to go more smoothly in my daily life. But Hebrews 12:4 ASSUMES that we as Christians are actively fighting against sin. Yielding to Jesus means accepting the reality of the war on sin.

As we accept the reality of this race of faith, knowing that it will involve enduring persecution and fighting against sin, we might be tempted to feel overwhelmed. The author of Hebrews anticipates this, doesn't he? Let's look at verse 3 again:

"Consider [Jesus] who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted."

Consider the sinless JESUS, who persevered through hate and rejection and shame and torture in order to provide a more excellent way for US to have OUR sins forgiven. Verse 2 tells us that he is the author of our faith, the one who started it all, who has called us to himself. And he's the perfecter, too - the one who continues his good work in you until he returns to establish his unshakeable kingdom, as we'll see this afternoon. We are urged to "look to him," and I'm encouraged that it says there in verse 2 that "for the joy **that was set before him** he endured." It may not have seemed joyful every minute, even for Jesus. Have you ever watched someone run a race? If you asked, "How are you?" in the middle of mile 23, they would probably not smile sweetly and say, "I'm fine, praise the Lord, how are you?", right? The struggle is real. The race is hard. But God is calling us to stay in it, to bear the reproach of the world and to wage war on our own sin, looking to Jesus, our enduring and exalted Savior.

Bear the discipline of the Lord

In the next section, verses 5-13, the dominant image changes. The author is not saying something new or different here as much as he's approaching the same topic from another perspective. So for you non-runners out there, who aren't resonating as much with that imagery, let's consider the exhortation to yield to God's will through the lens of family discipline. The vast majority of us were raised by one or both of our parents, and I know that many of you are moms, so I think we'll be able to relate to a lot of what the author is saying here.

Bear the Discipline of the Lord. Let's read it together, starting in verse 5:

5 And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reprov'd by him.

6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”

7 It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? **8** If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. **9** Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? **10** For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. **11** For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. **12** Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, **13** and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.

What is Discipline?

Instruction and education

In the first section, we defined the race, and here I think we need to define God's discipline. What is the discipline of the Lord?

It's tempting to think of discipline just in terms of punishment, isn't it? My husband and I were asked to lead a parenting class at our church last year, and one of the topics we were asked to address was "discipline." As you can probably imagine, the burning question was "to spank or not to spank." You can ask me later what I think about that, but as we prepared for that session, we took a step back and tried to consider what **besides punishment** was included in the category of discipline. We actually came up with a pretty long list of things that we do in order to train our children, to cultivate their minds and hearts.

Discipline, Biblically speaking, can **involve** punishment. But the term is much more broadly referring to all the means of training and instruction parents employ with their children. Here's my one Greek reference for the weekend. The word that gets translated as "discipline" here in these verses is the same word that we find in 2 Timothy 3:16, where all Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and **training** in righteousness. That word **training** is the same word that's translated as **discipline** in Hebrews 12. **Scripture** is profitable for discipline. So how does God discipline us? Primarily, I think, by the instruction of his word.

Endurance

But also, in verse 7 we read that "it is for discipline that [we] have to endure." The redemptive purpose in our endurance is that through that endurance, we are being trained by our loving father. Running the race with endurance is training us. It's disciplining us.

The analogy to human parenting is really relatable, but the challenge here is in not taking the analogy too far or attributing to God the same motives and shortcomings of

our earthly parents (or of ourselves as parents). So to guard against that, we have to stay grounded in what God's Word **says** about discipline. Let's look more closely at a few of these verses and see what we can discern about God's discipline.

Fatherly love

I'm going to take verse 6 first.

"For the Lord disciplines **the one he loves**,

And chastises every **son** whom he **receives**"

If we're going to view God's discipline rightly, we have to ground it in his Fatherly LOVE. He loves his children, and he RECEIVES his children. We belong to him. He has adopted us, we read in Ephesians. We're HIS.

Sometimes because we believe that God is sovereignly working through our circumstances, through our endurance of trials and persecution, we can start to see him as sitting up in heaven scheming up some plans for making our lives miserable so that we can see the error of our ways, right? If we could just figure out what God was after, then we could start obeying and the "trial" could be over. That's not what's going on here. That's not the way that God disciplines his precious children. The Lord disciplines the one he **loves**.

Not optional or insignificant or irrelevant

So we can see God as overly harsh in his discipline, or we can make the opposite error. In verse 5, the author quotes from Proverbs 3:

"My son, do **not** regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,

nor be weary when reproved by him.

He's warning against our temptation to consider the training and instruction of God to be sort of optional or insignificant, or to just get tired of dealing with our own sin.

I can regard God's discipline lightly in a lot of ways: I can get defensive if a brother or sister challenges me from God's Word. I can skip over a verse or two in my study of Scripture because it's just too hard to deal with. I can make excuses for a semi-broken relationship or some minor immorality because, well, it's not really THAT serious, is it?

Or I can ignore the discipline that comes through trials and persecutions. I can choose not to enter the race, not to endure those hardships with God's good purposes in view.

I think that particularly as gospel-centered Christians, we can also regard God's discipline lightly by thinking of it as more of an Old Testament concept that we can set aside now that Christ has come. But the constant message of the New Testament - in the gospels, in the epistles, even all the way through the book of Revelation - is that God's people are called to walk in a manner worthy of our calling. God does discipline us. He reproves us, and the text even says, he chastises us. God **has** finally and fully dealt with our sin on the cross of Jesus Christ, but he has done this in order to bring us into his family where he is the FATHER. So God's discipline is not optional. It's not insignificant. And it's not just for those who are living their lives under the Old Covenant.

What does verse 10 teach us?

"They [our earthly parents] disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but God disciplines us for our good that we may share his holiness"!

And here's another place where I think our own parenting motives get in the way of our proper understanding of God's discipline. I, for one, am guilty of sometimes disciplining my children for MY good, not for their good. For my comfort and convenience, not for their growth in godliness. And even when I'm trying to discipline them for their own sake, I sometimes get the definition of their GOOD wrong. God's discipline might not be for my good in the sense that it makes me more likeable, or more comfortable, or more successful, but for my good in the sense that holiness is GOOD. "He disciplines us... that we may share in his holiness."

We are to be subject to – to yield to – our good and gracious Father. We are to bear whatever discipline he sees fit to give us – whatever teaching and training from his word, whatever trials and tribulations he asks us to endure.

Painful

The last aspect of discipline we'll consider is found in verse 11: "for the moment all discipline seems painful." That word can also mean sorrowful. It hurts to be disciplined, doesn't it? But as we yield ourselves to the discipline of God, we find that pain, that sorrow, yielding FRUIT, the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

Have you ever been disciplined like that? I remember in my early twenties, leading youth ministry and being pretty involved in leadership circles at my church. I was full of zeal, sometimes for the right motives and sometimes not. We had a leader from our denomination come, an older gentleman, and speak to a small group of us, and during the conversation, I took it upon myself in all my 20 year old wisdom, to correct his theology of ministry. The next day, our associate pastor, who had been in the meeting, called me. This pastor was the kindest, gentlest man you could ever know. And in his exceedingly kind and gentle way, he let me know that I had been way out of line. Disrespectful. Arrogant. I still remember where I was standing in that moment probably 20 years ago. My face went hot. I stumbled through an apology. And I hung up the phone, in tears. By the grace of God, though, I didn't get defensive. I took my pastor's words as they were intended - for God's glory and for my good. I received the discipline of the Lord that day. It hurt, but I truly believe that it has borne fruit in my life.

Our posture toward discipline

The author Hebrews comes to this conclusion in verse 12:

12 Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, **13** and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.

He returns to the athletic imagery to tie these last two sections together. You can picture what he's talking about here, can't you? Drooping hands, weak knees... When I'm running, and I start to get tired, I can feel my feet start kind of scuffing along. I start to sort of hunch over into a position that's temporarily easier to maintain. He's again addressing that very real temptation toward weariness when we're running the race of faith. And when we're tired, it's easy to just kind of limp around, to give in to discouragement, to wander... But we're encouraged here to take note of our posture and to adjust it. Running with bad posture leads to all kinds of trouble later on, doesn't it? Limping throws the rest of your body out of alignment. And I think the writer is trying to get us to really just FEEL the urgency, the significance, the gravity of the call to keep our eyes focused ahead of us. To give this race our ALL. Not to just give in to the weariness, not to resign ourselves to the struggle, not to bemoan the true cost of living in holiness. That's not the attitude the writer of Hebrews has in mind! He says, "Come on, y'all! Straighten up! Keep running! It's a good race we're in!

"Make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be HEALED!" Exercising our faith with focus and intentionality enables us to run with more endurance. We are being perfected, made holy, HEALED!"

Sisters, let's together meditate on these words. Let's reconfigure our notions of discipline in light of what God is revealing to us here. God is disciplining us as his beloved daughters. Yes, our trials are painful. Yes, his correcting words can be so difficult to hear. But he LOVES us! He longs for us to share his holiness! He wants GOOD for us - not comfort, prosperity, ease - but peace and joy and fruitfulness.

Continue in Community

So in yielding to the Lord, we Accept the Reality of the Race, looking to Jesus who has gone before us, we Bear the Discipline of the Lord, knowing that he is training us in holiness as his beloved children, and we Continue in Community, helping others to obtain the grace of God. Let's read verses 14-17.

14 Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. **15** See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; **16** that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. **17** For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

And it’s really interesting how this portion of the text proceeds. It seems to turn a little corner here and start talking about our relationship to our fellow runners, to our brothers and sisters who are also faithfully bearing the discipline of the Lord. Did you hear all the “everyone” and “no one” language? God is not just concerned with our lives as individuals. He wants us to be running this race together. This part of the text is a string of imperatives, so I’m going to go ahead and list them here, with a few comments on each.

“Strive for peace with **everyone**,” verse 14. Not just with those who want to be at peace with you. Not just with those that you like and already mostly get along with. “Strive for peace with everyone.” Underline it if you hear God speaking to you on that...

“Strive for holiness,” he goes on to say. I think that’s what we’ve been talking about throughout this entire passage right? There is effort involved in the pursuit of holiness. The “without which no one will see the Lord” part is tricky, isn’t it? I think we’ll understand it better after we look at the rest of chapter 12 this afternoon. For now, let’s move on to verse 15:

“See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God.” God’s not just concerned that you have people encouraging YOU, but that YOU are an encouragement to others, as well. Is that your heart’s cry for your sisters around you, that they would fully obtain the grace of God?!

And where do you see a “root of bitterness” springing up? This could be a question for your own heart. I think that’s often how this text is applied, right? Is there a root of bitterness springing up in YOUR heart? But these verses are encouraging us to be

helping others, so I think the implication is fundamentally, do you see anyone ELSE becoming bitter? How can you help your sister to replace that bitterness with the sweet grace of God? Because we know that bitterness doesn't just harm the one who holds it. It's not just to my own personal detriment or to the detriment of your personal sanctification. Bitterness defiles MANY! See to it that no bitterness takes root among you all.

And see to it "that no one is sexually immoral," verse 16. This is gonna get a little personal, but can I ask you a few questions? Who among you is flirting with or completely entangled in sexual immorality? Masturbation, pornography, same-sex temptations, fornication, adulterous thoughts or actions? Are your sisters struggling with any of these sins? Would you know if they were? What is your responsibility to them in this? How can you help them not to fall short of the grace of God?

While I was preparing for this retreat, just a couple of weekends ago, our women's ministry conducted a workshop on Biblical sexuality, and a woman in my community group confessed that she believes she's bisexual, and even though she's not in a relationship with anyone right now, she would consider marrying another woman someday. It also came to our attention that someone else who attended the workshop, who has recently become a Christian, is living with her unbelieving fiancé. These words in Hebrews 12 are hitting me hard. See to it that no one is sexually immoral. That's a big responsibility, isn't it?

And one more word on this: Are YOU entangled in any form of sexual immorality (or any other besetting sin, really)? I've been there. And when I finally found the courage - the desperation, really - to confess my sin to my sisters in the Lord, they helped me to access the grace of God and to get back in the race toward holiness. If you're being weighed down by sin, it's up to us to help you not to fall short of the grace of God. You're not in this alone.

We're talking about yielding to the Lord this weekend. This final portion of our text this morning makes me think of those merge signs on the expressway when you're coming

in from a ramp. There's the one kind of sign that shows that I'll have my own lane to keep driving in as I merge. Then there's the other one that shows the two lanes coming together. I'm really happy when I see that sign that means that I can just stay in my own lane and not worry about anyone else for the moment. But that other sign means I need to get into the ONE lane and be aware of all the other people who are going in the same direction! This is the sort of merging, the sort of yielding that we find here in this text. The kind that is mindful that we're all on the same path together, and it's up to ME to help YOU to safely arrive at our mutual destination.

And don't worry, I didn't forget about Esau. What was his sin? Prioritizing his momentary desires over a lasting inheritance. He wanted ONE BOWL OF SOUP so much that he traded away his position as the recipient of all of his father's possessions. Isn't that what this whole text is about? Putting aside our present, momentary hungers and desires in order to do the will of God, in order to enter fully into the blessing he's provided for us. Laying aside weights and sins in order to run with Jesus. Taking on the pain of God's discipline in order to grow in holiness. Taking responsibility for those who are running beside us, not just for our own individual happiness. Yielding to the Lord is not a passive activity!

But be encouraged! We have a cloud of witnesses that has gone before us. We have sisters running beside us. We have a Father, working in us always for our good. We have Jesus, who has gone before us, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of God, interceding for us. And we have the promise that all of this running and endurance and training is working in us the peaceful fruit of righteousness, preparing us to one day see the Lord and experience his grace and holiness in all their fullness.

Please pray with me.