

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Following Jesus...ESPECIALLY **when life gets tough!**

(Studies in the letter to the Hebrews)

Running TOGETHER with Endurance

(Hebrews 12:1-17)

Study #14

Introduction: Following Jesus - a solo AND a team sport...

With the start of the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris, lots of us are going to be tuning in to watch some of our favorite events. Maybe even this afternoon...

A lot of the events are individual competitions. The focus in these events is one person vs another (as in boxing and wrestling). Or the event will pit one performer against other performers (as in gymnastics and golf).

In the solo events, the individual athlete competes alone. He or she gets all the attention, all the credit, and all the blame.

But there are a lot of team sports in the Olympics, too. We'll enjoy watching relay races in swimming and running, along with games like basketball, soccer, and volleyball.

The team events highlight athletes working together, supporting each other, one unit made up of many teammates, each having the others' back.

We'll see in our time in Hebrews this morning that life in Jesus is a solo sport, but it is not only a solo sport.

It is also a team sport. We're all in this together. But we start off viewing our faith as a solo sport.

The "***Therefore***" that begins today's passage (Hebrews 12:1) points us back to chapter 11 where the theme was the inspiring stories of faith of those who have gone before us.

Today, it is our own faith journey that is in view. The author gives us our marching orders. Better, he gives us our racing orders.

Follow the Leader (12:1-3)

A Race to Endure (v. 1)

[12:1] Therefore...let's run with endurance the race that is set before us

Those words take us right to the Paris track events.

The sprints are among the most glamorous of the Olympic events. The 100 and 200 meter races are glitzy. Those racers are so fast, the races are over in a few seconds. The sprints are high drama.

What an athlete needs to win a sprint is speed. Pure and simple. Endurance doesn't really factor into the sprints. The runners run all out, start to finish.

But endurance is critical in the longer races, like the 10k and the marathon.

The author of Hebrews has the long race of following Jesus in mind as he calls us to run our race "***with endurance.***"

The race of following Jesus isn't a sprint. It's a marathon. The Christian life as a long run that calls for endurance.

That is the mission. Follow Jesus and endure in following Him. Persevere. Crash through quitting points.

Surrounding that explicit call, the author of Hebrews gives us racing strategies that will help us cross the finish line.

For instance, if we are to win this race, we will need to leave a few things behind.

Things to Leave Behind (v. 1)

Every obstacle

[12:1]...let's rid ourselves of every obstacle...¹

***As an aside, I love the translation of the Bible that I use - the 2020 version of the New American Standard Bible. I find it to give a very accurate translation of the New Testament Greek text. However, today I'm going to point out a couple of places where I take exception to the translators' choices.

The word that my version translates "**obstacle**" makes us think of something that is in the runner's way, like a stone on a track. But that is really not the sense of the Greek word.

What's in view here is a weight. Think of running with ankle weights. A runner who runs with baggage doesn't win any races. The successful runner makes a priority out of running light.

Just so, you and I can run longer with Jesus if we run lighter.

This is the author inviting us to inventory our use of time and our expenditure of energy.²

We all have only a limited number of minutes and hours and only a limited number of calories to burn in any given day.

To run our race for Jesus while wasting time on trivialities, or while spending energy on things that don't matter is like an Olympic runner competing in a 10k with a weighted vest.

No athlete would do that, and we shouldn't do that in our spiritual race, either.

We stay with the image of running as the author urges us to get rid of something else.

The sin which so easily entangles us

[12:1]...let's rid ourselves of...the sin which so easily entangles us.

An Olympic runner could potentially be caught up in all kinds of sinful behavior and still be really fast, still have great endurance, and still win gold.

A Christian running the race of faith will not win "**the race set before [them]**" if they are entangled in sin.

The author is writing as a Christian to Christians. He knows how easy it is to get caught up in sin. He knows how common it is for a Christian to get caught up in sin.³

He's got in mind behaviors that the Bible clearly identifies as sin. Breaches of integrity. Sexual sins. Sins of greed and dishonesty. Sins against love.⁴

If we are going to run the race of following Jesus with endurance, we'll pursue purity, honesty, faithfulness, and love.

³ "**Easily entangles**" is one Greek word. (*ευπεριστατος*) It refers to something that is off-limits to the Christian but may be popular or widely-accepted.

⁴ He is not, I believe, explicitly calling out the sin of not following Jesus, although some people think that he is. It is certainly true, though, that every sin that entangles us tempts us to not follow Jesus.

¹ I would suggest, "*impediment*." Also, something sinful is not necessarily in view.

² I like the way the International Critical Commentary translates: We are to put aside "*any encumbrance that handicaps us*."

Here's another race strategy to help us keep running with endurance. We are to remember that, as we run, we have an audience.

People to Imitate / Focus on (vv. 1-2)

Remember the great crowd of witnesses that surround us

[12:1] Therefore, since we also have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us...

Abel, Enoch, and Noah are watching us. So are Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Rahab.

As Bill reminded us last week, so are Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets, and so many others.

They have run their race. Now, these are a **"cloud of witnesses"** telling us that the race is worth running, it is worth the exhaustion, it's worth the pain. They cheer us on - *"Keep running!"*

As we run, we can imagine ourselves looking up into the stands. By faith, we can see them. They have finished their races well and they want us to win our race, too.

We take encouragement and inspiration by looking at these ancient heroes. But mainly, we are to look at Jesus.⁵

Look to / Gaze at / Fix your eyes on / Focus on Jesus

He is the originator and perfecter of the Christian faith

[12:2] looking only⁶ at Jesus, the originator and perfecter of the faith...

⁵ This is the fourth extended meditation on Jesus in Hebrews. The other three all emphasized various aspects of His High Priestly role. (2:9-18; 4:14-16; 7:26-28)

⁶ **"Only"** is not in the original text. We could suggest *"looking primarily"* or *"fixing our eyes / gaze"* on Jesus. But **"only"** would rule out looking at the **"cloud of witnesses"** who are surrounding us.

Here's another translation note. The author isn't telling us to **"only"** look at Jesus. We know that because the word **"only"** isn't in the original text and because he just told us to see / imagine that **"great cloud of witnesses"** that surrounds us.

He is telling us to **"fix our gaze on"** and to **"look intently at"** Jesus. We are to focus on Jesus.

He is the **"originator and perfecter"** of the Christian faith. Yes, it is true that He is the One who started the Christian movement. And He created it perfect, without flaw in design or application.

But it seems to me that what the author is really doing is putting Jesus forward as the ultimate example of faithful living.⁷

He was the first One to make it through life perfectly faithful to God. He has modeled for us what *"The Jesus way"* looks like.

That is why we must intently gaze at Him, look to Him, fix our eyes on Him. He shows us the way to **"run the race set before us with endurance"** because He ran the race that was set before Him with endurance.

He set the bar for endurance on the cross

[12:2]...who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame...

Jesus was crucified, crucifixion being the most humiliating and degrading way for someone to die in the Roman world. The cross was reserved for the lowest of criminals.

And the Lord knew that it would all be worth it in the end. He got through the shame and the pain by anticipating the coming joy of reigning over God's kingdom.

⁷ Earlier in Hebrews we read that Jesus was **"perfected"** by the suffering He endured. (2:10). Then (5:8-9) that He, having been perfected, became the source of eternal salvation to all those who obey Him.

And sure enough...

Has now sat down at the right hand of God's throne

[12:2]...and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.⁸

And there is a great reason for reminding us of the force that motivated Jesus as He ran His race.

It is that we, too, are to anticipate the great joy set before us of reigning with Him. We have an inheritance and a rich reward to look forward to later as we run our race now.

So, whatever sufferings we may endure will not compare to the rewards we will receive if we faithfully endure while running the race.

A Suffering Savior to Consider (v. 3)

[3] For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

The author wants us to take some time to reflect on Jesus' sufferings. Consider. OK.

He endured the process that led to the cross, starting with a humble birth at Bethlehem. He grew up in a poor family in an oppressed nation. He faced rejection and opposition at every turn from His own people. He was betrayed, denied, scourged, and then crucified.

He was treated cruelly by both Jews and Romans. He suffered unimaginably for no wrongdoing. He was innocent and perfect. And He suffered with God's allowance, with God's approval.

He endured all of that, confident that the joy that would follow the hard endurance of His marathon suffering was worth it all.

So, if we endure while suffering (no matter what kind of suffering it is), we are following in the footsteps of Jesus. And if we do this ("**consider [Jesus] ...**"), we won't "**grow weary and lose heart.**"

If anything, the author now gets more serious. More pointed.

Endure - And Even EMBRACE - God's Discipline (12:4-11)

Keep Resisting (v. 4)

[4] You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin.

A part of the point here is that Jesus went through much more difficult times than the readers were experiencing. And he isn't making fun of them or making light of their sufferings.

He is simply reminding them of the difference in kind, not just degree between what Jesus went through (the cross) and what they have gone through (loss of possessions; 10:34).

None of these Christians he's writing to have yet come to the point of shedding blood. They have resisted sin and they're still running their race. But martyrdom has not yet come their way.

The bigger point is that there is (likely) more severe suffering ahead.

And we ready ourselves for a mind-blowing, category-exploding consideration of what the author describes here as God's "**discipline.**"

Start Remembering (vv. 5-6)

[5] and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons,

⁸ Also at Hebrews 1:3, 8:1, 10:12, and here at 12:2.

***“MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD,
NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE PUNISHED⁹ BY HIM;
[6] FOR WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES,
AND HE PUNISHES EVERY SON WHOM HE ACCEPTS.”¹⁰***

Discipline

Now, there’s “*discipline*” and then there’s “*discipline*.”

There is the discipline of setting a goal and meeting it, getting a job done, sticking to a diet or to an exercise regimen.

That’s self-discipline. Self-discipline is an important character trait and it’s one of the fruits of the Spirit in a Christian’s life.

But that is not the discipline in view here.

The author is referring here to a father’s discipline of his child. The father exposes his child to all that the world will throw his way so that the child is equipped to handle it. He introduces his child to what the child needs to know - before he receives the father’s inheritance.¹¹

The discipline may be **instructive** (as in teaching and training), or it may be **corrective** (involving punishment), or it may be **passive** (as in allowing something to come into the child’s life that will mature him / her).

God’s discipline of His “sons”

But that - disciplining; training - is what a good father does for his sons and daughters. And that is also what God does for His sons and daughters. He trains us.

⁹ Verse 6 has *punishes* - otherwise translated *scourged* / *flogged* (John 19:1). This word doesn’t describe a good father’s child-rearing. It described the pre-cross beating that Jesus endured.

¹⁰ Quotations from Proverbs 3:11-12.

¹¹ Greek: *paideia* = child training / correcting.

In speaking here of God’s discipline, what the author had in mind were the persecutions that his readers were getting from their fellow Jews due to the simple fact that they were following Jesus.

When God allows these sufferings - and any other sorts of sufferings! - into the life of a Christian, He is treating that Christian just like a good father treats his children.

Christians are to understand life’s sufferings as God’s discipline.

We should not “**regard**” these sufferings “**lightly**.” We shouldn’t complain about them, resent them, or object to them.

The fact that the quote (Hebrews 12:5-6) is from Proverbs tells us that we would be wise to see our sufferings / God’s discipline, as necessary. They are for our good.

We all are in need of change and transformation. Among the sharpest of God’s tools to make that life change is discipline.

Discipline is graduate level spiritual training. It is what our heavenly Father uses to teach us the transcendent value of following Jesus, to transform us into the image of Jesus, and to prepare us to reign with Jesus.

That God allows discipline into our lives is an indication that He is a very good Father.

Submit to God's Discipline (vv. 7-11)

Discipline signifies sonship (vv. 7-8)

***[7] It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?
[8] But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.***

If you were living in the ancient world and came across a son who was not being disciplined / trained by his father, you would know that one of two things was true.

One, you have either come across a very bad father, or you have come across a child who was not in line to inherit.¹²

In light of the message of Hebrews, the point of what you just heard about **“illegitimate children”** is simply to affirm what the letter has been saying from the beginning.

Not every son / daughter of the Father will receive a rich inheritance.

Some who are children of the heavenly Father don't remain faithful to Jesus. They don't follow Jesus. They are, therefore, not in line to receive a rich inheritance, and the Father won't discipline them.

So, the absence of discipline is a form of judgment. The presence of discipline affirms that we are in line to inherit.

Knowing this brings a whole new perspective to the challenges and the sufferings that come our way.

God allows suffering into my life and yours to shape us and mold us into the image of Jesus. He is training us to reign with Jesus.¹³

In fact, as verse 7 says, **“It is for discipline that you endure.”**

God's discipline is so precious to us that we don't just endure it, we endure FOR IT.¹⁴

God's discipline is exactly what we need. So, when we have our wits about us, it is also exactly what we want.

Disciplined by our fathers / by our Father (vv. 9-10)

[9] Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline 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 seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.

Our earthly fathers' hearts were generally in the right place. My dad didn't do everything perfectly, but I know that what he did in his role as a father was what he thought was best.

But, try as we might, we earthly dads don't always get it right.

Our Heavenly Father, though, is perfect and disciplines us perfectly. He never makes fathering mistakes.

This may be a new concept to many of us today, but God's Word is giving us an interpretive grid to put in place to understand our sufferings.

We are to accept that everything that comes into our lives as filtered through the love and care and shepherding hand of a heavenly Father who is crazy about us.

He can use everything that comes into our lives to fit us for a glorious future. But Hebrews is very honest about God's discipline.

The fruit of discipline (v. 11)

[11] For the moment, all discipline seems not to be pleasant, but painful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterward it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.¹⁵

¹² In the Roman world, this would have been the most natural way to read this. Given that Ishmael was a son of Abraham and Esau was a son of Isaac - but neither received the Abrahamic promise or inheritance - it would also have been the most reasonable way to read it among the Jews.

¹³ As Todd Havekost pointed out in his message a few weeks ago, *“This life is training time for reigning time.”*

¹⁴ Could be rendered *“It is for discipline that you endure...”* (indicative) or *“Endure for discipline!”* (imperative) Indicative (as NASB) is probably to be preferred. But it is easy to see how the imperatival force is present.

¹⁵ **“Righteousness”** here is not forensic righteousness (justification before God, which comes when we believe in Jesus), but practical, daily righteous living, which is REALLY living.

No one is saying that God's discipline is pleasant. The author isn't and I'm not, either. Discipline is hard.

But every athlete we're going to see over the next couple of weeks in Paris has willingly endured punishing workouts so that they might stand up on a podium.

Temporary, but serious suffering "**yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.**" BUT, in order for it to have its intended result we must respond to it, accept it, not resent it, submit to it...just like Jesus did.

Remember that He was perfected through His own sufferings (Hebrews 2:10), was tempted in all things (2:18; 4:15), learned obedience through His sufferings (5:8), and submitted to the race the Father had set for Him to die on a cross for our sins (1:3; 2:9, 14, 17; 7:27; 9:11-12, 28; 10:10, 12)

You and I will find strength to endure and to keep running the race God has set before us if we will embrace the life-changing, character-building, equipping for reigning impact that every trial that comes our way can have.

Thus far, each one of us has learned to embrace the Father's much-needed discipline so that we can run our race.

The next word in the text is "**Therefore...**" (12:12) which ties what has gone before to what is about to come.

Run Together (12:12-17)

Get Strong...to Strengthen Others (vv. 12-13)

Make straight paths for your feet (v. 13a)

[12-13a] Therefore...make straight paths for your feet...

Each one of us is to give attention to the trajectory of our own life with Jesus. We are to make sure that we're traveling in the right direction, feet pointed straight ahead, taking one spiritual next step after the other.

Why? Because if you keep your own path straight, you'll be able to help those who are struggling to also keep going.¹⁶

Help the weak and misguided (v. 12-13)

[12] Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, [13] and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is impaired may not be dislocated, but rather be healed.

Life in Jesus is not just about "*me and Jesus.*" It's about "*Jesus and us.*"

In any race (except for the shortest of sprints, which the Christian life certainly is not) there is the possibility of exhaustion.

The authors' terms "**Weak hands...feeble knees...impaired limbs**" are different ways to describe weak and wounded and misguided members of the church.

Some of the readers were exhausted and were in danger of losing heart. They were ready to throw in the towel, not finish the race.

The final words today point to how the community of faith can rescue the weary and the wounded.

Path-Strengthening Ways (vv. 14-17)¹⁷

¹⁶ Other passages in Hebrews thus far that point to the importance of the community of faith. Look at 3:12-13; 10:24-25.

¹⁷ The author has included numerous "warning passages" in this letter, sent to persecuted Christians. We find the warnings at 2:1-4, 3:12--4:7, 6:1-8, 10:19-31, today at 12:14-17, and next Sunday at 12:25-29.

Pursue peace with each other - and holiness (v. 14)

[14a] Pursue peace with all people¹⁸, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord...¹⁹

The discussion here is about how we in the church can help each other run our race with Jesus. So, the point of the first exhortation is that you and I, here, are to pursue peace with each other.

I suggest that this means that we are to...
 ...work hard to establish open, meaningful relationships.
 ...be diligent to maintain open lines of communication.
 ...take pains to nip relational problems in the bud.

Peace is more than the absence of conflict. It means more than that we aren't fighting with each other. Peace is the presence of safety. It describes relational depth.

If there is going to be peace between us, it requires that we be open to relating and it requires that we make time to interact.

I urge everyone here to leverage the time we have on Sundays to go deep. Make good, solid connections. Engage meaningfully.

Try praying before you get here that God would open your eyes to identify someone who is suffering from spiritually weak hands, feeble knees, or impaired limbs.

Make it your aim to pursue peace with that person this morning - and in the days to come.

¹⁸ The word "people" is not present in the original Greek text. Its inclusion into the verse in my version gives the verse a universal sense, as in a call to "be at peace with all people everywhere at all times." However, since "people" is absent in the original text, it begs the question, "Who is the 'all' referring to here?" The context demands that the author is urging his readers to be at peace with each other in the community of faith.

¹⁹ All Christians will have it at the moment when Christ arrives. See 1 John 3:2.

And the second part of the verse fills out the idea of the first pursuit. Our pursuit of peace is grounded in holiness, purity, and righteous living.²⁰

Walking a "**straight path**" requires that we run the race, in holiness, together.

Conclusion:

On the one hand, life with Jesus is a solo competition. Each one of us is competing individually, running the race set before us.

Each one of us is to learn to graciously accept the hardships in life as God's discipline. It's a perspective that is clearly taught here in Hebrews 12 and it's a perspective that only rings true if this life is a training ground for the life to come.

So, keep running!

But life in Jesus is also a team sport. We are to see each other as teammates. We are to support each other, have each others' back, cheer each other on to run with endurance.

We run best for Jesus when we run together.

²⁰ The author is not at all saying that a Christian who doesn't live morally will not be in heaven (have eternal life). Rather, having been declared righteous by faith in Jesus, we are to live like the righteous people we are.