

Strategic Priorities

Hebrews 12:12-17

Introduction

In the verses that precede our text for this morning, we learned that when you set your focus on Jesus, the trailblazer and perfecter of our faith, you find the endurance you need to run the life-race God has assigned you, to face the world's hostility, and to benefit from God's Fatherly discipline of you as His child.

With these truths in mind, there are life strategies that promote living strong by faith, as did many saints who have gone before you, and many who now run alongside you. Hebrews 12:12-17 lays them out for us.

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. **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.

1. Improve Your Spiritual Health (12-13)
2. Pursue Healthy Relationships with Others and God (14)
3. Beware Poisonous Defectors within the Congregation (15-17)

1. Improve Your Spiritual Health (12-13)

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.

Therefore—because God is using the hard things in your lives to grow you as His children, don't shortchange the process by giving up, quitting, turning aside. Most of us know what it's like trying to get in shape physically, whether for sports or just for our general health. There are times we just want to quit. It seems too hard. We are having to give up too much. It seems like it's not making that much of a difference.

Our ability to tough it out has a lot to do with our sense of purpose and our hope of success. You see it watching a ballgame. You can sense when there is a shift of momentum when a team that's losing so far gets a breakthrough play and scores. When they

start to believe they can actually win they actually start playing better. At the same time, the team that has been winning can be unnerved by the reversal and start playing worse.

So the writer of Hebrews is saying to us. Hang in there. Don't give up. What you're having to bear up under is going to pay off. Jack up your courage and your determination and press on.

Actually quoting from Isaiah 35:3-4, 10
³ Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴ Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you."

¹⁰ And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Drooping hands are inactive hands—get them busy doing what matters.

Weak knees a result of lack of exercise

Straight paths are better suited for progress, so fill up the potholes and define the lanes

Brace the legs that are lame so they can heal properly

All these athletic comparisons call to mind that what is true of physical health is true of spiritual health as well. We are in a strenuous contest, not lounging around or coasting along. It's important to stay active and fit. It's important to do the preparation necessary to engaging in a challenging contest. Lay off the spiritual disciplines and you weaken your ability to fulfill what God has assigned to you in life, to endure hostility from the world, or to benefit from your heavenly Father's training you as His child.

Are your hands busy doing what God has called you to do?

Are you bearing up under the load God has assigned you?

Are you clear on the path you are to run?

Are you taking care to care for what is out of joint or wounded?

The text is clearly more than just looking out for your own individual health, but the spiritual health of the brothers and sisters around you.

We are strengthened by using the gifts and opportunities God has given us to build others up, to advance the gospel, to grow in grace. Time in the Word and prayer to distinguish what is your assigned load and what is God's appointed path for you. You need time for meditation, for evaluation. Reminding

yourself who God is, who you are, His promises, and His purposes for you.

Time with others with eyes open to needs, quick to respond to those needs with whatever action will bring healing.

Watch out for what undermines your walk with God and your relationship to others. Be honest with yourself, and cut those things out of your life—the distractions and weights, the sins that cripple you. And encourage one another to keep fighting the good fight. We need each other in this battle of faith.

Keep your spiritual health strong. Keep growing. Do it together.

2. Pursue Healthy Relationships with Others and God (14)

14 Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Strive—pursue, follow—as a hunter pursues whatever game animal he’s hunting

Peace with everyone—not just fellow believers but all people as those made in God’s image

Matthew 5:9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

People who love God love others. And people who love others seek to benefit them. They avoid what harms others. It's not just about being nice to everyone because that makes your life easier. That can be nothing but self-centered cowardice. It's about seeking the good of others. It means you aren't turning a blind eye to their pursuing something or someone that will destroy them—as we will see in the following verses.

Whom are you are investing in? What are their names?

Whom are you watching out for?

Whom are you encouraging?

Who is encouraging you, watching out for you, investing in you?

This strategic priority is why we pastors in trying to know and care for the flock better, are trying to make sure every member has a close, encouraging relationship with at least one or two other members of the church family.

And for holiness—sanctification; practical holiness of life that marks those indwelt by the Holy Spirit and under His control.

Grace and forgiveness are not license to pursue a wicked lifestyle; rather they empower pursuing a holy lifestyle. The sins we allow in our lives undermine that health.

1 Peter 1:13-16

13 Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. **14** As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, **15** but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, **16** since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

God has made us holy when He made us His own. So we live our lives in His power and to His glory. Everything centers on our relationship to Him as His servants, His children, His kingdom citizens.

1 John 3:2-3

2 Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. **3** And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

Think of your battles against the flesh not just in terms of what's morally right and wrong, but in terms of what grows or harms your relationship with God (and with others). When we clean up rotten stuff in our kitchens, we do so not just to make the kitchen look clean, but to reduce the risk of disease and

infection. We keep our bodies clean for the same reasons.

2 Corinthians 7:1

Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

Guard your heart. Guard your habits of desire and thought and word and deed. We protect what we most value. Value your closeness to God. Value your relationship to others.

The apostles hammer this theme throughout the NT.

1 Thessalonians 4:3-8

³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴ that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, ⁵ not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶ that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. ⁷ For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. ⁸ Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

3. Beware Poisonous Defectors within the Congregation (15-17)

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;

See to it—we are looking out for one another

Fails to obtain the grace of God—to fall short of it—true grace at work a person’s heart is marked by perseverance (theme of Hebrews)

“If it is the grace of God that sets a man’s feet at the entrance of the pathway of faith, it is equally the grace of God that enables him to continue and complete that pathway.”

F.F. Bruce, 365

Philippians 2:12-13

12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, **13** for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Work out—to work down to its intended goal
So the opposite of failing to obtain the grace of God is to live life the way God’s grace saved you to live. Don’t fall short of it. Don’t live as if God’s grace never took hold of you.

Hebrews 3:12-13

12 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. **13** But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Verse 15 continues—

That no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled—what does that mean?

Quoting from Deuteronomy 29:18-19

18 Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the LORD our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, **19** one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.' This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike.

So the root of bitterness—a person who is outwardly among God's people but whose heart stubbornly rejects God and is still holding on to idols. That kind of person is poison to those he or she influences. Many can be defiled by such a person.

We look out for one another to discourage such a way of life and hold one another accountable. It's what church discipline is about. We don't ignore sin but deal with it with forbearance and forgiveness, seeking to restore the person to repentance and faith.

But if such a person refuses to repent despite multiple attempts from individuals all the way to the entire church family, we remove the person from being recognized as a member in good standing among God's people. In so doing we protect the rest of the flock from thinking it's okay to live such a double life. It's poison. Further, the action of the church hopefully provides the wake-up call the person needs to return to fellowship with God and His people.

Verse 16 illustrates how such a person lives **16** that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.

We have no record of Esau being sexually immoral. The closest thing Genesis records is his marrying two Hittite women. So the reference to sexual immorality seems directed to pitfalls the first-century readers were facing. Remember that the immorality so common in our culture today is not modern at all. It is a return to the in-your-face

sensuality that dominated the ancient world of paganism. The church was born in the middle of a culture obsessed with sexual immorality—both heterosexual and homosexual—and stood strongly against it (as Romans 1 so very clearly articulates). Purity and sexual morality are not Victorian in origin. They were hallmarks that distinguished Christianity from the pagan culture of the times. To argue that we should affirm and accept such practices today turns the NT on its head. Doing so does not show love for those trapped in destructive sin, but reveals a soft and selfish cowardice that would rather persons be destroyed than risk their having bad feelings toward you.

What we do see in our text and in Genesis is that Esau was unholy. He did not value spiritual things. He was all about His physical appetite, an earthbound man. He counted a bowl of stew more valuable than his birthright as the firstborn. Jacob was a conniving man, but he did seem to have greater appreciation for the family heritage as those blessed by God. That blessing would culminate in the coming of the promised Messiah, who would be a descendant of Jacob, renamed Israel by God Himself. Jesus, the Savior-King, was the One to whom all these blessings from God led.

So when Jacob stole the blessing Isaac intended to give to Esau, he was taking what Esau had already demonstrated he valued little. But that changed.

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.

Esau sought the blessing he had lost with tears, but it was too late. There was no turning back. Isaac would not change what he had done. Esau was not repenting of his appetite driven life; he was lamenting the cost of such choices, not the choices themselves.

Jacob's deception was wrong, to be sure, and it cost him dearly over his life. God had to discipline and transform him. But Esau's whole worldview, what he considered important, where he directed his efforts, showed a lack of appreciation for how valuable God's blessing on the family truly was. He got what he thought he wanted, but found to his dismay that it cost him more than he wanted to pay.

How many have lived their lives the same way. They end up regretting the consequences of a lifetime of poor choices when it is too late to change course.

Thankfully, some actually change their life focus before they enter eternity, but the tragedy remains of all the years they wasted valuing what would pass away while they turned up their noses at what lasts forever.

1 Timothy 6:17-19

17 As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. **18** They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, **19** thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.

Guard your heart from idols.

Pursue first of all what matters forever.

Be careful show is shaping your worldview, who is discipling you (smart phone?).

Look out for your brothers and sisters around you so that they too continue on the right path. Don't ignore those in trouble.

Conclusion

Looking to Jesus is our reason for hope; He is our reason to endure.

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Discussion Questions

1. What discouragements have made you feel like giving up, and what encouragements have helped you keep going in an enduring life of faith?
2. What is the effect of inactivity (drooping hands), or fear (weak knees), or obstacles and injuries on pursuing an aggressive life of faith in God?
3. What strategies have you found helpful in improving your spiritual health?
4. What kinds of things interfere with peaceful relationships with other people, and what are ways you have help in pursuing peace with them?
5. Who are some of the persons who have invested in and encouraged you over the years?
6. Who are some individuals you are investing in right now?
7. Why do you think treasuring and cultivating your relationship with God is so important to your fighting soul battles against sin and distractions?
8. What are ways you can reach out to a brother or sister who seems to be slipping away from God?

9. Why is it so important not to ignore warning signs that a professing believer is turning away from the Lord (15-17), and what are some reasons you might fear to say or do anything to help him or her?