

HEBREWS 44
(Hebrews 12:15)

LOOKING DILIGENTLY, LEST YE FAIL
By Ron Harvey
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INTRODUCTION

We live in a culture where we have virtually everything our hearts desire. We not only have shelter, but most of us have very fine homes to live in. Most of us have our very own private bedroom and bath. In our bathrooms we have showers with adjustable settings and large tubs and sometimes we have our own saunas. If we have an achy muscle, we go in and turn on the hot water and the jets and we lay back in luxury. We have walk-in closets. We have large dens with television sets. These days we usually have large flat screens hanging on our walls. And we don't even have to get up off the couch to turn the channel. We just sit there and press buttons. And there are hundreds of selections that you can make with satellite and cable.

Our homes are climate controlled. If we are slightly too warm, we punch a button and adjust the climate in our home. We have machines that wash our dishes and our clothing. Occasionally we actually have to do work like cutting the grass, so we hop up on our riding lawn mowers and we ride in comfort.

We have everything. If we want water, we go get a glass and turn a knob and there it is – cold, clear, purified water. If we want ice water, we have an automatic ice maker that keeps our tray full.

We have microwave ovens which will cook meals in seconds.

When it gets dark at night, we flip a switch and our homes are filled with light.

Our kids don't get bored anymore. They simply turn on their computer and there are interactive games to play day and night. They stay at home until they are 30 or 40 years old because it is so wonderful.

But in spite of how wonderful it is to live in our luxury homes, we think we need a vacation about three times per year. And when vacation time gets here, we go out and get in our magnificent driving machines. Automobiles these days are luxurious, traveling wonders. They are not cars anymore. Sport Utility Vehicles take us in style wherever we want to go. These fine automobiles these days have dual climate control so Husband

can turn his side on 65 and Wife can turn her side on 85. They have cruise control so that you can set your desired speed and rest your weary foot. Beautiful stereo music comforts us along the way.

When we get to wherever we are going, we stay in hotels with every amenity. The panoramic view of the ocean is enjoyed from the balcony of our room. And we stroll out to the beach and lay in the sun all day. And we turn on the music and rub on the tanning oils.

It is no wonder that God and heaven is not on the minds of the wealthy. The wealthy have everything they need in the here and now. They are unimaginably happy here on this earth. They are not looking for something better. And when I speak of the wealthy, I'm not talking about Donald Trump, I'm talking about you and I. We have everything we want. Our heart is satisfied. When our birthday comes around, no one knows what to get us, because we already have everything. And if we don't have it, we can go to Wal-Mart and buy it.

So in light of all that, let me ask you, "Do you have any need of Christ whatsoever?" Let's just be honest, given the life of ease that you enjoy in our culture, "Do you have any interest in running the hard course that Christ puts before you?"

You see, that's what Hebrews 12 is all about.

Let us run with patience the race that is set before us. (v. 1)

It is about laying aside comfort and ease and running a long marathon. It is about running a race where there are imposing obstacles. It is a race where you are required to lay aside every weight that would hinder you.

Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us. (v.1)

It is a race that involves putting yourself under a hard trainer who will discipline you all along the way.

For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. (v.6)

How much does Christ mean to you? Does he mean enough to you that you are willing to run the race at all? Does he mean enough to you that you would be willing to lay aside any weights that drag you down? Does

Christ mean enough to you that you would be willing to endure his rod of discipline upon your back?

Now we saw last time that if you have made your profession of faith in Christ then you are running a hard race. It is a marathon and it is likely that there will be times of weariness along the way. Every runner who runs a race is to expect fatigue and pain. At some point in the race, the runner's hands begin to hang down and his knees get weak and in his fatigue, he may wobble from side to side.

But our text says to all those who are wearied in the race,

Lift up your hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; and make straight paths for your feet. (v.12)

And the Christian must dig deep and find strength for the race. We are running this race as though we must outrun all others. We are running as though there is only one prize to be given to the winner. And therefore lift up those hands that hang down and lift up those feeble knees and run a straight course. All of that we saw last time.

We also saw last time though, that there are certain rules of the race, certain principles which we must follow in order to win the race.

Example: Now several years ago there was a runner by the name of Rosie Ruiz. And she was entered in the Boston Marathon. And at the end of the 26 mile race, the crowd cheered as Rosie Ruiz entered the stadium well ahead of all the other female runners. In fact, her time was the fastest time for a female in Boston Marathon history and the third fastest time for a female for any marathon ever. But later, when reporters began to ask her about her race, it became apparent that she didn't know many things about the course. And then, the other runners began to question why they had never seen her on the course at all. Come to find out, she had burst out of a crowd about a half mile from the finish line. She had not run the course at all. She was amazingly fresh at the end of the race, because she had circumvented the rules. The other runners had run 26 miles. She had run one-half mile.

And there are certain rules of the race which Christ has given us. And these rules must be followed in order to receive the prize at the end.

Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord. (v.14)

Now those who are only feigning Christianity will never run the Christian course to its completion. They will either drop out of the race before crossing the finish line or they will appear to cross the finish line but they will cross it deceptively. There are certain rules that must be followed in order to win the Christian race.

Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord. (v.14)

The Christian life is a life that is run differently from all others in the world. It is a very distinctive run. It is a life that stands out in stark contrast to the life that is run without Christ.

And it says in verse 14 that one of these distinctives is that the Christian runner strives for peace with all men. The Christian runner is a selfless runner. He is not clamoring for recognition or for exaltation in this life. He is not using others for stepping stones. He is not engaged in personal and perpetual wars with others. Rather he looks for every opportunity to find peace. He chases peace like a hound chases a rabbit.

And also in verse 14, you will see that the Christian runner pursues holiness. The Christian runner knows that he must pass each and every checkpoint along the way and that when he finally crosses the finish line he will have passed through the gauntlet of Christ's discipline; that he will have been chastised and scourged along the way; that he will have run the race according to the rules.

Those who do not know Christ, those who have not been made alive by the Holy Spirit, those who are not a new creation are not able to run this race by the rules. They are not able to attain unto the way of holiness. And so, they cannot win the race. Or, as verse 14 puts it, "They shall not see the Lord."

But that brings us to verse 15 where another rule of the race is mentioned. Not only is the race ultimately won by following a path of peace with all men and by following a route of holiness, but it is ultimately won also by constant and diligent inward reflection. It says in verse 15,

Looking diligently.

Now we saw earlier in the chapter that there are several things that the runner should look at in order to help him complete the race.

In verse one, he is told to look at all those who have previously run the race successfully. It is encouraging to see that others have made it. And in this analogy, they are sitting in the arena cheering us on.

But we are also to look at the example of Jesus. He also ran the race successfully. And he is our bright and shining example.

Also in verse one, it is implied that we are to observe the course that is laid out before us. It is a hard course with many hurdles along the way. So, look around the course and know what obstacles lie ahead. This will further equip you to run the race to completion without dropping out.

So,

1. See those of faith who have gone before you.
2. See the example of Jesus.
3. See the course that is set before you.

And now, in verse 15, we are to be “looking diligently.” And the principle idea here is that the Christian runner is always looking inside himself. You will notice that he is always looking out for something called here a “root of bitterness.”

A Root of Bitterness

In the present context, it appears that when you are running this Christian race, you will encounter many challenges. The course itself has many troubles. And in addition to that, the course must be run properly in order to win the prize. And because Christ loves you, he stands behind you as you run this race. And in order to get you through the race properly and

lawfully, in order to keep you from giving up or to keep you from cheating along the way, he disciplines you and chastises you. You cannot go around a hurdle. You must go over it.

And when you feel the rod on your back it is not pleasant for the moment. However, that rod is designed to make you the runner that you should be.

Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby. (v.11)

Now here are the two ways that Christ's discipline might affect you. When his rod slaps you on the back you will have one of two reactions.

1. Verse 11 says that you may be exercised thereby. That is, his discipline may have a positive effect on you. And you will be exercised. That is, you will be trained. It will teach you and you will likely not make the same mistake the next time.

Example: It is like a golf coach who is watching his student and he tells his student that every time he takes a backswing he is lifting up his head. And the coach says, "Don't lift your head." And when the golfer takes another backswing he lifts his head. And the coach raps him with a stick. And the coach says, "Don't lift your head." After about three raps with the stick, the golfer is careful not to lift his head.

Now Christ's discipline is much the same. When we lie and cheat along the race, Christ's discipline is laid upon us. And it corrects us and we learn that it is not advisable to lie and cheat in the Christian race. And we are exercised thereby. Christ's discipline corrected us.

But we have to be very careful that we don't react to the discipline of Christ like a spoiled child. A spoiled child reacts to a spanking by becoming bitter. And the child says to his father, "I hate you." And perhaps he ultimately runs away from home and he drops out of the race.

2. And so, the improper reaction to the discipline of Christ is bitterness.

Looking diligently . . . lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you. (v.15)

You cannot possibly run the Christian race without encountering the discipline of Christ. Your sin nature is a wild stallion and it must be brought into submission to the new nature. And Christ himself is the trainer.

If in the course of discipline your life is brought under control, if that wild stallion is finally broken where he takes orders from the trainer, then you are the elect of God. You are his indeed, because you were exercised by his discipline.

But what if you prove to be an incorrigible rebel? When the trainer pulls one way, you pull the other; when he strikes you, you rear up on your hind legs and kick at him. And in your heart, bitterness swells up inside of you. That is the danger.

And verse 15 says, "Looking diligently . . . lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you."

Let me say that the worst reaction you can possibly have against the discipline of the Lord is to react in bitterness. His discipline may seem very harsh at times. Nevertheless, it is necessary for the eternal salvation of your soul. The discipline of the Lord is a sign that he loves you. It is a sign that he accepts you.

For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.

When troubles mount, don't get bitter. When it seems that afflictions are too heavy, don't react in bitterness against God. Listen to what Job said,

Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.

Job 13:15

Now I want you to see from this context what will happen to you if you react to God's discipline by becoming bitter.

1. It will trouble you.

Chaffing against God's bit of discipline will cause you great trouble. God will not let his people go on in sin. And if you are his, then he will trouble you because of your sin.

Sin is pleasant to the old nature for a moment, but then, when that brief moment is passed, it is very troublesome. Sin tastes sweet in the mouth, and then it will turn sour in the belly. And it will make you sick all night long. It will make you sick until you wish you had never eaten it.

The Bible says,

Sin biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder. (Prov. 23:32)

Example: There was a football coach at Penn State University and he was rather famous in that community because of his high profile position. And for many years he molested young boys in the locker room. Finally his sin found him out. And just this week, he was sentenced to spend the rest of his life in prison. And they walked him to the patrol car in handcuffs and he nodded goodbye to his wife and he will never see outside the prison walls again.

Sin biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder.

If perchance you escape the eyes of men with your sin, you will nevertheless not escape the eyes of God. And if he disciplines you, it is very wise to accept his discipline gladly and to be exercised thereby. If you react in bitterness, it will trouble you.

Lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you. (v.15)

If you react in bitterness to God's discipline,

2. It will defile you.

Sin is like leaven – its influence spreads to the whole lump. A little sin unchecked will become much sin. And pretty soon the whole loaf of bread is leavened. A little sin in your life will permeate the whole man. And the

whole man will be defiled. And therefore, despise not the chastening of the Lord.

But, thirdly, there is a far greater risk to those who react in bitterness to the discipline of the Lord. In the end it will be far worse than just a little trouble. It will be worse than just the defiling of the life. For if you react in bitterness to his discipline,

3. It will cause you to fall short of salvation.

Looking diligently, lest any man fail of the grace of God. (v.15)

This verse has been a troubling verse for many because on first blush it seems to suggest that we can lose our salvation. Those of the Arminian persuasion grasp at a verse like this to support their position that it is possible to lose your salvation.

But, I want to suggest to you that this is not what this verse means at all. We know from the Scriptures that the very root of our salvation is in the electing love of the Father. And if he chose us from the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him (as Ephesians 1:4 says) then we shall be holy and blameless before him. If upon our election before the foundation of the world he placed us in Christ (as Ephesians 1:4 says) then we shall always be in Christ. Nothing shall shake our confidence in the ability of our God to save us.

This verse (v.15) says,

Lest any man fail of the grace of God.

The root word which is here rendered fail (hustereo) occurs many times in the New Testament, but never once does it mean to fall from something. It never means to have it and then lose it. But what it means is to lack it, to be deficient in it or to fall short of it.

For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

Romans 3:23

It is not that we attained the glory of God and then we fell away from it. It means that we were deficient in it from the beginning. We tried to get there, but we fell short.

You see our salvation can be viewed from God's perspective or from our perspective. From the divine perspective, God knows every one of his elect. He knows who he has placed in Christ. He knows every name in the Lamb's book of life. And so, from his perspective, salvation is already accomplished. It is sure. And it is final. None of his elect can ever be lost.

But from the perspective of man, salvation is something that must be proven. I don't have an E written in my forehead that proves that God has chosen me. My life will prove it. I can claim to be a Christian. But, my life will be the evidence.

And by this metaphor here in Hebrews, salvation (from man's point of view) is something to be attained by running the race and running it lawfully and running it to its completion. Not that running the race merits salvation, but running the race verifies it and proves it. It is called making your calling and election sure.

And when it says, "Lest any man fail of the grace of God," it suggests that bitterness over God's discipline may cause us to rebel and drop out of the race. And if this happens, then we will fail of the grace of God. That is, we will come up short of it. We will quit before we cross the finish line. And we will prove that we were none of his all along.

You see, at the end of the race, the finish line will be stretched across the track. And the tape across the track will say, "The Grace of God," or "Salvation." And if we quit, if we give up the faith before we cross that line, then we have fallen short.

This is called apostasy. It is professing to be a Christian, but ultimately proving, by failing in the race, that you were not a Christian after all. It is laying a claim to salvation, but ultimately proving that salvation was never yours. It is giving lip service to Christ for a time, but never the service of the heart.

The call of this verse is a call to self-examination. It says, "Looking diligently, lest a root of bitterness springing up trouble you, looking diligently, lest any man come short of the grace of God."

The urgency of self-examination

It seems to me that self-examination is a most crucial characteristic of those who are running the Christian race. Look diligently, lest you come up short of the grace of God. There are eternal consequences at stake. And one of the most crucial characteristics of a true runner in the race is that he will diligently examine himself. And when he looks on the inside, does he find a peace maker? Or does he find a trouble maker? Does he find progress in the way of holiness? Or does he find persistence in the way of sin? Does he find a heart that is submissive to God's discipline? Or does he find bitterness springing up? The answer to these questions will advise you as to the condition of your soul.

The difficulty of self-examination

The huge problem is that sin has darkened the understanding so that man is unable to perceive his real state before God.

Satan has blinded the minds of them which believe not.

2 Corinthians 4:4

Those who follow Mohammad think they are on their way to heaven. Those who are stuck in the rituals of Judaism think they are safe. Millions of Roman Catholics think they are saved by offering continual sacrifices in the Mass every week.

The human heart is filled with self-deception. We convince ourselves that we are alright, when we are not alright at all. It is not enough to merely say, "I am saved." It is not enough to make some public announcement that you are saved.

But it is necessary to run the race of salvation. You must run it as though you must outrun every other runner – as though only one will receive the prize.

And all along the race, you must be engaged in self-examination.

I'll tell you one thing, the unregenerate are not interested in self-examination. They are interested in a salvation that does not require a change of heart. They prefer a ritual. They prefer a prayer. They prefer the performance of an ordinance. And they will not look within to see the true condition of their hearts.

The unregenerate are much more concerned about their bodies than their souls. They are much more concerned about earthly riches than spiritual riches. They are more interested in earthly comforts than heavenly comforts.

But there are a few – Oh how few – who God has made serious about the condition of their souls. And they are deadly earnest. The condition of their soul is the most important thing in all the world to them. It is more important than a house. It is more important than a car. It is even more important than television or a computer game. Can you possibly imagine?

To them the race is not run haphazardly. To them their faith is not something that might be given up or laid down when troubles come. Where they will spend eternity is their all-absorbing concern. Every other interest in life sinks into utter insignificance before the vital consideration of seeking to make sure that they have Christ in them.

Let me beg you this morning not to be satisfied with the cheap, easy-going religion of the day. There are many churches where you could go, that would never ask you to look inside yourself. They would not have you to agonize over your soul. But listen to the words of Jesus:

Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.

Luke 13:24

Salvation is a miracle of God's grace whereby he changes your heart forever. And you must regularly open up your heart and look inside to make sure that in fact it has been changed. Our text says, "Looking diligently, lest you come short of the grace of God."