

Remove Any Hindrances

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Hebrews 12:1

Sermon Series:
The Race to Run

How alive and vital is your connection with God?

I am just delighted that we are into the Summer Olympics. The Chinese gave us a breath-taking, beyond spectacular, opening ceremony. I love the pageantry of the Olympics, and there is something wonderful and motivating about watching people who dream great dreams and who make great personal sacrifices to fulfill those dreams. It always challenges me to dream new dreams and be open to what new adventure our Lord has in mind.

During these weeks of the Olympics, we are looking at one of the most famous passages from the Book of Hebrews we find in the Bible and it certainly has an Olympic ring to it: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” Hebrews 12:1-2a.

It describes the Christian life in terms of a foot race—and not a sprint but a lifelong marathon. At a recent family reunion, I talked with the husband of one of Ann Marie’s cousins. He is a regular marathoner and runs ten miles just about every day. The Greek word in our New Testament translated as race is *agon*, from which we have the word agony, implying effort. I jog a mile and a half to two miles a few times during the week (forget ten miles). Even during such short runs, my body is talking to me because of the *agon*, the effort: “Whoa, relax, stop. This is effort! Why are you doing this to me?” But the author of Hebrews cuts right to the chase. The Christian life is not a walk in the park or evening stroll under the stars, but it is a focused effort over the long haul—however, it’s a focused effort with a wonderful goal.

The finish line of our faith is knowing God and God’s son, Jesus. As the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death...”

Philippians 3:10. Paul’s goal, the finish line of his race, is clear: I want to know Christ! We run this race of faith as we push aside anything that would slow us or divert us from the finish line because the Letter to the Hebrews says, let us also lay aside every weight [or hindrance] and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

Think for a moment about your relationship with God. How fresh is it? How alive and vital is your connection with God? If knowing God in deeper and more personal ways is your goal and the finish line that motivates you, then what are the things in your life that hold you back, the things that hinder you? Anyone in a race knows that reducing the weight you carry and the drag on your body makes a big difference. When my son Lee was on his high school track team, I would occasionally go to watch his team practice. The coach tied three-foot-in-diameter parachutes behind some of the runners and would have them run around the track with the chute pulling them back. To really run they had to get rid of the hindering chute. One of the interesting news stories of this year’s Olympics concerns the new LZR Racer full-body swimsuit developed by Speedo and NASA that is being hailed as the fastest swimsuit on the planet. It hugs the body so closely it feels like a second skin which, with almost zero drag in the water, lets the racer swim even faster. The goal is removing any hindrance to the race.

So what are the hindrances the Book of Hebrews is referring to? Earlier in the

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letter, the author interrupts a discussion about Jesus Christ and says, “About this, [the person of Jesus] we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have be-come dull in understanding” Hebrews 5:11. The word translated dull—you have become dull in understanding— comes from two words, one meaning no and the other meaning push. No push—they were slow of mind, sluggish people without passion. Clearly, one hindrance to a growing relationship with God is a ho hum attitude, a “take it or leave it, I’ll pursue God when it’s convenient, when I am in the mood” attitude. You won’t see any Olympic competitor this week with a ho hum attitude. Every single one of them is going for the gold. So throw off any ho hum attitude in you about knowing God!

Another hindrance to move beyond is hang ups on our past. As the Apostle Paul wrote, ¹²“...but I press on to make it [the goal of knowing Christ] my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.” Sometimes hurtful things happen in our past that we allow to dominate our minds in the present and the emotion and weight of them take us out of the race. The apostle is saying, “It’s time to move on!” Are there other hindrances? Of course, we can allow many things to crowd God out of our lives. However, know that not everything that weighs us down in life also weighs us down in our faith. Sometimes people say, “My marriage, my friendship, my work, my situation is keeping me from Jesus,” when the truth is the very situation you face, as tough as it may be, is the track you are to run on in getting to know God, it is the place where you will most profoundly discover Jesus. So Hebrews calls us to run the race with endurance, and we know that there are certain burdens in life we are meant to carry just as there are others that we are to throw aside.

Later, in the twelfth chapter of Hebrews, we catch a glimpse of a number of hindrances to knowing God. ¹⁴Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. So broken relationships and sin are clearly hindrances and call us to seek reconciliation and get back in the race. ¹⁵See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God. Why? Because a guilt can toss us out of the race. God offers grace, mercy and forgiveness to you, no matter what has happened, if you come to him in sincere humility. See to it that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled. The root of bitterness is a deep-seated resentment towards someone, anger over some past wound that just keeps on spewing out anger, meanness and revenge. Clearly such bitterness is a hindrance. And ¹⁶“See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son [NIV].” Inappropriate sexual conduct is a clear and immediate hindrance to knowing God.

So Hebrews says let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely. It speaks both of the weights that may encumber our faith and of the sin that clings to our lives. The idea of sin “clinging” is also expressed with the word entangling. When a runner has a rope wrapped around the feet, the entanglement makes it difficult to run. What sin, what inappropriate attitudes and actions are there in your life that cling to you and entangle you, constantly harassing you, surrounding you, tempting you, tripping you up? The sin that so easily entangles is that matter to which you are personally vulnerable, that habit, that attitude, that addiction, that old resentment, that way of reacting, that inclination that so easily trips you up.

So, when you are honest with yourself and recognize a hindrance or weight or sin in your life that you know perfectly well is compromising your race to the finish line of knowing Jesus, what do you do? Well first, we have to want to get rid of it, and

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frankly, sometimes we want to hold on to what weighs us down and the sin that entangles. To push every hindrance aside, we have to have the heart to do it. A psychiatrist turned to her patient and shook his hand. "In my profession we rarely tell a patient that he or she is cured, but after six years of therapy, Mr. Smedley, I am saying to you that you are a cured man." Smedley just frowned and didn't look very happy. "Why aren't you happy about this?" asked the psychiatrist. Smedley replied, "Because six years ago I was Napoleon Bonaparte. Now I'm nobody." We can easily develop a fascination, a preference for holding on to our hindrances. We become accustomed to them, even like them, actually depend on them. Remember Jesus asking a man who had been lame for forty years if he wanted to get well? Why ask such a question? Because to push every hindrance aside we have to have the heart and will to do it.

Ken Callahan tells of sailing with his family near the Florida Keys. They saw a storm coming and headed toward the shore. Ken said, "As we neared the beach, I could see through the crystal clear water that the ocean bottom was just a foot or two under water. I picked up the anchor and jumped off the boat and was startled to discover I was rapidly sinking down through over twenty feet of water. The water was so clear that things looked closer than they were. After I had sunk perhaps ten or more feet, it suddenly occurred to me, let-go-of-the-anchor. I did and rapidly rose to the surface." Now all Ken had to do was let go of the anchor weighing him down and up he went. When there is something in your life that actually is clouding the vitality of your relationship with God and dragging you down, let go of it! And if you can't let it go by yourself, and some things we want to let go of, practices, habits and situations that won't let go of us, then seek help, from a friend or a counselor, to help you make it happen.

Occasionally, we thoroughly mess up, we really blow it, and we might be tempted to feel that God's given up on us. The longer we think that way, it just means the longer we hold onto an anchor pulling us down, the farther down we go. God loves you. Through the sacrifice and love of Jesus, God is always thinking wonderful thoughts about you, having already paid the price for every wrong thing, every stupid thing, every hurtful thing you have done, will ever do. God calls you to accept His mercy, to let go of past failure, to remember God is doing a good work in you and that God has no intention of giving up on you, that in fact He will present you with great joy to Jesus Christ upon His coming.

After my Dad retired from the Army, he moved to southern Louisiana, where he began to work as a forester raising southern pine trees. Every now and then, working with other foresters, Dad would actually start forest fires! By starting them downwind, so that the fire had to move against the wind, they prevented the firestorm that happens when wind drives a fire. What they burned was the underbrush to remove competition for nutrients from the soil and the thick carpet of pine needles on the forest floor to remove fuel for a real forest fire. Additionally, every five to seven years, Dad and the other foresters would thin each forest tract cutting out every fifth to seventh tree. As the trees grew, their branch canopies would overlap, making it harder for each tree to get adequate sunlight. By thinning the forest, every tree could directly receive all of the sunlight it needed. This is the idea here in Hebrews. To throw off excess weight, like thinning the forest, and to remove the sin that entangles, like burning the underbrush, you are free to run the race of faith and to have a fully open, growing relationship with the loving God of the universe.

A young man, I'll call Gabe Anderson, was a senior at a small mid-western college. He was a big, average looking guy with a warm heart. Gabe really had

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only one problem in life and that was his stutter. He couldn't utter a single word without stuttering. One day, Gabe was walking across the college green with a couple of friends when they saw Mary, one of the most bright, beautiful personable girls on campus. Mary and two of her friends were walking on the other side of the green. Gabe turned to his friends and said, "G-g-g-guys, s-s-someday M-m-m-mary is g-g-going to be m-m-my w-w-wife." They just said, "Gabe you have to be kidding. You've got to get a grip. Get real. She's the most gorgeous woman on campus and she'll never pay attention to you. She certainly never has." Gabe said, "G-g-guys, j-j-just w-w-wait and s-s-see."

He left his friends, walked to his dorm room, closed the door, walked over to the mirror, and began to speak, "M-m-mary, w-w-will you g-g-go out w-w-with m-m-m-ee?" "M-m-mary, w-w-will you g-g-go out w-w-with m-m-m-ee?" "M-m-mary, w-w-will you g-g-go out w-w-with me?" "M-m-mary, w-w-will you g-g-go out with me?" He practiced for hours until finally he could say without a single error, "Mary will you go out with me?" "Mary, will you go out with me?"

The next day, Gabe was crossing the campus green with his friends and, sure enough, Mary appeared with her friends. Gabe said to his buds, "G-g-guys, b-b-be r-r-right b-b-back." He walked across the green and right up to Mary. Her friends rolled their eyes a bit. Mary, however, did know Gabe. They'd been students together for four years. She said, "Hi, Gabe. How are you today?" He looked her right in the eyes, "Mary, will you go out with me?"

Mary and her friends froze. Everyone knew of Gabe's terrible stutter. Mary's friends started to roll their eyes and turning toward Mary were stopped cold when they saw that Mary, never taking her eyes off of Gabe said, "Gabe, you said that entire sentence and you didn't stutter one single time. You must have worked really hard to speak those words to me. Of course I'll go out with

you." She did go out with him and, you can guess the rest of the story, they were married and shared a long life together.

Gabe Anderson had a goal, a finish line in mind and that was to know Mary. He had an encumbrance, a weight in his life, and he knew he had to rid himself of that hindrance to have any hope. When you want to know the Lord Jesus more deeply, you will find within yourself a push and a passion to know him more personally and more authentically. Make an inventory of your life and take the steps you need to throw every hindrance aside and the sins which entangle and run your race with endurance.

