

Recover From Injuries

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Hebrews 12:5-11

Sermon Series:
The Race to Run

*The Christian
life is like
running a race.*

Our focus this past month, has been on running the race of faith. The Christian life is like running a race. We run this race surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1). The author of Hebrews imagines a stadium full of believers who have already run this race. They're not dispassionate spectators; they've come to cheer for us as we run our race of faith. We must eliminate any weight and sin that hinders us from running our best race (12:1). We run this race with perseverance, looking to Jesus, who blazed the trail of faith and ran this race to perfection from start to finish (12:2). There will invariably be obstacles and challenges along the way of this race (12:5-11). Some contestants are in danger of dropping out altogether. Our author implores us, in today's lesson, to stay the course and finish the race (12:12-13).

This letter of Hebrews functions as a communal imperative. We are not each running our own race. We are running this race of faith together.

The recent summer Olympics served as the backdrop for this race of faith motif. The more I read this chapter, the more I'm convinced the type of race our author has in mind resembles the Special Olympics rather than the

Beijing Olympics. In Special Olympics, every achievement is celebrated. At every Special Olympics award ceremony, traditional medals are awarded to first, second and third place finishers. Additionally, every athlete who finishes, from fourth to last place, is presented with an award.

Hebrews 12 is not a winner-take-all approach to running this race of faith. We do whatever is necessary to ensure the success of each participant.

In the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, a British runner, Derek Redman, competed in the 400-meter race. Derek posted the fastest time in the first round and won his quarterfinal heat. In the 400m semi-finals, Derek was running near the front of the pack when he pulled a hamstring muscle and fell to the track. The other racers blew right by him. Derek staggered to his feet and hobbled around the track toward the finish line, writhing in pain. His father, Jim, couldn't bear to watch. He jumped the restraining wall and eluded security personnel to assist his son. They locked arms and staggered together toward the finish line. Jim told Derek, "We started this thing and we're going to finish it together." When 65,000 stunned spectators figured out what was going on, they rose as one in tribute to this remarkable finish. I wish we

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had the ability to show you this moving video, but then you can watch it on YouTube.

We're called to run this race of faith together. We assist those with "drooping hands and weak knees" to finish the race (12:13). We remove whatever obstacles are in the way in the course marked out for us (12:2).

We read in verse 14, "Pursue peace with everyone and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord." The ethical aspirations of harmony and holiness must be doggedly pursued. We relentlessly chase after them.

Holiness has taken a semantic beating of late, given its negative connotations with being "holier than thou." Holiness means "separate, distinct or in a class by oneself." God alone is holy. God clearly is in a class unto Himself. We are holy to the extent that we reflect God's priorities. The holiness talked about in verse 14 is the kind of holiness that leads to peace, not the type of holiness that leads to a wholesale withdrawal from society.

The Greek word for peace equates to the Hebrew concept of shalom. God bestows peace to people and promotes peace among people. God's peace enables us to respond in kindness, not in kind!

Peace contrasts with the words of verse 15, "Let no root of bitterness spring up and cause trouble, and by it many become defiled." Bitterness incubates anger. It allows anger to fester and inflame.

Bitterness in Paul's letter to the Ephesians sets into motion a chain reaction of negative emotions, "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice" (Ephesians 4:31).

Bitterness is described as a root because it initially grows underground. At its outset, bitterness takes root in the soil of people's hearts. It remains hidden behind plastic smiles and feigned gestures of friendship. But in the end, these bitter roots produce sour fruit trees.

We don't eliminate weeds in our lawn or garden by hacking off the surface of weeds; we dig down to destroy the entire root system. We will not eradicate weeds unless we dig out the root. The sin of bitterness will not die unless it is likewise uprooted and destroyed. We must dig down to eradicate the root causes of sin. A surface cut will not kill the desire.

Allen Beck is a preacher who grew up in a rural community specializing in growing tobacco. His first summer job was weeding tobacco. He would walk the seemingly endless rows with a hoe, digging out weeds in relative comfort. But when he came close to the fence, he ran into thistles, hundreds and hundreds of little thistles. He couldn't dig them out with a hoe, he had to get down on his hands and knees to pull these prickly thistles out by the root. These thistles looked harmless enough. He often thought it would be far easier to leave them alone until harvest time.

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After all, they weren't very big. But the farmer knew if they were left until harvest time, when his laborers reached down to get a handful of tobacco, they would come away with a fistful of thorns.

Beck writes, "I have found in life that bitterness is a lot like those little thistles. We can push away hurts and pain, but the only way to get rid of bitterness is to fall to our knees and root it out through prayer and forgiveness. It is hard work, but if we leave a little bitterness in our hearts, it grows until it does real damage to someone."

I read an article by Catherine Marshall this week on fasting. I had always associated fasting with food. But she practiced a fast from criticism. She determined for a period of time to cease criticizing anybody about anything. She found in the process that her critical spirit was stifling her creativity.

Some of us are allowing roots of bitterness to spring up and cause trouble in our interpersonal relationships. We derive a perverse pleasure from bitterness. Frederick Buechner says it well: "Of the Seven Deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll your tongue over the prospect of bitter confrontations to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are

wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."

If you hang around the church for any length of time, sooner or later someone's bound to hurt your feelings. I don't say this because people are mean in this church. Actually, I find that, as churches go, quite the opposite is the case here. But neither is the church a fantasy-land where disagreements never occur and people never clash. We are, after all, deeply flawed, imperfect people. We do not engage in confession each Sunday to keep up appearances. In truth, we are sinners who allow roots of bitterness and anger to grow in the soil of our hearts. G. K. Chesterton said, with tongue-in-cheek seriousness, that "Sin is the only Christian doctrine that can be proven empirically."

People will sometimes hurt you intentionally. But it's far more likely people will hurt you unintentionally. They're simply not aware a cutting remark or slight will hurt you as much as it does. (There's also the possibility that the hurt is imaginary.)

If someone has hurt you, it is incumbent on you to go to that person to seek restitution. Don't wait for that person to come to you. Don't go around that person to build a guerrilla SWAT team to ambush this person later. Go directly to the source of the hurt. Follow the process for conflict resolution outlined in Matthew 18:15-20. It's not the absence of conflict, but the presence of a reconciling spirit that should characterize the church of Jesus Christ.

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There is something we must relinquish when we let go of bitterness. We must surrender our right to get even. Yet, there is also something we receive in return. When we let go of bitterness, we relinquish the death grip bitterness has over our lives. We must destroy the root of bitterness before it destroys us. Harry Emerson Fosdick said, "Bitterness imprisons us; love releases us. Bitterness paralyzes life; love empowers it. Bitterness sours life; love sweetens it. Bitterness sickens life; love heals it. Bitterness blinds life; love illumines it."

Beginning next Sunday, we will devote nine months worth of sermons to God's big story in Scripture. Many of us were raised in Sunday School with a dizzying array of Bible stories. We don't quite know how these stories fit together. If you are new to faith, you may be stymied to know where to begin in this 2000-page, 66-book, Bible. This sermon series is intended to help us understand the meta-narrative of Scripture. Our goal, as we work our way from Genesis to Revelation, is to comprehend God's big story.

It's only three chapters into Genesis before we read that something goes horribly wrong in this divine-human relationship. The Bible calls it sin, which has the net effect of separating us from God and one another. The rest of the Bible is essentially commentary on the extent to which God goes to restore this sin-induced breach.

Forgiveness is at the heart of God's big story. Ultimately, forgiveness exacts from God a heavy toll: the death of His own Son, as we recall in the Lord's Supper. Forgiveness stands at the center of God's big story; God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of each other. Dan Allender, who will be speaking to us about God's big story, writes, "I will not live with purpose and joy unless I love. I will not be able to love unless I forgive. I will not be able to forgive unless my hatred is continually melted by the searing truth and grace of Jesus Christ."

