

You know trying to become more like Jesus and living the Christian life can be difficult in the world we live in today. So, this morning let's look at some guidance for living the Christian life from the Book of Hebrews. Someone once said that "Hebrews is in many respects the riddle of the New Testament." Scholars have debated for years as to when it was written, to whom it was written and who wrote it. There are no easy answers to these questions. However, while there is a lot of debate over who was the author, based on my personal research of several commentaries, I believe that it was written by the Apostle Paul since Hebrews is included with all the other letters by Paul in the New Testament. But no matter who you think the author was, there is one central theme throughout Hebrews and that is to draw near to God.

So this morning, let's focus on growing closer to the Lord in our personal relationship; becoming more like Jesus in our thoughts, words and actions; and exhibiting Christ-like qualities in our daily life. Let's see what Hebrews has to tell us about living the Christian life and becoming the person that God calls us to be. Our scripture text is taken from the twelfth chapter, the first two verses. You can follow along on the screen or on Page 212 of the New Testament in the Pew Bibles.

Read Hebrews 12:1-2

One of the reasons that I believe Paul wrote Hebrews is that in many of his letters, Paul frequently compared the Christian life to a race as recorded here in the first verse. From his constant use of athletic terms in his letters, we can safely assume that Paul was a big sports fan, and that he would have loved this time of year with the start of college and pro football and the heated baseball race for the World Series. Those of you who are or have been at one time runners can relate to what Paul is saying. Our Christian life is not a destination, but a journey. While we often use the term "walk" to describe our Christian journey, there are times when it seems more like we are running for our lives. In many ways life is a race. It has a beginning, a finish line and a prize with most of our time here on earth spent between the starting point and crossing the finish line.

In running a race, the focus is always on the finish line. Thus, in the Christian life, our focus should always be on Jesus Christ. Paul tells us to "run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." The *Message* paraphrases it this way: "Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in."

Most runners know that you must keep your eyes on what lies ahead of you, on the goal. Three things, all bad, can happen to you if you look back over your shoulder while running. You may fall down, hit something in your path, or get passed by another runner because when you look back, your natural tendency is to slow down and lose pace. The legendary baseball player Satchel Page once said: "Don't look back, they might be gaining on you." In Philippians 3:13-14, Paul tells us to forget what is behind and press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us, eternal life and salvation. As Christians, our goal should be to become more

like Jesus each and every day. The Christian life should always be going somewhere, and it is well if, at the end of each day, we ask ourselves: "Am I any farther along the way?"

The author of Hebrews tells us to throw off everything that hinders us, that holds us back from running the race of life. One way we do this is by not letting anything or anybody distract us, but by focusing entirely on a single objective; letting Jesus Christ be the center of our attention. In other words, zeroing in completely on Him. If we are to win the race of life, we must become Christ-centered! Now Christ-centered is the opposite of self-centered. Think about this: do my thoughts, conversation, activities, and actions draw attention to myself or do they glorify and serve the Lord? When I discuss my life, is my conversation dominated by the words "I" or "me," or God and Christ? Am I Christ-centered or self-centered? Your honest assessment will tell you how far you have come or how far you have to go to reach the goal of becoming more like Jesus. We should never run for the cheers of the crowd or congregation, but live with the goal of imitating Jesus in all our thoughts, words and actions.

In one of our hymns this morning, we sang: "Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart, in my heart." We must become more Christ-like in our hearts and minds before we can be called true Christians. In order to become Christ-centered, there must be a total commitment on our part. Christ must be all, or not at all! Commitment is the foundation for successful Christian living. We know that the Lord is going to stand behind His promises; He is committed to what He has said and done; thus, for the Christian there can also be nothing less than total commitment.

A photographer tells of a young man who wanted duplicate copies of his girlfriend's picture. The photographer noticed the following inscription on the back of the portrait: "My dearest Tom, I love you with all my heart. I love you more and more each day. I will love you forever and ever. I am yours for all eternity." Signed Jessica. "P.S. If we ever break up, I want this picture back!" As Christians, we have professed our faith in Jesus Christ; thus, we belong to Him. Therefore, there can be no P.S. in our relationship with the Lord; He desires and wants our total commitment.

There are many abilities that people acquire, cultivate, and demonstrate over their life. However, in the service of the Lord there is only one ability that stands out among all the others, and that is availability. If we are not available to God, no matter what other kinds of abilities we may have, it is no good. Ability without availability is a liability.

And what does availability mean? It means to place one's self completely at God's disposal for Him to do anything and everything that He wants to in us, through us, with us, and for us whenever He chooses. Anything less than that is putting restrictions on God, and writing fine print in our commitment contract to Jesus Christ.

Chuck Colson tells about speaking on a college campus. He was talking about his commitment to Jesus and mentioned that he was willing, if necessary, to die on behalf of his Savior. A young man in the audience angrily interrupted, shouting: "C'mon, Colson! Nothing is worth dying

for!" To which Colson replied: "If there is nothing that you are willing to die for, then I submit that you have nothing to live for!"

Now one of the hardest words for most Christians to swallow is "surrender." When we hear this word, we immediately think about giving up our individual rights and control of our life, giving in, or being dominated by someone else. In other words, we think that we are losing something. But that's far from the truth when it comes to surrendering to God and giving Him complete control over our lives, our time and our possessions. Not only do we not lose anything of real value, but we gain everything: such as, the abundant life that Jesus promised to all who will believe in Him; grace that encompasses our lives; a love that goes beyond all expectation; forgiveness that washes away our sins and our guilt; and finally, the promise of eternal life.

One of the greatest devotional books ever written is *My Utmost for High Highest*. The author Oswald Chambers leads the reader through a year of biblical readings and thoughts on how to surrender your life completely to God. I have been reading this devotional off and on for over thirty years as I have struggled to release more control of my life to God. It is not easy, but I have found that each time I give Him more control of my life, life becomes more enjoyable and worthwhile.

Many of us have seen the sign or heard the phrase: "Let go and let God." Have you ever wondered where this phrase came from? There is a story about a college student in the nineteenth century who took six place cards and wrote a large letter on each one. When he placed them on the mantle in his room, they spelled out: "L-E-T-G-O-D." One evening a gust of wind blew through the open window and knocked the "D" off the mantle. As he picked it up, what he saw appeared to be a message from God, the secret of the Christian life: "Let Go!" Only by letting go can we let God carry out His will in our life.

While commitment is difficult for most people, I have found that one of the biggest problems in our society and the church today is the lack of consistency. There was a car commercial on TV a while back that went something like this: "If you don't like your nose change it; if you don't like your wife, get a new one; if you don't like your job quit." We have become a people who can't stick with anything, especially when things don't go our way. In a way, TV shows have become the model for our lives. You know what I mean. All the problems of life can be solved in thirty minutes minus several commercials, or if you don't like what's on one channel, you can surf through several hundred other ones until you find something that you do like.

What's happened to us? Have we forgotten what Paul said in the first verse of this morning's text: "let us run with perseverance?" Perseverance, now there's a word that is foreign to most people today. Not only can't most people spell it, very few people really know what it means or how to apply it to their lives. Webster defines perseverance as "steadfast adherence to a course of action, belief, or purpose." In other words: "Don't give in, don't stop, don't quit." To persevere means to keep going in your spiritual journey to become more like Jesus each and

every day no matter what. Winston Churchill was once asked to give a commencement address. After he had been introduced, he stood up and said firmly: "Never, never, never give up." Then he sat down. While this may have been one of the shortest commencement addresses in history, it may have been one of the most meaningful to the graduates.

Most of us are guilty of starting something and never finishing it. We volunteer for something and after a while, when the notoriety wears off, we quit. We come up with all kinds of excuses: not feeling well, too many other things to do, doesn't fit our schedule. Let's face it, many of us are guilty of running from one fad to another, always looking for attention or recognition.

Earlier in the second chapter of Hebrews, the author states: "Therefore we must pay more attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away." Nothing in the world is easier than drifting. No person drifts upstream, only downstream. It is so easy. All you have to do is sit back, relax and let the boat go. You are soon lulled into a lazy daze, not caring where you go. You may not even be aware you are drifting until it is too late and the boat hits the rocks. The devil is very wise; he likes for us to drift. He seldom urges a Christian to leave church or give up their faith in the Lord. Instead, he causes us to relax, rest on the oars and drift along in the Christian life, never growing closer to the Lord.

All around us are Christians who have drifted into a state of coldness and indifference. They have stopped trying to grow in their personal relationship with the Lord. Loving God and loving their neighbors are not a priority for their lives. Are you still drifting? Then wake up, grab the oars and pull. We are called to run the race set out for us, and not sit on the sidelines. The Christian life is not a sprint, it is a marathon. We are not called to be flash-in-the-pan or shooting-star Christians. God wants us in it for the long haul.

A friend of mine at St. John's United Methodist Church in Santa Fe once told me that it is not the most educated or most talented people who are successful in life, it is those who persevere, those who keep going when the going gets tough and when the notoriety wears off and the cameras have gone home. The dictionary is the only place where success comes before work!

One of the real battles in running is a psychological struggle. The runner has to battle constantly with thoughts of quitting or continuing. The author of Hebrews encourages believers to "run with perseverance the race that is set out for us." Sometimes we are tempted to quit living the Christian life. In the mind of every runner the temptation to quit is always present. The runner must fight feelings of fatigue, the possibility of failure, and doubts about why am I doing this, especially on the back stretch when you are all alone and no one is watching.

We as Christians face the same temptations to slow down or quit; to stop praying, reading the Bible, serving, and attending church every chance we have. But we must not; we must persevere; and we can because Jesus Christ is with us. As our text says: "He is the author and perfecter of our faith." Another word for perfecter is finisher. Jesus has finished the race; He knows the course; and He will be our constant companion as we run our spiritual journey.

It is my hope and prayer that each one of us is committed to trying to be more like Jesus each and every day as we strive to become the person that God created us to be. Our goal should be to follow the 3C's of Christianity: Christ-centered, commitment, and consistency. As Paul saw it, the Christian is an athlete for Christ. Christianity is not a spectator sport; it is something that we are all called to participate in. There's a famous line in the movie "Forrest Gump" where his childhood sweetheart Jeannie yells: "Run, Forrest, Run." In the same way, Paul is yelling to us: "Run, Christian, Run." Run for your life. The best is yet to come, don't give up, stay focused on Jesus Christ, be committed and finish the race. Amen