

The Pursuit of Holiness (Part 1)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 January 2011

Preacher: Don Coleman

[0:00] A marvelous book, the book of Hebrews, is one of my favorites.

! It's not, I would say, among the easiest to exegete, to expound upon. Even in your own study and reading the scripture, I'm sure you've discovered that a great deal of Hebrews is difficult to understand.

And if you don't have any understanding or maybe a limited understanding of Old Testament, you're going to have a real big problem. You're so attached to that. But having said that, I think it's pretty easy to discover what the author of Hebrews was getting at here in chapter 12.

And I'll just go ahead and tell you right now, I believe it was Paul in Hebrews. And I think I mentioned that before. In fact, I think there's been a couple here in the church already that have come up to me afterwards and said, Well, I don't know if it's Paul or not.

Anyway, you might have your idea of who the author was. And the simple fact of the matter is, nobody really knows for sure. So, I'll just pick Paul. You can pick somebody else who you want to.

[1:27] But Hebrews chapter 12, that's where we need to be. So, go ahead and open your Bibles to that chapter. If you want to, we'll get to it here in just a minute. In fact, I plan to, in a moment, read the entire chapter.

Just kind of get it started and kind of get the whole scope of it. And maybe as we read along, you'll be able to say, you know, holiness is the subject of you.

And I would also encourage you, in your own personal study of God's word or a quiet time in the community. If you're not reading through something right now, just take some time and kind of meditate upon Hebrews chapter 12.

When I was in high school, I was, I know this would be hard to believe, but I was a relatively athletic guy. And I played basketball and primarily played football.

Yeah, but I also ran in, or participated in track and field. And I did the high jump. Never very good at that. But I also ran. And my race was the endurance kinds of races.

[2:41] I, you know, it's no wonder, really, as a preacher, that I would have a lot of men. And I, it was kind of the preparatory part of my life in the ministry.

But my race in those days was what we called then the 880. And that's a pretty long race. And I enjoyed doing that.

It just seemed like I could run and just had a lot of breath. I still was not all that great. Football, I enjoyed and probably excelled more at that. But I do remember those races.

And not only my particular race, but also just being part of the whole team and watching some of our guys run the shorter races, the sprints, as well as some of the other endurance races and high hurdles and all those kinds of things.

I've always enjoyed that, even when the Olympics come around. I enjoy watching the track and field, especially the 100-yard dash. I would say that's probably my favorite.

[3:44] And I guess, even still today, you know, the winner of the 100-yard dash is usually the, what? The fastest man in the world. And I don't know who that is right now.

Maybe you know his name. But anyway, have it in your mind, the race, whether it's a long race, an endurance race, you know, like me, the 880, or maybe it's a mile, or whatever it may be.

But especially the short races. And just kind of picture that runner who's running the race. And that kind of sets you up for the imagery or the illustration, I would even say more specifically, the metaphor that Paul uses here in the opening verses of Hebrews chapter 12.

Now, I'm going to suggest to you that that is the prime illustration of the life of a believer, a race.

Now, I don't know so much the short races as maybe the prime illustration of the life of a believer, the journey of Christian life.

[4:56] We've better understood it as an endurance race, a long race. But the race really does illustrate, and it's not just something I've come up with.

It's what Paul used here, as we're going to see in a minute. That's a great illustration of the Christian life. Because you and I are, in a sense, running a race in Christian life. Now, we're not in competition with one another.

I'm not running against you. You're not running against me. So we never should have that in our thoughts that, you know, we've got to run it better than the next guy or this guy or that guy. We're not in competition.

But we are in pursuit of the same thing in our Christian lives. And I believe that what we're in pursuit of is holiness.

Is the life of Christ, if I'm not putting it in another way, the life of Christ expressed in and through our lives, that we become more like Christ.

[5:54] Now, the doctrinal word or the theological word for that would be sanctification.

Sanctification. Sanctification. And which just basically is that process, process by which we, as God's children, are being transformed into the very life of Christ.

That's just kind of a short definition. Sanctification, though it's much bigger than that. Sanctification, or we could even shorten more, that process where we're becoming more like Christ. And it's a process that we're involved in, well, started to be involved in day one when we were born again. And it's a process that has continued and will continue until we leave this planet. And so it's a lifelong kind of thing.

And every believer, every believer, is involved in that process, that process of sanctification, or in one aspect of that sanctification that I would call the pursuit of holiness.

Philippians chapter 1, verse 6. You know that passage well, I'm sure. Philippians chapter 1, verse 6.

[7:34] He will finish. He will finish. He will finish. And now, having said that, that passage, Philippians 1, verse 6, speaks more so to God's side.

Or God's side, the divine side of sanctification. And God is going to accomplish the work one way or another. He's going to. But there is also a human side of sanctification.

In fact, of all the great doctrinal words, doctrinal words that pertain to our salvation and sanctification, one of those. Of all those great words, I would say that sanctification is the one part of our salvation that we participate with God in.

Now, we can't participate with that before we're saved. But after we're saved, we participate with God in that process of becoming more and more like Christ.

That's the human side. And somehow, in God's sovereign grace, He has given every born-again believer the ability to choose holiness, to grow in holiness.

[8:49] That is, I might just say it this way, I have a choice today, whether or not I'm going to obey Jesus. In fact, not just one choice today, but numerous choices throughout today.

And I've had those choices, and you have too. And you can choose to obey Him or not obey Him. I can choose whether or not I'm going to sin.

I can choose whether or not I'm going to serve Jesus today. Or this year. I have that choice. Right? You have that choice too. And many times, we choose not to, quite frankly. And that's what? That's sin. But we have that choice. I have a certain amount of power in my life that has been granted me by the grace of God.

That's given me the freedom to choose whether or not I'm going to serve the Lord and grow in His Word. I have within me the power, as a regenerate child of God, to seek Jesus today or tomorrow.

[9:57] If I have the power to do that, then I also have the power to refuse to do that. And become a disobedient child. And God will take care of me. And will you.

But nevertheless, I have the choice whether or not I'm going to participate with God in His desire to transform me, conform me into the very life of Christ.

And God is going to get that job done, but He desires that I participate in that. So remember that about sanctification. And remember that as we go throughout this chapter in the next several weeks.

Now, let's go ahead and read, or let me read, rather, chapter 12. The first part of it is going to be the most familiar.

In fact, you don't even have to look at your Bibles. Or you didn't have to look at your Bibles, probably. But you can be reminded of at least the first few verses of chapter 12. Because they are

memorized quite often by God's people.

[11:03] And at least they have been studied, I'm sure, by many of you. You've heard preachers preach on this passage a number of times. So here it is. Therefore, we also, and I'm reading from the New King James, of course.

Therefore, we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight in the sin which so easily ensnares us. And let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him who endured such hostility from sinners against himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. You have not yet resisted to much sin striving against sin.

And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons. My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord. You will be discouraged when you are rebuked by him.

[12:10] For whom the Lord loves, he chastens and scourges every son whom he receives. If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons. For what son is there whom a father does not chasten?

But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them. But be he for our profit, that we may be partakers of his holiness.

Now, no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful. Nevertheless, after one, it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Therefore, strengthen the hands which hang down at the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed.

[13:12] Pursue peace with all people in holiness, without which no one will see the Lord. Looking carefully, lest anyone fall short of the grace of God, lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled, lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright.

For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears. For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and have burned with fire, and do blackness and darkness and tempest, and the sound of the trumpet and the voice of the word, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them any more.

For they could not endure what was commanded, and if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stung or shocked and arrowed. And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, I am exceedingly afraid and trembling, but you have come to Mount Zion, and to the city of the living God, and the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, who are registered in heaven, to God the judge of all, to the spirits of just being made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abraham, so that you do not refuse him who speaks, for if they did not escape, we refused him who spoke on earth.

Much more shall we not escape, if we turn away from him who speaks from heaven, whose voice then shook the earth. But now he has promised, saying, Yet once more I shake, not only the earth, but also heaven.

Now this, yet once more, indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain.

[15:12] Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom, which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably, with reverence and godly fear, our God is the consuming fire.

Well, that's kind of a lengthy chapter, maybe a lengthy reading tonight, but I want to read through the whole thing first. Then again, encourage you to spend some time this week, and read through this chapter several times, and do your own study, and we'll be kind of making our way through it, and finding, I think, some instruction in certain holdings, or process of sanctification.

I believe that's a simple. All right, now, the metaphor that he uses there in the first couple of verses, primarily verse 1, is very vivid, and I think we can all kind of picture that.

The runner, running race, the start line, finish line, whether it's a short race, or a long endurance race, or maybe even a high hurdle race, we can kind of picture that, and it's very vivid.

Now, he's using it to illustrate this pursuit, this pursuit of holiness, our life as a believer, and the process of sanctification. And the first thing I want you to notice about this pursuit of holiness, and you can fill in your blank there, is the determination.

[16:41] The determination to run. The determination. The key word, or key phrase, in verse 1, is pretty clear, isn't it?

It's, let us run with endurance. That's the whole point of the illustration. Let us run with endurance the race that is set for us.

That's the key phrase in the opening verse, the two verses of chapter 12. That's all what's Paul saying. He's saying the race has begun. That is, you know, the main event is underway.

And that's true of every one of us. In the name of Christ, you're born again. You know, Paul is saying, the race has begun.

You're a part of it. Let's run it. Basically, is what he's saying. Now, there are, though, a whole lot of believers.

[17:40] Now, I believe, in many cases, bonafide, born-again believers who are not running for race determination. That is, they're not pursuing holiness.

Some are kind of casually trotting along in their lives as a believer. Some are just kind of walking. I'm just kind of carrying the illustration, the imagery, of the race into some other ways that a person might run it.

They might walk it. They might trot it. I would even say to you that some are not hardly moving at all. Now, you know, there is some question there as whether they're true believers.

If they're not growing at all, not maturing at all, or, to use the metaphor here, they're not running at all, are they true believers? Well, I don't know.

I wonder sometimes if they are. But it does seem to me that there are some who, when they were born again, they were running the race, and then something happened, and they stopped running.

[18:56] Maybe it got down to a little trot, then maybe down to a little walk, and then it seems like they're not running at all. And maybe just kind of sitting there. Can you imagine that at the Olympics?

Can you imagine a race that has begun, and some of the runners are running in full steam, and then there are some who are just sitting there on the starting line? No, we would never see them.

They're just sitting there, or maybe they ran for a little ways, and then they decide to just kind of plop down there and eat a hot dog or something like that.

You can imagine that in a race, and yet some professing born-again believers seemingly have very little desire to do what God requires and what God has provided to participate and what God has provided to grow in their faith, in their faith.

But the Bible describes the holy life, if we just take what Paul has said here, take this metaphor, the Bible describes this holy life as an agonizing race.

Maybe this explains, maybe helps explain, though it's not a good excuse, why some struggle with it. Because nowhere in Scripture are we promised that it will be easy, that we won't have struggles, that there won't be obstacles, that we have plenty of obstacles to running the race just inside ourselves and our flesh.

[20:26] But there are others as well, and the Bible doesn't promise that we're not going to have these. And in fact, the Bible promises quite the opposite in this text as a case in point, that the race is agonizing.

It's not just a stroll in the park, literally. In fact, the word race, you'll see that in your text there in verse one, where it says, lay aside every weight and run with endurance the race that is set before.

That word race, in fact, you might just write in the margin of your Bible, if you don't mind doing that in your Bible, some people don't like to write in their Bibles, you can just write the word agony.

Because the Greek word that's translated race here is the Greek word *agon*. we get our word agonize or agony from that word.

And so, just like it's true if you've ever ran a race, been a part of that kind of athletic event, you know how agonizing that is.

[21:36] I can tell you as a former long distance runner, it is agonizing. In fact, there are times when you think you're going to make it, and not only your chest is hurting, but your legs are hurting, and pretty soon they feel kind of like putty, you know.

And it's an agonizing thing, you've got to get to that finish line. And so, that's the way it is in the Christian life as well. Also, the Bible describes this holy living or holy life as one that requires endurance.

And these two go together, don't they? I mean, if it's an agonizing kind of race, that there are struggles and obstacles and so forth, then you know the implication is that it's going to require endurance in order to run this race.

The word endurance here, at least that's the way it's translated to New King James. I think King James translates it patience, which is really not a very good translation for our time.

It probably made perfect sense back in King James' day. The word really is endurance, or it might be steadfast. Well, that's a little antiquated. Maybe another word would be perseverance.

[23:00] I think we could understand the idea behind that word. But that's what Paul is conveying here. to live the holy life, to pursue that holy life, is agonizing.

And it requires that we never give up. It requires that we not faint, that we remain steadfast, that we persevere, that we endure, whatever word you might want to use.

They all convey the same idea. See, the pursuit of the holiness is not a cakewalk. When I was thinking about that, I was reminded of our fall family festival, and the cakewalk there was quite agonizing.

I didn't know if I was going to win that cheese cake. But not only that, but as I watched some of those who were in the cakewalk, it got kind of violent.

But the Christian life is not a cakewalk in the sense of that expression. It's demanding, and sometimes agonizing.

[24:15] It requires endurance, and when everything in you desires to slow down, kind of like in a race, you're battling even with your own will. Do I quit?

Do I slow down? Do I just give this up? I'm not going to make it. Or do you keep on going? And you need to keep on going. So it takes determination.

Philippians chapter 3 verse 14, one of my favorite passages, in fact, the book of Philippians is one of my favorites, where Paul says, I press toward the mark.

You know this passage? The word stress, or rather press, means to strain. Now, it's a picture of runners. We've all seen those kind of races.

Now, in the long-distance races that I ran, I never had to stretch for that. I was never close enough to do that to beat the other guy. But you can see that picture in those sprints, you know, and they're getting close, and they're two or three, and they're neck and neck, and winning will depend on who can stretch out the furthest.

[25:22] And that's kind of the idea, but it's really more powerful than that. It's talking about a physical kind of and mental, everything in your body is straining, stretching toward the mark of the prize, the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

And so Paul says, let us therefore as many as be perfect and be holy, let us all be of one mind. What minded? He was minded, Paul was minded, a strange stress for that mind.

So, determination, first of all. Number two, there is the motivation to run. verse one again. Let's look at that real quickly.

Therefore, we also since we are surrounded, that's what he says there, I think the King James is encompassed or compassed about, surrounded by, so great a cloud of witnesses.

You know, that's kind of an interesting image. Now, it certainly fits with the medical because it is, the desire, Paul's desire is to picture the sporting event, the track and field event, you know, probably had in his mind the Olympics of his day.

[26:45] And, I mean, they were going on in this day, very famous, and so there's the runner, and, or runners and up in the stands or in that coliseum or all those people who are looking and watching and we can just kind of, you know, we don't have a problem understanding the image.

But what does he mean here in regard to this pursuit of holiness? So I would ask the question, who are the witnesses Paul is referring to?

Well, obviously, it seems a no-brainer that it's a reference back to chapter 1. In that famous chapter he was in the Hall of Faith, and he lists all of these men and some women and some he doesn't

even name countless people who were people of faith.

And they, I think, it's safe to say, are the witnesses to whom he's referring. He mentioned Abel, where in chapter 11 he says, Abel offered more excellent sacrifice.

He mentioned Enoch, who walked with God, walked so closely with God, one day, they're walking along, and God said, you know, it's closer to my house than here, so let's just go on and I don't think it happened quite like that.

[28:15] And then there's, of course, Noah, who believed God, said he was going to flood the entire world, and he obeyed God and built an ark. He was a man of faith. And there's Abraham, who offered up Isaac, his only son, his son of promise.

And you've read through Hebrews chapter 11, I'm sure, and read about all these people of faith. And what's astounding, if you've ever thought about it, is here's this long list of these men and women who had great faith in God, just believed God, and they didn't even have the Bible, like we have today.

They didn't even have Jesus yet, that is, in his incarnation. And yet there were people of faith, and the list goes off of there. There's Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Sarah is mentioned there, and Joseph, and Moses, and Rahab, and Gideon, and Barak.

It's interesting to kind of look in to the biblical description of these men and women throughout the Bible, and what they did. I mean, he doesn't mention all the details about many of these, you know, like Samson, they know about Samson.

And there's Jephthah, and David, and Samuel, the great prophets of the Old Testament, and then kind of generalizes, and he talks about those who through faith subdued kingdoms, and brought righteousness, and obtained promises, and stopped the mouths of lions, and quenched the violence of fire, and escaped the edge of the sword, and waxed valiantly in battle, and then of course there are also those listed there who were tortured to death.

[30:04] We don't really like that part of chapter 11. They were people of faith, and some people, it was important to them to be tortured for their faith, and they do cruel mockings, and scourgings, and imprisonment, and some were sawed in two, you know, and some were murdered by the sword, and others kind of got off a little lighter, they just simply wandered, and nothing but sheepskins wear, and they were destitute, and afflicted, and tormented, and the Bible kind of ends, or Paul ends with of whom, all these, of whom the world is not worthy.

So he lists all these in chapter 11, and then in chapter 12, he goes right on into this metaphor of the race, and seeing that we're encompassed about by all these witnesses.

So it's pretty clear that the reference is back to chapter 11, and what's not clear is in what way are they witnesses? in what way do they motivate us?

I guess is what I'm asking there in the question. Well, I have to tell you that I do not think that they are looking right now, watching you run your race.

If that were true, would that motivate you? They're watching you right now. I'd be terrified by that.

[31:31] Can you imagine, for example, if you were running in a race, I mean, in a real live race, down there on the track, and you look up there in the stands, and there is, I don't know, I mean, just to think of some of the great runners of the years, Carl Lewis, one that I enjoyed watching years ago.

What a runner he was. Can you imagine, you're up there, you're going to run your race, and Carl Lewis is up in the stands, watching me. And you might just fill in the blank, any particular runner that you liked over the years, you know, if you're a woman, maybe it's Jackie Joyner Cursey, you know, that great runner, and maybe some others.

And just think about all of them, they're all up there in the stands, and they, you know, they're watching you getting ready to run your race. I'd be embarrassed. Now, and that's the way I would feel, by the way, if I do say Abraham was up there watching me, live my Christian mind.

everything. Can I just talk to that? Or how about the Apostle Paul? A man that, you know, one of the New Testament characters that I, that I am so, you know, just so enamored by, by his preaching and all these things.

Imagine, I just can't imagine, with my life and I know that the Apostle Paul is watching. Or maybe we can pray it closer to home and maybe there's someone in your family that's just one of those stalwart Christians, family members, your grandma or grandpa or something like that, and to think that they are watching.

[33:19] And then, on the flip side of that, why would they want to watch anything going on down here on this planet, you know? Heaven would not be a great place to be if I had to look down and see all the woe and sin and sadness and sickness and all of the junk that's going on down here on this earth.

I just don't think it's going to be that way. So, the idea here is one of example. I believe that's Paul's point. One of example or one of motivation.

Not spectators in that sense, but role models. role models in what way? In the way that we have been described in the scripture and they're encouraging to us in the way they look their lives.

So, there's the motivation. Number three, there is the opposition to run. I'm going to quit here pretty soon. The opposition to run.

You know, in order to run this race and win, there are some things that must be continuously laid aside. Things that we need to get out of our lives.

[34:38] Paul says, let us lay aside every weight. First of all, he says that. Now, what does that mean? What does he mean by that? The word weight, this is important to know, the word weight here refers to something that is bulky, cumbersome.

It just specifically speaks of just anything that is kind of a massive subject, without really being verse received. And the word is amoral. That is, in a sense, it's referring neither to anything bad or good.

It's not a bad or good kind of thing that the word refers to, or you might insert rather bad or good, or you might insert right or wrong.

It's not a matter of right or wrong things. The point here is not what the weight is. The point is what the weight does. What the weight does that is in our lives.

For example, suppose you turn on the television on Sunday afternoon or Saturday afternoon and say a traffic deal event is going on. Maybe it's during the summer Olympics and you turn on the TV and you're watching and they're getting ready to run a race.

[35:59] And let's just say it's the 100 yard dash. Alright? That's one of the favorite ones to watch. And you know how they do it. The cameras will be focusing on each of the runners and the commentators are going to be giving the information about each one, one after another, and then they move to the next one, move to the next one.

You know how they're dressed and it seemed like every time the Olympics roll around they have less awe. In fact, maybe they're eventually going to return to what historians have said occurred during the original Olympics and they just got them run naked.

I hope not. What's always astounding me is that they have very little awe and then they have all these chains running next. They're looking at each one and you see them and they're slick, sleek and ready to run.

Let's say they pan to the next one and the next guy is there standing on the line suited up in a deep sea diving suit. I'm talking about one of those old kind with big helmets and lead boots and big you know.

Can you imagine that? See that, here's this guy, they're lined up getting ready to run. Now, is he likely to win? What a way is he going to win.

[37:20] Is he likely to finish the race? Probably not. Probably not. Let me ask you something. Is there anything inherently wrong with an easy diving suit?

Anything sinful about that? It may be crazy, but anything sinful about it? No. It's just no good for running a race.

It may be just perfectly fine for deep sea diving, but it's just no good for running a race. And that's the idea here. So what's the point? Well, the point is, does it, whatever it may be in your life, does it keep you from winning?

That's the idea. That's what Paul's getting at. Does it keep you from winning? And you and I, each of us individually must identify in our lives any activities, anything we're involved in, anything we enjoy doing and so forth that may be good things and nothing wrong with them, maybe good things, things we enjoy, but they are hindrances.

So we've got to identify those things in our lives. That's what Paul is getting at. Anything going on in your life, anything apart of your life that is a hindrance, a weight.

[38:44] Like one preacher said, a young lady came to her pastor and asked, is it all right to do dancing on Saturday nights? And he said, of course, it's all right if you don't want to win.

So is there anything wrong with dancing? Well, per se, no. A whole lot wrong with it with me, because I don't know that.

But you think inherently wrong with it. You might say there are some things wrong with where those kind of things take place, and I would agree to you, but is dancing per se not wrong?

But see, you're missing the point. The point is not the rightness or wrongness of a certain activity. Not in this sense here. It talks about weights. The point is, does it keep you from winning?

That's what you have to decide. Does it keep you from riding the race? And so you've got to answer that. I went away and quit there, and we'll get to the sin that so easily entangles us or ensnares us.

[39 : 50] We'll read it that next time. Thank you.