



Sermon-Based Study Guide
Prepared by Rev. James R. Wilson, D. Min.
Good Shepherd Church - February 19, 2012

Sermon Title: Avoiding the Dangers of the Race

Sermon Text: Hebrews 12.12-17

Related Texts: Isaiah 35.1-10; Genesis 25.27-34
and 27.25-40; Romans 6.15-23; 1 Peter 1.13-16

I. Start It – Connecting With One Another

If you were running a marathon, what things would most likely tempt or actually cause you to give up?

II. Introduction

The 12th chapter of Hebrews pictures followers of Jesus being runners in a marathon who are called to "run with perseverance the race marked out for us." A marathon is a fitting metaphor for the race of faith we are on. It takes focus - fixing our eye son Jesus. It takes discipline - training and enduring hardship in order to run successfully. Those who are focused, who train hard, often run with seemingly effortless efficiency - and often complete the race well ahead of others. Some runners are less conditioned and finish later. Still others compete but due to physical handicaps they find themselves at the back of the pack. The Hebrews Author addresses those who are wavering in the journey of faith to overcome lameness, to stay on track, and to avoid the pitfalls that will undo them as followers of Jesus.

III. Study the Text – Read Through Hebrews 12.12-17

- 1) Before looking at verses 12 and 13, scan through Isaiah 35.1-10.
 - a. What is suggested by having "feeble arms and weak knees?" How are those with such weaknesses made strong?
 - b. How is the admonition to "make level paths" related to upright conduct? How does God-honoring behavior encourage those who are spiritually and morally weak?
- 2) Verse 14 is a call to live in peace with others and to be holy.
 - a. What does it take to live at peace with others? With **all** others (even those who are difficult to live at peace with)?
 - b. What does it mean to be holy?

c. Read through Romans 6.15-23. How is a person made holy? Why is it impossible to see God apart from this holiness (refer to 1 Peter 1.13-16)?

Note: Holiness - it's another word for being sanctified or made Christ-like - is the result of God's activity in our lives. Through that activity we have been rescued from the dominion of darkness, freed from slavery to a distorted human nature that tends to rebel against God and seek to serve the self, and transformed through the life-changing power of God's Holy Spirit. Holiness is not something one creates or brings about by human effort. It is the result of willingly accepting God's presence and on-going transforming power.

- 3) In verse 15 the author has in mind people who are part of the church but still having difficulty entering fully into a life of faith and submission to Jesus.
 - a. How can followers of Jesus help others to not miss the grace of God? How does our behavior help or hinder this from happening?
 - b. How would you describe the damage that a "bitter root" among believers can cause?
 - c. What is the best way to avoid "bitter roots" within a church body?
- 4) The author points to Esau as an example of godlessness that is to be avoided (verses 16 and 17). Scan through Genesis 25.27-34 and 27.25-40 to see what Esau did and what it cost him.
 - a. What motivated Esau to give up his inheritance and the blessing of carrying the family name?
 - b. What does this suggest for the Hebrew Christians who might be tempted to turn from following Jesus because they are weary and beleaguered and wanting immediate relief?
 - c. How does this serve as a warning to those who are in the church but still not accepting the grace, love, and transformation that Jesus offers?
 - d. How is this a warning to those who follow Jesus but fall short in pursuing holiness or living at peace with others, or stir up divisions and dissension?

IV. Apply It – Reflect and Respond

- 1) As you think of these verses apply the admonitions found in them to yourself. How are you doing in terms of holiness? Living at peace with others? Encouraging unity and harmony within the church? Encouraging those who are struggling in their faith journey?
- 2) Are there ways in which you are not "walking the talk" of being a Christian? In other

words, are you living in a way that is consistent with being a follower of Jesus? If not, are you willing to repent (change your mind) about those things and be more faithful to live a Christ-like life?

3) What specific things can you do to encourage others in their race (or journey) of faith?

...when they were passing out tee shirts for the big marathon, Esau was in the chow line and missed the race. When they were passing out blessings, Esau was too tired and hungry to pay attention, and he lost his inheritance. This is, of course, what the Preacher fears his congregation is about to do. Like Esau, they are feeling some immediate pressures, some hunger pangs, and the temptation is foolishly and shortsightedly to abandon the faith for something more immediately gratifying. If they do, if they limp off the track and head for the pub, they will miss what waits for them at the finish line...

Thomas G. Long