

**Eyes On The Prize**  
**Hebrews 12:1-3**

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Good evening. First I want to say a special thank you to all mothers here tonight. You have one of the hardest and most important jobs in all the world. Would you stand and be recognized tonight. You deserve all the recognition you can get for the incredible ways that you invest yourselves in your children.

Tonight I want to share a message from one of my favorite passages of scripture.

Hebrews 12:1-3 “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

*Let's pray.*

So this evening we are going to talk about running. Running. Yes I as I am sure you can tell be looking at me I am an expert on running. Ok, maybe not quite an expert. Ok maybe it makes me breathe hard just to think about running, but we are indeed going to be talking about running tonight. Luckily for you and me both we are not going to be

covering the basics of physical running, but rather we are going to talk about running the spiritual race God has set before us.

### **What is this race we are to be running?**

The first question I want to consider is simply, “What is this race we are supposed to be running?” Verse 1 says let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. So what race is the author of Hebrews talking about? The race that God has called each of His followers to is one of discipleship. *God has called each of His followers to a race of obedient discipleship.* God has set before us a path towards Christ-likeness. We are to be formed in Christ. We are literally to become more and more like Jesus and less and less like our sinful selves. *This is a race to become like Jesus.* That is the race we are called to run. A race of faith. This is not just a race we should run but this is the race we were created for. This is a race about true transformation.

Our world is hungry for genuinely changed people. Leo Tolstoy observed, “Everybody thinks of changing humanity and nobody thinks of changing himself.” Richard Foster adds, “Let us be among those who believe that the inner transformation of our lives is a goal worthy of our best effort.”

### **What kind of race is this?**

Second, “What kind of race is this?” I am little leery of running, so if I am going to be doing any kind of running, even spiritual running I need to know what I am getting myself into.

Well put simply, *this is a difficult and costly race*. Sometimes we too often live with the false idea that we can say some magic prayer and poof our Christianity is settled and that's all there is to that. Punch our ticket to heaven and sit back and enjoy the ride. Well that is not the picture of Christianity that the bible portrays. God isn't some sort of giant monopoly banker who loves to handout "get of hell" free cards and then let you continue on with your own game. No, Jesus says in his initial call to, "Deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow me." That is not call to an easy race. If you are here today and you were under the impression that Christianity was about making our lives easier, I hate to break it to you but it's not.

Verse 1 says let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. So whatever race we are called to run it is going to take perseverance, it is going to take stamina, hard work and some serious guts. The race the writer is describing is certainly not a sprint. No, *the Christian life is not a sprint it is a marathon*. A marathon...Now I don't know about you but there is nothing less appealing in the world to me than having to run 26.2 miles. Has anyone here ever ran a marathon? Because I think you are crazy. Why run 26.2 miles? Why do you think on the 8<sup>th</sup> day God created cars? Although I have to say running is sounding a little more appealing now with gas being \$100 a gallon or whatever it is.

I remember when I was in elementary I wasn't as over weight as I am now but I was still a stinky little kid. Well there was one part of gym class that I hated every year. Every year we had to do the Presidential fitness test and part of that test was getting timed in the mile. I didn't mind the other events so much, but I hated HATED having to run the mile. I would have done better but they never let me use my bike. I always had

to run. Well that one short mile was really hard for me and so the idea of a marathon lifestyle doesn't sound too great.

Certainly, if the Christian life is a marathon then it is going to be difficult, but that doesn't mean it won't be the better than any life you or I can even imagine. Many times the most difficult things in life are the things that are the most rewarding and bring us the most joy, certainly this is true of the race in discipleship that God has called us to. Following Christ isn't easy, but oh is it ever good. Yes this race will be hard, but *this race will be the most rewarding life you could live.*

One other note about this marathon of discipleship...we have to be intentional about it. Anyone who runs a marathon would tell you that you don't just wake up on race day and think, "I'd like to run a marathon today." No, it takes a lot of time and effort working up to that. You have to be really intentional about getting prepared. The Christian life is the same way. You don't just decide to follow Christ one day and then hope you just instantly become like Him. You have to be intentional and do things to put yourself in the place where God can shape you. Certainly it is only by the grace of God that we can do anything, especially become like Jesus. It is only by his power, but that doesn't leave us off the hook. One of my favorite Christian writers, Dallas Willard, says "Grace is opposed to earning, not effort." Grace means we don't get the credit and can't earn God's favor, but it doesn't mean we don't put in any effort to become like Jesus.

### **How do we run this race of discipleship?**

So how do we make it happen? If we have chosen to follow Christ, we have been called to a difficult lifetime race of discipleship and being formed into His likeness. So

how do we run this race? How do we approach so daunting a task? Well let's look again at our passage for this morning that urges us to run this race, because it also outlines some fundamentals to help us do that.

### **1. Follow the example of the faithful.**

First, we need to follow the example of the faithful. Our passage starts, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses..." This whole section hinges on what came before it in chapter 11. In chapter 11 the author lays out a history of faith some call the "Hall of Faith." The writer goes through a lineup of some of the heroes of faith from the Old Testament - Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph and Moses just to name a few. All of these men offer a great witness to what a life run through faith looks like. These are examples of what Godly men can do.

Many of us have a cloud of witnesses in our own lives too. Not only can we look to the examples in scripture but we can learn how to run this race of discipleship by following the example of people whom we have witnessed live out their lives for Christ. Try to think of a man or woman in your life who you would consider a faithful witness for Christ. How have they run the marathon of discipleship? What can you learn from their fruitful life? If we are going to run well the race marked out for us we need to follow the example of the faithful who have run before us, both in scripture and in our everyday lives.

### **2. Free yourself from anything holding you back.**

The second thing we need to do in order to run this race is to free ourselves from anything holding us back. Verse 1 continues, “Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles...” We will not be able to run this incredible race if we have got anything weighing us down.

The metaphor of an athletic race is common to the scriptures and would have been very relevant to the Greek culture of the time. The foot race was one of the five main events in the pentathlon of the original Olympic games. It was the normal custom at the beginning of the race at these games for the men to remove all of their clothing just prior to the start in order to rid themselves of anything that would impede their running.

This is what we must do as Christians. We need to keep our clothes on. But we need to strip ourselves of anything holding us back in the race towards becoming like Jesus. Notice the language in this verse. It says “everything” that hinders. For each of us it may be something different that is holding us back in our walk with God. Maybe it is the love of wealth, maybe it is a desire for earthly things, maybe it is an bad relationship, maybe it is selfish desires or impure motives, maybe it is some harbored feeling of anger or resentment. Whatever it is that is holding us back from running all out for Christ we need to strip it away. We cannot fully run the marathon of discipleship until we release all of the baggage that weighs us down. Running is hard enough without extra weight and God doesn’t intend for us to run the race of our lives carrying extra baggage. He wants to remove those burdens for us if we will release them to Him.

This verse also speaks of the sin that so easily entangles. I think this is such a vivid description of the way that sin attacks our lives. It truly does begin weaving its way in an out of the cracks in our lives until we become so entangled that we cannot even

move and many times we give up on trying to run the race any longer. If we let it, sin will bind us so tightly that we are paralyzed to move - let alone run.

Jesus conquered sin and death on the cross and we must allow the power of the Holy Spirit living in us to conquer the sin in our lives. If we ever hope to run the race marked out for us, allowing God to remove the sin that entangles us is essential.

What is holding you back in your race? What baggage are you trying to carry that you need to release to God? What sin is entangling you and hindering your journey? These questions must be answered if we ever hope to run with perseverance. If we want to run this race we must free ourselves from anything holding us back.

### **3. Fix your eyes on Jesus.**

Last and most important, we must fix our eyes on Jesus. Certainly we need to follow the example of the faithful and free ourselves from anything holding us back, but we will never be able to run the race of discipleship without first fixing our eyes on Jesus.

One of the biggest pitfalls in running this race of discipleship is allowing ourselves to be distracted by the things of this world. We live in a world where everyday there are countless people and things screaming for our attention. Our work wants our attention, our families, our church, our clubs, our friends, our TV's, our hobbies. Everybody and everything wants our time and attention. We have the constant nagging of so many things trying to steal our focus. But all of those things will steer us off course. We will never be able to run the right race if we make any of those things our ultimate focus. No, the only one that is worthy of our gaze, the only one that will provide true direction and fulfillment when we place all of our focus in one place is Jesus Christ.

To run this race we have to keep our eyes on the prize. We have to keep our eyes on Jesus. I mean he is the whole point of this race anyways. He is the race. He is the direction we are headed. As Christians, He is who we are trying to become. Christ is the finish line and the second we take our eyes off of Him we will veer off course.

These verses describe how Jesus set the stage for our race. He ran the perfect race to show us how to run. The passage says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." Jesus showed us this difficult race is to be run. And now he is the one where our focus must be.

How do we fix our eyes on Jesus? Well I think one of the main ways that Christians have done this throughout the centuries is through spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines like prayer, bible reading, meditation, solitude, silence, fasting. These are the intentional steps we can take to begin the process of transformation. Famous Christian author, Richard Foster, says the spiritual disciplines are, "a means of receiving God's grace. ...[They] allow us to place ourselves before God so he can transform us."

In my opinion if you have been a Christian for any length of time you know the things that help you keep your eyes on Jesus it is simply a matter of practicing those things throughout our busy lives so the world doesn't steal our focus.

If we don't keep our eyes on Jesus we will veer off course. I am sure you have all experienced what can happen if you take your eyes off the road for just a minute while you are driving. Many times it is the rumble strip that gets your attention again. The

spiritual disciplines can be like a rumble strip in our lives that God uses to grab our focus once again.

What are the things in your life that try and steal your focus? What things cause your vision to waver? What things make you turn your head to the right or left? If we want to run this race of discipleship we are going to have to always keep the finish line in mind. We must always keep our eyes on the prize and fix our eyes on Jesus.

## **Conclusion**

If we are to run this marathon, this life long race of discipleship that we were created to run, than we need to follow the example of the faithful, we need to free ourselves from anything holding us back and we need to fix our eyes on Jesus. Only then will we experience the kind of incredible race that has been set before us. We have been called to a great adventure if we will only choose to run. We were born to run this race to become like Jesus.

I think that one of the biggest reasons that people feel restless in life and bored with what life has to offer is because they are not running the race God has created them for. There are so many people walking around today thinking there has got to be more to life than this. There is! It is the incredible race towards Jesus that we were created for. This race is a crazy and hard adventure, but it is the most rewarding life we can live. If more people were running this race there would be far fewer people seeking out something sinful just to make them feel alive.

I recently watched the Kentucky Derby on TV. I think it is so funny how there is all this build up and coverage all day on TV and literally the race is over in 2 minutes. I

am not really into horse racing but there was something intriguing about this big event. The race was won with ease by the favorite, Big Brown. Big Brown was a thing of beauty, a huge beautiful muscular animal that was simply born to run. Now what would happen if that beautiful towering steed were stuck in some children's fair some where and made to walk in circles with kids on his back? I imagine he would grow restless because Big Brown was born to run. Of course he is going to be a little bored by anything less.

Much like Big Brown, we were born to run! We were created to be in a relationship with the God of the universe and live out this race of becoming like Jesus. If you have not fully embraced that race, of course you are feeling restless. You were created to run. So RUN!

In 1968, the Olympics were held in Mexico City. The last runner to finish the marathon was a man from Tanzania named John Stephen Ahkwari. During the race, he had hurt his leg badly. He'd stumbled, he'd been hurt badly, he was bruised, beaten up, and he was bloodied. Long after everybody else had finished the race, and in fact as the stadium quickly emptied - there were only 7,000 people left - around 7:00 in the evening, as it was getting dark, he entered to do his last lap and finish the marathon. The crowd gave him a standing ovation. Watch this short clip as he finishes the race.

*Show clip.*

John Stephen Ahkwari said, "My country did not send me 5,000 miles around the world to start the race, they sent me 5,000 miles to finish it."

This is a true story of perseverance and someone who had a vision for the finish line. He knew his mission was to run and nothing was going to stop him from seeing that through.

The time has come for the church of Christ to catch a vision of the finish line. The time has come for us to keep our eyes on the prize and press on. No obstacle is too great. Nothing is too hard. By God's grace we must press on and run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Sometimes we hit rough patches and come away injured, but press on. It is time for Christ's church to fix our eyes on Jesus and stop being distracted by the trivial and the petty. The world is desperate for Christians running the true race of transformation. It is time to unify our efforts as one team in one race with one goal, eyes on the prize, fixed on Jesus...it is time to run.

So what will you do? Will you allow something to hold you back? Will you allow things of this world to steal your vision and take your eyes off of Jesus? What are you waiting for? Are you ready to run?