

So What?

How the Apostle Paul instructs us to live out our life as members of a the body of believers.

Part 6—Demonstrating

“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, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. ⁴ In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵ And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as children? It says,

“My children, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, ⁶ because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his child.”

⁷ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ⁸ If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate children at all. ⁹ Moreover, we have all had parents who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! ¹⁰ Our parents disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

¹² Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ¹³ “Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

¹⁴ Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. ¹⁶ See that no one is sexually immoral...”

Hebrews, Chapter 12

Today is an exciting day. Today we open our first new branch of our church in California. That’s right...we are now joining that hot trend in church work--multi-sight ministry. Of course this day did not come without a lot of planning. The people who are in San Diego today have been training for this moment for about 6 months. It is only a 2-person branch today, but in theory it could grow. Angela and Mike, who started attending our church 2 months ago and now have since taken the Alpha Course

and are in a weekly evening gathering, are in San Diego today for the Rock and Roll Marathon, one of the great road races in America. Mike is volunteering; Angela is running the race. Since the scriptures teach that the church is the body of believers, not a building or the staff, and since further the scriptures say that “where two or more are gathered, I (Jesus) am in their midst” then wherever two people from our church are located, we are there. We have a “branch office” opening every time we gather together.

Marathon running is hard. What Angela is doing today in running her first marathon is very impressive. Oops, this is not her first marathon! She gave birth to beautiful twin daughters 9 years ago. After giving birth to and then raising her little cherubs, running in a little 26.2 mile road race might be like a walk in the park for Angela! A few years back, the difference in strength between mothers and the rest of us was clearly demonstrated to me. I was running in the Kansas City Marathon. By mile 16 or so, marathoners are running with the same group of people who run at the same pace. Typically, these runners begin to talk to each other and friendship are started. I met up with a 26-year old med-student named Rob, and we agreed to work together to finish the race. At mile 23, we were so proud. Both of us were utterly exhausted, but through mutual encouragement and pain-staking work, we were both on pace for our Personal Record, or PR. PR running is the “holy grail” in the marathon world. Towards the end, we were struggling up a hill and spouting encouraging words to each other. Then we heard the most amazing thing. Behind us, we heard the conversation recorded below, though we were too tired to turn around to see the source. No bother...the source soon was in front of us.

“So Jimmy is in premier soccer? How will you get him to all the practices?”

“I know...it will be tough, because Kaitlyn has dance most summer mornings and Shawn has to get to swim practice.”

“Is Doug still traveling for his job.”

“Yeah, but he is home most weekends....”

“Hey, you guys look great...keep it going.”

“What about Joey and baseball? When are his practices?”

Med-student Rob and I, who were both on pace for PRs, were passed by two 40-something soccer moms discussing their day-planners like they were on the phone and drinking lattes! Humbled and in awe, we finished about 4 minutes behind them!

As we gather today, Angela is indeed likely in a mighty battle to finish the race. She will struggle, hurt, sweat, and maybe bleed. But the disciplined approach she has had to her training will pay off. About 100,000 spectators will cheer the 17,500 participants along the route and greet them at the finish line with a medal and a celebration.

For some people, becoming a Christian is an event. They have an “aw-ha” moment, perhaps at a church or an event or while reading the bible or in prayer. For others, it is a long, slow process over months or years of encountering the truth, ingesting it, and receiving it. Some people can tell you the exact moment their journey of faith began; others, who perhaps grew up in a Christian home, could not tell you a time or a place. The how and the when is not important—the “what” is important.

However, according the passage above, living out our lives as a Christian is apparently a lot like running a marathon. It is going to take hard, disciplined work and at times will be a struggle.

Some people enjoy reading the novels of John Grisham, David Baldacci, Nora Roberts, Danielle Steele, or Tom Clancy. Others enjoy the poetry and composition of Shakespeare. In the former, the prose is simple and the plot is straightforward and quickly moving. In the latter, each word has been carefully

selected, often with double-meaning, and much of the joy is experienced by the language and the images it conjures.

If you like thriller or romance novels that rely on plot, then Biblical books such as Exodus, Ruth, Mark, Acts, and Romans might suit you well. If you like Shakespeare, then the book of Hebrews, from which the passage above is excerpted, might suit your tastes.

Though usually attributed to the Apostle Paul, the authorship of Hebrews is uncertain. Contributing to the debate over authorship is the style and genre of the work. Hebrews is written in eloquent Greek and the argument in it is complex and well developed.

The original audience for the work, however, is made clear by the content. Hebrews is written to the Jewish Diaspora distributed across the Roman empire, Jews who had become Christians through the evangelistic works of the apostles. As Christians became persecuted under Nero and others, persecutions that included torture, exile, and death, these recent converts were renouncing the faith and returning to Jewish legalism. To be “Jewish” in the Roman empire was less of a threat to the Romans than to be “Christian” simply because there is no call in Judaism to proselytize. As Christianity spread, the pressures mounted against Christians from governments who were threatened by them. As the pressures mounted, people faithful to Yahweh thought they could still worship the one, true God without fear of death by returning to the Jewish faith. The author of Hebrews writes to persuade weak-kneed Christians to retain the Christian faith.

The eloquent argument of the Hebrews broadly goes like this: Christ is superior to all other historical religious figures; Christ is the answer to all religious questions; Christ, by faith, is the means of atonement—reconciliation with God—for all people.

Like many of the Apostle Paul’s epistles, the work turns on a great “therefore...” statement—the “so what” conclusion to the argument.

This is the “gist” of what the author says:

1. Everybody who is not a Christian is watching we who are Christians.
2. As these “witnesses” watch us, they are making judgments about Christ based on how we behave.
3. Stop engaging in behaviors that make us look bad to these witnesses (“the sin that so easily entangles”).
4. The Christian life is a tough marathon that can only be completed through perseverance, discipline, and commitment.
5. As a Christian, we are a part of a community that must work together, striving to holiness, and holding each other accountable to a Christian standard of behavior.

St. Francis of Assisi had an amazing line: “Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary **use words.**” In Hebrews, we are called to demonstrate and live-out the Gospel as a way of preaching it. Anybody who knows we are a church attendee is making judgments not only about our church but about the God of our church based on how we behave. As the saying goes, “we may be the only Gospel anybody ever ‘reads.’”

In order to complete the marathon, Angela has had to change her behaviors. She goes to bed and gets up at different times. She has changed her diet. She has changed her clothing. She has to work out several times a week while logging and measuring the progress. Angela had to become more disciplined. Discipline usually is not fun. Indeed, our passage above correctly says, “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, it produces a harvest...”

To complete the marathon of Christianity, we will need to change our behaviors. Though we know that as redeemed Christians, “all things are permissible (1 Corinthians)” and that we are entirely free from legalism (Galatians), not everything is beneficial. Can Angela eat foods high in fat content, drink excessively, sleep late, and train infrequently and still be a marathon runner? Sure, but the likelihood of her finishing the race and looking good to others during it is pretty slim. Likewise, can a Christian continue in their old patterns of living and still be forgiven by God? Absolutely, but the probability of them finishing life as a deeply committed Christian is pretty low. Moreover, it is doubtful they can ever become the witnesses, or example, for the Gospel God intended them to become without engaging in the spiritual disciplines of a deeply committed Christian. Hauling ourselves out of bed early to read the bible, pray, make confessions, gather with others in a small group, and serving in the community are not initially “pleasant” behaviors. Making a monthly tithe—that is to say, giving 10% of our income to Christ—as well as making offerings from the abundance of our resources, is not initially fun. Christian behaviors are hard work. But a consistent approach to the spiritual disciplines reaps the “peaceful fruit of righteousness” in our lives. Additionally, they create in us character that is attractive to others and thus we become a good witness.

Like in the Galatians passage we looked at last time, Hebrews speaks to our freedoms. But it also calls us to be holy, not a function of our at-one-ness (atonement) with God, but as a choice to bring glory to him in a Franciscan way (preaching without words).

Finally, like in successfully completing a marathon, we are going to need training partners and running buddies. I have started three marathons—Marine Corps D.C. Marathon, The Rhode Island Marathon, and the Kansas City Marathon. I have only finished two. For the DC and KC Marathons, I recruited a partner or partners to run a significant portion of the race with me. I also befriended a fellow runner to collaborate with me and share the journey. Also, both the DC and KC marathons fell on days that had near perfect running weather. However, in the Rhode Island Marathon, I did not think I needed a partner. After all, I had already successfully completed a marathon in DC just a few years before—how tough could this be? And then on the day the race fell, a classic “Noreaster” winter storm hit, making the conditions really cold and windy. More than ½ of the field of racers did not show up for the start. Most of the competitors dropped out after the first two hours of cold/driving rain. By mile 23, I was running alone in a remote part of the course and was getting chilled. Then I saw it. I saw my own car parked in a lot, driven by the support crew for a friend who was running her first marathon. The temptation of a warm, easy route to the finish was too much. I quit, alone and dejected yet warm and dry in my nice, cozy car. In the last verses of our passage today, the author speaks to the necessity of working together as a community, “see to it that no one else falls short of the grace...” Christianity, like marathons, should not be attempted as a lone ranger. Cozy comforts and easy ways out are too numerous. We as a church must live together, holding each other accountable to the disciplines of Christ. We must finish this race to the glory of God.