

Run the Path of Peace and Holiness (Heb.12.12-14)

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Hebrews 12:12-14 ¹² Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. ¹⁴ Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Introduction

In the text before us today, the author to the Hebrews continues the image of the foot race and narrows his concern to two strange things for the world in which we live. He puts peace and holiness together in striking ways: peace with everyone and holiness as a requirement for entering heaven: **Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord** (12.14). Is this realistic? How can we live at peace with *everyone*? How can we, sinners that we are, make any *claim to holiness* here and *for* heaven hereafter?

Well, peace and holiness are vital aspects of the race we are to run as Christians; in fact, they make up the turf where our feet are to land. So, today I want to direct your attention to running the path of peace and holiness. We will do this in three steps: the way to run, the path to run, and the reason to run.

1A. The way to run

The fact that there are opposing forces within and without (sin that besets us, 12.1; the hostility of sinners, 12.3-4) shows that the race is intense and demands soldier-like dedication. Clearly, the image of the athlete indicates the intensity that running the race requires. That is why he returns to this theme after his discussion of chastening (12.5-11).

We already know some things about the way we are to run this race. The very idea that it is a race indicates that the Christian life reflects the endurance of an athletic runner: **let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,** ² **looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.** Now the emphasis narrows to the straight pathway of peace and holiness with some magnification of the way to run. He gives us a twofold way (or two ways) to race to the finish line: prepare in earnest and engage with determination.

1) Preparation

Consider the runner in a difficult race who gives up: he will no longer use his hands to aid momentum. His hands will hang loose and catch the wind rather than being part of his energetic rhythm of legs, arms, and hands. To run with hands *drooping* is to run without serious effort. They need to be lifted and the weak knees have to be strengthened. Drooping hands and weakened knees lead to discouragement in running and difficulty in maintaining a straight course: hence the exhortation to make straight paths for your feet, which is a graphic way of saying prepare your feet (and all the members of your body) for running a straight line.

Notably, things can go from bad to worse if you do not prepare properly. If you do not strengthen weak knees then a limp may turn into immobility; you will go from being lame to being disjointed. On the other hand, if you strengthen weak knees by energetic effort on straight paths, then you move in the other direction from being lame to healing. The connection of means and ends is sure; it is God-ordained. For example, my wife went to the doctor with a chronic sore arm. She had intense pain when she raised it above her head. He said, "You have to exercise it; climb the wall with your fingers. If you do not stretch it out, you may develop stone shoulder; you may lose the ability to raise your arm." He was telling her that she has to work through the pain to keep the joints lubricated and in good shape. A physical therapist had recommended a rope over a nail. What she can do is use the good arm to help the weak arm by pulling down with

one arm to stretch the other arm up. Remember, as it is with physical health, so it is with spiritual health. The way to spiritual muscles with strong joints is spiritual exercise rather than laziness. Preparation is half the battle.

2) Engagement

How does the author state the way of this running in one word? He states it with the word “strive.” This is a strong word. It means to run after, to seek after, to pursue, and even to persecute. Just think about the persistence and determination of a persecutor. Therefore, you are to keep your feet in the running lane with persistence and determination.

Thus, both the preparation and the engagement suggest nothing less than strenuous effort. There is some heavy-duty work to do in being a Christian. This is not for the faint of heart; it is not for those who look back from the plow: **Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God"** (Lk. 9.62). You have to simply get “junk yard dog mean” with earnest preparation and determined resolve to run the race of your life, the race that is your life, and run it for dear life. Thus, the way to run is by preparation in earnest and engagement with determination.

2A. The path to run

Clearly, the author continues to use the image of the foot race by adding detail to things he has already said, so, it is important, again, that we define what it means to run the race of your life.

In general, and to recap the earlier section, when you think back in the text, you have to immediately conclude that in view is the race of faith. It is the life of those who live by faith to the preservation of their souls (10.39, **we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls**). The author is exhorting you to run the race of persevering faith. But now he narrows his focus to two things, peace and holiness. Your life is a journey of peace and holiness, the journey is a race. So, run the race set before you, run the race of your life. As odd as it may sound in our world, *run for peace* and *run for holiness!* That is the path of this Christian running in general, but the author gets down to particulars. When he does this, he goes beyond preaching to meddling. Consider what he says about peace and holiness when he particularizes. **Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord** (12.14).

1B. First, he commands that we strive for peace with all

The language of the text does not have the word men (or everyone); it has “with all.” We need context to get his precise point. It cannot mean “all people without exception” because that is impossible for creatures limited by time and space (likewise, that is not the case in 2.9 as the context there shows). To whom then does he refer? On one hand, the language is imprecise, which suggests that unbelievers are in view. On the other hand, the nature of this letter to the church suggests that “all” must be inclusive of the Christian family. So, it is both. We have the duty to strive after peace with *all kinds of people* whether they are believers or unbelievers.

The particulars make the point with power because the need to strive after peace presupposes the turmoil that clinging sin and unbelieving sinners bring to the table of human relationships. There is great difficulty maintaining peace in this fallen world, so, we are to run the race of a peace-maker “as much as is possible” on our part (as Paul states it in Rom.12.16-18 where both the family and outsiders are in view: ¹⁶ **Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited.** ¹⁷ **Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.** ¹⁸ **If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.**). Jesus also called for peace with one another (Mk. 9.50). Sadly, we break this command often within the churches. For example, debate is good and necessary, but the challenge is to maintain the right spirit of debate for enrichment and mutual up building. Here is where we often fail our Lord. However, peacemaking is not just for formal church debates; it relates to the calm of the home and household of faith. A negative attitude and an unwillingness to receive instruction is a spirit of

“debate” that breeds disharmony. Instead of manifesting silent-divisive-debate spirit, you aim for the calm of heart that the pure in heart possess in their open-heartedness to all claims of truth. Then “debate” is a warm fact in both the home and the household of faith. That is the cement that holds Christian fellowship together.

Therefore, the strengthening of weak knees includes helping one another. The OT text in mind is Isaiah 35: **They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.** ³ **Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.** ⁴ **Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you."** ⁵ **Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;** ⁶ **then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy...**⁸ **And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness... the redeemed shall walk there (2-9).** Note how this looks ahead to the work of Christ (**the eyes of the blind shall be opened**) and to the time of final glory when the saints shall see God (**see the glory of the Lord, v. 2**). We do not heal like Jesus healed; we help people find healing by being physical therapists of the heart and spirit.

We are back again to one anothering love: ²³ **Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.** ²⁴ **And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,** ²⁵ **not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Heb. 10.23-25).** And we have the caution regarding how deceitful sin actually is: ¹² **Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.** ¹³ **But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3.12-13).** Willingness in the right spirit of debate is peacemaking.

2B. Second, he commands that we pursue the holiness that is necessary

The holiness here is the kind that is needed for seeing God: **Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.** These are crisp and sobering words. What kind of holiness is he talking about? We can summarize it in three simple notions: it is heart holiness, family holiness, and dynamic holiness.

1) Heart holiness

Of course, there is a phony pursuit of holiness as exemplified in the sanctimony, pride, and hypocrisy of the Pharisees that Jesus condemned. They were ostentatious seeing the applause of men (seeking their own glory in the way of religion and piety). True holiness is first a matter of the heart; it has the motivation of bringing praise to God; that is the driving force in the private relationship of the Christian and His God.

Still, it does manifest itself in *public* works, but not with fanfare. We might say that the heart-holy people work as quietly as possible, as Jesus did His miracles in as humble a way as possible (Mat. 12.15-21). Of course, it is public and that side of it is the way that men see them and give glory to God. It is single-minded love for God; seeking only His honor and glory. The aim is to see God in His glory and not your name up in pious lights.

2) Family holiness

It takes peace-loving, peace-making one anothering love to stay on the path of holiness! In Proverbs 4, you have the exhortation to ponder the path of your feet, keep your eyes directly forward, and do not swerve to the right or to the left: (v. 27). In this light, you cannot sever family love from holiness or holiness from family love. Without the pursuit of peace, love, harmony, and mutuality within the family, you break the conjunction that ought not to be broken: pursue peace *and* the kind of holiness that is necessary to see God. You cannot leave out the “and.” So, the kind of holiness in mind is family holiness.

3) Dynamic holiness

This kind of holiness has nothing static about it. It involves spiritual planting, watering, and weeding too! The weeding is part of the reality of holiness. It hints at the dynamic nature of things here.

Let us put the full picture before us. This athletic imagery illustrates the effort that is to go into the goal of peace and holiness. These are goals that stretch out in front of us. They are goals associated with looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith. It is helpful to fix on

the notion of a goal in this context. Peace and holiness are necessary for eternal life, for seeing the Lord. They must be attained or heaven will not be attained. However, *attaining them is both real but incomplete*. We must not go to the left or to the right on this point either. There is a real attainment required and it comes by the strenuous effort of that athletic competition. Still, it is incomplete. It is peace and holiness tainted by sin. The answer to this tension is the work of Christ that stands behind the *therefores* of this chapter. Thus, (from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, Mat. 5.3-9), we know that a number of things go into this striving *at the same time*: a) due recognition of our sinfulness and sins (poverty of spirit), b) hunger for righteousness, c) exposure to the full teaching of God's word, to among other things, be peacemakers, d) exposure instills poverty of spirit and repentance, e) repentance means that we see our need of righteousness, so we return again hungry for holiness on the path of peace.

Therefore, holiness involves the use of the means of grace and fellowship with God and His people. It takes conversation in the things of God that has mutual benefit. You must take up the means to plant, water, *and weed* the garden of your spiritual life for heart, family, and dynamic holiness; that is the kind of holiness that goes with the promise to the pure in heart: you shall see God (Mat. 5.8).

3A. The reason to run

There are two things indicated by the "therefores" of this text (12.1 and 12.12). One is to focus on your Father's discipline and the other is to focus on your brother's work.

1B. Your Father's discipline

We have to think weighty thoughts about chastening at this point because it is sandwiched within the treatment of the Christian race; it is a highly important consideration that goes with running the race of your life.

Therefore, you should fear the chastening of the Lord. This is not a servile fear; it is awe-filled respectful fear. Moreover, it is a comforting fear because with David you can say, "Your rod and staff comfort me" (Ps. 23). In the dynamic of "heaven bound holiness" or heavenly holiness (this kind of holiness), there is tension between real growth in holy living and the continuation of sin-tainted living. Right here, in the midst of the athletic-like effort and much perplexity, knowledge of divine discipline is a great reason to run that motivates and encourages running. Here is how it does so. Because of His discipline, you know that though you meander your way along, though you falter and fail in the process, He will not let you stray out of the bounds of the running lane. Your work, your walk, your race is hemmed in by His correction.

2B. Your Brother's work

Of all the examples of Hebrews 11 to encourage faithful obedience, you come finally to the example *par excellence*, your Lord Jesus Christ. Keep your eyes on Him with determined resolve and singleness of purpose to run the race of your life by heartfelt, earnest, and determined learning at His feet and by heartfelt, earnest, and determined living by His will for His honor and glory.

He promises forward progress versus backward movement; He promises grace here and glory hereafter. But it is in a process; it is a dynamic holiness. In this process, by this means, we make progress in peace and holiness, the kind that is required: the kind that involves clinging to Christ for dear life (beginning to end) and that is dutiful before Him in love and gratitude. These are not stagnant waters. There is growth; growth in holiness being fashioned more and more in the image of God.

Of course, the final ground is the work of Christ as your great high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. His work stands behind the Father's discipline; that is why we can look to Christ and see the rod, as it were, in His hand. This is the final ground, the ultimate ground. You must work and work hard, even strive like a persecutor. But you are to not only know and do

your duty; you are to also know that your victory has its ultimate basis in the work of Christ on your behalf, once for all on the cross, and continuing forever at the right hand of the Father on high. You must run this race; you must put forth effort and you will hold on firm to the end if you share in Christ (Heb. 3.14, because holding on is necessary for sharing in Christ, then sharing in Christ is sufficient for holding on: **For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end**).

Conclusion: motivation flows from these things in combination

Because of His example, His promise, and His effectual working, we have to fix our eyes *on Him at the end of the track* and fix our eyes firmly *on the pathway to Him* which is the path of peace and holiness. So, you are to work hard; put forth strenuous effort in running for peace and running for holiness. Surely, you long to see Him in the final day, therefore, you long for Him all along the way. You have to say and sing of this longing: Longing, longing for Jesus, I have a longing in my heart for Him.

May we fall down before the majesty of our God in heartfelt acknowledgement of our sins; may the Holy Spirit teach us the way of holiness; may He cause us to hear and heed these words about our duty to put forth strenuous effort while we rest in Christ as both the author and finisher of our faith; may the Holy Spirit teach us to love the Lord Jesus more fully and therefore to serve Him more gladly. To the triune God be all glory now and forevermore, amen.