

Sermon for Pentecost 13 (Series C)

Text: Hebrews 12:1-13

Preached on 08-26-2007

Introduction:

Have you ever watched the Olympics? It's kind of exciting! In fact, I sometimes can't help fantasizing about being gifted enough to compete in some of those events; to be making a bicycle dance in a freestyle event, to be zooming down a hill a hundred plus miles per hour in a bobsled event, to be spiking a volleyball on a warm, sunny beach, or any number of other things. But for all the events I'd like to be in, there is one event that I have absolutely no desire to be a part of. Anyone who knows me well knows that I really dislike running. I can't even stand running short distances. So I can't imagine running twenty-six miles all in one race. Yes, there are thousands of people out there who would say, "Come on. It's invigorating running all those miles." Still, that kind of marathon event isn't for me. Because of all the grueling miles, one after another, I expect that a marathon event isn't for the great majority of us.

But in our text for today the writer to the Hebrews draws a parallel between a marathon runner and the life of a Christian. In essence he says that we are in a race of sorts. And wouldn't you know it, it's a marathon. "Oh no; that's not for me! I can't do it! I'll never make it!" On our own, that's very true. That's why the writer to the Hebrews offers us the encouragement he does. He realizes that the goal of the Christian is not to win the race. Jesus has already done that! Our goal, then, is to simply...

Theme: Run To Finish The Race!

Part I: With great perseverance

Part II: Without any interference

Part I: With great perseverance

A person running a marathon can't run wherever he wants. He can't say, "Hey, there's a shortcut. I think I'll take that way instead." Every once in awhile we hear of marathon runners doing exactly that; maybe catching a ride in a car even! But what happens to those runners? Because they fail to follow the course that has been marked out for them, they get disqualified.

It's the same with the spiritual race we're involved in. God tells us to, "**Run with perseverance the race marked out for us**" (v. 1). Notice that we're not told to run with quickness or great speed. We're not in a

100 meter dash. We're in a marathon. It's going to be a long, grueling race. It's going to require us to hang in there, even when we feel like quitting. Dropping out of the race, though, disqualifies us for the prize. That is why staying the course in our Christian lives requires the kind of hope and perseverance that knows where this race ends and can't wait to get there. It means being willing to put up with hardship and making sacrifices in the short term in order to enjoy greater blessing in the long term. Spiritually speaking, that requires the conviction that Heaven is as good as God says it is and that Jesus has absolutely secured our place there. He has won the race for us! That knowledge pushes us to keep on running, no matter how long or hard our individual race is. We do this by running with great perseverance.

Application:

Perseverance was once a great American virtue. It explained why our ancestors took a disease-ridden ship to the new world; why pioneers endured the hazards of dangerous and hard-to-travel trails; why young men went to war to preserve freedom for their families, why parents saved money so their children could go to college. In each case, the goal or final destination made the journey all worthwhile. Our culture is quite different today! It prefers instant gratification as opposed to patient endurance (or perseverance). The founder of JC Penny, for example, built his empire by *running* his store on a cash only basis. He didn't believe in putting his customers in debt. Today, however, nearly all of JC Penny's profit is made through store credit. Almost every business decision today is based on the same short-term bottom line rather than on the long-term good of the company and its customers.

Have you noticed the impact the loss of perseverance in our culture has had on churches? Go around! Visit some of the other churches in the area. The message is less and less about staying the course that leads to and ends in Heaven, and more and more about how to have a happier and more prosperous life here and now. Church members are becoming consumers, church-shoppers, looking for what meets their needs and preferences, not how they can sacrifice and serve to bring the Gospel message to future generations. Yes, Biblical Christianity has become the road less traveled. That is why, more than ever, we need to run with great perseverance.

Transition:

Trusting that Jesus has already won our race provides all the strength, energy, and determination we need to *Run To Finish The Race!* Not

only is it important to run with great perseverance. It is even more important to run...

Part II: Without any interference

The Olympic Games started in Greece in 776 BC. Do you know what kind of clothing the people back then wore? They had long flowing robes that reached all the way down to their ankles. Can you imagine trying to run a race wearing something like that? Well, neither could the ancient Olympians. They didn't want to be tripped up or hindered by all that clothing. They didn't want to be weighed down by it either. So they threw it off. They got rid of anything that would hinder their progress, slow them down, or trip them up.

It's the same with the spiritual race we're involved in. God tells us to, **"Throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles"** (v. 1). Boy isn't that a vivid picture? There is nothing that Satan wants more than to have us get all tangled up in sin. And it happens, doesn't it? For example, maybe you couldn't bear to tell the truth about where you were, or what you did, or how much you spent. And that leads to telling another lie and another lie, until we're hopelessly entangled in a web of lies. Or maybe it's the appeal of human reason that trips you up, thinking "It doesn't make sense that a loving God would send people to Hell just because they don't believe in Jesus. I can't buy that." What's happened here? A person has been tripped up by his own sinful reason. That is why we need to run without any interference.

Application:

Take a look at your life as a Christian and you'll see all kinds of things that have the potential to trip you up and knock you out of your race forever. And many of them seem so innocent. For example, maybe you have a tendency to complain about your job or worry about paying the next mortgage payment. Perhaps you have a soft spot for drunkenness or adult entertainment. Or maybe you make it a habit of filling your Sundays with so many activities that there is no time left to worship the God THAT SAVED YOU! Each of these sins can knock you out of your race faster than you can snap your fingers. Each one of them can trip you up to the point that you become disqualified for the prize.

The writer to the Hebrews explains precisely how this happens. It's mainly because of a lack of discipline. Discipline is at the very heart of

athletic competition, from the physical training to the day of the big race. Some runners quit when the going gets tough. Staying the course, therefore, requires discipline. People who are uncertain and insecure often look down at their feet. They end up going nowhere. When people look up toward their goal, however, they become purposeful and confident. That is why the writer to the Hebrews encourages us to, **“Fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (v. 2)**. In other words, Jesus is what our faith is all about. His perfect life and innocent suffering and death made Him the object of our salvation. The Bible says that, **“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12)**. Faith, then, is about keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus Alone. Doing that requires concentrated discipline: Discipline in coming to church on a more regular basis; discipline in reading our Bible at home. Doing these things will enable us to run our race without any interference.

Conclusion:

We’ve been talking an awful lot about the race God has given us to run. What about the race God gave Jesus to run? What was it that enabled Jesus to keep on running in the face of such opposition and hatred? How could He keep moving forward when things got so bad? Love! Love for you! Love for me too! Trusting in His Father’s plan, Jesus knew that everything He would endure on His way to the cross; everything He would suffer from the cross, would ultimately serve a good and eternal purpose: Namely our salvation!

You realize, don’t you, that we can have the same confidence when faced with really bad times in life? We can rest assured that no matter how bad things get; no matter how much we hurt, **“Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39)**. God made His great love for us known at our Baptism. That was the day when God brought us to faith in Jesus Christ, firing the starting gun on a race He intended to last our entire life. In Jesus Alone, God empowers us to run (1) with great perseverance. In Jesus Alone, God gives us the freedom to run (2) without any interference. All-in-all, we *Run To Finish The Race!* Amen!