

tion of how bitterness cannot be allowed to go unchecked. You have to actively keep bitterness and kill it. Bitterness (and really any sin) isn't something where you think you can manage it. Bitterness isn't intended to be managed – but killed. When bitterness goes unchecked it doesn't naturally just go away. If bitterness is allowed to take root, it leads to many being defiled...it must be uprooted. It's not a coincidence that just before the warning of bitterness, we're reminded how important it is to be aware of the grace of God. Having an eternal perspective that is aware of the grace of God and balanced with thankfulness for what He's done is the perfect RX for bitterness.

Finally, as we are accountable to others, Hebrews 12:16-17 remind us we're called to guard against immorality and unholiness. Esau is the example of one who was short-sighted and failed to think with an eternal perspective that strived after holiness and righteousness.

The end of the chapter in Genesis 25 details how Esau was willing to trade his birthright for a bowl of soup. He comes in from being outside hunting all day and exclaims that if he doesn't eat immediately, he's going to die. So, he traded all the privilege and rights of his future for the immediate fulfillment of a bowl of soup. Now, before you start to try to defend him for his action because hunger is a real concern, the author of Genesis exposes Esau and comments he did it because he despised his birthright. He was short-sighted in trading his future to accommodate his immediate appetite. Later, he'd realize the consequences of his actions. But, it never led to changed perspective or lifestyle.

The author of Hebrews uses Esau as the example and challenges them not to be so short-sighted that they sacrifice the eternal to fulfill their immediate sexual appetite. The word is fornication – the sexual immoral desires that are immediate urges and appetites, but not eternally focused or minded. It is a challenge for believers to not sacrifice the short-term fulfillment of their sexual appetite for the future goal of holiness and righteousness they're supposed to be pursuing as their long-term goal.

As believers we should exhort and push one another to towards God's grace, to stay away from bitterness and to pursue holiness

and purity.

As we leave this morning and go about our week, look with eyes to see the brother or sister you may encourage, strengthen and make straight paths as they run the Christian race, and be willing to engage in biblical community of accountability – as we remind one another of God's grace, guard against bitterness, and pursue holiness and the fruit of righteousness.

“The 40-Yard Dash Vs. 200-Mile Ultra Relay”

Sermon Series: “Greater Than: A Study Through the Book of Hebrews”

NORTHVIEW BIBLE CHURCH



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Hebrews 12:12-17

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This morning, even as we speak, the Spokane Marathon, Half-Marathon and 10K are taking place downtown. Think about that. People are willingly participating and even paying to run 3.5, 13 and 26 miles and face the rigors of the race. Have I mentioned how glad I am to be here with you this morning? Now, in many ways those are individual races. You may train together, but you can't have someone help you run and you're competing against other racers trying to get a personal record on time and beat other runners. However, they do have marathon relays – where you run as a team and break up the marathon into sections. Did you know there are ultra-relays that sometimes cover up to 200 miles? Usually, they span over multiple days (as you run throughout the entire night) and through various terrains. You form a team that breaks up the distance and then competes and runs the race together. You usually end up running the distance of a marathon, but there is one runner at a time for the team. As the designated person runs, the others ride along the course and encourage, support and then prepare for times when they need to relay and trade out to start running their portion of the rigorous race.

Here's the interesting thing – you have to run the portion of the race designated and allotted to you. Some have straight and level sections, some are running uphill, some run during the daytime, others get the middle of the night. But, here's the thing: you compete and either succeed or fail as a team. Team members cannot break off and run on their own. It's a team event that depends on functioning and succeeding in a community of runners.

Now, maybe just the thought of running 200 miles is exhausting. The reality is you have done your best just to get up and drag yourself here this morning. You are physically tired from the project at work, rest is elusive as you wrestle over a stressful challenge, or maybe the kids aren't sleeping at night. Maybe it's the relational tension that challenges you and leaves you restless throughout the day and into the night, from a relationship that was once vibrant and refreshing is now challenging and full of difficulties. Or maybe you

are spiritually tired where as we have read through Hebrews 12, you understand and feel the struggle of being under spiritual discipline and training to grow you in your faith as you pursue following after God.

As you are in the midst of this race and may be tired, there is the temptation to shrink back or maybe just give up. There's the temptation to isolate, trying not to get hurt, embarrassed or challenged. But, instead we're called (even commanded) to live and engage the race by realizing we do it in community – not on our own. We're commanded to engage in accountability with one another, to strengthen and encourage one another, and to realize the need to strive together for the goal (not against one another).

This morning as we look at God's Word and continue our study in Hebrews 12, I hope that we would be encouraged by the truth that may be fitly spoken as encouragement for the one who is weak and tired – who needs to be helped. But, for the one who says, I'm not tired, I feel great, there's a command to live mindful of those around us who are in need. As believers, we are running not an individual race, but a relay that is intended to be run in community.

The author of Hebrews has set Jesus as the author and finisher (the ultimate example we set our eyes on as we live). He's also given a cast of others who have gone before and lived out their faith; now to those who are facing challenges and seeing the hard-work of living out their faith in adversity, he challenges them to see the discipline and training as a worthy endeavor that will bring about their taking part and sharing in Christ's holiness as we bear fruit of righteousness. But, we want to see that it happens as a community and in the community of believers.

If you have your Bible, turn with me and read Hebrews 12:12-17. As I read, I want you to stand and realize that believers are being addressed together – as a plural you. Not just as an individual, but a collective body.

Read Hebrews 12:12-17

The author of Hebrews has been emphasizing for believers to recognize the Christian

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walk is not an individual event, but it's actually intended to involve a community of believers. Throughout the letter, and especially in Hebrews 12, the author has been emphasizing that he's interested in the entire body. You can see it as he addresses the crowd: Let us, we, our, and as we read through each time you see "you," it's the plural form talking to a group. If it's a race, it requires other partners to complete the long endeavor.

The Christian Walk is a Community Event.

The Christian walk is not an individual sprint, but a team race where we are called to not only be interested, but there's the expectation, responsibility and opportunity to be actively involved in the welfare and success of the race of others.

The author of Hebrews reminds his audience the Christian walk is not a sprint, but instead a long process that requires endurance (there's imagery of it being a long race). If it's a race, it's more like a 200-mile ultra-relay, instead of a 40-yard dash. Think about it, if the Christian walk were a 40-yard dash, you wouldn't need endurance, and you wouldn't need others to have in the relay. I've never seen a 40-yard dash relay where you have 4 people who run about 10 yards each. Instead, the imagery calls us to realize the importance of having endurance over a long period of time, while we're involved and interested with the lives of others along the way.

There are three commands given in verses 12-14 that require we have an interest in "one another."

Look at 12:12, strengthen one another. Strengthen the one who has hands that are weak and knees that are feeble. The readers are facing outside pressure for their faith, they are enduring discipline and training that is bringing about their holiness and righteousness – and it's expected that it may lead to the potential weariness of the work.

The command may lead readers to recall the encouragement from Isaiah 35:3, where Israel was collectively called to encourage and bear up under the burdens they faced. But, ultimately the encouragement was rooted in the goodness and promises of God. Similarly, there is a corporate aspect to care for one another, meet the person at their point of need, and strengthen those who may be weak. If you are struggling, let me encourage you

that you are not alone. You were never intended to be on your own. There's an expectation you will be strengthened and encouraged, even as you are weak and weary – by others in the body. It requires admitting that you're in need of help. But, when we do that, we open ourselves up to the possibility of being ministered to in a community of believers. Maybe you're strong and encouraged right now. Who is the person this week that God has placed in your life, or you need to be aware of to encourage, strengthen and minister to this week? As the body of Christ, there's an opportunity to be the hands and feet that minister to one another. Let's not miss out on the responsibility and opportunity this week.

Verse thirteen continues the idea of helping those in need by commanding, make straight paths. There's imagery of removing the stumbling blocks that may trip you up. It's leveling the ground so others will be able to safely travel without getting injured. It's an environment where there is the ability to heal instead of continually being disjointed and put in difficult positions.

Proverbs 4 refers to straight paths and it's based on having wisdom to follow God's instructions. You see, it's a good reminder that the healing and strengthening doesn't just come from community that commiserates together in difficulty. It's intentional relationship that points one another to God's truth, reminding one another of those who have gone before us, celebrating the goal that will be jointly enjoyed as share together in Jesus Christ's holiness and righteousness.

What a good reminder that if you are hurting, you need to be surrounded by others who provide a safe place of healing and recovery. The church should be a place where we point one another to holiness (not compromising the righteousness of Jesus Christ), but also creating an environment where you can heal, recover and grow stronger – with the point being that once you are healed, you continue the race of pursuing Jesus Christ by faith and living differently in the world. This is the benefit of Stephen's Ministry – where you have people who come alongside others and walk with them, attempting to make paths straight that bring healing to those who are tired or hurting. Now, here's the interesting thing about the commands. As we strengthen one another, as we make straight paths, the next command in 12:14 is to pursue peace. It has the idea of dili-

gently chasing after and striving to achieve or reach something. It's not passively looking for it, but it's an active persistence in being at peace with one another. There's an assumption that as you live in close proximity to one another, for all the benefits of strengthening and encouraging, it can be messy. I love the idea of striving not with one another, but striving and fiercely fighting to live at peace with one another.

It's worth noting - watch throughout Scripture. Whenever living in community is mentioned, there will be the challenge and reminder that we're to live at peace with one another. There's the command to be gentle to one another, that we'll be patient and that we'll be long-suffering with the differences of others. It's like the authors know – if you live in community, there will be plenty of opportunity (even the need) to value and pursue peace. The goal isn't just to stay away from the challenging person. If you see them in the store, you're not called to run down the opposite aisle before they see you. It's that you actively pursue making things right with the person, chasing and pursuing peace.

The pursuit of peace is connected with holiness in the lives of believers. We're reminded people are watching our lives and how we navigate through trials, difficulties, relationships. As we run through the Christian race, peace and the pursuit of holiness should be identifying characteristics. Does an outside, hurting world see holiness and living peaceably together as the first recognizable attributes? As we live out our faith realizing it's not just an individual event, we're wise to keep an eternal perspective, not a short-sighted view. If the Christian walk was brief and without challenges there'd be no need for relying upon other people and putting ourselves at risk of living in community, where we may be hurt and have to pursue peace. We'd act differently if there wasn't a long-term goal of holiness and righteousness for the body of believers that we were looking to as our goal.

But if and when we understand it's an enduring race that demands persistence, we need to be willing to see the need for others being actively engaged in our lives. It's short-sighted to not be in accountability relationships.

The danger of short-sightedness is spurning accountability and thinking we can do everything on our own. Since we op-

erate as a community, there's a need for accountability as we live out our faith. With an eternal perspective, we're wise to open ourselves up to accountability with others to ensure we don't go off-course and disqualify ourselves.

Hebrews 12:15 creates the responsibility for us to care for the spiritual walk of others. We're called to give attention so others don't miss out on the grace of God. We must be willing to think of others instead of just ourselves. There should be a concern for the well-being and spiritual growth of the other.

When things get difficult as we'll inevitably face challenges, you can't opt out and just quit. You must continue on, which is why it's so important to have others who can help encourage you along the way. I was thinking about how important it is to take advantage of Side by Side mentoring for women, or accountability groups for the men, LIFE Groups that are offered for everyone, where you'll be challenged to find people who are deeply invested and can speak into your life. Who can you call out to when you are in need? Do you have someone? Are you making yourself available where people can call you if they ever need help?

As we push people to receive and appropriate the grace of God, living in accountability relationships should help as guard against any bitterness. The image is that if the root of bitterness is allowed to take root, it will spring up quickly and lead to trouble. Bitterness that goes unchecked doesn't naturally go away. Left undone, bitterness will quickly populate and lead to corruption. Therefore, it must be uprooted before it defiles others.

I have a friend who shared about how a grove of aspen trees functions. Aspen trees have roots that run about six inches underground and create a web that connects and quickly populates by springing up new tree shoots. In Utah, there's a large grove of aspen that shares the same root system. This friend had an aspen in his backyard here in Spokane that kept sprouting up new tree shoots. Not wanting a grove that was quickly overtaking his backyard and the backyard of his neighbor required the attention and activity of not allowing the roots to take hold and keep sprouting. The hard work and attention meant not allowing the aspen grove to take root and lead to multiple aspen trees taking root and growing. As I heard the account, it's a perfect illustra-