



“Winning” - part 2

Hebrews 12

by Pastor Tim Dodson
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Hebrews 12:12-29

12 Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed. 14

Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: 15 looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; 16 lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. 17 For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears. 18 For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, 19 and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. 20 (For they could not endure what was commanded: "And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow." 21 And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.") 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, 23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, 24 to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel. 25 See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven, 26 whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven." 27 Now this, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. 29 For our God is a consuming fire.

Living out the Hebrew's faith requires a public walk. It is always both a blessing and a curse when we are able to keep our sin... as well as God's correction ...private. So often God is quite patient as He waits for us to self-correct. Yet when a private correction fails to wake us up and change our direction, it seems inevitable that such goes public. In a church community it is hard to hide who we really are and I think it *should* be hard.

Its Mardi Gras time in New Orleans right now. Did you ever wonder why they dress up in masks and costumes for Mardi Gras? It's in order to party clandestinely and then be able to begin Lent immediately following days of hell-raising and nobody is the wiser. But this isn't Mardi Gras up here, gang. It's real life and real faith and real community. Here you don't get to pretend everything is ok when it's not, and furthermore, you don't have to. We are in this thing together. That's one of the reasons we have this thing called church, this thing called "Intentional Christian Community." We are living this thing out on purpose.

Naturally, we want to believe that if we're good boys and girls, everything will come up roses for us. That there is a righteous ying yang going on. But one of the realities of adulthood is to discover that such a realm does not exist. It's a pipe dream. A "Peter Pan" world. Children get cancer and die, accidents come to all of us, we get sick, we struggle financially, we argue with our spouses and we don't get things we want. For Christians too.

Our understanding concerning God's "wrath" tends toward the likes of lightning strikes, tornados, earthquakes, and sinkholes swallowing us up when we are sleeping in our bed. But the wrath, the chastening of God, can be manifested in His simply turning you over to your sin...with all of its consequences. Romans 1:18 speaks of God's revealed wrath and goes on to paint that picture.

Romans 1:28 says, “*And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,...*”

So just because you are able to walk away from God's correction in what appears to “be one piece,” our surprise epiphany usually comes on down the road when we find ourselves in the full blown manifestation of a crashing life. Ironically, sometimes His “wrath” is to simply let you have what you want so badly that you are unwilling to listen to Him concerning. Note Romans 1:28 says “they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer” which means they *did* as some point acknowledge Him but later decided not to continue to do so.

While God most definitely is not aloof or unsympathetic when it comes to our pain, His attitude may again be somewhat more parental than we would like at times. And I, too, would not want to minimize anyone's trials, pains, and difficulties, especially when I am not always fully cognizant of the fullness of what they might be enduring. That being said, we also must acknowledge that it is a fact that we often want to handle our pain like a child with a boo-boo. You know the scene: a child trips and falls and you would think that the kid lost a leg. I bring this up because I want you to notice what God is saying in this passage about how we are to deal with the issues of discipline, correction, hard times.

Verses 12-13 say, “*So take a new grip with your tired hands and strengthen your weak knees. Mark out a straight path for your feet so that those who are weak and lame will not fall but become strong.*” (NLT)

That is sort of the scriptural way of nicely saying, “Ok, *suck it up.*” I say this with the utmost caution because, again, I do not want to trivialize what you might be enduring today. But it's here in scripture and we must address it. And we must admit that oftentimes we are not the strongest of species when it comes to pain and stress! We have become a rather soft and essentially weak people, particularly here in America. It often doesn't take much to bring us to our knees mentally and emotionally. That's why we're popping pills and flooding the offices of psychotherapists. And, sadly, those that claim the mantle of faith are often just as guilty. This passage is trying to tell us that it isn't supposed to be that way...again, especially for believers!

Somehow we have gotten the idea that we aren't ever to feel bad or have a depressing moment. God's answer is for us to make moves in our lives to actually address these issues and actively step away from that realm. But that's so un-American, isn't it? I mean, we want to have our cake and eat it too! And to make matters worse, there are elements of the greater church today that just believes that they don't have to! They believe that to exert effort and discipline ourselves within the faith is the same as biblical works. So if I discipline myself, ...if I say no to the “weights” that slow me down in this race, ...well, I'm just a legalist. A “works” church.

So we whine and complain about our poor financial state, but don't make moves to attain a better paying job or to cut expenses. We complain about our weight, but we don't put down the pizza and chips...or you know...actually *move*. We cough and hack as we stand smoking, claim our drinking habit is a disease instead of a sin, complain about our marriages, our kids, our jobs, our extended families, etc. and yet not move to make things different. We don't go to God, seek His plan, and execute it in obedience. Why would we do that when it's so much easier to whine, not to mention just surrender to our sin?

So much of this letter to the Hebrews is addressing the power and sovereignty of God. How within the realm of salvation we have been positionally sanctified and wholly redeemed ...and all of it outside of anything we personally do. It addresses the fact that we stand now inside the realm of the cross, so we therefore stand inside the circle of power that still emanates from the gospel. God has given us the power to change, the power to walk in holiness, the power to live in righteousness. But He will not force you. He will not make you go there if you refuse Him. If you are sitting back and playing this game where you think God is going to somehow compel you to live holy when you don't have the passion to do so, you are dealing with another Jesus and are not operating within the realm of scripture.

Hyper-Calvinists want to plug their ears here because they clearly don't want to take any responsibility for their living. They want to sin and then claim, “Well, that's not really my fault because God is responsible for everything.” Meaning then, it's sort of God's fault. That's blasphemy, but they don't want to discuss it.

It makes me think of Isaiah 47:10-11, which says, “You felt secure in your wickedness. ‘No one sees me,’ you said. But your ‘wisdom’ and ‘knowledge’ have led you astray, and you said, ‘I am the only one, and there is no other.’ So disaster will overtake you, and you won't be able to charm it away. Calamity will fall upon you, and you won't be able to buy your way out. A catastrophe will strike you suddenly, one for which you are not prepared.”

The fact is, from Genesis to Revelation, scripture absolutely repeatedly teaches a practical sanctification in which you personally and intimately participate in. You are not a puppet! God wants a relationship with you, not a Calvinistic ventriloquist act! He does indeed

solely and personally make right your standing before God. The scripture uses terms like lawyer and mediator. He alone bridges the gap between me and my Father, allowing me access to the throne of God. But to intimate that He does not ask anything in response and, further, does not empower you *to* respond, is painfully unbiblical. That's not my Jesus, and not the one of the Bible either. For that *relational interaction* IS the journey of a faithful maturing life. It's what we understand to be the progressive sanctification He seeks in us. Christ has given us the stuff to walk this walk. Thus we are without excuse if we don't! Many will claim that we don't personally participate in our holiness. Really? Are you really saying that scripture doesn't ask you to obey God?

So the writer, understanding all this argument, says if then, *"Therefore [you] strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and [you] make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed."* Let me ask you, does that sound like the call for you to do something? If the answer is yes, then apparently God **does** want your participation and exert effort! I facetiously poke at this because this is just one of thousands of like passages in the Bible! It's just crazy to believe that God doesn't expect you to have skin in the game! To be "engaged." God is *trying* to do something in you. And how many of us are actually either fighting Him on it or we are just wanting God to do it all because we are lazy and not really in love with Him. We want to ignore all the scriptures concerning free will and Holy Spirit interaction. It's just crazy nonsense...modern day Gnosticism.

He goes on in the next verse to again ask you to do something. He says, "[You] *Pursue peace with all people, and [you pursue] holiness, ...without which no one will see the Lord.*" Let's right here drive the stake into the heart of this false doctrine we have been discussing. Do we all clearly see that we are being asked to actually do something here? To engage ourselves in the process of holiness? For then—*are you ready for this*—it says, ...reading it from the New American Standard: "Pursue [1] peace with all men, and [2] [pursue] the sanctification ...*without which no one will see the Lord.*" What was that? Yes, that's right, YOU pursue (active and present imperative tense, meaning continual and ongoing action) sanctification and holiness (same root word). The original word "pursue" means "to follow or press hard after, pursue with earnestness and diligence in order to obtain, go after with the desire of obtaining."

The great pastor/evangelist William MacDonald says:

"We should also strive for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. What is the holiness referred to here? To answer the question we should remind ourselves that holiness is used of believers in at least three different ways in the NT. First of all, the believer becomes positionally holy at the time of his conversion; he is set apart to God from the world (1 Cor. 1:2; 6:11). By virtue of his union with Christ, he is sanctified forever. This is what Martin Luther meant when he said, "My holiness is in heaven." Christ is our holiness, that is, as far as our standing before God is concerned. Then there is a practical sanctification (1 Thess. 4:3; 5:23). This is what we should be day by day. We should separate ourselves from every form of evil. This holiness should be progressive, that is, we should be growing more and more like the Lord Jesus all the time. Finally, there is complete or perfect sanctification. This takes place when a believer goes to heaven. Then he is forever free from sin. His old nature is removed, and his state perfectly corresponds to his standing. Now which holiness are we to pursue? Obviously it is practical sanctification that is in view. We do not strive after positional sanctification; it is ours automatically when we are born again. And we do not strive after the perfect sanctification that will be ours when we see His face. But practical or progressive sanctification is something that involves our obedience and cooperation; we must cultivate this holiness continually. The fact that we must follow it is proof that we do not fully attain it in this life. You will not gain holiness by standing still. Nobody ever grew holy without consenting, desiring, and agonizing to be holy. Sin will grow without sowing, but holiness needs cultivation. Follow it; it will not run after you. You must pursue it with determination, with eagerness, with perseverance, as a hunter pursues his prey."

The commentator Wuest writes:

"But a difficulty remains! Is it true that we cannot see the Lord without practical sanctification? Yes, there is a sense in which this is true; but let us understand that this does not mean that we earn the right to see God by living holy lives. Jesus Christ is our only title to heaven. What this verse means is that there must be practical holiness as a proof of new life within. If a person is not growing more holy, he is not saved. When the Holy Spirit indwells a person, He manifests His presence by a separated life. It is a matter of cause and effect; if Christ has been received, the rivers of living water will flow."

R.A. Torrey says:

"Here we are taught that we have our own part in sanctification, and that if we are to be sanctified in the fullest sense, sanctification is something that we must pursue, or seek earnestly, if we are to obtain it. While sanctification is God's work, we have our part in it, to make it the object of our earnest desire and eager pursuit." (Torrey, R. A. 1918. *The Fundamental Doctrines of the Christian Faith*. New York George H.: Doran Company)

2 Co 7:1 *"Therefore, having these promises, beloved, **let us cleanse ourselves** from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God."* (Practical sanctification!)

1 Peter 1:14-15 “...as obedient children, **not conforming yourselves** to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, **you also be holy** in all your conduct...”

Rom 6:19 “...**[you] present your members as slaves** to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.”

Now, in light of all of this, let's put this issue to rest. The fact that the pursuance of peace ...and sanctification/holiness ...is present in the same sentence would seem to tie these two together. They may seem unrelated, but once a person has a few years of walking in faith, one's understanding becomes increasingly clear in this matter. When I am not pursuing personal practical sanctification in my life, there are aspects of my flesh which notoriously rise to the surface, ***not the least of which is my pride***. The pursuing of practical and progressive sanctification inevitably drives us to our knees in humility. If I am not pursuing such ...but still claim to be a believer, I will certainly be drowning in selfishness and pride. And nothing causes strife between me and my brother as much as my pride. When I am humble, I allow others to speak into my life. Some folks are so rooted in their pride that you can't tell them anything! And if you try, you are likely to get your head bitten off. So everyone just backs away from these guys. In the end, such individuals find themselves outside of any fellowship because no one has the truth like they do, and they stay home and listen to preaching on the internet where they can critique without debate. We are to “seek peace.” Not live our lives in division and dissention.

John MacArthur explains it this way:

“This verse ... has been a problem for many sincere Christians. At first glance, it seems to be teaching salvation by works—if we successfully pursue peace and sanctification, we will be saved and will see the Lord. The truth is, however, that a person who is not saved cannot pursue either peace or sanctification, at least not successfully. Only the Christian has the ability, through the Holy Spirit, to live in peace and in holiness. “‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked’” (Isa 57:21) and any righteousness men try to produce apart from God is as “a filthy garment” (Isa 64:6). I believe the writer is speaking of practical peace and righteousness. Positionally, in Christ, Christians already are at peace (Ro 5:1-note) and already are righteous (2Cor 5:21), but practically we have a great deal to do (Php 2:12-“Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”). Because we are at peace with God, we should be peacemakers. Because we are counted righteous, we should live righteously. Our practice should match our position. Otherwise the unbeliever will stand back and ask, “Why don't you practice what you preach? If you don't live like Christ says to live, why should I accept Him as my Lord and Savior?” (cf. 1John 2:6). Pursuing peace primarily relates to loving men, and pursuing righteousness primarily to loving God. If we love men, we will be at peace with them, and if we love God we will live righteously.”

Back in verse 5, we were warned not to “take lightly the discipline of the Lord.” The writer had been warning us that when we use our sorrow, difficulty and hardships as a justification to excuse ourselves from holy living, we have “taken lightly the discipline of the Lord.” We can say, “Well, I'm struggling with this or that, I have these desires. God made me. How can He judge me if He's the one that gave me these sinful desires? I'm not doing wrong if it's God's work alone that sanctifies me.” But all of that is just justified sin!

And to justify your shortcomings means you are neglecting, robbing and regarding lightly the very purpose of the difficulties you are dealing with to sanctify you, to make you holy. You may respond to that by claiming, “Well, I don't have anywhere to go on this issue....I have no other option.” That's a lie. Christ was crucified so you could have always someone to run to, somewhere to go. Always. And regarding lightly the Lord's discipline is when you and I use the difficulties of our lives as an excuse to sin, as an excuse to stand down...as a justifying trump card to the will of God in our lives. So to say, “I'm hurting, ...I'm tired, ...I need to feel better. If God isn't going to remove this discomfort...the situation from me, then I'm just going to do what I want.” Of course this always just brings more sorrow and more pain. The factual end is that such a reaction to our trials, our pains, the “no's” in life, ...robs us, slows down or even stops this process of righteousness, holiness, and peace that God desires in your life to grow you and mature you, and of course to bless you.

It's been said that we are the first generation that has ever lived that has latched upon the idea that we individually can be completely and wholly happy in this life. We are the first generation who has lived that is not living in any way for the welfare of the next generation. Is it not true? Our culture is just living for ourselves and ourselves alone. That's why true friendship and genuine loyalty are so rare today. And how's that working out for us? It's not. It's gone horribly, horribly wrong. That is what happens when there is an expectation in your soul that everything is about you and you can be supremely happy always. That you should never have to suffer ...and there should never be difficulties ...and things should always go well for you. That you should be able to have whatever you want. What is going to happen when life fails to line up with that model? Generally, it is our tendency to look at other people to find out why they're not fulfilling this for us and making us happy. Because somebody's to blame for this and it can't be me. Somebody's to blame. We're bitter.

The easiest ...and generally the first ...targets are our spouses, our friend relationships, and of course our church community. It's what the scriptures call the “root of bitterness” and when it starts to find a place to grow, it starts to destroy everything around you.

Bitterness is just a terrible disease of the soul. When you have it, you defile everything you touch. You rot from the inside out and take others with you on your way down. I cannot stress this enough: bitterness eventually manifests as a scorched earth response.

Verse 15 says, "... See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal.

How many such situations have we witnessed? How many people have we known that went down this road? Those who have "sold their birthright?" Surrendered that for which they were born...walked away from the purpose for which they were created? All because they allowed bitterness to consume them and then in response they burned their world down around them, and now it's just gone. Marriages and families, spiritual gifts and calling, fellowship, community, history...it's all gone now.

Verse 18 goes on to say, " You have not come to a physical mountain, to a place of flaming fire, darkness, gloom, and whirlwind, as the Israelites did at Mount Sinai. For they heard an awesome trumpet blast and a voice so terrible that they begged God to stop speaking. They staggered back under God's command: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death." Moses himself was so frightened at the sight that he said, "I am terrified and trembling."

What is the writer saying? He is bringing the people back to a place, a period when the children of Israel were in the wilderness, where God's presence, His approach, and literally His very being, was just scary. Nobody wanted to go up there and deal with Him. The people were like, "Yo, we're out, Moses. You go."

But the writer goes on to remind them that that is not where they were anymore and not where we are today: "No, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to countless thousands of angels in a joyful gathering. You have come to the assembly of God's firstborn children, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God himself, who is the judge over all things. You have come to the spirits of the righteous ones in heaven who have now been made perfect. You have come to Jesus, the one who mediates the new covenant between God and people, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks of forgiveness instead of crying out for vengeance like the blood of Abel."

And if that is true, then the call is made in the next verse...verse 25: "See that you do not refuse Him who speaks." All of this means that we are truly without excuse. The door is open to the throne of God. Access has been provided and granted by the blood of Christ! You are not on Mt. Sinai. God is not watching you like a hall monitor... waiting to react violently and to beat you for all your mistakes. That is not where we are. God is not in the heavens, just waiting for you to slip up so He can come and whoop you for it. You're not on Mt. Sinai; you're in Zion.

Because of the cross, because of the gospel, God is now "Daddy." Romans 8:15 says, "For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father.'" "Abba." It's an intimate title. It's like calling our Creator "Papa." J.I. Packer once wrote, "Still He seeks the fellowship of His people, and sends them both sorrows and joys in order to detach their love from other things and attach it to Himself."

Now if all of that is true, once again we must ask ourselves, as we have been called to do throughout this book of Hebrews, what will we do with that? Because as we have mentioned repeatedly throughout this book, the writer is stating our position in God because of Christ and then calling upon us to respond. Without a response, all of this stuff is merely religion and is ultimately meaningless.

Verses 28-29 say, "Since we are receiving a Kingdom that is unshakable, let us be thankful and please God by worshiping him with holy fear and awe. For our God is a devouring fire."

This is how we are to run the race. This is how we are to WIN.