

# ***“Practicing Toward Perfect”***

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from 2011 New International Version.)*

***Whatever is holding us back in the life of faith requires practice to overcome.***

***Hebrews 12:1-13***

***July 24, 2022***

***A thing of beauty***

The quote at the top of your bulletin today is from Dr. Curt Thompson, a Christian psychiatrist, who will be our featured speaker at the church retreat this fall. In a lecture based on Hebrews 12:1-2, he says, “Name me one thing in the world, whether manmade or otherwise, that is long-lasting, sustainable, and a thing of beauty, that did not take a long time to construct.”

As I was processing that quote this week, Linda and I were also dreaming about a trip we’re planning to take after we retire. We have decided nothing for certain yet, but are thinking about Europe. If you think that narrows down the choices, you haven’t planned a trip to Europe lately. There are so many countries to visit, and so many options within each country.

Everywhere in Europe validates what Curt says. The iconic manmade attractions of Europe took “a long time to construct.” Think Notre Dame, Neuschwanstein Castle, the Vatican, the Colosseum. “Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

For “otherwise” (not man made), think Norway’s Fjords, Switzerland’s Matterhorn, Germany’s Black Forest, or Ireland’s Giant’s Causeway. Nothing “long-lasting, sustainable, and a thing of beauty” is created and shaped overnight.

Neither are you. This is the theme of Hebrews 12. You are being formed into a long-lasting, sustainable thing of beauty. It’s a long process. In the language of Hebrews, you are running a marathon. The issue is not what’s next, it’s whether you’ll finish, and not just finish, but finish well. Hebrews doesn’t want you to drop out, but to endure.

## ***Run to finish***

I love the Bible. I love studying it, teaching it, applying it. For me that means a close look at the words and grammatical structure of the passage. Sometimes, it helps me further to examine and share what I see or what I've read about the Greek original. I don't want this to intimidate someone who hasn't studied Greek, but part of my role as a preacher is to make these insights accessible. This text is one that we can enlighten further by looking at the original.

Barney (my nickname for Barnabas, whom I presume wrote this anonymous work), has carefully constructed the text we just read around one central imperative. It's hard for English texts to translate his intent directly without turning it into awkward English. It's clear in Greek that the whole chapter revolves around these words in verse 1: "Let us run with endurance the race marked out for us."

"Run" is a word that Barney borrows from his Greco-Roman culture, which loved a good race as much as we do, if not more. One Greek dictionary defines the word "run" as "to advance speedily, like an athlete moving forward with full effort and directed purpose."

The Greeks built colosseums for humans and hippodromes for chariots the way we build stadia for athletes and race tracks for horses and automobiles. In the ancient Panhellenic games (the equivalent of the world championships) the footrace was one of the five contests of the pentathlon and always came first. In ancient Olympic games the footrace was the only extended competition – other races were about much shorter bursts. This race required "endurance." "Endurance" is a compound word which means "to remain under." It's patience, steadfastness, perseverance, under the assumption that there are counter pressures to quit before the race is over. If you "run with endurance," you're "under it," but you're not giving up.

So there's the grammatical heart of the passage. "Let's keep moving forward with determined perseverance." Why? Curt Thompson says because nothing durable happens quickly. Let's look at what else Barney says about running with endurance. So that I don't lose you in technicalities of Greek, here are some clichés.

*You've got people.* "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses." This is a reference back to Hebrews 11. I said last week that in the entire chapter of faith heroes from Abel to Abraham to Rahab, "Christ" is only mentioned once. These are people who ran by faith, which is "the evidence of things not seen." They had not yet seen Jesus, but they lived and moved and obeyed God by faith.

They are your people, Barney says. They are your "great cloud of witnesses." If it seems odd to call people a cloud, it should. But it's an apt metaphor. A "cloud" means they surround you. I think of my Dad and his Dad Barney, Jack Williams, David

Abernethy, Dr. Althouse, Luther, Zwingli, Wycliffe, Benedict, Augustine, Peter, Paul. I want my life to be worthy of them as they surround me like a cloud.

The word “witnesses” is literally “martyrs.” Barney had concluded chapter 11 with references to those who were “put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword.” He could have been talking about Old Testament martyrs, first century martyrs, or Polycarp, John Hus, Joan of Arc, or Jim Elliott.

*Let it go.* “Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.” The second phrase reads like a command (or an exhortation), but it’s really a past participle: “...having thrown off everything that hinders....” You’re not yet ready for the race until you’ve lightened your load. We’ll come back to this.

*Focus.* “Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” There are three important words in this phrase. “Fixing our eyes” is one Greek word that means you choose a focal point by looking away from everything else.

Our focus is on Jesus, described by two words: “pioneer” and “perfecter.” The King James Version says “the author and finisher” of our faith. He was the first to complete the race from birth to life to death to hades to a resurrected body. It’s not the idea that you’re a loser because he’s already finished first. It’s that he’s our champion who showed us this race is finish able. He models, he inspires.

*No pain, no gain.* “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children.” There’s an entire section on discipline that follows in verses 4-11. We can’t go into it in detail, but the essence is that Jesus “endured opposition from sinners,” so we’re inspired to do the same. Barney goes on to make the parallel between “hardship” and “discipline.”

Barney knows that all discipline is hardship, but not all hardship is discipline. Discipline is one of those words we both love and hate. Sometimes in church we’re so afraid of implying that every hardship is discipline that we forget the constructive role of discipline.

Not everything difficult in your life is discipline from God, but some hard things are. When we wander off course with God, bad things can happen as a result. If you give your addictions free reign, if you are careless in your relationships, if you ignore God and his word, if you fail to use his gifts for his kingdom, bad things can happen to help you correct your course. When that happens, Barney says, thank God for the mercy of discipline. Thank God that he claims you as his child.

St. Jerome said in the fourth century, “The greatest anger of all is when God is no longer angry with us when we sin.” That’s a variation on what Barney says: a father doesn’t discipline the illegitimate child he denies fathering. Rejected children and spoiled children both go through life with a severe emotional and spiritual handicap.

God claims us and attends to us. Choose to trust him and view every hardship as a way he is drawing us back to himself.

Some hardship is discipline. Barney says we should persevere through all of it and trust the heavenly Father who claims us as his own and will produce “a harvest of righteousness and peace.”

*It takes a village.* “Make level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.” This phrase puzzled me early in the week. Verses 12-13 seem to take a hard right turn. But we’re back to the race analogy after a few verses about discipline. There is weakness in you that must be strengthened. Think physical therapy after a surgery or fall. But there’s also the responsibility you have for others. Be part of their healing journey. You are their village and they are yours.

“You’ve got people” – and not just those already in the invisible cloud. You’ve got living ones who can help you and who need your help.

### **Three questions**

First, what’s your race? Let’s go back to that main clause. “Let us run with endurance the race marked out for us.” In a race, you don’t get to choose your course. It’s “marked out.” In a sprint, you have to stay in your lane. In a 5K or a marathon, you are disqualified if you alter the course.

The race of faith varies for each of us. The obstacles are individualized. I don’t know what part of your race you’re running today. Are you on a downslope? Just beginning? Midpoint? Turning a corner? Finding new strength, new insight? Or facing a steep climb or a detour, something harder than you ever imagined?

Second, what’s holding you back? The sermon title and the quote in your bulletin is borrowed from a talk Curt Thompson gave at Biola University a few years back. I’m going to share with you a 90-second video clip for a couple of reasons. One is that Curt Thompson will be our speaker this fall at the church retreat you’ve been hearing about. If you have never heard or read him, you may be wondering how a Christian psychiatrist makes neurobiology accessible and practical. More importantly, this is very relevant to Hebrews 12. Here’s Curt Thompson:

*Throw off the sin that so easily entangles, and run with perseverance the race set before us. Perseverance, it’s about practice. We like to say in my world, in brain language, practice doesn’t make perfect; practice makes permanent. Rules of neuroplasticity go something like this: neurons that fire together wire together.*

*The way that I most effectively wire my brain is to practice small things frequently rather than large things infrequently. If you really want to be good at the piano, even if you’re not going to be a concert pianist, you’re far better to*

*practice for only 15 minutes every day of the week than practicing for two hours one day a week. It's how the brain works. That's why when it comes to combatting shame, we must be at this over and over until we're in dead.*

*In America, we want McDonald's spirituality. Drive through, I get it, I pay for it, and I'm good to go, right? The notion that we would have to work hard at this is not very attractive. Name me one thing in the world, whether manmade or otherwise, that is long-lasting, sustainable, and a thing of beauty, that did not take a long time to construct. If we're practicing for heaven, then we must practice for heaven. Practice, practice, we persevere.*

If you listen to the whole talk, you'll know that the theme of the talk is the subject of Curt's second book, *The Soul of Shame*. You heard the word "shame" once in that brief clip, when he said, "When it comes to combatting shame, we must be at this over and over until we're dead." His point is that shame is one of those weights that hold us down spiritually, and that shame requires perseverance to overcome.

Earlier in the talk he distinguishes between guilt and shame in a way that I think is very helpful. Brain science tells us that guilt, which is realizing we've done something wrong and owning up to it, develops at about age three or four. My mother likes to say of me that at that age if I did something wrong I would sit in a corner and say, "Bob'um!" I was a conformist early on, and when I experienced guilt I confessed. If it's guilt, you want to go to someone, get it off your chest, and say, "I'm sorry" so that the rupture in the relationship can be healed.

Shame begins to develop much earlier, at about 15 months of age. Shame develops, in other words, before language develops. Before we can say, "Bob'um!" we can feel shame in our relationships with others. And yes, parents and other caregivers have a lot to do with whether and how much shame we experience. That's neuroscience, demonstrable, provable brain science.

If it's shame, you hide. You don't want anyone to know. It's hard to admit it. You're not just embarrassed, you're terrified that someone will know what a worthless, unlovable, good-for-nothing scum bag you are. Shame was the first result of sin in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve hid from God.

Shame is deep, and it's a tool of the devil. It's a tool he has used frequently. It's even a tool that parents and teachers and caregivers of previous generations used intentionally. Now that neuroscience is helping us understand shame more, we can help one another and help ourselves deal with it. This is where the church comes in.

We have an answer to guilt – it's the blood of Jesus that cleanses us from all sin. We also have an answer to shame – it's us. It's community. It's the body of Christ. This is, in part, what Curt's newest book is about and what I hope he'll put on a very practical

level this fall at the retreat. How can the church become better at providing safe places where we can understand the shame that's been keeping us apart and overcome it?

Curt's primary point in the clip I played, however, is that it's not a drive through. I'm as big a fan of McDonald's as anyone, but that's for tasty fries and ice cream cones. It's not for overcoming guilt and shame. You don't come to church once, get a God-fix, and deal with what's weighing you down. You can't even come weekly to fix it all, although that's headed in the right direction. Coming to church opens the door to deeper and more personal relationships.

You feel freer to move toward people instead of hiding. This is not an absolute statement, but I have found in most cases that when people think they can't show up in church or admit what they've done because they'll be rejected it is about shame that is deeply embedded inside them long before they ever met the actual people in church. It's not necessarily that we approve of what you did – it might be sin or addiction or conflict. But you belong to us, and this is the place to find the grace of God in Christ to deal with guilt, shame, isolation, or anything else keeping you from running the race.

Still, overcoming shame requires practice, practice, perseverance, endurance, staying at it. And that's true of whatever is holding us back in the life of faith. Addictions, sins, fears, doubts, bitterness, anger, conflict – you have to work at it, you have to stay with it. And you need help, lots of help.

I was working on this sermon yesterday when one of you emailed me and said, "I just finished reading this great book – *Get Out of Your Head*, by Jennie Allen." I downloaded the book on Kindle and found it to be a great parallel to what you said today – everything from brain science to shame to Hebrews 1:1-2. I asked Linda if she'd heard of it, and she said, "Oh, yes. Our women's groups have read and studied it." It's a great resource if you want to go into this topic on your own, but an even better reminder that if you struggle with letting go of what's holding you back, join a group!

Finally, where's your focus? Go back to verse 2. "Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter, who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, despising its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God."

Here's the way I ask this question frequently. "When you don't have to be thinking about something – working, cooking, organizing, listening – where does your mind go? Barney reminds you that you can choose a focus, choose peripheral blinders so that your focal point is Jesus. When you come into this sanctuary, your focal point is provided for you – the risen Jesus who graces our stained glass window. Keep a Scripture verse, a song, a picture, something with you so that even when you endure hardship, you remember that he who endured the cross for you is closer than a cloud, greater than the martyrs, and seated at God's right hand to intercede for you. Amen.