

Hebrews

Hebrews 12:1-2 – Removing Encumbrances - Part 2

December 27, 2009

- I. The Necessity of Discipline for Living A Life of Faith
 - A. Generally speaking, God uses the first 11 chapters of Hebrews to show us what He has done to save us and the part He has in our sanctification and living a life of faith. In that same general way, God uses the last two chapters – **Hebrews 12-13** – to show us what **we need to do** to live a life of faith – or in other words, what our part is in the sanctification process and in living by faith.
 - 1. One theme that runs through each of the “how to’s” found in these two chapters is discipline. To help us remember this theme, I’ve given these two chapters a title – with two sub-titles.
 - 2. The title is “The Necessity of **Discipline** for Living a Life of Faith.” The two sub-titles are: (1) **Self-Discipline** in Living by Faith. (2) **God’s Discipline** for Living by Faith.
 - B. Now lets read **Hebrews 12:1-2** . . . Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, [2] fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.
 - C. Prayer
- II. Review Teaching from November 22 –
 - A. One of the important truths that God places before us here in **Hebrews 12:1**, is that no athlete runs a marathon without the kind of preparation that conditions him for winning.
 - 1. God then uses this truth to call us to properly and adequately prepare to run each day’s race of Christian living so that we will be in the spiritual and mental and emotional condition whereby we can run to win.
 - 2. And of course, the marathon of the Christian life is the accumulation of each daily race – from the point of being born again until we pass from this life to the next. Therefore, God is calling us to maintain the kind of spiritual conditioning whereby

it can be said of us, “We were ran the Christian marathon as those wanting to win.

- B. There is a second important truth related to this first truth that God brings to our attention in **I Corinthians 9:24-27**. No athlete runs a marathon intending to finish in the middle of the pack. His intention is to win! And God uses that reality to impress on us that it is to be our mindset, our attitude, our earnest desire to run the Christian marathon as one intending to win. And what does running to win mean? It means living by faith in such a way as to both please God and bring glory to God in how we live day in and day out.
- C. Returning to **Hebrews 12**, God points out five things that we must give attention to if we are to run to win.
 - 1. First, we are to use God’s people of faith from the past as our examples in living by faith today.
 - 2. Second, we are to lay aside or cast off or avoid everything and anything that weighs us down during the race. Why? Because excess weight makes it impossible to run to win.
 - 3. Third, we are to remove the sin which continues to trip us up. In other words, we are put off those sins which – if allowed to remain in us – trip us up again and again so that after having fallen some number of times there is absolutely no chance of winning.
 - 4. Fourth, we are to fix our eyes on Jesus – measuring our progress in sanctification and in running to win against Him and not our fellow Christians.
- D. What I want to do today is continue talking about encumbrances. Why? Because even though an encumbrance can be something good, that is, something within God’s allowable options, they nevertheless prevent us from running to win – just as much as the practice of known sin prevents us from running to win.

III. What are encumbrances?

- A. First, encumbrances are **not** specific sins, nor are they the possession of or the enjoyment of sinful things.
 - 1. Encumbrances are anything that impedes or slows down or distracts us or turns us aside from living by faith in the areas of holiness, fellowship with God, and service unto God.

2. This means an encumbrance can be something as worthy as Bible study or Christian service and as neutral as playing sports or reading books or eating.
 3. Give examples of each: bible study, Christian service, playing sports, reading books, eating.
- B. To give us a clearer picture of an encumbrance, let me take you back 1700 years to a time when some of the Christians of the day were committed to taking seriously the teaching of scripture in relation to living a godly life.
1. According to church history, it was at this time that the monastic movement began – not in an organized way as we see it today, but rather as individual Christians moving to more isolated areas in an effort to free themselves from many of the snares and temptations and encumbrances of life experienced in the cities or towns and villages.
 2. They soon began gathering in groups for the purpose of learning from those who were more mature and to make life easier by sharing chores related to the necessities of life. It was there gathering together that led church historians to look back on these groups as the beginning of the monastic movement.
 3. Now let me be clear here. I am not recommending we all move into monasteries or live a monastic type of life. Why? Because they became excessive in their desire to become spiritually mature. But on the other hand, we've become excessive in our desire to unite spiritual maturity with worldly pleasures and selfish living. So even though the monastic life has its excesses, I believe we can learn some things from them concerning this matter of encumbrances that can pull us back a bit from our excesses.
- C. The separated life these Christians sought had many qualities to commend it – with the most important being creating a setting and atmosphere where they had greater freedom to pursue God, godliness, and fellowship with God in an encumbered way. But before looking at the encumbrances they were committed to throwing off, let me say three things about them in relation to encumbrances.
1. First, the encumbrances they sought to throw off were not evil in and of themselves. These encumbrances could never be mistaken for sins. And I suspect most of us would consider the things they deemed worthy of throwing off as God's blessings for us to enjoy

and as things necessary to our livelihood and vital to our sense of well-being. The point being, there was nothing inherently evil or sinful in the encumbrances they threw off. For them, it was a matter of throwing off the good to get that which was far better.

2. Second, the most helpful literature for pursuing godly living and intimacy with God comes from those who took throwing off encumbrances seriously – whether they fled to a desolate area or remained in the city and lived a simple life unencumbered by many of the things their neighbors accepted as normal and necessary. My point is, these folks found what they were looking for – a holiness more akin to the teachings of Scripture and an intimacy with God more akin to Moses' face-to-face relationship with God. And laying aside every encumbrance was an important part of having their hunger and thirst for righteousness and intimacy with God satisfied.
3. Third, they had a different attitude toward hard times, trials, tribulation and testing than most of us have.
 - a. For them, all the things and people God either brought their way or allowed to come into their life were to be embraced as God's blessed and perfect way of sanctifying them. So when hard times, trials, tribulation, and testing came – they sought grace and strength from God to endure and pass through them in order to grow in faith, holiness, and in a deeper fellowship with God. You see, they valued spiritual growth and intimacy with God over relief.
 - b. It seems to me we value relief or some temporary comfort when faced with hard times, trials, tribulation, and testing. And this difference in attitude that makes a big difference in how they looked at encumbrances in comparison to how we look at them.

D. There were three common areas of encumbrances which those pursuing this life of holiness and intimacy with God sought to throw off – not only upon entering such a group, but for the duration of their life. And one more thought here – theirs was not a one time removal of encumbrances, but a beginning removal which they continued to renew when necessary or add to as they grew in understanding, faith, grace, and love for God.

1. **Material Possessions** (money and possessions):

- a. They saw in the words and life of Jesus a willingness and call to give up possessions for the sake of the kingdom.
 - (1) **Matthew 8:19** . . . Jesus said to him, “The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.”
 - (2) **Matthew 19:20** . . . The young man said to Him, “All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?” 21 Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.
- b. Application to us: For the most part, material possessions have no intrinsic evil. They are neutral by nature and it is only in the way we view them and use them that they become either an encumbrance or a source of sin to us.
 - (1) Yet God warned Israel before they ever set foot in the Promised Land to be on guard against personal wealth – whether it is represented by money or possessions.
 - (a) **Deuteronomy 6:10-12** . . . Then it shall come about when the LORD your God brings you into the land which He swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you, great and splendid cities which you did not build, [11] and houses full of all good things which you did not fill, and hewn cisterns which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant, and you eat and are satisfied, [12] **then watch yourself, that you do not forget the LORD** who brought you from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.
 - (2) And Paul warned Timothy and those who Timothy taught.
 - (a) **I Timothy 6:8-10** . . . If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. [9] But **those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires** which plunge men into ruin and destruction. [10] For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

2. Obedience (self-rule and personal freedom):

- a. They saw in Christ an absolute obedience to His Father and a call to His followers to obey Him. And they saw in the New Testament a call to obey their leaders.
 - (1) **Matthew 16:24** . . . Then Jesus said to His disciples, If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. (Obedience to Jesus)
 - (2) **Hebrews 13:17** . . . Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. (To one another)
 - b. Application to us:
 - (1) Submission and obedience to those over you breaks down your zeal for self-rule and makes you more pliable in submitting to God's rule.
 - (2) Obedience breaks down pride and promotes humility.
 - (3) Obedience opens us up to a greater honesty with those over us – which in turn promotes a greater self-honesty in dealing with encumbrances and sin in the pursuit of holiness and fellowship with God.
 - (4) Does self-rule or the “I’m my own boss” attitude weigh you down?
3. **Death to the Flesh** (physical pleasures)
- a. This had a two pronged focus that spread out from there.
 - (1) Eating – they believed if they were ruled by the “belly god” they would be prone to be ruled by any physical pleasure to the hurt of their pursuit of God.
 - (2) Celibacy – They saw in the Bible that Christ never married and Paul called us to first consider celibacy, then marriage as a second option. Now it was not marriage that was seen as the encumbrance, but the sensual pleasures gained from marriage that they saw as weakening them to any physical pleasure – thus opening the door to many encumbrances of the flesh.
 - b. Application to us:

IV. Conclusion

- A. Let me make this clear once again. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with money and possessions, or with personal freedom and making our own decisions, or with many of the pleasures of body and mind. Right and wrong is not the issue here. What we are considering in this part

of **Hebrews 12:1** are those things which weigh us down so that we are no longer able to run to win. There's nothing inherently wrong with a marathon runner wearing sweat pants and a down jacket – but it will encumber him in the race and prevent him from winning!

- B. Which brings us back to our encumbrances and the question, “How do we decide what to put off and what to keep on or allow to remain?”
1. As I have already stated, we must want to run to win to see clearly the encumbrances which weigh us down.
 2. Then, we must ask the right questions.
 - a. Too often we look at things in our lives – the music we listen to, the books we read, the things we watch, the entertainment that we enjoy, the hobbies we indulge in, and say, "What's wrong with it?" What is the harm or sin in my doing this or that thing, or in enjoying that pleasure? These are the wrong questions!!
 - b. What we are wise to ask ourselves is, "Does this thing help me run to win the race of Christian faith?" Does this activity or possession or whatever help me make progress in holiness and fellowship with God?" These are the right questions!!
 3. Once again, the race of the Christian life is not run well by asking, "what's wrong with this or that?" but by asking, "will this promote greater faith and greater love and greater purity and greater humility and greater self-control? Don't ask, “Is it a sin?” But, “Does it help me run to win?”