

HEB 12:1-4—FOCUSING ON JESUS

INTRO: Most people in the world, even if they are not Christians, look up to Jesus. In Islam, Jesus is considered a great prophet. Most nonbelievers and even most atheists think of Jesus as a great teacher. We Christians call Jesus our Lord. According to the Bible, the whole point of our lives is to be **“conformed into the image”** of Jesus—IOW, to be like him: to think like him and act like him and have his values, his priorities, his character.

How are we doing at that? OK in some ways, I suppose, but not so well in others. Why not?

Here’s something to think about: The rest of the world may look up to Jesus in certain ways, but they do not know him personally. They can take him or leave him. He doesn’t play a personal role in their lives. For Christians, it’s different, or at least it is supposed to be different. When we come to faith in Jesus, he promised to send us the Holy Spirit who would live inside of us, and he said in **John 14:18, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”** In **John 14:23** he added, **“If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”**

With promises like that, shouldn’t non-Christians want to at least check out how they might come to know Jesus? But so many don’t. Why not? That question was answered many years ago by a perceptive Hindu named Gandhi. Gandhi said to some missionaries, **“I like your Christ; I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”**

Given the promises Jesus made to his followers, don’t you think that people should see a real difference—a real “Christlikeness”—in Christians that they don’t see in non-Christians? That stands to reason, it seems to me.

Where are we going wrong? Today’s passage—**Heb 12:1-4**—points us to the reasons why we are having difficulties being like Jesus. We will also see some practical solutions to how we can get to know Jesus and become more like him. **[READ]**

PROP: When we focus our lives on Jesus, we will become like him.

O/S: In these 4 verses we will see: (1) The nature and reasons why we are not making the difference we would like to make; and (2) How we can get out of this trap.

I. THE NATURE AND REASONS WHY WE ARE NOT MAKING THE DIFFERENCE WE WOULD LIKE TO MAKE.

This passage actually explains our problem in a logical progression: **v.1** is using the analogy of a runner when it speaks of **“running with endurance the race that is set before us.”** That race is our life. So we are all running the race—but we are not winning; in fact, many of us are not even running to win. Why not? **v.1** also tells us to **“lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely”** to us. Imagine if you are in a foot race. But instead of having trained and being in shape and wearing your track suit and running shoes, you haven’t trained, you’re out of shape, and you come to the race wearing a snow suit, heavy boots, and a 30 or 40 pound backpack. No matter how much you’d “like to set a good example” and do well, you’re not going to.

I mentioned how this passage explains our problem in a logical progression. First, it tells us that our life is like a race, but we are not doing well because we are not prepared—weights and sin are clinging to us. Second, **v.3** tells us the results of that; it says we **“grow weary and fainthearted.”** Of course. If we are unprepared, out of shape, and weighted down by all kinds of things, we’ll get tired and lose heart. Then we’ll make excuses: “I’m doing the best I can”; “No one knows the great problems and adversity I face.”

So what’s the result? **v.4** tells us the end of the progression: **“In your struggle against sin you have not resisted to the point of shedding your blood.”** Jesus shed his blood in his struggle against sin. IOW, he resisted sin all the way to the end. But we don’t. If we are unprepared, we grow weary, so we give up; we give in; we keep living our lives in the same old way just like everybody else. So no one can really tell if we are Christians or not. It is not a happy picture, but it is all too common. The good news is that there is hope and there are solutions. So for the rest of this message I want to concentrate on:

II. HOW WE GET OUT OF THIS TRAP

This passage also gives us sort of a progression regarding how we change our lives to bring them in conformity with Jesus. First, we need to *be aware* of something; second, we need to *do* something; but third, and most important, we can only succeed when we *focus* on something. It is the focus that will enable us to do what we need to do and will make our doing successful.

A. What do we need to be aware of? v.1 tells us. We need to be aware that **“we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.”** This tells us two things. First, it’s telling us that we are not running our race of life alone. We are surrounded by others, those who are running the race with us and those who have gone before. It may be suggesting that those who have gone before us in Christ are watching us and encouraging us to persevere in faithfulness.

Second, and more important, the reference to the “great cloud of witnesses” is referring to all those men and women of faith talked about in ch. 11. It is telling us to look to them for inspiration and encouragement. The people in **ch. 11** faced great odds. Many faced persecution. Some of them were put to death for their faith. Yet they resisted sin by shedding their blood. IOW, they remained faithful all the way to the end. It can be done; it has been done; it is being done today by regular people just like us.

The whole argument from the end of ch. 10 through the beginning of ch. 12 is that although we face hardship in this world, sometimes great hardship, God’s promises and rewards for those who remain faithful to him are sure. We will receive them—eternal life in new glorious bodies on a new glorious earth; an inheritance of incomparable joy and fullness beyond our imagination—if we remain faithful and do not shrink back. The result forever and ever will be like Mother Teresa once said, **“In light of heaven, the worst suffering on earth, a life full of the most atrocious tortures on earth, will be seen to be no more serious than one night in an inconvenient hotel.”**

Be aware of this. Draw encouragement and inspiration from those faithful saints who have gone before us. That is one reason I suggest reading biographies of great Christians or subscribing to the VOM newsletter which tells of faithful believers who suffer great hardship for their faith. To see what others have gone through and are going through—and yet remain faithful, even to death—helps to put the things we face in our lives, even tough things like cancer, divorce, problems with kids, financial problems, and other things, into a little better perspective. And that leads us to:

B. What we need to do. v.1 tells us that. It says, **“Lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely”** to us. Only by doing that can we **“run with endurance the race that is set before us.”** Notice that it talks about both **“every weight AND sin.”** The NASB translates it as **“every encumbrance”** and sin. The two are not necessarily the same, although the weight or encumbrance can become sin. What do I mean?

When the verse talks about the “weight” or “encumbrance,” it is talking about the way we think about and deal with the circumstances of our lives that distract us, that take up so much of our thought, time, effort, money, and energy; our families, our jobs, our houses, in short, everything that we are living for. These are all good things. But we all tend to let them crowd out Jesus Christ and become the most important things.

I remember when I was still practicing law. When my kids were growing up, one Sunday morning one of my sons asked if I could take him sledding. I told him I couldn’t, because I had to go to the office. We were at church and later he told one of his friends that “my dad doesn’t have the time to take me sledding.” Fortunately, the friend’s dad overheard that and said, “We’re going sledding; why don’t you come with us.” You’ve got to do what you’ve got to do. But I could have taken my son sledding and then gone to the office. But I had let success in my job become a weight which encumbered me. We’ve got to be wise in our priorities. Make the time to put first things first.

I also said that our weights, our encumbrances, can become sin. Ultimately, sin is putting anything, even good things, over Jesus Christ. And it can happen very subtly, particularly here where we live. If we were living in Egypt or Iran or many other parts of the world, the decision to become a Christian and remain a Christian would be a stark confrontation with society and the culture with stark and obvious consequences.

Here it is not like that. In the US it is still acceptable to be a Christian. So we don’t confront society and the culture, but instead we blend in. Let me give you just one example. The US is only about 4.4% of the world’s population but owns over 40% of the world’s private wealth. Almost everyone in this room has a bigger house or apartment and more things than almost everyone else in the world. I include myself in this. The book of Revelation contrasts Babylon the great with the New Jerusalem. One Christian writer commented on Revelation and the current state of the US as follows: **“How can it be morally acceptable that so much of the planet’s wealth should be in the hands of so few? This reflects the ethos of Babylon, not that of New Jerusalem. People captivated by wealth and power are divorced from God.”**

As I said, I’m in this too. This is serious. Jesus talked more about money than he did about any other subject except the Kingdom of God. Money is spiritual. Sometimes the Bible calls it “Mammon,” IOW it is given the name of a rival god. Both **Eph 5:5** and **Col 3:5** call coveting and greed “idolatry.” None of us would say that we are greedy or idolaters. Yet what are we doing with our money? How much are we spending on ourselves and keeping for ourselves, compared to how much we are giving to build the kingdom and help the poor and needy. Actions speak louder than words, and what we actually do with our money shows more clearly

than almost anything else what is really most important to us. As Jesus said, **“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”** I suggest that we need to budget what we do with our money. Take a very serious look at where our money is actually going and adjust accordingly.

How can we succeed in having the right priorities for our time, our money, our lives? That brings us to the most important thing, namely:

C. What must we focus on? vv. 2 and 3 give us the answer. v. 2 says, **“Look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.”** The NASB translates this as **“fix our eyes on Jesus.”** v.3 says, **“Consider him.”** The words used here are significant. The word for “look” is an intensive word meaning **“to direct one’s attention without distraction, to fix one’s eyes trustingly, to look steadfastly and intently, and metaphorically, to fix the mind upon.”** To “consider” means **“to reason with careful deliberation, to reckon, think, to consider accurately and distinctly or again and again.”**

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Similarly, Col 3 talks about **“Christ who is our life.”** We hear these statements, but they tend to go in one ear and out the other. Yet this is what the Christian life is all about. It is all about Jesus. Jesus in us. Us becoming more and more like him. Do we ever really think about how radical this is? *Christ-is-the-way; he is the truth; he is the life; he is our life.* That is why we are to **“fix our eyes on him”** and **“direct our attention without distraction, steadfastly and intently, thinking about him, again and again.”**

For the Christian, Jesus Christ is to be in the forefront of our mind all the time. Our lives are to revolve around him. Frank Laubach was a missionary in the Philippines. He pointed out that Jesus’s course of instruction for his disciples was for them to **“come with me, walk with me, talk and listen to me, work and rest with me, eat and sleep with me, twenty-four hours a day for three years.”**

Laubach suggested that, for us, that means, first: **“We read and reread the life of Jesus recorded in the Gospels thoughtfully and prayerfully at least an hour a day. We find fresh and new translations, so that this reading will never be dull, but always stimulating and inspiring.”** In this way **“we walk with Jesus through Galilee by walking with Him through the pages of His earthly history.”**

Laubach’s suggestion of walking with Jesus through regularly reading the gospels is a great way to get to know Jesus if you are not a Christian. It is also a great way to get to know him better if you are. Laubach talked about reading the gospels thoughtfully and prayerfully an hour a day. Will we do that? I doubt it. But everyone can start with reading the gospels thoughtfully and prayerfully 10 or 15 minutes a day. That might lead us to 20 or 30 minutes or more as we see the riches of the gospel, as we get to know Jesus, as we start falling in love with him. Everyone makes the time and takes the time for the things that are important to us. And the things we make the time for and take the time for *reveal* what really is most important to us. Let that be Jesus.

Second, Laubach said we need to make **“Jesus our inseparable friend. We try to call Him to mind at least one second of each minute. We do not need to forget other things nor stop our work, but we invite Him to share everything we do or say or think. In fact, it is no harder to learn this new habit than to learn the touch system in typing, and in time one can win a high percentage of his minutes with as little effort as an expert needs to write a letter.”**

He called this practice the “game with minutes.” He said, **“Select a favorable hour; try how many minutes of the hour you can remember God at least ONCE each minute; that is, today bring God to mind at least one second out of every sixty. It is not necessary to remember God every second, for the mind runs along like a rapid stream from one idea to another. Your score will be low at first, but keep trying, for it constantly becomes easier, and after a while is almost automatic.”**

Laubach concluded that: **“While these two practices [reading the gospels every day and the game with minutes] take all our time, yet they do not take it away from any good enterprise. They take Christ *into* that enterprise. Men and women who had been slaves of vices have been set free. The results of this program begin to show clearly in a month. They grow rich after six months, and glorious after ten years.”** If you are interested in this, google “The Game with Minutes.” A brief PDF article by Laubach containing a number of suggestions will come right up.

If Christ really is the focus of our life, he will affect everything. We said earlier that the “weights” of our lives are the way we think about and deal with our circumstances. Many of us think that the bad circumstances of our lives, the cancer, the divorce, the financial and other problems, are themselves the “weights” we have to bear. But from today’s passage, that cannot be so. Why not? Because v.1 tells us to **“lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely”** to us. You can’t just “lay aside” your cancer, or divorce, or financial problems as if they were only figments of your imagination.

However, when Christ is our focus, he will transform our attitudes and our responses to the problems we face. Yes, they are real problems. But when Christ is our focus we will see that these problems are among the vehicles God is using to transform our thinking and our character—IOW, to make us just like Jesus. That is what God is mainly interested in. If we understand that, we will start seeing our problems and our circumstances as God-ordained opportunities: opportunities to see Christ at work in us; opportunities to grow in Christlikeness and to exhibit a Christlike response in how we deal with the problems and issues we face.

It's like what Jesus said to Peter in Matt 16. Jesus said that he was going to Jerusalem and would suffer and be killed; Peter said “No, that should never happen to you.” Jesus said, **“Get behind me, Satan, because you are thinking like men, not like God.”** But v.2 of our passage today says that **“for the joy that was set before him, Jesus endured the cross.”**

Suffering, being crucified, bearing the sins of countless people were hard, painful things to experience. Jesus could endure such things, not with gritted teeth, whining and complaining, but with joy. Why? Because he knew that, as a result of his enduring these things, he would have us as his bride forever. Jesus looked at the same circumstances Peter looked at, but from a different perspective. Peter saw only the bad part of the earthly circumstances. Jesus saw what God was doing *in* those circumstances. And he saw the end result of remaining faithful in this earthly life. Jesus is calling us, just as he was calling Peter, to look at the circumstances of our lives—especially the hard circumstances—from his perspective.

This is possible in even the worst of circumstances. Last month's VOM newsletter tells of a husband and wife from Yemen who became Christians. They faced great opposition, and ultimately the wife was killed. Yet both forgave their oppressors. The article says, **“He came to realize that God had allowed these circumstances in order to build his courage. Khaled [the husband] saw consistent evidence of God's refining work. ‘What I was afraid of in 2004, I was not afraid of in 2005,’ he said. ‘What I was afraid of in 2007, I wasn't afraid of in 2009.’ As he recalls his life in Yemen with Samira [his wife], Khaled sees how God used each layer of persecution to shape their faith, grow their courage, and reveal his goodness and love through them. For that, he is grateful.”**

Jesus told us, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” That means that everything we are facing, he is facing with us. Everything we are facing has first passed through his hands. He is using everything we are facing to help us become more like himself. That is what the Christian life is all about. It is about him and becoming like him. He has made glorious promises to those who remain faithful to him. On the cross and by his resurrection he proved that we can trust him. So keep Christ in mind and the end in mind.

That's why vv. 3-4 say, “Consider him who endured from sinners hostility against himself so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted,” because **“you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood”** But he did—and now he is in us. As we focus our lives on Jesus, we *will* become like him. As we become more and more aware of what he is like from the gospels, and more and more aware of his presence from having him in the conscious forefront of our mind, then his character will more and more become our own. And that will transform us: our thoughts, our actions, what we do with our money, and how we respond to hardship. We *will* be able to **“lay aside every weight that clings to us”** and **“resist sin to the point of shedding blood.”**

CONCL: Life ultimately is all about Christ and being in relationship with him. The way people *come* into a relationship with Christ is through those of us who already *have* a relationship with him—when they see that Jesus is real and that he makes a difference in our lives. The way *we grow* in our relationship with Christ is by focusing on him: by regularly walking with him in the gospels and by having him more and more in the conscious forefront of our mind. When we focus our lives on Jesus, we *will* become like him. Everyone in the world has to deal with various forms of hardship and earthly responsibilities. When they see Christians responding to hardships and earthly responsibilities with the peace of Christ and an inner joy, they will be drawn to him because they see him in us.