

The Race Set Before Us

Hebrews 12

Mark Vroegop

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. 4 In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5 And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. 6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

7 It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. 11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

12 Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. 14 Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. 15 See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; 16 that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. 17 For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest 19 and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. 20 For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." 21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

25 See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. 26 At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." 27 This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire.

Last Sunday was a very special moment in the history of our church family as we held our first service in the new sanctuary and dedicated it to the Lord on Sunday Night during our Fresh Encounter Prayer meeting. It was one of those rare moments in the life of any church or gathering of God's people.

Over the last three weeks we've talked a lot about our Core Values and our doctrine because we want you to know – even reassure you – that there are some very important things that not changing as we use move into this new season of ministry. We've intentionally emphasized these values because they capture the historical work of God in our midst and represent what makes this body of believers unique.

Next week we will begin our Missions Emphasis Month, and for three Sundays we will consider our strategic role in reaching the world – specifically unreached people groups – for the glory of God. In late October we'll start our new book study on 1 Timothy. The next three weeks are one of my favorite in the church calendar, and I think it is divine timing that very soon after moving into this wonderful space we are talking about ministry beyond what happens here. Don't forget what Nate said last week: "This is for that!"

How Do We Make Disciples?

Today I want to reflect on something that is not necessarily new. In fact, if you've been a part of our membership class you would have heard about this often. I'm talking about our biblical strategy for discipleship at College Park. This is a very important issue because it is the primary command that Jesus gave the church when he left the earth in Matthew 28, and because core values mean nothing unless they are actually lived out. In other words, church ministry was never meant to be only ethereal, theoretical, and philosophical; it was meant to be very practical. Church is supposed to work. Spiritual growth is meant to make a difference in your life.

Therefore, it is really important for you to know what our structural plan for making disciples looks like. There is a great book on this subject, and its title captures something very well. The book is called "The Trellis and the Vine," and it identifies that the disciple-making, like growing a vine, is an organic process. But laying out a structure or a framework is important. Strategy is not everything but it is important.

We express the "trellis" of ministry at College Park with a singular mission and a three-fold strategy. The mission tells us where we are headed; the strategy tells us how we intend to get there. Here is how we summarize the trellis:

OUR MISSION: igniting a passion to follow Jesus

OUR STRATEGY: exalting Christ | experiencing community | embracing a calling

A number of years ago, our Elders worked for months on bringing clarity and simplicity to these important areas. These words and statements are not inspired nor are they all-inclusive, but they do provide a helpful framework for looking at the ministry.

Big Picture Ministry from Hebrews 12-13

The challenge with ministry structure or discipleship trellis-work is that you cannot point to just one or two verses. In fact it is important to remember that entire letters were written for this purpose. You can find big picture themes, but you need to look at big passages of Scripture. Let's see what we find in Hebrews 12 and 13.

Follow Jesus

The preceding chapter in Hebrews – chapter 11 – is one of the most famous sections of scripture in the entire Bible. It is often called the “Hall of Faith,” and it includes some amazing examples of people of faith. Abel, Enoch, Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, and Moses are all held up as great examples of “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). But as great as these men and women were, they pale in comparison to Jesus.

Jesus is the primary subject of this entire book. It begins, in chapter one, with a clear focus on Jesus:

“...in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. 3 He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Heb. 1:2-3).

So when we come to chapter 12, the focus shifts from this great record of historical faithfulness to the person of Jesus. After reminding the readers about the great cloud of witnesses, the importance of putting off all besetting sin (“lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely”), and the call to “run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb. 12:1), the writer gets to the essential point of Hebrews and, for that matter, the Bible: Jesus.

Specifically the text says “looking to Jesus.” Other translations have “let us fix our eyes on Jesus.” The idea is meant to be that the ultimate goal is Jesus. The finish line and the goal is not an idea, concept, or activity per se; it is a person.

What's more is the fact that this person is very special. Notice how Jesus is described: *“... the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2).* He founded, perfected, suffered and won the victory for our faith. Jesus is not just at the finish line; he **is** the finish line. You don't follow him to something else; you to follow him to become like him.

And when things get really tough – when you feel fainthearted or grow weary – the thing to do in that moment is to keep looking to Jesus. Hebrews 12:3 says as much: *“Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted” (Heb 12:3).*

The message of Hebrews is the mission of College Park Church. We summarize it with the statement “igniting a passion to follow Jesus.” So our mission as a church is to show you the

beauty of what it means to “look to Jesus.” That begins with coming to a personal relationship with Jesus when you admit that you are a sinner and receive Jesus. To receive him this way means to become a follower of His.

But following him extends to every area of your life. Receiving Jesus means that he gloriously takes over, and your life is now marked by a passionate pursuit of him – even when that includes hardship, difficulty, or discipline (see Heb. 12:5-11). The Apostle Paul expressed it this way:

“...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death (Phil 3:10).

Our mission is to have you live this way, to have you fall deeper and deeper in love with Jesus, to have you follow him faithfully. That is what we are all about – following Jesus passionately.

How to Follow?

That is the target, the goal, or the mission. It is important to be very clear and for every area of this ministry to be aligned to that particular mission. There is only one mission at College Park; however, there are lots of different ways that we live it out.

Some time ago our Elders wrestled with how to summarize what our “trellis” or strategy of ministry looks like. What I’m about to share with you is not the all-inclusive summary, but rather the basic structure of how we live out following Jesus. In our new member’s classes we use this as the summary of what we believe every person at College Park should do. It represents the building blocks of discipleship.

Exalting Christ

Let me show you this from Hebrews 12. In verses 18-29 we see the writer use an image of a lofty, supreme, and powerful God. He brings us back to Mount Sinai.

18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest 19 and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. 20 For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." 21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear" (Heb 12:18-21).

But then he shows us how much greater is the awe and majesty of the New Covenant:

22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Heb. 12:22-24).

Jesus has ushered in the new covenant through his blood. Abel was first person who was murdered, and Jesus's blood "speaks a better word." Oh and what a better word it speaks! Abel's blood was about sin and vengeance; Jesus's blood is all about deliverance. And in light of this spiritual reality, God's people should be filled with worship! Look at verse 28:

"Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:28-29)

This text clearly indicates the primary importance of worship and that is what we mean by "exalting Christ." God redeems us for the purpose of glorifying his own name (Eph. 2:7). In other words, worship is a central purpose behind God's redemption of you.

You were made to worship. You were created to exult in something greater than yourself. And we believe that central to discipleship process is the corporate gathering of God's people on the Lord's Day for the express purpose of meeting with him and beholding the beauty of His Son. Therefore, we take corporate worship on Sunday very seriously. We spend hours each week planning, preparing, and praying over what Sunday will be like because we believe that it is really important for all of us to meet with God and focus on Jesus during our corporate worship time.

Our aim is to point you vertically – beyond yourself, your sin, and your struggles – and to have you behold the beauty of God in the face of Jesus. Our view is that every Sunday is a special meeting with the creator of universe and the captain of our faith. It is serious, important, and vital to your soul.

By the way, this extends beyond just you. It extends to your children as well. When I first arrived at College Park I was alarmed at how few children were worshipping along with their parents on Sundays. I'm thrilled with how that has changed, but I just want to emphasize again to all of our parents that we need to create in our kids an appetite for corporate worship. Even at a young age they absorb far more than what you realize, and they need to see you worshipping. It is a grave error to think that children who rarely have worshipped with anyone except their peers will suddenly discover and value corporate worship in high school or college. The corporate, vertically-focused gathering of God's people – from every walk of life, every age, and from multiple cultures and races - is vitally important for following Jesus.

Sunday morning worship is a sacred time for the body of College Park as we gather before our King and celebrate him. We need to exalt Christ.

However, Sunday morning worship alone is not sufficient. We need each other, and that leads to the second part of our strategy.

Experiencing Community

The second leg on this spiritual formation or discipleship stool is community which I would define as "doing life together." The beauty of following Jesus is that we were never meant to do it solo! Listen to what we find in verses 12-16:

12 Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. 14 Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. 15 See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled (Heb. 12:12-16).

This book was written to be read in the context of a community of people, and we need to read these verses this way. The writer continues the athletic metaphor from verse one, but he does not have a solo run in view. The church is running together.

This is even more obvious when you see the exhortation toward peace with one another (v 14), and the call to "see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God" (v 15). There is clearly a mutual obligation to do life together, to watch out for one another, and to help each other. In other words, following Jesus is not something that God designed for us to do all by ourselves.

Notice what else this text says in verse 15: "...that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble and by it many become defiled." Some people take this to be a warning about the problem of emotional bitterness – like two people who don't like each other. Certainly that is not good, but that is not what is in view here. Rather it is referring to what Deuteronomy 29:18 talks about:

18 Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the Lord our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, 19 one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart...' (Deut. 29:18-19).

The root of bitterness is what happens when a person, through the hardness of his or heart, begins to wander away from God. It is referring to an immoral man or woman or a person like Esau (12:17) who is beyond true repentance. This is the tragic moment when sin creates a hardened heart, and the person is so self-deluded that they do not see that they are making a shipwreck of their faith. A root of bitterness springs up when a person – particularly a respected person – walks away from the faith. People are devastated. Many are defiled.

So the question could be stated this way: Who is in your life that would know if your soul started to wander? Who is a part of your spiritual formation such that they would sense growing pride, callousness, insensitivity to spiritual things, or moral issues? Who will help you cling to Jesus when life falls apart?

Therefore, the second strategy for how we do discipleship at College Park is experiencing community. This means that we want you to grow with others who are involved in your life. We do this through Small Groups which meet in homes and Big Groups that meet at Church. This is also why we emphasize church membership and why we practice church discipline. We believe that spiritual growth happens with other people.

So we're okay if you come just to Sunday morning worship for a while, but if that is all that your spiritual life involves, you will never grow as God intended. You need people in your life.

Exalting Christ and experiencing community are two key parts of how we follow Jesus, but there is one more important piece.

Embracing a Calling

This final arena involves the important use of the gifts and abilities which God has given you. But this is more than just doing things, serving, and spiritual activity. This involves discovering God's calling on your life. It means that you come to understand and embrace your place in making a difference for God's glory.

It seems to us that spiritual formation, in its most basic form, involves worship, community, and service. It means what you behold, what you become, and how you behave all center on the person of Jesus.

Jesus's mission is to give you a mission. So what is it?

Now to see this critical area, we need to move beyond Hebrews 12 and see what is being said in chapter 13. Notice how many other-centered, service-oriented the things are listed:

- **"Let brotherly love continue"** (13:1) – He begins with an over-arching thought or idea about the importance of love. Love is the greatest of all gifts (1 Cor 13) and is the ultimate aim of Christian ministry (1 Timothy 1:5). We are called to find many creative ways to love one another.
- **"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers"** (v 2) - During the time when Hebrews was written it wouldn't be uncommon for Christians to have to stay with one another when traveling. For moral and safety reasons, this was pretty important. Hospitality and taking care of strangers just fits with God's grace to us. And in our present day this looks like being hospitable to visitors when they come to College Park, reaching out beyond your comfort zone to meet people who are different than you or getting involved in post-service response ministry. It could also include being a foster parent, adopting a child, assisting in the challenges of immigration, or doing something about human trafficking.
- **"Remember those who are in prison"** (v 3) – This was likely referring to those who were imprisoned for their faith and for people whose faith was very costly. I don't think it is too much of a stretch to connect this idea to believers around the world in hard areas who are doing ministry in dangerous or very difficult circumstances.
- **"Imitate the life and faith of your leaders"** (v 7) – He is calling them to see themselves as ministers. He is calling them to be like your spiritual leaders.
- **"Bear the reproach that Jesus endured"** (v 13) – Suffering is assumed as a part of the Christian faith. Serve in a way that proves to be costly or with people who don't want you to be there. Find a calling where no one says, "Thanks!"

- **“Do not neglect to do good and share what you have”** (v 16) – Here is summary statement that is meant capture the heart of what this great book is all about.
- **“Pray for us”** (v 18) – The final thing that the writer lists is a call to prayer. He asks the church to pray for him. It should be noted how seriously important this is for the life, vibrancy, and protection of the ministry. Make it part of your calling to pray, and this is something that everyone of us can and should do.

I’ve seen the importance of this in my own family. Due to the way our family worships and children’s Sunday School worked out last year, our twins had an available worship hour on Sunday. My wife saw this coming and wisely suggested that we needed to find some way for them to serve. Therefore, she left a Sunday School class that she really enjoyed, started helping in the Kindergarten class, and decided that our twins would serve along with her. I remember when we first told them that they were going to be assisting their Mom in a kindergarten class. They were willing but not real excited.

But over time, with her coaching and some really great kids, my boys came to love that class. They learned how to love on challenging kids, answer spiritual questions, and build into the lives of Kindergarteners. This is their second year and they’re leading worship, serving as table leaders, and loving every minute of it. Plus, Mom has become a hero to them as they’ve seen her use her teaching gift with elementary kids. With corporate worship, a great High School youth ministry, and this kind of service, I see them growing.

Exalting Christ, experiencing community, and embracing a calling are all a part of what it means for us to follow Jesus. And I want you to be a part of what God is doing here. I long for you to worship, to grow together, and for us to serve in ways that reflect the beauty of who Jesus is.

Notice how Hebrews ends:

20 Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, 21 equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb. 13:20-21)

May God help us to be that kind of church – a place filled with passionate followers of Jesus!

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