Endure Hardship as Discipline

Hebrews 12:1-13

Key Verse: 12:7a “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children.”

The 2020 Tokyo Olympics was over two weeks ago amidst this pandemic situation. The Marathon is called the flower of the Olympics and it is held just before the closing ceremony. People in the stadium want to watch the winners finishing the line because they endured hardships and completed their race. All runners who finish the race deserve to be honored. In chapter 12 the author compares our life of faith to running a race. He teaches us how to prepare for the race and how to run and finish the race successfully.

First, Fix our eyes on Jesus. (1-3) Look at verse 1a. “***Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.***” This verse teaches us how to prepare for running. The runners should make themselves as light as possible. This is why they only wear shirts, short pants, and running shoes. There are no runners who wear heavy winter coats and combat boots when they run. What are the things that hinder our race and the sin that so easily entangles us? In John 1:15-17 John the Apostle said that they are everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. In a word they are the love of this world. Jesus describes them as the thorns which chock the plants in the Parable of the Sower. (Mt 13:7,22) As the thorns choke the plants not to grow, so too does something entangle us not to run. Jesus said that they are the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth. Consider what things hinder your spiritual life. What do you spend most of your time with in your daily life? These days people are entangled by games, movies, YouTube, and other social media.

About the sin, Apostle Paul describes in Galatians 5:19 as the fruits of the flesh. They are “*sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like*.” Is there anyone who is exempt from this list of sins? Among these, hatred and anger really entangle us not to run properly. Jesus said that we must reconcile with our brothers and sisters before we bring our offering to God. Jesus teaches us that we cannot run properly unless we forgive others. As long as we run with hatred and anger, we will easily become tired and weary not because of physical weakness, but because of spiritual and mental burnt out. We cannot run with a heavy heart. We have to run with a joyful spirit and thankful mind. Let us repent and ask God for a joyful spirit and thankful mind.

Now look at verses 1b-3. “***And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.***” These verses teach us how to run the race. We have to run the race with perseverance, fixing our eyes on Jesus. Perseverance is one of the most important and essential attitudes for runners. The Marathon is a long-distance race. It requires perseverance for completion. They say all marathoners face ‘the moment of hitting the wall’ which means the moment they want to give up. Those who overcome this deadly moment can finish the race.

Fixing their eyes on the prize makes them persevering. No one runs in vain or aimlessly. They run toward the finishing line, expecting for the prize. This is the reason why we have to fix our eyes on Jesus. Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our race. This means that Jesus started this race of faith and finished it successfully. He endured the cross to finish his race. He endured shame and pain, and he finally sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Read verse 3 again. Consider Jesus who endured such opposition from sinners. Jesus, although the Creator God, was mistreated by his creatures. He was mocked, spitted, flogged, and finally crucified. He had no reason to die for himself, but for sinners who crucified him. He endured the cross. He did not come down from the cross, but hung on the tree until he said, “*It is finished*” (Jn 19:30) Jesus showed us how to run.

There are many examples in the Bible. They are Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, David, Daniel, and so on. Abraham was called to be a father of many nations. He had to leave his father’s household and his country to obey God’s command. His race started with the promise of God. But his race was not easy for him. He went down to Egypt to support his family in the time of famine. He took a concubine to get a son. He lied to the gentiles to save his life. Abraham made many mistakes in his race, still he didn’t give up. In fact, God did not give him up, either. Abraham ran his race with perseverance until he completed it. He finished his race and became the father of many nations as God had promised.

The race is marked out for each person according to God’s plan. Some are short and others are long. Some are straight and others crooked with many uphill and downhills. God wants us to run the race which is marked out for each and to finish with perseverance. Amen!

Second, God disciplines us because he loves us (Endure hardship as discipline) (4-13) In all sports games athletes put themselves into strict training regiments to win the games or gain the prize. This is no exception for marathoners. They put themselves into strict training to run the race. They start controlling everything to keep their best physical condition, especially proper weight to run. As verse 4 says they struggle against their fleshly desire to the point of shedding their blood.

We summarize verses 5-11 with three statements: 1. We need discipline. I mean everybody needs discipline in one way or the other. 2. Discipline is not bad, but good. 3. God’s discipline has good purpose. Look at verses 5-6. “***And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.***” While I was out of town, my son got into his car and got into an accident. It was his first day practicing driving. Since then, Sam and I have worked together. He had to learn to distinguish a break from an accelerator. He had to learn how to follow the traffic rules while he was driving. He failed his first driving test. He got it in his second trial. It took time for him to drive his car comfortably. In the same way we need discipline in order to achieve our goal. Everybody needs to go through a certain period of discipline to reach the standard. As verse 11 says, “***No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it***.” No one likes to be disciplined, but those who are disciplined are rewarded and get promoted. Psalm 126:5 says, “*Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.*”

When we are disciplined by God, we should not make it light or lose our heart. God disciplines us because he loves us. He treats us as his children. Verse 6 says, “*because the Lord disciplines the one he loves.”*  Verses 7-10 continues, “***Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness***.” Every discipline has purpose. Fathers discipline their children as they think best. There are children who keep their table manners appropriately because they have been disciplined by their parents from a young age. On the contrary there are some children who undergo difficulty in adjusting to social life because they didn’t receive proper discipline from their parents.

When I was in high school, I wasted time by going out to the river for fishing instead of studying for my exam. My father rebuked me and punished me. If human fathers’ discipline for their children is good and necessary, how much more important and necessary is God's discipline for his people? God disciplines us for our good. God’s discipline for us has good purpose. In the Bible God disciplined the Israelites in the desert for 40 years. The Israelites needed discipline because they had lived as lawless slaves in Egypt for 430 years. God had to teach them from scratch how to live as people of God. So, God gave them the Ten Commandments as their law. God also disciplined them how to depend on him by providing manna and water in the desert. There was a greater purpose of God’s discipline for the Israelites than just bringing them into the Promised Land. God’s divine purpose for them was to make them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Ex 19:5,6) God wanted to bless the whole world through them. This is a great blessing for the Israelites who had lived as slaves in the foreign country. In order to become a blessing, they needed discipline.

Look at verse 10 b “*but God disciplines us for good, in order that we may share in his holiness.*” In this verse we know that the ultimate goal of God’s discipline us is to share his holiness. In a word God wants us to be like Jesus through discipline. We carry too many things to carry in following Jesus. We commit sin everyday which entangles us. We are easily distracted by the things of this world. We are tempted to give up our life of faith when we face difficulties. We are often dismayed and discouraged when things don’t go well as we expect. We often doubt God’s existence and his love when we are in trouble. We are long way to go to follow Jesus. Still, Jesus encourages us to run the race. He still rebukes us when we doubt and are tempted to give up.

Remember that discipline makes us strong. No discipline is pleasant at that time, but painful. Later on, when we pass the period of discipline, we will have the harvest of righteousness and peace. No pain, no gain. No cross, no crown. No discipline, no disciple. Jesus endured the cross for the joy which was set before him. We endure our cross for the joy set before us. What is our joy? Our joy is the reunion with our Lord Jesus Christ, who will wipe out every tear from our eyes and will give us the crown of life. Amen! We are now passing through the tunnel of pandemic. God disciplines us somewhat through this pandemic. I believe that God uses this pandemic as discipline for us to share his holiness. Grace Choi and Deborah Park face a new living environment. It is a discipline for them to learn how to depend on God and to live by faith. Daniel in the Bible faced the same challenge when he was in exile. Still, he kept his identity and faith as people of God. I pray that they may endure hardship as discipline to share God’s holiness and to live as people of God. Amen!

Discipline requires our willing response. Read v. 12-13. “***Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. “Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disable, but rather healed.***” Let us fix our eyes on Jesus and run the race marked out for each of us with perseverance. Let us endure hardship as God’s divine love to share his holiness. May God bless us when we finish the race which is marked out for each of us. Amen!