

Jesus – greater than Run the Race with Discipline

Hebrews 12:1-11
Rev'd Chris Johnson

There is a famous Prime Minister who once said, *"Life wasn't meant to be easy."* There has probably never been a truer word spoken by one of our Prime Ministers.

Scott Peck in his famous book, 'The Road Less Travelled' begins with these words,
"Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult - once we truly understand and accept it - then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, then the fact that life is difficult no longer matters."

He goes on to talk about how most people expect life to be much easier than they've got it, so they moan and groan about their circumstances. But he says he can't talk because he's done his fair share of whinging to.

So what's the remedy for this whinging?

He says that it is **discipline**. He says that it is discipline which helps us to face the fact that life is difficult and still be happy. Let me quote from him again a little later in Ch 1, *"Discipline is the basic set of tools we require to solve life's problems. Without discipline we can solve nothing.... It is in the whole process of meeting and solving problems that life has its meaning. Problems are the cutting edge that distinguishes between success and failure. Problems call forth our courage and our wisdom; indeed they create our courage and our wisdom. It is only because of problems that we grow mentally and spiritually."*

This morning we come to the second last sermon in our series from the Book of Hebrews - Jesus greater than. The title for this talk is, **Run the Race with Discipline**. Our author talks about the importance of discipline in a person's life. As children our parents disciplined us so that hopefully later on in life as adults we would be self-disciplined.

Alongside this theme of discipline our author uses the metaphor of an athletic race as a picture of the Christian life. He exhorts us to run the race with perseverance and joy. We have a great cloud of witnesses cheering us on, and our goal is Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

We are to run with discipline.

Let's look at discipline first and then apply it to the race of life.

Our author quotes from the book of Proverbs Chapter 3 which we have also read today. The analogy is that just as parents discipline their children for their own good, so God disciplines us as his children for our good.

The writer recognises that discipline is not pleasant but if we are prepared to submit to it, it does grow us in holiness and produces a harvest of righteousness and peace.

So how might we think about children and discipline today. Firstly, we need to be aware it is possible for there to be too much discipline in the rearing of children. I remember sitting on the

front step of our Rectory at Petrie with a gentleman who was bemoaning the fact that he was estranged from his adult children. He told me how he had brought them up with strong discipline and always told them the right way to go. Sadly, there was no love or affection in his tone, it was all about him knowing what was right and they should have obeyed. From what he said and the way he said it, it didn't surprise me that they no longer wanted to talk to him.

On the other hand, it is possible to have too little discipline and from my observation this is probably the more likely problem today. Or it may be that I'm just getting older and showing my age. I do read stories of parents whose mantra for parenting is, "I want to be my children's friend." They are very reluctant to apply any discipline because you don't discipline a friend. My mantra is you firstly have to parent and that leads into friendship. Being the parent may mean some short-term angst but I believe it leads to long-term respect and friendship.

There can be the tendency for parents to constantly rescue their children from their bad decisions and naughty behaviour. So children never grow up facing the consequences of their wrong behaviour and just expect the world should adjust to them and their needs.

The key in all of this of course is the phrase loving discipline.

- Discipline that arises out of love.
- Discipline which is for our highest good.

The most loving parents are those who are firm with bad behaviour but are also ready with an explanation and restoration.

This is the sort of loving discipline I believe God exercises with us his children. He gives us the rules, if we break them there is punishment, but he is always there waiting for our repentance and ready to take us back. He is like the Father in the story of the prodigal son, waiting for us to come to our senses and come home. And even ready to embrace us and throw a party.

It is good to learn discipline as a child. Even better to know it as an adult.

Following Jesus of course is the best way to learn discipline. The word disciple and the word discipline come from the same root. The word disciple literally means a learner, but it is not just learning facts.

- It is about sitting under a teacher who we imitate.
- It's about a way of life, letting the teaching sink down from our heads into our hearts and into our actions.
- This takes discipline.
- This is what it means to be a disciple.

Following Jesus, being his disciple, really is the best way to learn discipline.

Let's apply this to the metaphor of an athletic race.

There is a very memorable scene from the 1984 Olympic Games of Gabriela Andersen-Schiess running in the marathon or should I say staggering. This was the first women's marathon run at an Olympics and Gabriella ended up coming 37th out of 44 runners, but more importantly she finished the race.

That stadium was packed with people on their feet clapping and cheering to get her across that line.

Sometimes you just need one person cheering you on. Do you remember this scene from the Tokyo Olympics a little earlier this year. Ash Moloney winning bronze in the Men's Decathlon but being cheered on by his teammate and mentor Cedric Dubler.

It's amazing what you can do with a bit of encouragement.

Hebrews 12 says

"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. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us fixing our eyes on Jesus."

The great cloud of witnesses is all the saints mentioned in Hebrews Chapter 11. We have people like

- Noah who obeyed God and built the ark,
- Abraham who obeyed God and travelled to the promised land even though he had no idea where he was going and how it would work out. He travelled by faith.
- Moses who obeyed God by confronting Pharaoh and leading the people out of Egypt and through the Red Sea.
- and many others just get a brief mention - Gideon, Barack, Samson, Samuel, David and the prophets.

The image here is of a relay race with many people of faith who have gone before; they have run their leg of the race, handed the baton on and then moved into the stadium crowd to cheer on those still to run their leg of the race. The obedience of these saints and their examples of faith are what is cheering us on. We need to be reading the stories of these Old Testament saints and find the encouragement we need for the obedience we're called to.

The passage says to throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. This means the

- trivial concerns,
- the resentments we hold against others,
- the bodily appetites,
- the greed and the self-indulgence.

We have to throw off everything that hinders.

And then we have to keep our eyes on the finishing line and the finishing line is Jesus. He is both the starting line and the finishing line. Pioneer and perfecter. When the going gets tough we keep our eyes on him.

Jesus endured the cross - it was physically excruciating but also psychologically humiliating.

- The physical pain was the shedding of his blood v4.
- The psychological pain was the humiliation of dying a criminal's death in degrading circumstances, when he was totally innocent. Yet v2 says he scorned its shame.

And he did this because of the joy set before him. I think this means that he kept his eyes on the final goal which was the resurrection and ascension. He rose from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God. Jesus kept his eyes on the goal set before him. This is the joy set before him.

Likewise, we have to keep our eyes on the goal which is him. This is the joy set before us. This is the joy we hold onto whatever hardship might be involved in following him or in life in general.

Whatever the suffering. Whatever the problems.

I quoted Scott Peck at the beginning where he said life is full of problems and it's the disciplined who overcome problems and find a way forward in life. Well here it is both discipline and joy. The discipline comes because of the joy set before us.

Disciples of Jesus are people who face problems and work through them to find solutions. What problems are you facing at the moment? Are you running away from them or facing them squarely because you are a disciple of Jesus. Disciples walk into the problems of life holding the hand of Jesus and overcome. We know this is how we grow personally and spiritually.

People who don't have the joy of Jesus set before them, people who lack discipline, engage in all sorts of escapist behaviour.

They may blame someone else,

- problems are always someone else's fault,
- so they should fix it.
- I don't need to do anything.

Or it maybe people get into a party culture,

- take drugs,
- do whatever is easy to block out the pain of their problems and not have to face them.

It is the disciple of Jesus who faces the pain and keeps going anyway. Just like the athlete who breaks through the pain barrier and keeps going when others want to give up.

Let me give you one more illustration.

See if you can guess who this is.

- He was just nine years old when his mother died. He only received one year of formal education.
- At 23 he secured a loan to become a partner in a small shop.
- At 26 his business partner died, leaving him a huge debt that took years to repay.
- At 28, after dating a girl for four years he asked her to marry him, and she said no.
- He decided to have a go at politics. He tried twice and failed in a big way. On the third attempt he was elected to Congress, but failed to be re-elected two years later.
- At 41 his four year old son died.
- At 45 he ran for a seat in the American Senate and lost.
- At 47 he failed as a vice-presidential candidate.
- At 49 you would have thought he had learned by now - he ran for the Senate and lost again.
- At 51 he had still not given up, and was elected President of the United States. His name was Abraham Lincoln, the man a large number of Americans consider to be their greatest leader.

Life is full of problems isn't it. But it is those who have the discipline, who keep pushing on, who find a way.

My friends we are about to embark on a five year plan Vision 26.

We are setting ourselves some ambitious goals. There are many obstacles in the way to achieving those goals.

But that's OK. We've already overcome many obstacles. We've made it this far through Covid. As I remember Lynda and I arrived during a lockdown; there were just 20 people at our Commissioning. God has been faithful. There might be a few more Covid problems to solve before we see the end of it but God is faithful.

Who knows what other problems might arise in the next five years.

None of us knows the future but we do know who holds the future, therefore we run the race marked out before us with perseverance and discipline.

We set our eyes on Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.