

MAY 22, 1988

DISCIPLINED COMMITMENT

Have you ever noticed how caught up in sports events we tend to be as a nation? It is not just us, many people throughout the world have avid interest in sports. The modern day Olympic contests are but a witness of the far wider mania in which people get caught up. Many social conversations are centered around a certain team or particular sport. This is nothing new, it has been going on for thousands of years. There are many references in the New Testament to various sports. We encourage our children to participate in team sports or individual sports because these can be microcosms of the real world and there are lessons to be learned in a non-threatening environment. For example, in sports you can learn that breaking the rules can set your team back or even get you rejected from the game. If one has to learn that lesson in the real world it may exact a high price. Sometimes when people break the rules they must go to prison or they might get killed by accidents of their own making.

HEBREWS 12:1-2 The imagery used here is that of a long distance race. I used to think that the witnesses referred to in this passage were like spectators watching the race that we are in and we should be careful to not disappoint them. That probably is not the right picture. The witnesses are, of course, those people mentioned in the previous chapter of Hebrews and others like them. What they witnessed was the fact that faith in God is the most certain surety in the world. They exercised their faith in God by being faithful and they could testify (give witness) of the rightness of trusting in God. Having their witness of the success of these that were faithful should encourage us to prepare for and run the race that is before us. Part of that preparation is to be properly dressed for the occasion. The runners need to be unencumbered and not wear something that would trip them up or slow them down. In the race of life, the encumbrances are sins that we carry around (or those that we are attached to). We are told to "throw off" these things. If we are told to do it, then you must conclude that we have the power (ability) to do just that. God will not require that for which He does not empower.

You remember the story of the tortoise and the hare. The point of that tale is this: It is not necessarily the fastest or most powerful that wins the race, it is the one that keeps at it and first crosses the finish line. Many exceptionally bright children (and grown-ups) do not achieve or accomplish greatness because they lack a sense of closure -- a need to finish what is started. We are told here that we are to run the race with patience. Most people think of patience as being a passive thing--just sitting around waiting but having a good attitude about it. A lot of people sit around and wait and do NOT have a good attitude and we call them "impatient". But they both sit around and wait. That interpretation of patience will not win a race for you. The English word that is closer to the meaning in the original language is perseverance which is the ability to stick to the job until it is done. This requires commitment. Commitment grows out of discipline and vice versa. Commitment feeds on discipline which creates more discipline. You mix the two together and both will grow.

How can we be assured that faithfulness and perseverance and faith really works when we have obstacles on our racetrack of life? Most of us would like to see an example of such an approach working. Hebrews 12:2 anticipates this need for an example: "Looking unto Jesus, the author (pioneer) and finisher (perfecter) of our faith (faithfulness). Talk about obstacles--look at the cross. Was the goal (the prize for winning the race) of enough significance (value) to justify going through the obstacles? He was looking at the redemption of mankind--restoring the purposes of God that were being thwarted because of sin. That was the joy that was set before Him. It just may be that the reason we see so little disciplined commitment is that people have goals that are really not worth the hassle for going through the inevitable obstacles that will be there. This is a matter of setting

priorities in determining what you will expend your energies on. If we get involved in a lot of low value goals, then we have little reason for seeing them through with discipline and commitment. What happens is that we wind up spending valuable time and effort that could otherwise be spent on something more worthwhile, something that would bring out discipline and commitment (perseverance).

HEBREWS 12:3-6 Jesus put up with a lot of resistance from people in authoritative positions. It is one thing when you get contradicted by the village idiot--it is something else when the accepted experts contradict you. Are you going to continue to believe what you believe even when the experts say that you are wrong? If you have a higher authority on which to rely, then you have basis for sticking to your beliefs. Jesus had a message from His Father. This same type of resistance faced the leaders in the early church. Peter and John were arrested and told to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. Their response was simply a question that they asked of the religious leaders of that day: "Should we obey God or man?"

At the time of the writing of this letter to the Hebrews, people were beginning to turn away from Christianity because of opposition and persecution. The challenge put to these people was to consider if the price they were paying was anything compared to what Jesus did for them. He suffered and died for us--we haven't resisted to the point of losing even one drop of blood.

A very helpful way to view the hardships of life is to see if these are learning opportunities to grow and to put behind us the things in our life that keep us from reaching our goals. Such hardships are possibly the means of disciplining us to develop the strength and confidence for accomplishing greater things. If we were just allowed to drift and not be challenged to grow, then either God would be a negligent Father or we would already be perfect. How we respond to discipline affects the Father-child relationship we have with God.

HEBREWS 12:7--11 Apparently, those that received this letter were complaining about their situation in life. Just as we tell our children that we must limit them in what they are allowed to do, we should expect God to provide necessary limits for our own good. These limits are not just for our protection, but also for our growth. We send children to school to learn--they would rather play. However, because we make them endure the disciplined life for a certain period of time they reap the benefits later in life. What God is trying to do for us is much more important than formal education. He wants us to be partakers in His holiness--to be like Him.

HEBREWS 12:12-13 The conclusion is that we should be encouraged rather than discouraged when we see challenge before us. How do we face life? When something unexpected comes up that gets in our way, do we respond with slumped shoulder and a let's just give up attitude or do we rise to that challenge and throw our shoulders back and have a let's go get 'em attitude? We need to do the second option and encourage others to do so. If we give up we will influence others to do so. If we press on, in spite of the obstacles, then others will also be influenced to do so.