

Riverview Baptist Church
Sunday School Teaching Plan
June 8, 2014
“The Race of Faith”

Memory Verse

“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.” Hebrews 12:1, NIV

The Big Idea:

Sermon Scripture: Hebrews 12:1-6
Sermon Title: “Running God’s Way”

Sunday School Scripture: Hebrews 12:1-3
Sunday School Title: “The Race of Faith”

Big Idea: If we are to accept the challenge of running the race of faith, we must get rid of sin and distractions, focus our attention on Jesus, and run with perseverance.

REVIEW: Over the last few weeks, we’ve studied well-known Bible characters listed in Hebrews chapter 11, also known as the Faith Hall of Fame. Thinking back over the past few weeks’ lessons and sermons, what are some things you learned from these listed in the Faith Hall of Fame? (See Hebrews 11)

This week, we move on to Hebrews 12. Here, the author encourages us to learn from the lives of the Faith Hall of Famers and live lives of faith. The author uses a word picture here, comparing the Christian life to a race.

What are your feelings about running for exercise? Do you enjoy it, or not? What are the benefits of running? What is difficult about running?

Undoubtedly, running provides excellent exercise and helps to release stress. But it’s not easy, especially for those of us who are physically out of shape. Some enjoy running while others wouldn’t run unless someone scary was chasing them. As Christians, however, we are called to run a race. And our legacy and reward depend on how we choose to run it.

READ Hebrews 12:1-3

How is following Jesus like running a race?

RUNNER IN TRAINING

1. ACCEPT THE CHALLENGE

Hebrews 12:1 tells us to “*run the race marked out for us.*” Let’s dissect this statement one word at a time to understand why the author is comparing the Christian life to running a race.

RUN: not surprisingly, the Greek word here means to run, hard. To physically exert yourself. The idea here is that living the Christian life is not a spectator sport. We are meant to actively participate and intentionally engage. Just like a runner knows a race will require hard work, determination, and exertion to succeed, God wants us to live with purpose and passion, keeping a specific goal in mind.

RACE: the Greek word here describes a race, struggle, or contest involving competition and prizes. Just like a race is a physical contest involving struggle and competition, so too is the Christian life. As we strive to follow Jesus in our lives, we will constantly encounter obstacles in the form of temptation, sin, sorrows, and disappointments. It’s just part of the race! But just as a runner anticipates and overcomes obstacles during the race, we too should be prepared to defeat any hurdles in our pursuit of the finish line.

MARKED OUT FOR US: the Greek used for this phrase means a task that is specifically appointed or assigned. Runners who participate in races don’t go in blindly. They choose which races to run and then gather information - like the location, the distance, the route, the challenges involved (hills?). Whether it’s a sprinting event, a 5k

race or a marathon, a runner selects a specific race in which to compete, but he doesn't get to choose where the race is held or what the route will be. That part is marked out for him. The same is true for us. God invites us to follow Jesus with our lives. We can be confident that when we choose to run this race of faith, God has specifically and carefully planned our course. Though we may not always know which direction to take next, God knows, and He will point the way for us as we run.

The author of Hebrews compares the Christian life to a race. Just like running in a race, following Jesus demands time, energy, and effort. Are we willing to accept the challenge?

Many Christians live life passively, accepting things as they come and making decisions without praying or consulting the Bible. They often follow the world's priorities instead of Jesus'. In fact, many Christians wouldn't describe their lives as a race. Instead, they might describe the Christian life as...

2. LIGHTEN YOUR LOAD

Hebrews 12:1 tells us that, as we are running, we should *"throw off everything that hinders us and the sin that so easily entangles."* This is some great advice for runners! After all, running a race is difficult enough. Why run it with extra weight on your back or chains around your ankles? In order to be the best you can be, it makes sense to eliminate anything that might slow you down in the race. As Christians, we need to take the same approach. In this verse from Hebrews, there are 2 different types of things we are called to "throw off."

The first thing we are to get rid of is anything that might weigh us down or hinder us from following Jesus. This is a call to evaluate our lives and look closely at the activities and people to which we give our time and energy. Is there anything extra or unnecessary that we can get rid of? What is slowing us down or keeping us from truly following Jesus faithfully? This is not necessarily a question of *what's good* vs. *what's bad*. This is more of a question of *what's good* vs. *what's BEST*. Let's return to the running example. If you're preparing to run a race, things like practice, sleep, nutrition, and equipment will be priorities for you. Other matters will fade into the background until the race is over. For us as Christians, if we're truly following Jesus, our priorities will differ from the world's.

For the Christian running the race of faith, what things should be priorities in life? What things should be put aside? In your own life, are there activities that, though they might be considered "good", may not be best? What do you need to throw aside in order to run more effectively?

The second thing we are called to "throw aside" in this race of faith is sin. It might seem obvious, but let's pause to think about this. As a runner, would you want to do anything that would compromise your ability to run effectively and finish well? No! You would avoid anything that would slow you down, or demand unnecessary physical energy, or take you down the wrong route. As Christians, sin threatens to "entangle" us as we try to follow Jesus. Sin, when ignored and allowed to fester, has power to grow, cripple, and kill us. Not only can sin slow us down, but it can make the race much more difficult than it needs to be. And sin can even keep us from the rewards God offers us at the end of the race. Sin is not to be treated lightly or with indifference. This phrase "throw off" used in Scripture means to decisively get rid of something. It isn't a passive ignoring of something or a polite rebuff. Instead, this is a violent make-war-on-it kind of thing. As Christians, we are to be alert and ready to vehemently hate and decisively eliminate any sin that threatens to ensnare us.

Do you think we as Christians take sin seriously enough? What happens when we ignore the sin present in our lives? On the other hand, what would happen if we declared war on the sin in our lives?

3. FOLLOW THE FRONT RUNNER

Hebrews 12:2 encourage us to *"fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith."* In long races such as a marathon, the front-runner is the runner in the lead. Hebrews 12:2 says that we have a frontrunner in our race of faith. The Greek used in this phrase means Jesus is the first-goer or the pioneer. He was the first to run the race of faith. In fact, he created it! Jesus knows every twist and turn of the race route. He knows where the steep hills and the water tables are located. He's well acquainted with fatigued muscles and burning lungs. He's felt encouragement from shouts of loved ones in the crowd, but he's also felt rejection and isolation during the long, lonely miles. Above all, though, he has run the entire race. He completed it and has won the ultimate prize!

Living the Christian life can be difficult at times, but we can be encouraged by looking at Jesus, our front-runner, as our example. He encountered and conquered every trial or temptation common to man. His perfect life and final victory serve as our inspiration and goal.

And we are to “fix our eyes” on Him. This indicates the intentional looking away from other things in order to focus in on one particular thing. During a race, the runner’s mind and attitude are just as important as his physical fitness. If he is to run well and finish the race, he must focus his thoughts and attitude on the goal while ignoring distractions. As Christians, we must do the same. In our day-to-day lives, there are many things, people, and activities competing for our attention. We must be careful, through it all, to keep our thoughts and attitude focused on Jesus. As my youth pastor once said, the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.

How does having Jesus as our front-runner make this race of faith a bit easier?

4. PREPARE TO ENDURE

Hebrews 12:1 says we must “*run with endurance.*” In other words, the author warns us up front that this race of faith is more like a marathon than a sprint. It’s longer, harder, and more taxing. It takes a lifetime – not just a few minutes. And if we are to run it well, we must be ready to endure times of hardship.

Most serious long-distance runners will tell you that there is always one point in the race when your body becomes extremely tired and your muscles tense in pain. But, if you can just keep running through the fatigue and pain, make it over the physical and emotional mountain to the other side, the discomfort improves and you are able to continue. Endurance is a crucial component for the race. In Hebrews 12:1, the Greek used for *endurance* means to remain or bear up under something. It describes someone who, with patient and steadfast perseverance, continues plugging away at the task, regardless of the difficulty or discomfort. It describes a man who cannot be swerved or distracted from his present task and ultimate purpose. Endurance. The power to keep on keepin’ on. Runners need it in a race, and Christians need it in life.

Describe a time when you had to endure something painful or difficult. In other words, you couldn’t go around it or avoid it. You just had to go through it to get to the other side.

Our race of faith will require endurance. And we might become discouraged thinking about the potential obstacles and trials ahead. But the good news is we have an example of one who endured the worst of the worst. Jesus, our front-runner, endured the cross. He bravely chose to take our sin and our punishment upon Himself. He stayed the course, despite the pain, disgrace, and isolation. Surely, most of the situations we must endure pale in comparison to what Jesus endured on the cross. And this should bring us hope! Hebrews 12:3 encourages us to “*consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*” So when the race gets hard, our bodies grow tired, the miles stretch long and our minds ponder defeat, we can fix our hearts and minds on Jesus. He died for us. Surely we can run the race of faith for Him.

CLOSING: If we are to accept the challenge of running the race of faith, we must get rid of sin and distractions, focus our attention on Jesus, and run with perseverance.

APPLY IT! Consider these questions this week:

- Are you running the race of faith, or are you sitting on the sidelines?
- What hinders or entangles you? What do you need to “throw off” in order to run more effectively?
- Is your attention fixed on Jesus, or are you distracted?
- Are you ready and willing to endure tough circumstances with Jesus as your guide and example?

STUDY NOTES: (These are for your own study. This is NOT the lesson. Commentary written by David Guzik and available online: http://www.blueletterbible.org/commentaries/guzik_david/)

Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses: The author envisions these previous champions of faith as spectators from the heavens, cheering us on as we endeavor to overcome present discouragement as in an athletic competition. The idea of the heroes of faith in the past being spectators as we live lives of faith has made some think that in heaven, people can and do observe what goes on earth. This single passage may *suggest* this, but it is inconclusive to *prove* this. We rightly think of heaven as a place where people are always happy and untroubled; it would be hard to

think that those in heaven could be happy and untroubled if they saw what was happening on the earth. Therefore, it is difficult to say that people in heaven are actually observing us! Others consider that these **witnesses** are not witnessing *us* as we conduct our lives. Instead, they are **witnesses** to us of faith and endurance.

"Both the *Greeks* and the *Latins* frequently use the term *cloud*, to express a *great number* of persons or things." (Clarke)

Lay aside every weight, and the sin: Sin can hold us back. But there are also things that may not be sin (**every weight**) but are merely hindrances that can keep us from running effectively the race God has for us. Our choices are not always between right and wrong, but between something that may hinder us and something else that may not. Is there a **weight** in your life you must **lay aside**?

So easily ensnares us: **Easily ensnares** translates a difficult ancient Greek word (*euperistaton*), which can be translated four ways: "easily avoided," "admired," "ensnaring," or "dangerous." Some sins can be *easily avoided*, but are not. Some sins are *admired*, yet must be laid aside. Some sins are *ensnaring* and thus especially harmful. And some sins are more *dangerous* than others are. Let us **lay** them all **aside**! If such ensnaring sins were really the work of demonic possession or demonic influence in the Christian, wouldn't this not be an ideal place for the Holy Spirit to address this? Yet we are never given reason to blame our sin on demons; the appeal is simply for us to, in the power of the Holy Spirit, **lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us**.

Let us run with endurance: What is needed is **endurance**, to finish what we have begun in Jesus Christ - a **race that is set before us**. God has set before you a **race**. You must run it; and it will involve effort and commitment. Just being passive never runs a race. God wants us to run the race, and finish it right! In Acts 20:24, Paul pictures himself as a runner who had a race to finish, and nothing would keep Paul from finishing the race with joy. In that passage, Paul speaks of *my race*- he had his race to run, we have our own - but God calls us to finish it with joy, and that only happens with **endurance**.

Race is the ancient Greek word *agona*, a word used for conflict or struggle of many kinds, and a favorite word of Paul (Philippians 1:30, Colossians 2:1, 1 Thessalonians 2:2, 1 Timothy 6:12, 2 Timothy 4:7).

Endurance is needed to run that race. **Endurance** translates the ancient Greek word *hupomone*, "which does not mean the patience which sits down and accepts things but the patience which masters them ... It is a determination, unhurrying and yet undelaying, which goes steadily on and refuses to be deflected." (Barclay)

Looking unto Jesus: The *New American Standard Version* translates this beautifully: *fixing our eyes on Jesus*. We can only run the race as we look to Jesus, and have our eyes locked on to Him. He is our focus, our inspiration, and our example. In the ancient Greek, **looking unto Jesus** uses a verb that implies a definite *looking away* from other things and a present *looking unto* Jesus. We must guard against seeing Jesus as *only* an example; He was and is so much more. But He also remains the ultimate example of Christian endurance.

The author and finisher of our faith: Jesus is not only the **author** of our faith; He is the **finisher** of it also. The idea of *He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ* (Philippians 1:6) is comforting indeed to these discouraged Christians.

Who for the joy that was set before Him: Jesus did not regard the cross itself as a joy. But He could look past the horror of the cross to enjoy the joy beyond it. The same mentality will enable these Jewish Christians (and we ourselves) to endure.

Despising the shame: One of the most prominent elements of the torture of the cross was its extreme **shame**. Jesus did not welcome this shame - He *despised* it! - yet He endured through the shame.

This is a stumbling block to many; they will do just about anything for Jesus except endure shame or embarrassment. Spurgeon spoke boldly to Christians who could not bear the shame that comes from the world for following Jesus: "Yet you are a coward. Yes, put it down in English: you are a coward. If anybody called you so, you would turn red in the face; and perhaps you are not a coward in reference to any other subject. What a shameful thing it is that while you are bold about everything else you are cowardly about Jesus Christ. Brave for the world and cowardly towards Christ!"

And has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God: This speaks of Jesus' glorification. The same promise of being glorified after our shame (though in a different sense) is true for the Christian.