

Potential Problems in the Race

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[0:00] Let me tell you a bad place to be. We were driving to Wisconsin on an extended family vacation. It was 7 a.m. in December.

We were in what I would call the ghetto in Chicago. It might not have been the ghetto, but I grew up in Argus. I don't have a lot of perspective about these things.

And we were lost. The Skyway was right there. That was the road that we needed to be on. But we couldn't get on that road going the right direction.

So in the end, after going through the same toll booths three times, which, if you've ever been on the Skyway, is about \$10, we made it to the end of our trip, the Great Wolf Lodge in Wisconsin Dells.

On the same trip, my sister's GPS system, those ever-reliable inventions, gave her family and those following bad directions.

[1:07] And so there they were driving down some two-lane roads in Wisconsin. And that has a way of raising your blood pressure and putting some fear in your heart.

On a road trip, there's all kinds of problems, potential problems that you face before you can reach your destination. The last couple of weeks in the Sunday evening, we've been going through a small section in Hebrews 12.

And I'd invite you to turn there, Hebrews 12. The author to the Hebrews is telling us how we should run the Christian race. And it's not a sprint.

It's a long race. It's a road trip, if you will, to the celestial city. Amen. Last Sunday evening, we talked about verse 14. And it said that the Christian race is a pursuit.

It's a pursuit of two things. It's a pursuit of holiness, and it's a pursuit of peace. Holiness and peace are the tracks that Christians must run down if they're going to make it to the end.

[2:15] And our author wants us to know, well, our author wants everyone to make it, but he knows there's some potential problems facing them. Not everyone who starts the race will finish it.

So today we're going to talk about some potential problems, some potential roadblocks that face the runner and how to avoid them. And we're going to look at just two potential problems from verse 15.

So I'd invite you to turn to Hebrews 12, verse 15. It says this, See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and to defile many.

The first potential problem is falling short. It's falling short. He says, see to it that no one misses the grace of God. And the word misses there has the meaning of you fail to obtain it.

I think the ESV says you fall short. You're you come, but you don't make it to the end. The idea is that the church is running and that there's a real possibility that those some people who are running will stop before the end.

[3:28] They won't make it. Here's Hebrews 4.1 has already used this word to miss or to fall short when it says, Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.

So there's this heavenly Canaan. And we make it through believing in Jesus Christ. And he says there's a potential that we could fall short of reaching that Canaan.

And I take the phrase in verse 15, the grace of God, to refer to what he just said, that no one will see the Lord without holiness.

No one will see the Lord. This grace that he's talking about is seeing the Lord. And we have to remember that as we're going through Hebrews. The author is putting a lot of emphasis on our effort.

We're to be pursuing. We're to be running. We're to be making every effort. But in the final conclusion, it's grace that starts us on the race.

[4:36] It's grace that sees us through the end. And it is grace to make it to the end. And it is grace to see Jesus at the end.

We don't deserve any of that. And I believe that is what he is talking about. The grace of seeing our Lord Jesus and falling short of it.

It is a sad truth that many who start don't finish. They start in the good way. They taste the heavenly realities, the heavenly blessings.

And they have a kind of faith. But the cares of this world spring up and it chokes that faith out of them. Or sin entangles them. And they fall.

And they never get up again. The deceitfulness of sin hardens them. And they turn away from God. They fall away from him.

[5:32] Some begin the race. And they're like pliable in Pilgrim's Progress. He's going. And he's happy to be going. And he's glad to hear of all the good things that are going to be at the end.

But what happens? He falls into the slough of despond. And he immediately gives up. He turns around. He falls short of making it. One of the most sobering realities in my life is that I was baptized with three other people.

I was one of four. And one of those is no longer walking with the Lord. We were baptized on the same day. We gave a similar profession of faith.

And one is not walking with the Lord. That person fell short. And to fall short is to lose everything. Some of you high schoolers are in cross country.

And you run 5Ks. And let me ask you. What prize do you win for running four of the five? You don't win anything.

[6:39] Those who start the Christian race but don't finish it. They win nothing. They lose everything. And we want to say here at the beginning that that doesn't mean that God will lose any of his elect.

1 Peter says that we are kept by the power of God. This Christian life is a power of God thing where we're walking because of his power.

We're started on the course because of his power. And it's he. It's Jesus who calls us into the Christian life.

It's he that saves us. And when Jesus saves us, he saves us completely. And we can't fall away. But that isn't the emphasis that Hebrews is giving us.

He's saying all who start the race, all who are truly saved, will persevere in it. They don't shrink back. And that's the emphasis. That's the reality that the author to the Hebrews is giving.

[7:47] So we're in the middle of the race. We're running. And he's saying you're not at the end until you're at the end. And you don't see the Lord until you've seen the Lord.

You don't have heaven in hand until you have heaven in hand. When we're safe, then we're safe. But until then, we keep running. And that's what he's trying to tell us.

And so, brothers and sisters, we can never rest on our laurels. We can never take it for granted that I'm going to make it to heaven. We can't say, well, I'm a Christian. I'm one of God's elect. And so, you know, I don't have to try.

It's just going to come to me. I don't have to run. And it doesn't matter how I run. Well, the Bible says it does matter how you run for lots and lots of reasons.

But what the author has in mind here is that if you don't run all the way, then you will not be saved. You will not win the prize.

[8:47] Starting out well is not the same as ending well. Well, that's the first potential problem, that some are going to fall short. Not persevere, but fail to see the Lord.

Well, what's the prevention? He gives it to us. He says, it's at the very beginning of verse 15. It says, see to it.

See to it that no one misses the grace of God. This is a command to the whole church. And this is where we're going to get into a lot of what we talked about this morning.

He is telling us that each of us has a responsibility for one another to make sure that everyone makes it to the end. There's a corporate responsibility, an arm-in-arm running to heaven.

All the other members have to watch over each other. The verb, when he says see to it, it's the verb form of where we get our word overseer. This is what an overseer does.

[9:54] He oversees a task. And he's talking about the pastoral care that a pastor has, except he's giving part of that responsibility to each one of you.

He's telling you to oversee one another and to take care of each other. So parents, when you have a date night planned and you tell your teenage daughter, you say, I want you to make sure you have your younger brothers and sisters in bed at the right time and they need their baths.

You have to see to it. You're giving the responsibility of the care of your children into the hands of your teenager. And that is what the author is doing here. He's putting the responsibility of each of us finishing partly in everyone else's hands.

We're all accountable for it. So if a member starts skipping church and they start distancing themselves from the prayer meeting or there's a noticeable slacking off, they don't have the same love for God and the things of God, who's responsible to deal with that person?

It's everyone's concern. It's everyone's problem. It's everyone's responsibility. I'm to care for you just as a pastor cares for you. Because that's God's means of preventing me from falling and the means for you to not fall.

[11:25] That's God's means to keep the saints running all the way to the end. Well, does that mean that the shepherds, the pastors don't have a special responsibility? Well, of course not.

He says later in chapter 13, obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. It doesn't mean that pastors don't need to especially oversee the church.

But it does mean that some of that responsibility is not or all that responsibility is not just theirs. Some of the responsibility is yours. It's your responsibility.

And the author tells the church to see to it. So what is the practical way that we can do that? The verse is telling me to see to it. I have to care for you and oversee to make sure that you finish.

How can I practically do that? Well, there's lots of ways. And I just want to talk about one. Actively seek accountability partners.

[12:24] Actively seek accountability partners. It is impossible for me to oversee and to be intimately acquainted with all of you. And how all of you are doing spiritually.

I don't have enough time. And none of you have enough time to make sure that you're intimately involved in everyone's lives. But you can definitely be involved in one or two of your brothers and sisters in their lives.

And you can know their spiritual condition. And like we saw this morning, so that you can pray for them. And part of that prayer is to keep them persevering.

To keep them going on. Now, what that's going to mean. I'm going to have to get out of my comfort zone. Because I'm a good old American.

And I have a big circle of privacy around me. I don't like people getting into my circle. And I don't particularly like going into other people's either. I don't like asking personal questions.

[13:28] And I don't particularly like getting asked very specific, particular questions either. But this is what God has said.

He hasn't called us to be just like the world. He's called us to see to it. Where we are intimately involved in other people's lives. So that we can make sure that they finish.

So seek out an accountability partnership with one or two people. And faithfully involve yourself in their life. So you know their weaknesses.

You know when they're having problems. So that you can pray for them. It's an absolute necessity. It's how we're going to finish. Well, the first problem is falling short of reaching the end.

And the prevention is that the body watches over itself. They watch each other. And the second potential problem is found in the next verse. Or in the next section of the verse.

[14:24] See to it that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. So the second problem is a bitter root.

Is a bitter root. What is that bitter root? Well, for the last few weeks I've been thinking about this verse. And thinking it was talking about the feeling of bitterness.

You know what I'm saying. That feeling of spite. And disappointment. And pain. That happens when people sin against me. Or when I'm just disappointed in them.

And the way things are going. And so I was mulling over this passage thinking how bitterness. How this feeling of bitterness can defile and trouble many. And can cause people not to run.

And I had a nice little homily. That was going to be nice and short and sweet. And with a couple points for a nice afternoon sermon. But that isn't what that root of bitterness is.

[15 : 30] Turn with me in your Bibles to Deuteronomy chapter 29. Deuteronomy chapter 29. And we'll just start reading in verse 16.

What is the bitter root that the author is referring to? Deuteronomy 29 verse 16. You yourselves know how we lived in Egypt.

And how we passed through the countries on the way here. You saw among them their detestable images. And idols of wood and stone. Of silver and gold. Make sure there is no man or woman. Clan or tribe among you today. Whose heart turns away from the Lord our God. To go and worship the gods of those nations. Make sure there is no bitter root among you. That produces such bitter poison.

The author. In Hebrews. Is not. Talking about the feelings of bitterness. He's talking about idolatry. The potential problem.

[16 : 34] That he's addressing now. Is even more severe than. And then falling short. It's. It's completely turning away. From God. And following. An idol.

So here's a young man. And he's. He's walking. In the Christian way. He has a credible profession of faith. He's. Faithful in attendance.

He teaches Sunday school. He's in his mid-twenties. And he is impatient. To be married. He's impatient. To meet a girl. And get married. Well.

He meets a girl. And they start dating. And the problem is. Is that she's an unbeliever. And so now the young man has a choice. He can.

Choose. Marriage. And that path. And he can. Choose. God. So. He chooses. To worship. His idol. Of marriage.

[17 : 29] Well. What happens after that? He. He. Quits coming to church. He moves in with a girl. And justifies it. By saying. Well. This is what God wants. This is God's blessing on me.

God wants me to be happy. And I'm doing this for evangelistic reasons. After all. And I'll be. Safe. It's okay for me. We're in love. And. One thing leads to another.

And the young man. Has turned away. From God. And he's worshipping an idol. Well. He jeopardizes his own soul. He puts his own soul in danger.

Deuteronomy 29. Look at the verse. 19. When such a person. Hears the words of this oath. He invokes a blessing on himself.

And therefore thinks. I will be safe. Even though I persist in going my own way. This will bring disaster on the water land. As well as the dry. The Lord will never. Be willing to forgive him.

[18 : 25] His wrath. And zeal. Will burn against that man. And all the curses. Written in this book. Will fall upon him. And the Lord. Will blot out his name. From under heaven. So the man chooses an idol.

And God's wrath. Blazes. And burns against him. But is that the end though. That young. That one young man is lost.

That one young man turns away. Well the root of idolatry grows up. And it troubles. And it defiles. Many. The root of idolatry grows up.

And it's like a plant. That will just poison. The other plants around it. And so it is a lie. We even saw this. This morning. It's a lie to think that we can keep our idol in a box.

And we can take care of it. And make sure that no one knows about it. And if no one knows about it. It's okay. It won't damage anyone. It's a lie. Your idols grow. Your idolatry grows.

[19 : 26] And the seed is planted. And the plant blooms. And then it poisons. The other plants around it. A little leaven. Leavens the whole lump.

And so the author says. It troubles and defiles many. It troubles us. If we have an idol. It troubles us even. Romans 15. 13 says. God fills us with peace and joy.

As you trust in him. And so if we're trusting the wrong things. If we're worshipping the wrong thing. Our peace flies out the window. We can't have peace with God.

When we're worshipping an idol. And it troubles many. We can't have peace with each other. In the Christian body. Because a great part of our peace.

Is that we have one person that we worship. We have one thing that we worship. We worship God. And him alone. But if I'm offering my soul up to an idol.

[20:23] And you're offering yours up to God. How can we walk together? A single idol will trouble many. The idol also defiles.

It dirties us. If we're holding an idol in our heart. It makes us unsuitable for worship. Jesus Christ. His blood cleanses us.

From all sin. And it prepares us. To come into the presence of God in worship. But the idol pollutes us. So this idol is this factory in our heart.

Our hearts are these idol factories. Well this idol is a factory too. And what does it produce? It produces pollution. That goes out through all our heart. And it's dumping toxic waste into our lives. And we're not ready to worship. We can't worship with this toxic waste all over us. Well the idol doesn't only defile you.

[21:21] It defiles everyone. There is a corporate aspect. To this. If you're turning away from God. And following something else. Some other God.

Some other thing. You defile those around you. And you can ask. Well how do you do that? Well. You start talking about certain things.

And you start living a certain way. And you have certain priorities. And your passions will be all wrong. And that has a way of catching on with other people.

We spread our colds around. And we spread our idols around too. And the weak person. The person that leans in a certain direction. Will catch our idolatry.

And it defiles many. It causes more than just one person to turn away. It causes many to turn away. So that is the second potential problem.

[22:20] What is the prevention? Well it's the same prevention as before. The church is to watch over its members. They're to watch over one another. And take responsibility.

For the other people. To really care for them. Well how can we prevent idolatry? How can we prevent idolatry from growing up in our hearts. And then poisoning other people?

How can we prevent that idolatry from growing up. And producing its bitter poison in other people's lives. And then defiling many? Well we can prevent idolatry by knowing the common idols.

Now there is a lot of idols. There is a lot. There is almost no end to what our heart will change and transform into an idol. But there are some common ones in our culture.

So know what those are. We need to see a weed as a weed when we see the weed. Right? When you're in your garden. You have to know a weed when you see a weed.

[23:21] You have to know an idol when you see it. I used the example of marriage earlier. Some young singles think that if I could just get married. Then I would be happy and all my problems would go away.

And God would truly be blessing me. And then you have married people saying. You know if my husband or my wife was just this way. Then I could be happy and all my problems would go away. Marriage can be an idol. Relationships can be an idol. My husband or my wife can be an idol. Because I want them to be a certain way.

And when they're not the way I want them to be. Well then my world is ruined. God's not in control. God's not enough to make me happy. Because I have an idol in my heart.

Well many people bow down to athletic competition in our culture. We like to pretend fight. Because we don't really have anything to really be worth fighting for.

[24:21] So their lives have no true meaning. And so they put meaning into a competition. So how are the Cubs doing? That's going to determine if I'm happy or not.

How are the Bears doing? How's the high school team doing? Young people. That's sort of an old person. If I'm a fan I can make an idol out of my team. And young people we can make an idol out of the very competition that we're in.

So young people they quit going to church to play sports. They have their priorities in church and God and all that. Is sort of somewhere down after three or four sporting events.

They turn away to play baseball. They turn away to play volleyball. And so volleyball and baseball and basketball and then God. And that's idolatry.

Now are those things wrong to participate in? Of course not. But our culture loves those things. It makes idols out of them.

[25:21] And so we have to be careful. Look for it in ourselves. And look for it in others. So that you can take care of them and love them. Well many people bow down to the approval of man.

They worship men. And that's what we've been talking about in the high school Wednesday night. That's the reason Christians don't evangelize. It's because we're generally just afraid of men. We have all sorts of other justifications. But the bottom line usually is I'm afraid. And I think they're more important than God. We would never say it.

But that's what is actually motivating us. And so that's why we build bigger and bigger houses. That's why we're not satisfied with our possessions. That we have to keep up with our neighbor. We want others to think well of us. We want to please others. And so that's why we won't hold each other accountable. That's why we won't do what we heard on Sunday morning.

[26:21] Because my facade is actually still more important than loving and praying and taking care of one another. We worship men. Well we prevent idolatry when we see a weed as a weed.

We prevent idolatry when we take aggressive action. Aggressive action. So many of you have a garden at home or flower beds.

What do you do when you see a weed? Do you let it grow? Do you water it? Not really. You grab it and you yank it out. You get as much of it as possible. And that is what we're going to talk about. About yanking out each other's idolatry. Because there's going to be a time when you're going to have to come to me and say, brother, I think there's an idol in your heart. And you're going to have to take decisive action.

You have to know an idol when you see it. And then you have to take care of it. Now, by aggressive action, I don't mean anything mean, unkind, ungentle.

[27:27] It's nothing like that. The best thing that you can do for me is to take care of it. But the way you take care of it is with gentleness and compassion. And you hold this word before me.

And there's something in my heart that really loves this word that God put there. And so when you say, brother, the Bible says that's an idol. I'm going to respond to that by the Holy Spirit, by his grace.

So we confront each other with biblical truth. We confront each other's idolatry. And call it what it is. We don't justify it.

We just say it what it is. We do it carefully. We do it gently. We do it with love. We do it so that they will be healed and not further injured.

Well, I'm reminded of Titus. And he was this pastor in Crete. And the Cretans were known to be liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.

[28:30] And Paul said, you know what? That's right about them. Therefore, therefore, what? What do you do about it? He said, you rebuke them sharply. There is a place in the Christian life for a sharp, stinging rebuke.

You do it in love. You don't make it any more painful than possible. But there's going to be a time when you're going to have to rebuke someone if you love them.

So the wounds of a friend can be trusted. And better an open rebuke than hidden love. Better an open rebuke than hidden love.

So when we're dealing aggressively but gently and compassionately with the idols in our midst, what we do is we get rid of the poison. We pull up the root before it kills everyone else.

We do it so that people won't fall short of heaven's glory. And God uses means. And one of the means, one of the best means that he's given us is each other.

[29:33] Because you have eyes into my situation that I don't have. And I have eyes into your situation that you don't have. Idols have a way of blinding us.

We saw that in Sunday school. I have all sorts of justifications for my little idol. But you can see better into that situation. So God's kindness is giving us to one another and having us deal with each other.

Real. Being real with each other. Being gentle, being kind, but being aggressive. Now let me ask you. If you aren't connected to the local church.

In the intimate way that we've been talking about today. What's keeping you back? What's keeping you from it? You really can't go on without the church.

You can't. It's not an optional thing. It's not like you can make it on your own. Because God says you can't. You need. We need each other. So don't neglect the church.

[30:34] If you do, it puts you in great danger. It's like your garden will be overrun with idols. Well, if you aren't involved. And you aren't committed because you still love your sin.

Then hear me. Idolatry is a poisonous root. You can't eat it and live. It's like drinking bleach.

You drink it, you're going to die. God hates idols. God hates idols. God hates sports when you love sports more than him.

And God hates your husband and your wife when you love them more than him. Jesus said, If anyone loves his father or his mother more than me, he is not worthy of me.

Anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it.

[31 : 33] And whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. We can't hold on to our idols and have Jesus at the same time.

We can't have our idols and Jesus. But we will suffer forever and ever in hell if we don't have Jesus. So get rid of your idols. Get rid of them. Take up your cross and follow Jesus.

Put your idols on the cross. Put your life, your husband, your wife, your sports, everything on the cross. And die to them. And that's the only way to live. There's no other way to life.

You can't have them both. You can't serve God and mammon. You can't have all your friends and love them and have Jesus at the same time. If you don't take up your cross, you can't follow him.

So I say if you're not committed to Jesus, die to your life. Die to yourself. Die to your family. Die to your idols and follow him.

[32 : 32] And then you'll have life. Jesus has no plans of taking all those things away from you. But when you give yourself to Jesus, he has a way of bringing all those things back into your life in a way that is beautiful and that glorifies him.

So let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for one another. I thank you for my brothers and my sisters here. Thank you for the brothers and the sisters that have called me out, have pointed out my sin, that they didn't care what I thought of them, but they wanted what was best for me.

So I thank you for them. I pray that you would make me to be that kind of brother to my brothers and sisters here. Father, we need the gospel. We need the Lord Jesus.

We heard it this morning and it's still true. Still echoing true. We can't reach out to others. We can't be real with others.

We can't deal gently but aggressively with others unless we have Jesus in our lives. Unless the Holy Spirit is working in us. So thank you for the gospel.

[33 : 47] Thank you that in the gospel our sins have been washed away in the blood of Jesus Christ. Father, as we go out from this place into our lives, will you help us to carry the gospel that the word of Christ would dwell in us richly.

That we would sing songs to one another, that we would admonish one another in love. Father, you've shown us the path of obedience. Please give us grace to obey.

And it would be to your glory. There's lots and lots of churches where people are fake. And we don't want to be a church like that.

So will you please make us to be a church that is real and really tries to glorify you in our lives and the way that we live with one another. Thank you again for your people.

In Jesus' name, amen.