

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday ,26 June 2022. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced, and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

Exhortations to Christians

Hebrews 12:12-17

This past week, as I was studying the passage of Scripture for this morning's message, I was reminded of an incident that happened in December of 2010, when my wife, my two sons, and I were on a short furlough in America. At the time, we were travelling from Chicago to St. Paul by train, to visit my brother and his family for a few days. We had been travelling for about nine hours; and when we finally arrived at the station, my back was in excruciating pain.

Now, just to give a little backdrop to the story, in those days (for whatever reason), I suffered from excruciating sciatic pain. Oftentimes the pain would come on suddenly and fiercely, like a knife stabbing all the way up my leg; and I would suddenly yelp in pain, and double over, and hobble around like a ninety-year-old man for hours.

Well, this was one of those times. Sitting in a hard, cramped seat in the train for hours was making my back hurt severely. On top of that, we had lots of heavy baggage to carry. (The grandmas had loaded us down with lots of stuff to take back to Ireland). We also had two very little boys' hands to hold onto; and we had very narrow staircases to go down on our way out of the train. Then, when we stepped out of the train, my heart sank, as I saw that we had a very long walk to the station, across a huge plaza. It was snowing hard, and the ground was very slushy, icy, and slippery. It was a virtual ice-skating rink. Every single step was a potential slip and fall on the ground for me. Needless to say, it was a long, painful, treacherous walk to the station. Nonetheless, I was moving as fast as I could possibly move—and for two good reasons. First, I didn't want anyone to steal my luggage at the baggage claim. Secondly, I was eager to see my brother, whom I hadn't seen for five years. I was motivated to move quickly; yet, at that point, I needed help to do so. As I hobbled across the plaza, my wife sometimes had to hold onto my arm.

Now, what is the point of this story? The point is this: just as I was eager to race across that plaza into the station so that I could see my brother, and get my baggage, so those who are running the Christian race are eager to see their elder Brother, Jesus Christ, and to receive the reward for a hard-fought race.

However, the sad reality, for many Christians, is that they are so bruised and battered from the trials and temptations of life, and from their own sinful failures, that their Christian race is more like a "hobble" than a "run." As we read our passage in **Hebrews 12** this morning, we will find that Paul was writing to some Christians who were exactly like that. To these Christians who were "hobbling" along in the race, Paul had some words of exhortation and comfort. It is my prayer that as we examine this passage, every Christian in this room will be exhorted to run the Christian race with diligence.

The title of this morning's message is *Exhortations to Christians*.

Read Hebrews 12:12-15.

This morning we will be looking at three exhortations to Christians. The first exhortation is...

I. **Make straight paths for your feet (vv. 12-13).**

To the Christians who were fainting and weary in their Christian race, Paul had some encouraging words; and they came straight from the Old Testament Scripture. Let's start off by looking at the Scripture that Paul is quoting.

Read Isaiah 35:3-4.

In this passage, Isaiah is saying the same thing that Paul later said in **Hebrews 12**. To those who know the Lord, he's saying, "The end of the race is in sight. The LORD will return, and we will see our deliverance. So be strong! Don't let your limbs droop and grow feeble. Don't slow down. Draw your strength from the LORD, and keep running toward the prize!"

However, that isn't all Paul had to say. You see, not only were some of the Christians in his audience growing faint in their Christian race, but some of them were in such bad spiritual shape, that they were spiritually "lame." Spiritually, they were like Pastor Finley, with his sciatic nerve problem, as he tried to hurry down the treacherous path to the station. For these Christians, Paul has yet another exhortation from Scripture. Let's read **verse 13** again, and then read the Old Testament Scripture that Paul is quoting. (**Read Hebrews 12:13.**)

Read Proverbs 4:25-27.

Once again, we see the analogy of a race. In this passage, Solomon is exhorting his son, Rehoboam, to keep his eye on the goal; to keep going straight ahead; and not to turn to the right or left. In order that Rehoboam might keep that straight course, Solomon exhorted him to "ponder the path" of his feet, so that his "ways" would "be established." In other words, Solomon was saying, "Don't trip on any obstacles, son. In fact, make sure that your path is *clear* of any obstacles that might cause you to stumble. Do this, and your ways will be established."

By the way, the word "established," in the Hebrew language, has the idea of being "set aright" or "made stable." As Paul cited this verse in **Hebrews 12**, he turned it into a command. He said, "Make straight paths for your feet." The Greek word for "straight" has the sense of "even," or "level." Paul is commanding us to make even, level paths, so that we won't stumble.

Christian, as you run your Christian race, you won't be able to avoid *all* the "uneven" and "unstable" places in the road. (In other words, you won't be able to avoid every temptation that comes along.) However, there are many potential temptations that *can* be avoided, and which *can* be removed from the pathway, if we will be diligent to look out for them. In **Romans 13**, Paul wrote, "*Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.*" In **Ephesians 4**, Paul exhorted Christians to "*Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: neither give place to the devil.*" What does it mean to "give not place to the devil"? It means, "Don't put yourself in a situation where you could be tempted. Don't

give the devil a ‘beachhead’ in your life. Don’t give him a chance to throw a stumbling block in your way!”

What are some stumbling blocks that you can remove from your life, if you will ponder the path of your feet? Well, for one thing, you can guard your eyes. Don’t go to a place where you know that you can get access to pornography—whether it be a physical place, or a place in cyberspace. Do whatever it takes not to look upon evil! Job said, **“I made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I think upon a maid?”** Even more bluntly, Jesus said, **“If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out”!** Guard your eyes, Christian! Guard your emotions, too. Don’t allow yourself to be alone with someone of the opposite sex, who isn’t your spouse, or close relative—even if it be a godly person. Don’t allow yourself to be put into a situation in which unhealthy feelings could develop. Another stumbling block to remove is the temptation to strong drink. Don’t set foot in a place where there is drinking, and allow yourself to be potentially pressured into partaking of that sin. If you have had past trouble with addictions, be *extra* vigilant not to put yourself in a situation where you could have access to alcohol. Don’t hang out with people who you *know* will drag you down spiritually, and who will pull you into filthy talk, or gossip, or ungodly attitudes. Don’t watch the world’s movies, in which God’s name is cursed, and in which immorality is made to look cool and attractive. Don’t go to bed late if you *know* that you will not feel like getting up early in the morning to read your Bible, to pray, or to go to church.

There are countless things that could cause you to stumble in your race; but whatever the stumbling block in *your* life is, you must avoid it at all costs! The Christians in *Paul’s* day were tripping in *their* spiritual race; and you will “trip up,” too, if you do not ponder the path of your feet. In fact, not only should you be pondering your *own* path; you should be looking out for *other* believers, as well. When Paul says, **“Make straight paths for your feet,”** he is speaking to *all* of them. (The pronoun “your” is plural.) Paul is saying, “Don’t just look out for *yourself*; look out for your brother, as well. We are all running this race together!”

To illustrate this point, let’s go back to my train station story. What was *I* doing as I was walking across that icy plaza? I was on the lookout for patches of ice, or any other slight obstacles that could possibly land me on the ground. In fact, I was so paranoid, that if I had had my way, I would have gone a long way off course to *avoid* the obstacles! That is what Paul is talking about when he says, **“Make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way.”** Paul is saying that there are some Christians who are so spiritually weak, that they are like crippled people trying to run in a race; and when they come across even the slightest obstacle, they are likely either to stumble over that obstacle, or to go off the path in search of an easier detour.

What can be done about this problem? Well, this is where the “stronger brother” comes in. When I was walking across that plaza, I needed my wife to hold my arm, or to be ready to catch me. She didn’t let me go off course; she just kept leading me straight on, and standing right by me, in case I started to slip. Likewise, Christians need each other as they run the Christian race. Particularly, weaker brethren often need help from stronger brethren. If you are the “stronger brother,” here are your responsibilities!

First of all, if you are the stronger brother, **help your brother to keep his path clear of obstacles.** By removing stumbling blocks for your brother, you are helping him to keep going straight forward, without stumbling.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:4-13.

For Christians who lived in Paul’s day, meat that had been offered to idols was a real stumbling block for many Christians. This may not be an issue in *our* culture; but we have plenty of our own stumbling blocks to deal with! Mature Christians can unintentionally throw “stumbling blocks” into a weaker brother’s path; and oftentimes, these “stumbling blocks” are **things that are not necessarily sins** in and of themselves. For example, going into a restaurant where there is a bar in one corner of the restaurant can be a real cause of stumbling for a weaker brother. You yourself may not be the least bit tempted to drink alcohol, or to go into that section of the restaurant; but if you have a weaker brother who knows that you go into that place, he might be encouraged to go into that place, too; and he just might fall.

Sometimes there are **actual sins** that stronger Christians fall prey to in their own lives; and even though they go to God for cleansing, and get back into right fellowship with God, they forget that a weaker brother was watching. For example, you may be a mature believer; yet, at times, you are tempted to lose your temper, or to have a rotten attitude. You may realise your sin straightaway, and go to God for forgiveness; but in the meantime, a weaker brother has seen you “blow your top.” Because of these occasional slip-ups on your part, your weaker brother may begin to excuse the anger in *his* life—except that *his* anger problem is much more serious; and he isn’t strong enough to overcome it. He may even be offended by your bad testimony, and stop serving God. Christian, never forget that a weaker brother is watching you. Do everything in your power to make straight paths for his feet!

Now, what else can the stronger brother do to “make a straight path” for his weaker brother? He can **help his brother when he has fallen.** Galatians 6:1 says, **“Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.”** When your brother is sinning grievously, don’t turn a blind eye to it. Approaching a brother about a sin problem isn’t called “being judgmental”: it’s called “loving your brother enough to help him up.” Confronting a fallen brother is necessary; but it must *never* be undertaken if one is spiritually weak himself! You must confess the sin in your *own* heart before you attempt to restore someone else. Even then, it must be done meekly and humbly. If there be any pride or self-righteousness in your heart as you approach someone else about his sin, you will fall!

Another responsibility of the stronger brother is to help the weaker brother to *overcome* his spiritual weaknesses. Show him what the Bible says about how he can get victory!

Read Romans 15:1-3.

God doesn’t merely *suggest* that the stronger brother help the weaker brother; He *commands* it. Yet, helping a brother to overcome a spiritual weakness requires that you *know* the Word of God well enough to be able to give your brother sound, biblical counsel. That is why you must **“let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom.”** If you are giving a brother advice that seems right to *you*, but you cannot back it up with a single verse of Scripture,

you'd better study it out, and make sure that you are giving *biblical* counsel. If you don't know the Word well enough to be able to open it up and show someone, with confidence, what it says, maybe *you* are not as strong as you think you are!

Now, let's look once more at the last part of **Hebrews 12:13**. Paul says, "***But let it*** [the spiritual lameness] ***rather be healed.***" In other words, we need to *pray* for our brethren, that the Lord will *heal* them of the sins that are crippling them, and causing them to go "out of the way." We also need to pray for *ourselves*, that *we* will be healed of our *own* sinful infirmities. Don't think you are beyond temptation! When you are strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might, temptations that used to be difficult to overcome *do* begin to lose their attraction: yet, even then, you must always be on guard. **1 Corinthians 10:12** says, "***Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.***"

Are you growing *faint* in your race? Are your hands falling down, and your knees growing feeble? If so, take heart. **Isaiah** wrote, "***Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: but they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.***" Are you tired of *stumbling*, Christian? If so, then fill your heart and mind with God's Word! Meditating in His Word is the way to prevent stumbling. **Psalm 119:165** says, "***Great peace have they that love thy law; and nothing shall offend them*** [or, "cause them to stumble"]." Simply put, when you love God's Word, and you are filling your heart and mind with it every day, it will be much more difficult for the enemy to "trip you up." Keep your nose in this Book every day, Christian!

Now, the next exhortation that Paul gives to Christians is:

II. Follow peace with all men, and holiness (v. 14).

(**Read verse 14 again.**) Pursuing peace with others should be a priority for every child of God. Actually, this command has two distinct parts.

First, **every Christian has a responsibility to pursue peace with the unsaved**—even with those who hate them.

Read Matthew 5:44-48.

This is a hard command, isn't it? In fact, it is impossible. Now, in the power of the flesh, you *can* maintain a *fake* "peace" with your enemy. For example, you can maintain "peace" with an enemy for convenience' sake, or because you simply don't like confrontation. But actually *loving* an enemy? That's a different story. That takes the supernatural grace of God in your heart; and this grace is something that only God can give. How about it, Christian? Are you seeking to maintain peace with your enemies by actually *showing love* to them?

The believer also has a responsibility to be at peace with the saved. This command is even *more* compelling than the command to be at peace with unbelievers. There is *no* reason why two believers *cannot* be at peace, if both of them are yielding themselves to the Lord.

Read 1 Peter 1:22.

According to Peter, unfeigned (unpretentious) love of the brethren *is* possible. However, this peace is possible on a *condition*. The condition is that both brethren are “obeying the truth, through the Spirit.” To have pure love between brethren, both brethren must be putting sin to death in their lives every day, and allowing the Holy Spirit to control their thoughts and actions. When two brothers in Christ are right with the Lord, they can walk together in perfect peace and harmony. By the way, this is not an option: this is a *command!* Living at peace with your brother is well-pleasing to God.

However, there is another part to Paul’s exhortation. What did Paul say in **Hebrews 12:14**? Not only did he exhort us to “*follow peace*”: he also exhorted us to follow “*holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.*” Peace and holiness must be practiced; but holiness must never be sacrificed for the sake of “keeping peace.” This is why Paul said in **Romans 12:18**, “*If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.*” If your friends refuse to live at peace with you unless you compromise your holiness, then you must follow holiness, and let go of that relationship with your friend, if need be.

Many a Christian has been told by an unsaved friend or loved one, “If you don’t stop going to church every Sunday and Wednesday, and spend more time with me, or have a glass of wine with me, or stop witnessing and talking about the Bible to me, then I’m not going to be part of your life anymore.” What is a Christian to do in such a case? **He must follow holiness, no matter the cost!** Christian, if you compromise holiness for the sake of a relationship, then you don’t really love God all that much. Ironically, you don’t really love your friend all that much, either. Whenever you choose to disobey God rather than offend your friend, what are you showing your friend? You are showing him that your God isn’t really that important to you. How can you tell your friend that he needs to be reconciled to God if your friend can clearly see that you don’t really love your God very much? How can he take your message seriously? By compromising holiness, you are helping your friend to reject God!

Holiness is absolutely necessary in the lives of God’s people. In fact, it is *so* necessary, that without it, “*No man shall see the Lord.*” Now, maybe you’re thinking, “Wait a minute, Pastor! Does this mean that if I stumble and sin in my Christian walk, I can lose my salvation, and not get to Heaven after all?” No, that is not what Paul is saying. Remember, **holiness**, for the Christian, is both a *position* and a *practice*.

Read Philippians 3:7-9.

What is Paul saying, here? He’s saying that it was not his *own* righteousness that God accepted; rather, it was *Christ’s* righteousness that the Father accepted. When you place your trust in Jesus to save you, His perfect righteousness is put on your account; and in this way, God can accept you. This is your *position* as a child of God. When the Father puts on His judicial robe, and looks at you, He sees *His Son’s righteousness*, instead of your own puny “righteousness”; and as your Judge, He says, “I see no sin. Case dismissed!” If you have been saved, then Jesus *is* Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption to you!

Now, if God, as your Judge, does not see your sin, but instead sees Christ’s righteousness, does this mean that you are free to “party hardy,” and live in sin, since you won’t have your sin held against you? Not on your life! Remember, righteousness, for the Christian, is both a

position and a practice. Not only does Jesus give you His *imputed* righteousness, so that the Father can accept you; He also empowers you to *live* righteously! When you received Christ as your Saviour, that is what you signed up for!

Read 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

If you are saved, Christ didn't save you merely so that you could get to Heaven some day; He saved you so that He could move into your life, and give you the power to live a holy life. Remember what Paul said back in **Hebrews 12:10**? He said that the Father chastens His children in order that they might be *partakers* of His *holiness*. Brethren, we don't *have* to sin anymore. Before we were saved, sinning was the only thing we *could* do; but now, sin's power is broken. In Christ, we who are saved have all the power we need to overcome sin in our lives. What's more, holiness is not optional: it is a command! God *commands* us to follow after holiness.

Now, there is one more exhortation that Paul gives to us. His exhortation is:

III. Look diligently for any unbelievers who might be in the assembly (v. 15).

(Read Hebrews 12:15 again, stopping at the end of the first phrase.) This is an extremely frightening, hair-raising thought, folks. Paul was warning his readers that there might be some people in their churches who were “failing” of the grace of God. What does he mean? He's saying that there were some who had never experienced the grace of God in salvation. They were not truly God's children, even though they might have outwardly *appeared* to be.

How tragic would it be for a church to admit into membership even *one soul* whose profession of faith was not real? It would be the *height* of tragedy. Yet, it happens all the time. It is *very* possible for a person to be “enthusiastic” about the Bible; to attend a Gospel-preaching church; to know many of the *facts* about the Bible, and about salvation; to make a genuine-sounding *profession* of salvation; and to be admitted into membership of a good church—yet, not have salvation. How horrible would it be for even one soul to sit in the services Sunday after Sunday, with the mistaken belief that he's “grand” because he has been baptised, or because he does “Christian stuff”—yet, slip into eternity without Christ, and wake up in the eternal torment of the Lake of Fire. How awful would it be if the people of the church to which he was unequally yoked never thoroughly examined his testimony, and asked the “uncomfortable” questions that needed to be asked about his standing with God? This thought should send a chill down the spine of every believer! That's why Paul urges Christians to look **“diligently”** (with the utmost fervency, and deadly seriousness) to make sure that there is not even one soul in the assembly who is without Christ. May we, the saints of Redemption Baptist Church, look diligently, lest any man fail of the grace of God!

Conclusion: How are you doing in the race, Christian? Are your arms and knees growing feeble? Would you even have to say that you are spiritually “lame” at this point in your life? If so, please heed Paul's exhortation! Make the paths straight by removing the temptations that can be avoided; and pray for God to *heal* your spiritual lameness, so that you can stay on a straight course, and not be turned out of the way, and lose rewards in Heaven. Are there weaker brethren for whom you should be praying? Are you pursuing peace with all men (especially your brothers in the Lord)? Are you pursuing holiness? Do

you love the professing Christians in your life enough to *ask* them about their salvation testimonies, to see whether they have truly received God's gift of salvation?

As always, I would also ask whether you are sure that you are saved. If you are trusting in your own goodness to be saved, you do not know Christ. Salvation is not through your good works: it is entirely by the grace of God, which He poured out on the cross. Jesus paid it all; and it is *His* righteousness that saves you. Maybe you intellectually understand that salvation is by grace alone, and the idea is *agreeable* to you. Maybe you've even prayed some kind of sinner's prayer. Yet, you have never truly been *broken* about your sin; and you didn't have a truly *repentant* heart when you prayed that "sinner's prayer." If this be true of you, *please* don't wait another day to turn to Jesus! Place your faith in Him today!