

VIII. The Christian Life in Biblical Perspective  
7 Essentials Of the Christian Life  
“The Essential Life Focus of the Effective Christian Life”  
Hebrews 12:1-2  
By: Dr. Harry Reeder  
November 15, 2009 – Morning Sermon

Our text for this study is in Hebrews 12 and I look forward to being with you tonight in the study of Daniel. There are some things in Daniel 3 that I feel are so very important so if you can conclude the Lord's Day with us tonight. We will look at how to live in a pluralistic society and what is stated in Daniel 3 is so crucial to this. We will look at Daniel 4 after the advent holiday season.

Now let's look in Hebrews 12:1-2 which says, *1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and (the) sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*

The grass withers, the flower fades. This is the Word of our God. It abides forever and by His grace and mercy may it be preached for you.

We are going to get right into our study this morning. What is the picture here in Hebrews 12? It is to run a race with endurance. So what kind of race do you think that is? The writer of this epistle says the Christian life is a race. What kind of race is he showing us by running a race with endurance? It's a marathon. He is reaching in to the culture of his day. The Greeks had deposited this race that had come from their military history and was wrapped up in the mount Olympus fanfare of the day. It had been translated down through the Roman Empire as well. It is what we call the marathon race. That is the picture that is given to us here in Hebrews 12. The Christian life is like a marathon race.

In God's providence I do know a little bit about a marathon. When I turned 40 in 1988 I decided to run a marathon. That was the second dumbest decision I had made in my life. My first and biggest dumbest decision was I did it again in 1989. I received the training for it and got into it and everything. I got a couple of things for running it. I got a towel that has my name on it and says my time, 4hours and 18mintues. I got knee surgery from it and I got several sermon illustrations in which I will give you one now. Right before I jogged, appropriately speaking, the race I had heard that runners ate carbohydrates. So the night before I went out and ate a lot of spaghetti the night before.

When I played ball I used to go the field the night before and look at it and try to imagine what was going to happen. I had heard something similar in running a marathon so I decided the night before that I would ride the course. I got the map out and said to my dad, “Dad, would you like to go with me?” He said, “Sure, son.” We got in the car, we're riding along and got to mile 14 or 15 and my dad looked at me and said, “Son, I think this is the stupidest thing you've ever done in your life.” It wasn't exactly a cheerleading moment for me.” As we finished riding the course we got down to the square in Charlotte and my dad saw the finish line sign up and said, “I don't know much to tell you about this but you're going to want to quit tomorrow and when you want to

quit I want you to think of that finish sign and focus on the finish line. That's what you need to focus on."

That is kind of what this writer of Hebrews is doing for us. The Christian life is a marathon and there are a lot of times you will want to quit. There are a lot of times that you are discouraged and overwhelmed. So what do I focus on? We have taken eight sermons to study seven essentials of an effective Christian life. We found out that you start the Christian life from the end. How do you start from the end? You start with a life purpose as a Christian and that is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. The more you enjoy Him the more you glorify Him and the more you glorify Him the more you'll enjoy Him. Nothing else makes life meaningful. Nothing else moves you in life other than living for His glory and enjoying Him.

The second essential we learned in order to do the first one is that we need life lines. God has given life lines. From the throne of grace come two life lines whereby flows grace to us, which are God's Word and God's Spirit. Through God's Word and God's Spirit we are given life that we might serve Him, know Him, love Him, glorify Him and enjoy Him forever.

This leads to the third essential which is the life marks of a Christian. There are two marks that are upon the followers of Jesus Christ which are truth and love. Truth without love is barbarity and love without truth is cruelty. Those two marks mark out the believer.

This leads to the fourth essential which is a lifestyle of putting off the old man and putting on the new man whereby we live with repentance and faith as a way of life. Say "no" to the old man and say "yes" to the new man in Jesus Christ and put on the new man every single day.

That leads us to the fifth essential which is life formation and that means we need wisdom from God to know how to embrace our responsibilities in relationships in life. I want to pray for wisdom from above so I know how to live my life. I don't want wisdom from beneath that brings chaos, cynicism, skepticism, and the anger of man. I want the wisdom from above that is peaceable. The wisdom from above is manifested with the fruit of our obedience in Christ.

The sixth essential that we learned is that the Christian life is a life trust where God has set up a foundation and He has appointed you the chief executive officer of that foundation. He has entrusted to you your salvation, the Gospel. He has entrusted to you your life. He has given you a spiritual gift, His church, the means of grace whereby you can grow in. He has made all of these investments in you and He says, "Now I want you to be a good steward." A good steward responds faithfully. I want to be faithful. I'll never be profitable. I'll never make Him anything but I do want to be faithful as a steward of the Lord.

We also learned that when we have that wisdom put with that life trust that leads to putting first things first. The first appointment of every day I meet with the Lord. The first day of every week I give to the Lord. That's the Lord's Day. The first dime of every dollar is the Lord's. That's His tithe. The first relationships of my life need to go first which are all those covenant vow relationships – my marriage, my children, baptism, my church membership. Those primary relationships I want to put first and build from. The leads me to the first of all firsts which is my first love which is Christ who compels me and constrains me.

Now we finish up with our seventh essential which is our life focus. Why and how do we live our life? What's the focus? Sometimes I ask people when I talk with them, "I know this is a little bit morbid but could you go get your death bed? Just lay down in it. You have two more minutes to live. Now what is it that you wanted to have done with your life?" Do you really think one more sale would have made your life or a little bit bigger house or a few more technology toys? What is it? That's what you want to focus on. It's that that the Apostle gives us in the book of Hebrews.

The first word in Hebrews 12:1 is 'therefore.' In other words, before you read what you are about to read he says by the Holy Spirit, the writer of this epistle has arranged in the previous chapter something for you to embrace in order to understand what he is about to exhort you, invite you to do. So let's look back in the previous chapter. The writer has gone into the Old Testament and pulled out a number of believers who have been born again by God's grace. They have believed in the promises of God but they don't have the advantage you have. They believed in the promises of God and that God would fulfill what He had promised to them. You stand on the other side and you see that the promises are "yes" and "amen" in the Promised One, Jesus Christ. They were looking forward and you are looking backward but as they look forward they look to the Lord and they knew that the Lord was able to do what He had promised.

Who did the Holy Spirit lead the writer of Hebrews to choose? We don't have the time to go back and study Hebrews 11 but here is what you would find out there. The writer included those who lived by faith and those who died in faith. They began in faith and they finished by faith. They lived by faith. They died in faith. They ran to the end. They finished strong all the way to the end. They weren't perfect. They were sinners saved by grace but by that faith of the Lord Jesus, they lived by faith and they died in faith. So let's go back to the text now.

Hebrews 12:1a says, "*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...*" These witnesses are not spectators of us bearing witness to God. They are not up in heaven looking down on us as if we were a stadium. That is not what this is saying. These are not spectators of us giving a report to God but these are witnesses from God to us. These are people that God has raised up and one of the reasons He raised them up is for our encouragement, as an example to us. So now that we are surrounded by them, look at this number and that's just a specimen of them but look at this number that surrounds us.

Hebrews 12:1a says, "*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also...*" He says, "I invite you" all of us right here, every single one of us reading this. He is now inviting you. Let's join them, He says. He continues with the invitation, Hebrew 12:1b, "*... lay aside every weight, and (the) sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.*" So that is the invitation I give to you at the conclusion of this series. On behalf of the Apostle that writes on behalf of the Savior, inspired by the Spirit, I invite you to join this company and run this race. You don't run this race for salvation. You run this race for your Savior. I invite you to run this race with endurance.

When he says to run this race with endurance, this race isn't a sprint. My objective is to run with endurance to the finish. I begin by faith, I'm going to live by faith and I want to finish in faith. This isn't just any race. It is the race that is laid out for

the believer. We don't make our own course. We have a race that is defined by God's Word. Jesus says, "This is how you live for Me. Here is what I have done to save you. Now that I have saved you, this is how you live. You don't live this way to be saved. You live this way for Me the One who saved you. Here is the race that I have laid out for you." While every single one of us who are a believer in a sense runs the same race, we all have a uniqueness to it. God has put us in that marriage, our family, our neighborhood, our calling, our city, this place, this time, this generation. God has sovereignly put you right here.

Now how will I respond serving Jesus in a city that needs so much the Savior? How will I respond in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in a nation that is saying "no" to its Christian heritage built in by influence and saying "yes" to paganism and all of its devastation? They are actually going back to what they were saved out of scores and scores of years ago. How do I now respond to this? I have the race that is set before me. He says the key is that I invite you to the finish line. Fix your eyes on the finish line. It's Jesus. Jesus is the finish line. Fix your eyes on Him.

The word "looking" in Hebrews 12:2 in the Greek tense means to look and keep on looking. It's not something you just do. It's something you keep doing. Hebrews 12:2a says, "...looking to Jesus..." Why would I look to Jesus? It is because He is "*the founder and perfecter of our faith...*" This is so crucial. I'm supposed to join these people who lived by faith and they died in faith, they began in faith and finished in faith. How can I join them? I am to look to Jesus because He is the author of your faith for He began it in you. He is the finisher of your faith. He will keep you to the end. That's the One who keeps you. I want you to fix on Him. He gave you your faith. Ephesians 2:8, 9 says, *8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.* He is not only the One who gave you that faith but He is the One who keeps you. O believer, the invitation is to run the race set before you with your eyes fixed on the finish. There are going to be hills, valleys, stumbling, getting tired, being challenged but fix your eyes on the finish. That is Jesus who gave you your faith and He will keep you to the end.

How do I know this? You know this because of the Gospel, the Good News. It is looking unto Jesus, the Pioneer, the Author, the Finisher of our faith. Who is this Jesus? For the joy set before Him, He had a race that the Father set before Him. The Father says, "Son, I'm sending You for My children to a cross, to be a Redeemer." For the joy of accomplishing what the Father set before Him, He did three things. Hebrews 12:2b says, "*..who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*"

Number one is He endured the cross. He ran His race set before Him with endurance to the end. All the way to the end when He cries out, "It is finished, I have redeemed Your people Father. It is written of Me 'behold I have purchased Your brethren.' Father, all whom You have given Me I lose not one but will raise them up on the last day." He endured the cross. He ran the race. Fix your eyes on the One who saved you and put you into your race because He finished His race and that was the race of accomplishing your Redeemer. He finished and won the day and won the victory.

He endured the cross, despising its shame which is the second reason. He took the shame of our sin, drank the cup of judgment to the bottom, emptied it all and wiped away our shame. I have no fear. Why? It is because I have Jesus. 1 John 4:18,

“...*Perfect love casts out fear...*” I have no shame. Why? I have Jesus. Romans 8:1 says, “*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*” Who is it that condemns? Christ Jesus is the One who died, who was raised, who is at the right hand of the Father, who intercedes for us. My fear, my shame, my guilt is all gone. No fear in life, no guilt in death. By faith in Christ the One who endured the cross, despised the shame.

The third reason is He sat down at the right hand of the Father. The race is over. He has won the victory. He has sat down at the throne of praise. This is the One who endured the cross, despising its shame and has sat down at the right hand of the Father. He has won the victory. If He endured the cross, despising its shame that means He did what on that cross? He died. If He has sat down at the right hand of the Father then what does that tell me? It tells me He was raised. He has been raised in victory. Therefore the One who gives me my faith, the Author, will finish my faith because He has won the victory.

So what would this text tell me about the effective Christian life and this life focus I need to have? He is basically telling you that you are Christ-centered and you are Gospel empowered/driven. You have your eyes throughout your whole life fixed on Jesus, not fixed on cars, not fixed on technology, not fixed on power, not fixed on money, not fixed on popularity but fixed on Jesus. If you are fixed on popularity you will always be taking a survey on what people are saying about you and all it takes is on neurotic person and you’ve lost your life. If its money you will always be comparing yourself to others who have more money but when you’re eyes are fixed on Jesus then He is your life. It will be Christ centered all the way to the end when I will see Him whom I now believe. I love Him. I haven’t seen Him. By faith I am following Him and then I’ll finish and I will see Him. He is the lover of my soul. That is the life focus which is Christ centered and Gospel empowered. I am forgiven in Christ.

Here’s the Gospel. I am delivered from my sins and all my enemies. To what? It is to Him. It is not to heaven and yes you will get to heaven but the reason heaven is heaven is because He is there. Jesus said, “Where I am there you may be also.” The Gospel says I deliver you from sin, death, hell and the grave. By grace now I will bring you to Myself. I am His and He is mine. That’s the glorious message of the Gospel. You don’t have to be a Christian to be pretty, just get a good plastic surgeon. Now you’ll have to keep going back. You don’t have to be a Christian to lose weight, to be famous. All you have to do is be narcissistic and egocentric and you can get famous. But to get delivered from your sins, to know the true and living God who is life forever, you have to have Christ. When you have Him you have enough. Whatever it is that lurks in our heart that you’re telling Jesus “without this I can’t serve You” then that’s an idol. It might even be good things but whatever you have to have in place of Jesus or even along with Jesus is an idol. Jesus is sufficient so fix your eyes on Him. Paul says in Philippians 1:21, “For to me to live is Christ...”

Here are five takeaways from the text. The first one is that this text tells us the value in the effective Christian life is to get some models to encourage you to fix your eyes on Jesus. He takes the time to amass a whole chapter full of models for you. So find some model that are sinners saved by grace who can be an encouragement and an inspiration and who have gone before you. Don’t get those models from people living right now. Why? It is because they haven’t finished. You don’t know have they are

going to finish. So get your models from the Bible or from history. Get people who have lived by faith, died in faith and finished strong. Don't fix your eyes on them but use them to encourage you to fix your eyes on Jesus, just like this text encourages you to.

The second takeaway to remember the Christian life is a marathon not a sprint which means you're making progress. It means that it is long term, life long, it's a marathon that lasts your whole life. It's not a sprint just until you get to the age of 25 or a sprint until age 60 or a sprint to the end. It is a life long process. It's not you live this life and you live it long enough you become a Christian. No, you are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone but now that you are saved it is a life long privilege to live for that Savior. A person came to me and said his uncle prayed to receive Christ on his deathbed at 85 years of age. I said, "Praise the Lord." Then someone else said, "Doesn't that make you mad?" I said, "No." They said, "It does me." I said, "Why?" They said, "Here I am living my whole Christian life and this man lives his whole life and at the end he gets saved. Doesn't that make you mad?" I said, "No, it makes me sad, because I see what he fed on, the pig trough, his whole life when he could have walked with Jesus his whole life. I feel sorry for him but I'm glad he's saved." I don't think I have missed out on a thing since the day I was converted to the day I'll go to be with Jesus. Praise the Lord.

So that means the Christian life is one of steady progress and growing. Just like any marathon there are valleys and ups and downs, struggles and discouragements. I'll never forget running that marathon and I know I'm a chauvinist. As I was getting to the end everybody starts passing me. Women were passing me. I know I'm not supposed to be upset about that and I know I'm supposed to be liberated from that but I was dying. As everyone was passing me I noticed two things. I noticed those passing me didn't have the body fat I had. So I need to lay aside everything. I wasn't necessarily overweight but when he says let us also lay aside every encumbrance, he's not just talking about sin but there are good things that maybe I don't need in order for me to follow Jesus. If meat causes my brother to stumble I just won't eat it. If something gets in my way in serving Christ, then I just don't need it. Maybe God has called me to singleness or this or that. Paul says in Philippians 3:8, "*I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*" That's because He is enough. He's sufficient.

So he says, "Let's lay aside every encumbrance" and it's a gradual process of growing in the Lord. When He says that, I want you to be encouraged. The Christian life is ups and downs. It's adversity. Lay aside the sin that entangles, every encumbrance and I want you to be encouraged because you are growing. You may not know that you're growing sometimes but you're growing. It won't be long until its Spring. What happens to the grass in your yard when it's Spring? The grass grows. Go sit on your patio in April and look at the grass. Now can you see it growing? Not really. Sometimes something may pop up and I see that it's growing but I'm not encouraged by that because there are five things I hate to do in life and one of them is to cut grass. Another one is to fill up my car with gas. Another is to get my hair cut and the Lord is about to take care of that one. So when it comes to cutting grass I know I'm going to be right back doing it again in about 5 to 7 days. I may not see it's growing but I know it's growing. I may not see myself growing all the time but I know God's grace is at working and I'm growing in the Lord. So it's a marathon.

The third takeaway is the Christian life is one of reliance and exertion. You are fixing your eyes on Jesus and you are relying on the power of the Gospel because of the cross that He endured. You are also relying on the victory that He's won but you're running the race. You are working out what He is working in. You are laying hold what He has built in. The surpassing power that is working within you, you are working out in your life so it calls for intentional exertion to stay on the race, on the course, on the track and run it intentionally to finish utterly relying upon the grace of the Lord Jesus that brings you there.

The fourth takeaway is you have to maintain your focus on Christ all the way to the end. The world will keep trying to put your focus on you and say, "This is *your* life." I'll never forget when the Calvin Klein jeans were such a big deal. Everyone would go buy Calvin Klein jeans and guess what? Their life hadn't really changed. They just had Calvin Klein jeans and a little bit smaller bank account. So they go back and Calvin Klein says, "You just need more jeans" so we get more. The world keeps trying to give you things and they say, "This is your life focus." That's not it. By the way, there are good things in the Christian life. God has given you pastors, teaching, worship, sacraments, prayer, His Word. He has given you all of these things to use but don't fix on them. Preachers are there to point you to Jesus. The church is the church of Christ to point you to Jesus. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. Faith comes by hearing and hearing the Word of Christ. The Word is there to bring you to Christ. The Holy Spirit is there to bring you to Christ. Even those wonderful things He has built into your Christian life are not there for you to focus on them or look to them but you are to use them to fix on Jesus, to focus upon Christ Himself. That brings me to the last takeaway.

The fifth takeaway is this wonderful invitation – let us also lay aside the encumbrance, meaning anything that gets in the way of my serving Christ. Everything is expendable in my serving of Christ. What He gives me I will enjoy for Him. The things I need to set aside I have the liberty and power to set aside. I can count all things as loss for the sake of knowing Him and I want to lay aside the sin. What is the sin? The sin is pride, the exaltation of my self. That is the mother of all the rest of the sins. Lord, please let me lay that aside. Help me never to make the Gospel about me but to make the Gospel me for You. It's all about You, Lord, the preeminence of Christ. Don't let me or anything I do be preeminent in this thing. Whether its my ministry, my life, my wife, my children, whatever it is I want it to be about Christ. Allow me not to make it about me, the sin of self exaltation and self absorption. Please help me to die daily to my self that I might live to Christ. Run the race with endurance so He invites you by saying, let us also do this. I invite you to join the company of Hebrews 11 and all those who live by faith and died in faith. I invite you to Him and to a life in Him and for Him. Let's join them in Christ and for Christ.

Her name was Qamar Zia which was her Muslim name. She was born in India to a Muslim family in December of 1929. The way I came to know about her was I saw her name on a statue I saw on my last trip to London doing the Embers to a Flame Conference. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century at the Western Gate of the Westminster Abbey they erected statues of 20<sup>th</sup> century martyrs, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others. Qamar Zia is also there. She was born to a Muslim family but they couldn't educate her so they sent her over to a missionary school in India and there she met Jesus. She read the book of Isaiah 29 times and became a Christian. She found that Servant,

that Messiah. She flew under the radar because that meant death. The whole family picked up and moved to the new Islamic country that was being formed in the last century which is known as Pakistan. Her father and mother had plans for her to have a Muslim marriage so finally she said no. She said, "I belong to Jesus Christ and if I marry it will only be in Christ and for Christ." So she came under the death penalty.

She left her home. She was sent away. She was baptized and received a new name which is the name that is at Westminster Abbey. Her new name was Esther John. She became an evangelist that God used there in the church in Pakistan always under the threat of death. In 1960 they found her brutally murdered in her bed that night. It was a holy execution in the cowardess of night. This 31 year old girl was killed for Christ. The police came in and tidied up the place. They did their cursory inspection. They pulled out all her possessions and took them to a missionary couple that was there who had been caring for her. This couple was known as the Whites. The police officer handed Mrs. White her things including a journal of hers that he had just finished reading and said, "This girl had a lover. His name was Jesus." She had had her eyes fixed on Jesus. She has been added to the company, to the cloud of witnesses.

You and I may not have our statue at Westminster Abbey but we can join the company. I invite you to know the Lover of your soul who endured the cross, despised its shame and has sat down at the right hand of the Father. I invite you to love Him who loves you to the end. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could be together in Your Word. Thank You for the enormous privilege of praise and worship to Your Name. Thank You O God that we might come to Him. Today you may be running the wrong race and you want to run the race for Christ which means you come to Christ by faith, to put your trust in Him who paid for all of your sins on the cross. Would you do that today? I invite you to Jesus. Come to Jesus that you might sin your life to Him. Run the race for Him who has saved you. As we conclude with the reign of Christ and celebrating it, would you join me afresh and anew before our Savior? Jesus, we don't know when we're going to end the race but we have looked at the finish line. It's the beginning line, the Author and Finisher of our faith is You. So we fix our eyes on You. We lay aside every encumbrance, the sin that entangles, to run with endurance the race You have sovereignly designed for us to the end because You have already won the victory as You have sat down in victory for our redemption. Praise Your Name, Amen.