

### **“Dealing with that Troubling, Besetting Sin”**

Every one of us as a Christian, I suspect, struggles with a specific sin in our lives that persists regardless of the concern that we have felt, the efforts that we have exerted, and the prayers that we have offered to our Lord to deliver us. It is the common experience of most Christians to struggle with a troubling, besetting sin, of which they seem to be unable to subdue and defeat. We will give our attention this matter this morning within the context of **Hebrews 12:1-3**. Let us read these verses.

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup>looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

The great theme of the epistle to the Hebrews is that of the importance of Christians persevering in their faith in the Lord Jesus unto their full and final salvation. These Jewish Christians, to whom this epistle was written, were tempted to abandon their faith in Jesus due to the threat of political and spiritual forces that could bring great difficulty for them and severe persecution of them. The writer of this epistle, after a number of strong exhortations to persevere in faith, set forth here in the first three verses of chapter 12 the need for his readers to focus upon and to depend upon the Lord Jesus in order to be strengthened with needful grace to persevere in faith through difficulties.

The writer built upon what he had set forth in chapter 11, which is a rehearsal of a number of Old Testament people who through all of their trials and troubles persevered in faith through life, and thus pleased God. The writer at the opening of chapter 12 becomes direct in his exhortation and encourages his readers to persevere, following the lead and example of the people of God who persevered in their faith before them. But although the writer sets forth the Old Testament saints to be premier examples of faith, only the Lord Jesus can be the believer’s object of faith. It is faith in Jesus alone that enables a Christian to persevere unto salvation. These Jewish believers should persevere in their faith as did so many who had lived and gone on before them, but further, they should persevere because Jesus had done so. If Jesus Christ were made the object of their reflection and concentration, then they would discover and receive strength and encouragement to persevere in their faith in Jesus Christ.

We will consider the message of the passage generally, even as we will examine a few of the details more directly and thoroughly.

#### **I. The message of our passage**

##### **A. Jesus, the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith (12:1-3)**

Verse 1 reads, *“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”* The writer first makes reference to all of the witnesses to faith that he had set forth in chapter 11. He described them as “so great a cloud of witnesses.” They are not witnesses of us, that is, he is not saying that they are watching us, scrutinizing us, although this verse is commonly interpreted this way.<sup>1</sup> No, they are not *spectators of us* but they are witnesses to what endurance in faith looks like, serving as *examples for us*. They testify for us the nature of true faith that pleases God. As one wrote,

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the footnote in the **ESV Study Bible** allows for this possible interpretation (pp. 2382f.)

But in what sense are they “witnesses”? Not, probably, in the sense of spectators, watching their successors as they in turn run the race for which they have entered; but rather in the sense that by their loyalty and endurance they have borne witness to the possibilities of the life of faith. It is not so much they who look at us as we who look to them—for encouragement.

And so, they are not witnesses of what we are doing, but we are witnesses of what they had done. They have borne witness to a life of faith, which we should emulate. And so, we are to look at them as ones who have finished ahead of us. They witness to us what a life of faith entails and obtains. The writer is basically saying: “Because we have so many examples of persons who persevered in faith throughout their lives unto death, should not we, therefore, receive encouragement from their witness to do likewise?”

The saints of chapter 11 are described as “*so great a cloud of witnesses.*” It would seem that the writer is referring to more Old Testament saints than just the ones he had specifically identified. The image of a “cloud” in Scripture is commonly used to describe a group comprised of many in number. In this sense it would be like the expression, a great “host of witnesses.” Some have suggested that this is an analogy of Israel traveling through the wilderness following the “cloud”, the Shekenah glory of God. As the Israelites followed that cloud, so New Testament Christians are to follow this cloud of witnesses that has gone before them.

The writer then exhorts his readers, “*let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us.*” The “weight” and/or the “sin” which so easily besets us are those things that would prevent us from running and finishing a “race.” The Christian life of faith is likened to one who is in a race who may be assured of receiving the “prize” of eternal life upon finishing the race. The one who “runs” should not, therefore, “drop out” of the race, that is, forsake Christ. “Sin, which so easily ensnares us”, will lead to that fate. It is sin in general that is being referenced, rather than one specific sin. Any kind of sin might become something that will “trip you while attempting to run;” therefore, cast it aside. The great need for professing Christians is to complete the race; therefore, they had the great need to jettison anything that may hinder them from advancing in faith unto their final destination, which is to be brought into the presence of Jesus Christ with all of His brethren. Some have referred this to the spiritual work of the “mortification” of the believer, the putting to death sin.

There are those that have sought to distinguish between laying aside every “weight” and laying aside every “sin”. They argue that the “weight” represents those things that may not be wrong in themselves, but they are to be cast aside by the Christian because they will hinder his running his race before the Lord. **Thomas Manton** (1620-1677) wrote:

By *weight* is meant those things that burden the soul, and make our heavy progress more tedious and cumbersome; and by *weight* (I think) the delights and cares of the world, the multitude of secular business, all our earthly contentments and affairs, as far as they are a burden to us, hinder us in our way to heaven; these must be put off... The business and cares of this world; for these immoderately followed, and not in obedience to God, are a sore burden, and makes the soul heavy, and allows no time and strength for God and His service, and those happy opportunities of private communion with Him.<sup>2</sup>

Our Lord’s words are quoted in this regard. Jesus said to His disciples, “But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly” (Luke 21:34).

“The sin”, on the other hand, distinguished from “every weight” that may encumber us, is a reference to specific transgressions of God’s laws from which we are to repent before the Lord.

The next thing to be laid off is ‘sin, which doth so easily beset us.’ As we must guard against things without (i.e. the weight), so we must mortify our corrupt inclinations within, or else it will soon make us weary of our heavenly race, or faint in it... In every man there is some predominant sin, and in every regenerate person some relics of that sin, from whence is the greatest danger to his soul... Well, then,

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Manton, **The Complete Works of Thomas Manton**, vol. 2 (Solid Ground Christian Books, 2008), pp. 415f.

this is that sin that easily beset us; original sin improved into some tyranny or evil custom, which doth increase and prevail upon us more and more. Now, this is said easily to beset us for three reasons. (1) Partly because it hath a great power and restraint over us... so great an interest hath it acquired in our affections, it doth easily beset us, it hath great power and command over us. (2) Partly because it sticks so close that we cannot by our own strength lay it aside... (3) And partly because it mingles itself with all our motions and actions (Rom. 7:21). It easily besets us, it is present with us, it impels us, and solicits us, and draws us to sin further and further, and doth make us negligent in what is God's.

Deliberate and specific steps of action must be taken by us or we will not stand. We are told that we are "*to lay aside* every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us." The metaphor may be of the one who is about to *begin* his race. The ancient athlete would arrive to the arena clothed with outer garments covering himself. Underneath he had the barest of covering, so that he would be able to run his race unencumbered. When the time to start the event arrived, he would lay aside his loose-fitting toga, for he could not seriously run wearing such a thing, and then he would get set to begin his race. We are to lay aside any aspect of our lives that would hinder us from our life of faith in the Lord Jesus. There is a need for initial repentance when we enter the life of faith.

But the metaphor seems to go beyond this initial setting out upon a race. The "weight" spoken of may speak of an encumbrance that is picked up along the way. As you are running something gets caught in your feet and you become entangled. You begin to look downward rather than forward; your forward progress is impeded. These things must be removed and cast away lest we take our eyes off of Jesus.

Let us recall once again, that in the book of Hebrews salvation is presented as being received fully after this life has been lived out in faith. There is no hope for the one who went along with Christ for a while and then turned back. God promises no salvation to the temporary believer. The writer never says that these apostates lost their salvation; rather, he viewed them as unbelievers for they had forsaken Christ who is the only hope of salvation.

**John Brown** wrote of verses 1 and 2:

"The words which follow, in chapter 12:1, 2... contain the practical improvement of the Apostle's long and eloquent historical proof and illustration of the power of persevering faith, to enable men to do whatever God commands, however difficult, --to endure whatever God appoints, however severe,--and to obtain whatever God promises, however great and glorious, strange, and apparently unattainable. They are substantially an exhortation to the Hebrew Christians to a steady, active, persevering discharge of Christian duty, notwithstanding all the privations and sufferings, dangers and difficulties, to which this might expose them."<sup>3</sup>

We are to discard that which may hinder us, for we must complete successfully that to which our Lord has directed us. Here are more of Thomas Manton's words:

*Question:* Now, what is it to *lay aside*, or how can we lay aside, since sin sticks so close to us and is engraven in our natures?

*Answer:* Certainly something may be done by us, for this is everywhere pressed as our duty: Ephesians 4:22, "Put off the old man;" and 1 Peter 2:11. We may put it off more and more, though we cannot lay it aside. Then we are said to lay aside the sin that so easily besets us, when we prevent and break the dominion of it that it shall not reign over us: Romans 6:12, "Let not sin reign." Though it dwells in us, lives in us, and works in us, yet it should not overcome us and bring us into bondage, and so it will not be imputed to our condemnation; and at length, when the soul shall be separated from the body, we shall be wholly free from it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Brown [of Haddington] (1784-1858), **An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews** (Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), p. 599.

<sup>4</sup> Manton, **Works**, vol. 2, pp. 417f.

We then read the instruction of verse 1b, “*and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.*” This “race” is the entire Christian life from our conversion unto the end of this life of faith when we depart from this world to be with Christ. It is a race to be run and successfully completed.

The kind of race depicted is a prolonged race, not a sprint.

The footrace was one of the five contests of the pentathlon in the great panhellenic games and always came first. At the Olympic Games the footrace was the only athletic contest for an extended period... The exhortation to run *δι’ ὑπομονῆς*, “with endurance,” identifies the race not as a contest of speed but of stamina. The allusion is to a distance race requiring disciplined commitment and endurance (“not the sprinter but the marathon runner!”)<sup>5</sup>

The “race” is but one of many metaphors the Scriptures employ as portraying the Christian in pursuit of his salvation. Elsewhere we read that Christians are as *branches* who must remain attached to the Vine—Jesus Christ, from whom they derive the source and strength for their Christian life (John 15:1ff). The Christian can also be depicted as a spiritual *soldier* waging life-long warfare from which he must come forth the victor. The Christian is a *traveler* or pilgrim which must complete his journey. He is *fighter* who must train and discipline himself to be able to defeat his opponent and win his match. Paul told Timothy, “Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Tim. 6:12). And here, in Hebrews 12:1, the metaphor of a race is employed to show the great need for effort and perseverance. **Arthur Pink** (1886-1952) wrote,

The principle thoughts suggested by the figure of the “race” are rigorous self-denial and discipline, vigorous exertion, persevering endurance. The Christian life is not a thing of passive luxuration, but of active “*fighting* the good fight of faith!” The Christian is not called to lie down on flowery beds of ease, but to run a race, and athletics is strenuous, demanding self-sacrifice, hard training, the putting forth of every ounce of energy possessed. I am afraid that in this work-hating and pleasure-loving age, we do not keep this aspect of the truth sufficiently before us: we take things too placidly and lazily. The charge which God brought against Israel of old applies very largely to Christendom today: “Woe to them that are *at ease* in Zion” (Amos 6:1): to be “at ease” is the very opposite of “running the race.”

**Matthew Henry** (1662-1714) gave some detail and background to this metaphor of a “race.” He wrote, “The apostle speaks in the gymnastic style, taken from the Olympic and other exercises.

1. Christians have a race to run, a race of service and a race of sufferings, a course of active and passive obedience.

2. This race is set before them; it is marked out unto them, both by the word of God and the examples of the faithful servants of God, that cloud of witnesses with which they are compassed about. It is set out by proper limits and directions; the mark they run to, and the prize they run for, are set before them.

3. This race must be run with patience and perseverance. There will be need of patience to encounter the difficulties that lie in our way, of perseverance to resist all temptations to desist or turn aside. Faith and patience are the conquering graces, and therefore must be always cultivated and kept in lively exercise.

4. Christians have a greater example to animate and encourage them in their Christian course than any or all who have been mentioned before, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ: *Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith* (v. 2).”

**Verse 2** reads, “*looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*” There is only one sure way to deal with sin; we are to look unto Jesus. If you have a besetting sin, your greatest need is not human pity, understanding, or a support group, it is to get rid of that thing in order

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<sup>5</sup> William Lane, **Word Biblical Commentary 47B, Hebrews 9-13** (Zondervan, 1991), p. 409.

that you may look upon Jesus clearly and directly. Jesus is both the object as well as the source of faith. He is so because He, too, persevered through suffering and was exalted to God's throne because of having done so. Jesus is set forth as standing at the finish line. As we are running this marathon race of a lifetime we are to see Jesus at the end. We are running not just to the finish line, but to Him who is standing there to greet us and congratulate us on our successful completion of our life of faith. Sin will cause one to stumble regarding his faith in Jesus. Do not look down at that which is the cause of stumbling, in other words, do not fixate on your sin; rather, fix your eyes upon the One who will keep you from stumbling.

In my opinion, this is a basic problem of humanistic psychology: It can accurately describe the problem which causes the stumbling, but it fails in that it provides no cure. It can do a good job of describing a problem; it does a very poor job of prescribing a cure. These worldly would-be physicians of souls would have you look inward at yourself; Scripture would have you look upward to Jesus Christ. They would have you look backward, at your past life; Scripture would have you look forward to your meeting with Christ. They would have you look closely at what you are suffering; the Word of God would have you look closely at what Christ suffered.

Jesus Christ is described as both the "**Author**" and "**Finisher**" of our faith. These terms are sometimes set forth as Jesus being the **Pioneer** and **Perfector** of our faith. Christ is the Pioneer of our faith in that He blazed the trail first, opening the way before His people that they might follow Him in His path to glory. Christ is the Finisher or Perfector of our faith in two ways. First, He is finished or perfected our faith in that He first finished or completed the race of faith through His own life of faith and obedience. Second, He is the Finisher and Perfector of our faith in that He is strengthening us and leading us to arrive at the same destination. And so, Christ also is the Finisher of our faith in that He has not only gone in advance of us, showing us the way of faith, but He strengthens us in order to help us complete our own race.

Not only is Jesus the Pioneer of faith; in Him faith has reached its perfection. "He trusts in God," they said as they stood by His cross; the implication was, "Much good His trust in God is doing Him now!" The words, though not their implication, were truer than they knew. The whole life of Jesus was characterized by unbroken and unquestioning faith in His heavenly Father, and never more so than when in Gethsemane He committed Himself to His Father's hands for the ordeal of the cross with the words: "not what I will, but what thou wilt" (Mark 14:36). It was sheer faith in God, unsupported by any visible or tangible evidence, that carried Him through the taunting, the scourging, the crucifying, and the more bitter agony of rejection, desertion and dereliction. "Come down from the cross, and we will believe," they said. Had He come down, by some gesture of supernatural power, He would never have been hailed as the "perfector of faith" nor would He have left any practical example for others to follow.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that the writer just referred to the Savior by the name, "Jesus" without any other title or description, shows that the emphasis, the focus, is on the person of Jesus with particular attention to His human nature and the struggle that He endured and overcame.

Contemplation of Jesus offers paramount encouragement to Christians in their struggle. The appeal in v. 2 is for a concentrated attention that turns away from all distractions, with eyes only for the person of Jesus... The use of the simple personal name "Jesus" shows that the accent is upon His humanity, and especially His endurance of pain, humiliation, and the disgrace of the cross. Concentrated attention upon the person of Jesus and His redemptive accomplishment on behalf of the new people of God typifies 'the fundamental challenge of Hebrews.'<sup>7</sup>

In these few verses God is pressing upon us the same theme that has continued through this epistle-- the greatest need we have is for faith that will persevere. The way to obtain that needed faith is to make a study of Jesus. We are to be "looking unto Jesus." He not only fully exhibits the nature, form and path of

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<sup>6</sup> F. F. Bruce, **The Epistle to the Hebrews** (Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 352.

<sup>7</sup> William Lane, **Hebrews 9-13**, p. 410.

faith, but He has “perfected” faith in His own sufferings. He exemplified perfect faith in His obedience unto death. On the matter of Jesus having “endured the cross”, **F. F. Bruce** wrote,

He “endured the cross, despising the shame.” To die by crucifixion was to plumb the lowest depths of disgrace; it was a punishment reserved for those who were deemed of all men most unfit to live, a punishment for sub-men. From so degrading a death Roman citizens were exempt from ancient statute; the dignity of the Roman name would be besmirched by being brought into association with anything so vile as the cross. For slaves, and criminals of low degree, it was regarded as a suitable means of execution, and a grim deterrent to others. But this disgrace Jesus disregarded, as something not worthy to be taken into account when it was a question of His obedience to the will of God. So He brought faith to perfection by His endurance of the cross—and now the place of highest exaltation is His. The pioneer of salvation has been made perfect through sufferings, and has therefore taken His seat “at the right hand of the throne of God.” His exaltation there, with all that it means for His people’s well-being and for the triumph of God’s purpose in the universe, is “the joy that was set before Him”, for the sake of which He submitted to shame and death.<sup>8</sup>

And so, the “joy set before Him” was not the sufferings He endured, for He was “despising the shame” of the cross that He endured. The “joy” was the triumphant vindication of His obedient life upon His exaltation, but further, His “joy” was the prospect of bringing “many sons to glory” through His sufferings (cf. 2:9-12).<sup>9</sup> The “right hand of the throne of God” is the place of honor and co-regent rule with the Father; Jesus is now ruling with the Father.

We next read **verse 3**, “*For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.*” By way of reminder, the readers of this epistle were probably Jewish Christians who under threat of persecution were being tempted to forsake Christ and revert to Judaism which was a sanctioned religion by Rome at the time. They would “grow weary and loose heart,” that is they would become discouraged and loose resolve to persevere in faith, if they failed to continually consider Jesus. And so, here is a biblical prescription to deal with discouragement and depression in a Christian: *be thinking about* (meditating upon) *Jesus and His sufferings*. Furthermore, this is a biblical description of the cause of discouragement and depression in a Christian: *having failed to have been thinking about Jesus and His sufferings*. Thus we see that the preaching of the cross (the gospel) is not simply something that should be used to win the lost, but it also serves to preserve the faithful. We might say that as one contemplates the life of Jesus that was poured out on Calvary, life is poured into the contemplator. Ignore the instruction of Hebrews 12:3 and you will be drained of life; you will become discouraged and depressed.

## **II. A few words of exhortation**

Let us take this message to heart, considering some of its implications. God tells us: “let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” The writer presents three emphases in these verses: First, he sets before us what is to be done—*finish the race*; second, he identifies the means by which the race may be finished--by *putting away sin*; and third, he tells of the manner by which you put away a besetting sin--by *looking unto Jesus*.

### **1. Let us finish the race of faith.**

We have started out well, let us finish well. These Christians to whom this epistle was written had issues and situations that threatened their continuing in faith. We, too, have obstacles and deterrents that we must resist and overcome. If you do not have them immediately before you, you may be assured that they

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp. 352f.

<sup>9</sup> Further still it was joyous to our Lord that He would be able to share with us all that He obtained; cf. John 15:11; 16:20, 21, 22, 24; 17:3.

are in your path before you that you will most definitely encounter. Granted, we do not yet struggle with the physical threat of persecution under which they labored, but there are present threats that are just as dangerous and threatening to our faith. No, we do not live in a society that oppresses faith, as in many other places, but we do live in a world that largely disregards faith. As we live and move about daily in our world, we lose our own focus on Christ and are sapped of our resolve to live for Christ. Most of us live lives in which we think that we can get by without a great deal of dependence upon Him. Consequently we are weakened and our faith is diluted. To run a race involves a committed, resolve, training, a deliberate effort. Let us resolve to live and walk in faith, purposing, as God enables us, not to be deterred or distracted by anything the world may set before us.

## **2. Let us be *putting away that sin that hinders us presently, that besetting sin.***

Every one of us struggles with sin. Most of us do not just struggle with sin generally, but we may struggle with a singular, particular, recurring sin. There is always that sin that must be cast away. Arthur Pink wrote, “It is true that each of us has some special form of sin to which we are most prone, and that he is more sorely tempted from one direction than another.”<sup>10</sup> This is very grievous to the tenderhearted Christian. It is very debilitating to the growth in holiness in our Christian experience. When we read in our passage of the “sin that so easily besets you”, did one particular sin come to mind? Let us consider a few matters with regard to us sinning against our God.

### **a. The Scriptures contain vice lists**

First, let us acknowledge that there are many different sins from which we are to turn away, that is, sins for which we should repent. The sins that we strive to eradicate from our lives comes in many forms. There are lists of sins that are set before us in the New Testament, sins from which we are to seek deliverance. These lists of sins are sometimes called “vice lists.” For example, in Mark 7:21 and 22 the Lord Jesus said, “For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.”

Paul gave a vice list in Romans 1:29-31, “They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice, full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.” 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 10 contains another list: “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers -- none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.”

Paul gave a rather extensive list in Ephesians 4:25-32.

<sup>25</sup>Therefore, putting away *lying*, “Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,” for we are members of one another. <sup>26</sup>“Be angry, and *do not sin*”: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, <sup>27</sup>nor give place to the devil. <sup>28</sup>Let him who stole *steal* no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need. <sup>29</sup>Let no *corrupt word* proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. <sup>30</sup>And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup>*Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.* <sup>32</sup>*And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.*

**Colossians 3:1-14** contains a vice list.

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup>Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. <sup>3</sup>For you died, and

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<sup>10</sup> Arthur Pink, **An Exposition of Hebrews** (Baker Book House, 2003, p. 899).

your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup>When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

<sup>5</sup>Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: ***fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.*** <sup>6</sup>Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, <sup>7</sup>in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them.

<sup>8</sup>But now you yourselves are to put off all these: ***anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth.*** <sup>9</sup>***Do not lie to one another,*** since you have put off the old man with his deeds, <sup>10</sup>and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, <sup>11</sup>where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.<sup>11</sup>

## **b. There are three major categories of sin**

If one were to collect all of the sins identified and listed in the New Testament, they could be classified into **three categories**.<sup>12</sup> First, there are sins that may be classified under the heading of ***moral impurity*** (sexual immorality), or sins of the flesh. Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:3 and 4, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor.” These kinds of sins are described as ***sins against one’s own body***--selfishness lies at the heart of this sin. We read in 1 Corinthians 6:18, “Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body.” It is described in the Scriptures as “the lust of the flesh” (1 John 2:16).

A second category of sins is in the realm of corrupt temporal values, or more simply, ***greediness***. Greed is a sin with respect to our relationship to ***physical things***. Greediness is a root sin. Paul wrote to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:8-10,

<sup>8</sup>And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. <sup>9</sup>But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. <sup>10</sup>For ***the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil***, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

If a man is greedy, that is, if he has worldly, temporal values, or if he longs to be rich, he will be characterized by a variety of sins, all of which owe their origin to his greediness. This sin is described in the Scriptures as “the lust of the eyes” (also found in 1 John 2:16)

The third category of sins is that of ***bitterness***. Bitterness is a sin that surfaces in our relationships with ***other people*** (or God Himself). This sin is described in the Scriptures as “the pride of life” (again, 1 John 2:6). Bitterness is also described as a root sin. We read in Hebrews 12:15 and 16,

Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: <sup>15</sup>looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest ***any root of bitterness*** springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; <sup>16</sup>lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright.

And so, these three categories of sins may be seen as root sins that branch off into all kinds of manifestations of sin in life. Virtually any sin we commit can probably be classified under one or more of these three headings. If you are able to have these three areas in submission to the Lord Jesus, if you have sexual lust under control, if you are content with what things you have and with what things you do not have, and further, if you have a clear conscience in the arena of your interpersonal relationships, you are a long way advanced in the grace of sanctification in your life.

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<sup>11</sup> There are other vice lists in Scripture, including these: Rom. 13:13; 1 Cor. 5:10, 11; 2 Cor. 12:20-21; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:3-5; Col. 3:5, 8; 1 Tim. 1:9-10; 2 Tim. 3:2-5; Titus 3:3; 1 Pet. 2:1; 1 Pet. 4:3; Rev. 21:8; 22:15.

<sup>12</sup> We have addressed this before. See FBC925 and FBC878.



### c. There are four ways in which sin may be committed by us

The Word of God describes at least four ways in which we commit sins. We may sin against God through our *thoughts*, through our *attitudes* or emotions, through our *actions*, and through our *speech* or words. Sometimes we may sin only in our thought life. But sometimes our sinful thoughts are displayed in our sinful attitudes, even as we commit outward acts of sins. And sadly, many times our sin is shown forth in the words we speak. In other words, when we sin, it may show itself in various ways.

Regarding *sinful thoughts*, our Lord Jesus declared, “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (Matt. 15:19). Here the “heart” would be the sinful principle that shapes and directs the thoughts of man in the way of sin. Probably many sins we commit never show themselves openly because they are restricted to our thinking. But we should not think that we do not sin until they are manifested openly. The Scriptures declare, “The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the LORD” (Prov. 15:26). And on the Day of Judgment all of our thoughts will be assessed and judged by our Lord. Paul wrote about “the Day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel” (Rom. 2:16).

Our *attitudes* will also be assessed in the Day of Judgment. Those who are characterized by hatred, who are contentious, jealous, envious, or who are self-seeking, who possess selfish ambition, shall all be tried and damned by the Judge (Cf. Gal. 5:18-21).

Certainly our *actions* will be scrutinized by King Jesus on the Last Day. Jude wrote,

<sup>14</sup>Now Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men also, saying, “Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, <sup>15</sup>to execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly among them of *all their ungodly deeds which they have committed in an ungodly way...*” (Jude 14f)

Paul wrote of the self-righteous, “But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, *who will render to each one according to his deeds*” (Rom 2:5f).

The Lord Jesus Himself declared that *the words* we speak will either damn us on the Day of Judgment or our words will vindicate our claim to be Christian. The Lord Jesus said,

“But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the Day of Judgment. <sup>37</sup>For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” (Matt. 12:36f)

When we consider all of these manifestations of sins and the resultant condemnation they bring upon us, we must reaffirm the glorious gospel truth that the Lord Jesus satisfied the justice of God with respect to all of the sins of all of His people. But the question remains, “How may we ‘lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us’?”

### 3. Let us be *looking unto Jesus*.

What do we mean by *looking* unto Jesus? “By looking unto, we mean an inward experience of mental knowing, desiring, hoping, believing, loving, calling on Jesus, and conforming to Jesus” (Ambrose). One of the old Christian authors, **Isaac Ambrose**<sup>13</sup>, wrote a great book based upon these first three verses of Hebrews 12. I have mentioned it in the past. It is entitled “*Looking Unto Jesus*.” Its 694 pages explains the text and sets forth the manner in which the Christian is to look on to Jesus. He emphasized rightly that the exhortation is not only to be looking unto Jesus, but it implies looking away from other things. You cannot be looking unto both at the same time.

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<sup>13</sup> Not to be confused with “Saint” Ambrose of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries.

But first, we must look off all other things. The note is this, we must take off our mind from everything which might divert us in our Christian race from looking unto Jesus. *Aphrontes* (Greek), the first word, or first piece of a word in my text (v. 2), speaks to us thus, hands off, or eyes off from anything that stands in the way of Jesus Christ. I remember it was written over Plato's door, "There's none may come hither that is not a geometer."<sup>14</sup> But on the door of my text is written clean contrary: "No earthly-minded man must enter here." Not anything in the world, be it ever so excellent, if it stand in the way of Jesus Christ, is to be named the same day; we must not give a look, or squint at anything that may hinder this fair and lovely sight of Jesus.<sup>15</sup>

We read in Isaiah a prophecy of those who would enjoy salvation:

"In that day a man *will look to His Maker*,  
And His eyes will have respect for the Holy One of Israel,  
He will not look to the altars,  
The works of his hands." (Isa. 17:7f).

Hebrews 12:1-3 exhorts us to follow the principle of this prophecy in Isaiah 17. We are to take our eyes off worthless things, and even from "worthy" things, and fix them solely upon Jesus. This means that He must be first upon our hearts and be principal in our minds. Did not our Lord Himself say, "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me"? (Matt. 10:37). Now we love our father and mother and our sons and daughters, but we are to love the Lord our God supremely; we must fix our eyes first and foremost on Jesus Christ.

Ambrose set forth a number of *reasons we should look off the things of this world* and to fix our eyes upon Jesus:

(1) Consider that all other evil things are in God's account as very nothing.

Psalm 39:5 reads, "Certainly every man at his best state is but vapor." Ambrose reasons, "Not every man in his worst condition, but every man at his best estate; not every man at his best estate is little worth, but every man at his best estate is vanity, emptiness, nothing; it may be so in part, nay, but in every part, he is wholly, totally, altogether vanity. The Scriptures

Again, God has given us things to enjoy, but when we live solely for their enjoyment, when we sever their connection with God who has given them to us to enjoy, they become corruptible things. Jesus warned His disciples about this. The account is in Luke 12:

<sup>13</sup>Then one from the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

<sup>14</sup>But He said to him, "Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?" <sup>15</sup>But He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses."

<sup>16</sup>Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. <sup>17</sup>And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?' <sup>18</sup>So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. <sup>19</sup>And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.'" <sup>20</sup>But God said to him, 'You fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?'

<sup>21</sup>So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:13-21)

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<sup>14</sup> i.e. one who knows, loves, and does geometry.

<sup>15</sup> Isaac Ambrose, *Looking Unto Jesus* (Sprinkle pub., 1986), p. 19.

(2) Consider, that all such things are but trifles, deceits, thorns, miseries, uncertain things. In other words, see them for as they truly are in the light of eternity.

(3) Consider the difference of these objects, Christ, and all other things.

All other things are vanities, but Christ is a real, solid, substantial, glorious thing; all other things are temporary, fading things, but Christ is an enduring substance, ‘The same yesterday, today, and forever, which is, and which was, and which is to come’ (Rev. 1:4).<sup>16</sup>

(4) Consider, that Christ looked off heaven and heavenly things for you, how much more should you look off the earth and earthly things, the world and worldly things for Him?

(5) Consider, that the rational soul of man is too high a birth to spend its strength on other things.

(6) Consider how short is the time that you have here in this world.

(7) Consider the great account that you are to give of all earthly things.

Now we need to keep these matters in balance. We read that God has given us freely all things richly to enjoy (1 Tim. 6:17). We may live enjoying these things and prosper spiritually; but if live only to enjoy these things, we will suffer.

Ambrose next gives some practical advice on *how to look off of other things* and to look upon Jesus.

(1) Study every day more and more the vanity of the creature; read over the book of Ecclesiastes well.

(2) Converse but a little with any evil thing on this side of Christ; have as little to do with the world, the sinful pleasures, profits, riches, manners of it, as possibly you can; the less the better.

(3) Be more and more acquainted with Jesus Christ; get nearer to Him, be more in communion with Him, get more tastes of Christ and heaven, and earth will relish the worse for them.

(4) Set before us the example of such saints, who accounted themselves pilgrims and strangers on the earth.

(5) Go into your meditations to heaven, and keep there a while: the mind is in heaven cannot attend these earthly things.

(6) Cry mightily unto God, that He would take off your hearts and eyes. Pray as David, “Turn away my eyes from beholding vanity” (Psa. 119:37).

May the Lord enable us to live as our text instructs us. May we look upon Jesus and see all that satisfies all that beautifies in Him alone. May He enable us to see Him who is invisible, with the eyes of clear, unobstructed faith.

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<sup>16</sup> Ambrose, p. 23.