

A Christian commitment

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Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Rev Fergus A.J.Macdonald

[0 : 0 0] ...of determination, the race that is set before us, 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 is set down at the right hand of God.

For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be readied and faint in your minds. Come next Friday, the television screens will be filled with pictures of the Olympics.

These pictures will come to us virtually instantaneously via satellite from Atlanta, and many millions of people in this country and around the world will look in and be spectators through television.

Of the Olympic Games for this year. I was reading an article in the paper yesterday about the Scottish athlete Liz McColgan.

Some of you may have noticed that also in the Scotsman. It struck me it would be strange if she were to enter, having entered for the Olympic Games, that she were to go down when her race comes, down onto the track, and not take her track suit off.

[1 : 2 8] Normally when athletes go down to the track, they warm up, they take off the track suit, and they get ready for the race. And it's almost inconceivable that an athlete should go down and be in the track, and really have a change of mind, and begin to wonder whether they should participate.

But that is exactly the picture, the word picture that is painted in these verses here. This verse, or these verses, is a word picture, constitute a word picture of an athlete, or of athletes, who are in the arena, but who are reluctant to participate.

They are in the arena, they are on the field, they are on the track, but they are reluctant to go forward. They are reluctant to take off the track suit, as it were, and to get going.

Now why was it that the writer to the Hebrews drew that picture, draws that picture for us? And he does it because in the church to which he wrote, and we do not know where that church was, that in the church to which he wrote, there were at least some people who having made a commitment to Christianity were beginning to have second thoughts.

They were becoming, in a sense, reluctant Christians. They were beginning to encounter persecution. They had not yet resisted unto blood, as we were told.

[3 : 0 5] They had not yet physically suffered in the sense of violence spilling their blood. But restrictions had begun to appear, and the situation was ominous.

And some were beginning to have second thoughts about their commitment to Jesus Christ. They were attracted to become part of the Jewish religion.

They may, in fact, have been Jews previously. That is not clear. On the other hand, they could have been Gentiles. But they were attracted to become part of the Jewish religion because the Jewish religion had official protection.

Christianity did not enjoy that. As long as Christianity was seen as an extension or as a sequel to the Jewish faith, then, as Paul discovered, you could, you could, you could, Christianity enjoyed the benefits, the protection of the Jewish faith.

But it was becoming clearer and clearer that, in fact, the Jews as a whole were rejecting Christ. And so, therefore, Christianity was appearing as a new, unofficial religion and, therefore, was exposed to all the sanctions of the Roman Empire against something which was not approved.

[4 : 29] And so, this particular church was faced with the temptation of going back, or perhaps, not going back at all, but simply going into some form of Judaism. Some scholars believe that the particular form of Judaism into which they were tempted to return was similar to that practiced by the, in the Qumran community, by the Essenes, beside the Dead Sea.

The community well known because of the Dead Sea Scrolls. There are many similarities between what they believed and what the Hebrews were tempted to believe. But that be as it may.

That is the picture that is presented to us here and that is the reason why that picture was necessary. And there is a sense in which that picture is still relevant today, especially in the church in the Western countries of the world, where so many people are still, still want to be associated with the church, but are reluctant to make a full commitment.

They are reluctant to follow Jesus Christ, lock, stock, and barrel. We still have a high degree of nominalism in the churches in the Western world, perhaps not so much as once was the case, but nevertheless, there is a significant proportion of people in the church who have a sign above their lives which says, do not disturb.

Lots of people like that. They are prepared to hang on. They are prepared to receive whatever benefits they may conceive, the church conferring upon them, but they do not want to be committed.

[6 : 11] They are down in the track. They have got the tracksuit on, but they are not prepared to get it off and to run in the race following our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

And so, as we will see in coming days, pictures of the Olympics, let us remember the illustration that we have here in this letter to the Hebrews.

an illustration which was taken from the Olympics, if you like, of the ancient world. An illustration of an athlete or athletes who are, have entered, if you like, have entered the competition but are not committed to it.

Who have entered the Olympics but are not dedicated to it. And that is a parable of the church of Jesus Christ then and now.

And the question I want to ask you today, and the question I want you to ask every time you see an Olympic event in the coming days, is to ask, is that a picture of my life?

[7 : 22] Am I like that? Have I entered the church but I'm not committed to Jesus Christ? That was the picture that is being presented here.

I would like very briefly and very simply this morning to go over with you what is required of a committed Christian.

What is required of a committed Christian? Not a reluctant Christian but a committed Christian. Well I think first of all a committed Christian is called upon to be disciplined.

we read here let us lay aside every weight. Every weight that is referred to here.

Let us lay aside every weight. Let us throw off everything that hinders is the way the NIV puts it or the CEV. So we must get rid of everything that slows us down.

[8 : 22] let us lay aside every weight. In fact the word that is used here the Greek word that is used here can be used as of excessive body weight.

And you know how athletes train in order that they might be the right weight. In order that all the excess fat and flab might not be there.

That they might reach a peak condition. And the problem that the writer to the Hebrew sees is that some of the people to whom he was writing had become flabby in a spiritual sense.

They had become unfit spiritually through lack of discipline. Let us throw off everything that gets in the way.

Let us throw aside every weight. an athlete of course requires a certain amount of the body fat. The problem arises when that amount is excessive.

[9 : 34] And this is the I believe the literal picture that has been presented here. But the writer is thinking not physically he's not thinking in literal terms.

He's thinking figuratively. He's thinking of those things not so much which are the prohibited things but things which may in themselves be acceptable and good but which if taken to excess can in fact become harmful.

Excessive use of or an undue degree of involvement in things which are perfectly legitimate and even be commanded in scripture can in fact become harmful if they are indulged in to excess.

For example we are called upon to be diligent in business in our work. But if our work becomes the center of our lives rather than Christ then our work becomes like the thorns of the parable which choke our interest in the word of God.

the good can become the enemy of the best. The question I want to ask you and I want to ask myself today is how many things have we laid aside in order that we might be fitter athletes for Christ.

[11 : 03] In order that we might be more disciplined in our commitment to him. And so if we are going to be committed Christians then we must be disciplined.

We must put first things first and not allow other things to usurp the place of Christ in our life.

The good can become the enemy of the best. And a committed Christian is someone who knows what is best and that what is best is Christ and that Christ is at the center of all things and all the other things are centered on him.

Secondly to be a committed Christian I believe that we are called upon to be dynamic. We are called upon to be dynamic. The writer goes on to speak about laying aside not only every weight but also the sin which does so easily beset us.

the word beset has the idea of entanglement the sin which entangles us which so easily entangles the sin which holds onto us so tightly the sin that just won't let go.

[12 : 22] These are some alternative readings of this phrase. And here the allusion is probably to the robes of the athletes. In the ancient world the athletes did not wear track suits they wore big long robes right down to their ankles and perhaps almost to the ground.

And the writer is imagining them trying to run with the robe on. And it entangles them. And they can't do it. It's like running with a track suit. It's worse than running with a track suit.

The Hebrews to whom this letter was written were like athletes who had entered for the race who were on the track but not who had not taken off their robes. We still have the equivalent of their track suit.

On. The writer to the Hebrews says that this is a sin. He may be referring to some particular sin. On the other hand he may simply be referring to this reluctance as sin.

And if you go back to the passage that we read in the Old Testament in the book of Numbers that was precisely the sin of the people of Israel and it's referred to earlier in chapter 7 chapter 4 to 7 of the letter to the Hebrews when the writer looks back to that episode in the wilderness that episode in the desert when the people refused to follow Caleb when they refused to follow Joshua and when they stood still they marked time in the wilderness and in some ways that's the point that is being made again here.

[13 : 55] These athletes have gone onto the track but they're marking time. they're not dynamic they're not going forward they're not entering the race they're like the Israelites in the wilderness who were on the edge of the promised land but who refused to enter into it they were there ready on the border but they refused to cross the frontier because they were afraid of the giants the children of Anak in the land.

That is perhaps what is the pick at the back of these words here this fear of going forward this reluctance to go forward this marking time Christianity is dynamic one of the earliest names for the Christian faith probably the earliest is called the way Christianity was known as the way it's a road in which people travel it's not an armchair contemplation it's the commitment of the road and it's like that from the very beginning some people say today what must I do to go to hell and the answer is you don't need to do anything people are already on the way to hell and that's why the gospel calls us to commitment calls us to repentance calls us to give ourselves to

Christ and to follow him from the very beginning the gospel comes over as something dynamic something that calls for commitment it calls for action calls for dedication so it is as we live the Christian life we're called upon to be dynamic let us run says the writer to the Hebrews let us be finished with this humming and hawing let us give up this question of hopping from one foot to the other let us run the race that is set before us let us lay aside this sin of reluctance this sin of revarication this sin of doubting let us lay it aside and let us go forward I wonder are we dynamic are we committed to the

Lord Jesus Christ or sometimes do we tend to fall back almost to become spectators are we do we need this exhortation because this is what the letter to the Hebrews is it's a word of exhortation it's a word of encouragement the message of encouragement to the people of God and perhaps we need that word of encouragement this morning in order to move the power of the spirit of God we need if we're going to be committed Christians to be dynamic we need to run we need to enter the race and give ourselves to it thirdly I believe that we need to be dedicated sorry we need to be determined we need to be determined let us run the race with patience or with determination let us run the race and with determination that race which is set before us that is the race which is laid out before us in the word of

God we have in the word of God our manual as it were which helps us and guides us and shows us the way to run the race we need to run it with determination the Christian life is never easy and it's one of the I think indications of the confusion which persists which reveals in the church so often today and people think that to follow Christ is an easy way out it's not an easy way out he says if anyone will come after him let him deny himself take out this cross and follow him he calls upon us to follow him he calls upon us to be determined he who perseveres to the end shall be saved said Jesus follow Christ involves going against the current so often and we've got to be prepared to do that the Christian life is not a downhill romp it is an uphill struggle and we must be prepared to face that and be prepared to give ourselves to it that when we run the race that is set before us it is a race which must be run with determination it must be run with perseverance it must be run recognizing the difficulty recognizing the sacrifice and recognizing the cost this is a race which we cannot run in our own strength we need the strength of the

[19 : 28] Holy Spirit but God has promised to give his Holy Spirit to those who ask him for him but we need to recognize that we need the Holy Spirit it's because the way is hard the way of life is a narrow way it is a way which is hard it is a way which is uphill and we need to run with determination and it's so easy for us, is it not for our determination to erode and for us to become less determined less committed than we once were and this message has been preserved by the Holy Spirit in the canon of scripture as a word of encouragement as a message of encouragement for us to encourage us, to exhort us to press on to go forward in spite of the difficulty we will be difficult it's much more difficult for some for Christians in some parts of the world than it is for us but wherever we may be it is difficult and we must be prepared to follow to face these difficulties we must be prepared to go into the teeth of the gale to go forward following in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ this brings me to the last point and that is that we are called upon to be dedicated a committed Christian is someone who is dedicated dedicated not to himself or herself but dedicated to Christ and that's why the second verse is so important here we are to run this race which is set before us looking to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith we look to him he has already run the race he has gone forward he is ahead of us he is described elsewhere in this letter as our forerunner the one who is gone in advance and he has run the race and we are to look to him and there must be this element of dedication people tell us that that athletes who succeed tend to be athletes who visualize their victory in advance in other words they dream of winning they think of winning they visualize what it means to get to the tape first what it means to jump higher than anyone else or longer than anyone else they visualize it they visualize them winning they have a vision if you like they dream of winning and we also who are called upon to follow the Lord

Jesus Christ must dream but we dream not of ourselves but of him we look to Jesus we are to look to him and see him going ahead of us see him going forward seeing him as our forerunner knowing that he is ahead of us we are to fix our eyes upon him and follow him he for the joy that was set before him endured the cross he despised the shame and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God he is the author and the finisher of our faith he is the author and the perfecter of our faith it is he who can grant us that faith and equip us with that faith so that we are enabled to press forward in spite of difficulties he is the author of the pioneer the one who was the leader the one who was gone before the reference here is to his life on earth he lived here without sin without failure he did his father's will he prayed with strong cries and tears he has been made he has been made adequate for his destiny through suffering he ran the race of faith he continued until he finished he is our example he is not only our pioneer but also he is the perfecter of our the finisher of our faith he will make he can make our faith adequate for the task he is the one who can who is the finisher of our faith he is the one who is the perfecter of our faith he can make our faith adequate for the task and so you see the secret of perseverance the secret of commitment the secret of dedication is to look to Jesus look to him and see him as the one who is going forward for us see him as the one who endured the cross of Calvary for us and when we are called upon to suffer for him let us remember that he endured the cross one of the most barbaric forms of putting a human being to death which was ever invented and not only did he endure the cross but he despised the shame he scorned the shame there was not only pain but there was shame at Calvary and in fact in some ways the shame was greater than the pain because not only did our Lord suffer physically he suffered spiritually he endured our guilt he bore upon himself the punishment for our sin and that pain was infinitely greater than the pain which was the physical pain which was inflicted by the Roman soldiers the shame of the cross was infinitely more intense than the pain of the cross the death of the Lord

Jesus was a death experienced in two directions so he is the one to whom we must look so our dedication is a dedication to him we are to look to Jesus the author the pioneer the finisher the perfecter of our faith I wonder coming back to the illustration this pictorial illustration which we have here let me ask you again as I ask myself whether that is a picture which describes us does it describe you does it describe me an athlete on the track but reluctant to enter the event reluctant to run may God grant that today he who is the power pioneer he who is the finisher of our faith may so equip us and we may indeed take off the road off the tracksuit and seek by the grace of God to make a new commitment to follow him without reserve to follow him without reluctance to follow him with no strings attached to take up our cross and to follow him may God grant that all of us may be followers of Christ let us pray our heavenly father as we come at the close of the service we pray that you will help us to realize just how great was the sacrifice of the

Lord Jesus Christ for us we thank you that he gave himself without reserve that he held nothing back and as he held nothing back for us forbid that we would hold back anything from him grant Lord that all that we are and all that we have may be given to him that you will help us in the closing moments of the service like the sannas to follow hard after Christ that we may indeed be all out committed dedicated disciplined determined grant Lord that we may indeed follow him who is our forerunner we ask this in his name amen