

The Ease of Decision Making: Entanglement

Scripture: Hebrews 12:1

Code: B130415

What sense would it make for a long-distance runner to drag several pieces of luggage behind him during his race? Obviously none—in fact it would be highly counterproductive.

That's the point the writer of Hebrews makes in 12:1, "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."

The Greek word translated as "race" is *agōn*, and it's not referring to a sprint. The kind of race it describes is grueling, only undertaken by the most intense, self-controlled, self-disciplined, persevering people. It's the kind of race that demands *hupomonē*, "endurance." Its literal translation is "to remain under," so the writer of Hebrews is encouraging his readers to stay faithful under the pain and agony of life in this sinful world until they reach the end.

I've lived long enough to see many people run very well at the beginning, only to collapse somewhere in the middle, unable to endure to the end.

The question is, How do we run with excellence and endurance? How do you guard yourself from spiritual collapse—from embarrassing the Lord, bringing shame upon yourself, and dishonoring the church through sinful failure? How do you endure to the end?

The writer of Hebrews says godly endurance is possible when we've set aside two things: sin and encumbrances. Now obviously there is a sense in which sin is the worst encumbrance to our spiritual success. But the fact that he uses those two separate words indicates he has two specific ideas in mind.

We understand sin. We know what it is, and we know we need to take it seriously. The apostle Paul made it clear that sin has no place in the life of the believer.

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God (Romans 6:12-13).

In fact, he said sin is completely contrary to our new nature in Christ.

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

And when it comes to dealing with our sin, Christ used graphic hyperbole to illustrate the dire consequences of tolerating sin in our lives.

If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell (Matthew 5:29-30).

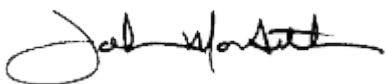
So if an encumbrance is *not* sin, what is it? The word in Greek is *onkos*, and it means “bulk.” That means an encumbrance is anything extra that weighs you down. It’s anything that slows you down, diverts your attention, drains your energy, or dampens your enthusiasm for the things of God. It’s anything that distracts you from faithfully running the race the Lord has set before you.

The Internet might be an encumbrance. Maybe television, or music, or movies are an encumbrance to your spiritual success. It could be a relationship, a hobby, a possession, or virtually anything else—it’s any unnecessary bulk that draws your attention and effort from the Lord.

Plenty of popular pastors today like to regularly demonstrate their knowledge of pop culture, usually by quoting the latest movies, television shows, and song lyrics. And even when that kind of thing isn’t directly dishonoring to the Lord—when it’s not overtly sinful—I still have to question what the point is? Going to those lengths to fill your mind with worldly entertainment just to identify with the culture is a lot like running your race while you’re wearing an overcoat and ankle weights.

This isn’t a call for separation from society, but for an honest assessment of its hold on you. Are you surrendering your time, energy, and attention to matters that make no contribution to successfully running your race? Are you inviting encumbrances into your life?

When you’re faced with a decision in one of those gray areas, you need to ask yourself, *Will this activity build up my spiritual endurance, or will it entangle me in worldly distractions?*

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joel Osteen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

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