

Text: Heb. 12:1-3

Title: "How to be faithful"

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Place: NBBC

Intro – Perhaps you have heard a definition of *insanity* attributed to Albert Einstein: "*Insanity* is doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a different result." Well, it turns out that it was not Einstein who said that. It was a lady named Rita Mae Brown. The quote appears in her 1984 novel titled, *Sudden Death*, a story about a lesbian professional tennis player who is exposed by the press. The phrase speaks to the main character's troubled love-life.

Brown had a troubled youth. Her mother was a teenage girl whose boyfriend, Rita's father, was married to someone else. Rita worked hard to educate herself, sometimes even living homeless as a student at New York University in the late 1960s. As an adult Rita became very active in the anti-war movement of the early 1970's, the feminist movement, and the gay-liberation movement. She was a founding member of The Furies Collective, a lesbian feminist newspaper collective in Washington, D.C. I must say that every time someone has told me Einstein's definition of insanity, it did not make much sense to me, and it always reduced my respect for Einstein's brilliance. I guess I owe the man an apology.

You may remember that the hall of the faithful of Hebrews 11 includes an exhibit on Noah. Noah built a sea-worthy ark in the middle of dry land, and that was a project that took him many years (Answers in Genesis estimates 55-75 years), and each morning he went out, looked up at the sky for rain, and experienced the same result – no rain. The au-

thor of Hebrews tells us about Noah's experience not as a definition of *insanity*, but rather as a definition of what it means to be faithful.

We should know what faith is after our study of chapter 11. Faith is the ability to live for what is unseen and promised, rather than for what is seen and obtainable right now. The promise is, of course, God's promise, so in that sense faith is also believing what God says He will do. As we come to the beginning of chapter 12, our author is still writing about faithfulness. Now, however, his concern is not so much to explain to us what faithfulness is. Rather, now that we know what it is, how do we make faithfulness a part of our lives (see the end of v. 3)? I have titled the message this morning, "How to be faithful," but we could also call it "How not to grow weary and faint." Notice three things in this regard.

I. To be faithful, we must pay attention to those who are set around us (the cloud; v. 1a).

Ill: We play a game at times during the week of Vacation Bible School that is similar to pin the tail on the donkey. You remember how that game works. The contestant is blindfolded and spun around a bit, and then he has to try to take his tail and pin it on the correct side of the donkey. As he does so, his teammates are cheering him on and trying to tell him where to go. If he listens to their direction carefully, he can hit the target well.

Appl: Our author uses a different illustration, that of an athlete preparing to compete in a race, and as he steps up to the starting line he can look into the stands and see that they are packed with what the author calls a "great cloud of witnesses." But I refer to the VBS game because I want to

emphasize that this great cloud does more for the runner in this race than simply spectate or even cheer. They are witnesses, not so much because they witness us runners, but rather because they witness to us what they have seen and learned about hitting the target of living the life of faith. We read of their witness in chapter 11 (vv. 2, 4, 5, 39). So they tell us that living a faithful life can be done, and it can be done by ordinary fallible human people. We have to pay attention to their witness, because we need to understand that this kind of life can be done, for they did it. I think this means two things for the way we must live our lives to be faithful.

1. We need to know our Bibles to live faithfully. If we do not know our Bibles, we will not know the encouragement of the witness of the faithful recorded there. When we read of their successes, we remember that God is greater than the enemy of our faithfulness. When we read of their failures, we are encouraged that God can forgive our sin and cleanse and use us again too.

2. We need to see that we do not run alone to live faithfully. The witnesses in the stands are former runners, and all runners, past and present, are witnesses. There is a plurality of runners and singularity of the race in the phrase, "Let *us* run *the race* that is set before *us*." We run together not only as runners but also as fellow-witnesses to the truth that it can be done. How faithful I am will affect how encouraged you are to be faithful, and vice versa. The weights and sins I tolerate in my life are not just a problem for me, they are a problem for us as we run the race set before us. To be faithful, we need to pay attention to those who are set around us, because we need the encouragement of past examples and of present fellow-runners.

II. To be faithful, we must pay attention to what is set in front of us (the race; v. 1b).

III: We all remember Aesop's tale of the Tortoise and the Hare. The slow tortoise beats the fast hare in the race because faithfulness was more important than speed. That is a good illustration of what it means to be a faithful Christian.

Appl: God has set a race before us. The word *race* here is the more general Greek word for an athletic contest (*agōn*). We get our word *agony* from this word, and it is a word that stresses the difficulty of the ancient games. What is the difficult contest that the Lord has set before us? Well, it is the calling to make disciples and to build His church. It is our race to run that men and women would come to know Christ, be baptized, and follow His commands in the context of a Bible-believing local church. That is a difficult race to run, and it requires the faithfulness of the tortoise more than the speed of the hare. Our passage emphasizes 3 characteristics of this Christian faithfulness.

1. Faithful running requires patience or endurance. The word means simply *to remain under*, and it is the word used in v. 2 where the author says that Jesus *endured* the cross. Remember the taunt that Jesus had to withstand while on the cross? "You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross!" In the face of that temptation to be unfaithful, Jesus ran the race faithfully with endurance. What tempts us to a lack of endurance for Him?

2. Faithful running requires consecration, the laying aside of every unnecessary weight that inhibits faithful running.

III: This past week I read an article about the kind of discipline the professional basketball player LeBron James

learned in Miami. Evidently, the practice facility for the Miami Heat has a massive glass wall next to the basketball floor with a beautiful view of the bay area and South Beach. The article made the point that it may as well have been a stone wall, because Pat Riley, the man in charge down there, installed blinds on the windows so that the players would work harder and not have any distractions during their practices.

That is the mentality our author tells us Christian faithfulness will require. We may have to give up some things that are not sinful in themselves in order to be more faithful. That was certainly the case with many of those we learned about in chapter 11: (1) Noah set aside the world (11:7); Abraham set aside his homeland (11:8-9, 15), Abraham set aside his son Isaac (11:17), Joseph set aside past mistreatment from his brothers (11:22), Moses's fathers set aside the king's edict (11:23), Moses set aside membership in the household of Pharaoh's daughter and the treasures of Egypt (11:24-26), Rahab set aside Jericho (11:31), the victorious set aside their weakness (11:34), and the fallen set aside the comforts of this world (11:38). What have we had to set aside for the cause of Christ? I am convinced that this is one of the great keys to revival. I think it is the reason persecution must often come before revival. Persecution often forcibly takes from us what we are unwilling to set aside. Like Isaac Watts reminds us, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all!" Have we given the Lord all of ours?

3. Faithful running requires confession, victory over the sin that so easily besets us. If running the race with a weight on your back is bad, this is worse. Here the idea is entrapment. It is like trying to run a race with your feet glued to the track or with shackles and chains on your ankles. Our sin is easily besetting because we are such thoroughgoing sin-

ners. But sin stops us in our tracks when it comes to faithfulness. How do we run faithfully under these conditions? There is only one way – “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). He is faithful to forgive, so we can be faithful as we run. Have you had to find the forgiveness of confession? We all have easily besetting sins, so the answer should be *yes*. If it is *no*, our faithfulness is in danger of being shackled by our sin. We must pay attention to what is set before us by the Lord, a race for making disciples and building His church that requires endurance, consecration, and confession.

III. To be faithful, we must pay attention to the One who finished before us (Jesus; vv. 2-3).

Ill: Brother Paul Beliasov spoke about some interesting exchange rates in Indonesia. Just imagine that we had such a strong US dollar that you could exchange it for enough Canadian dollars to buy a house! I might move to Canada and exchange all my dollars if that were the case.

Appl: There is a sense in which being faithful is all about making the right exchange. Verse 16 tells us about the way Esau got this exactly wrong. He exchanged his spiritual birthright for a bowl of soup. The One who got the exchange of faithfulness exactly correct is the Lord Jesus (“Who in exchange for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down on the right hand of the throne of God”). To be faithful, we must look to Jesus and not to Esau as our example. The passage emphasizes two things about Christ’s faithfulness:

1. His was the best example of faithfulness (“the author and finisher of the faith we have been talking about in chapter

11"; note that *our* is in italics in the KJV; what is meant here is that Jesus originated and completed the kind of faithfulness chapter 11 spoke of).

Faithfulness originated with Jesus the day He first submitted to the Father's will to die for your sins and mine (Acts 2:23, "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain"). Bruce: "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." That example of faithfulness is the object of everyone else's saving faith. We must believe He faithfully died for us, that his origination and completion of faithfulness is the ground of our salvation.

2. His was a victorious example of faithfulness. The joy set before Jesus was the prospect of being seated at the right hand of the throne of God. He exchanged the cross for this. But there is more to it than that, because this joy He already had before His suffering. He exchanged the suffering of His crucifixion for the joy of His resurrection, ascension, and session at the right hand of God, because the latter would be our joy as well. His joy was to give us His joy, the joy He had from eternity. It is the joy He mentioned just before His crucifixion in the upper room with His disciples (John 15:11, 16:20-24).

Conclusion: Has He shared this joy with you? Have you experienced the joy that comes from looking to Him for salvation from your sin? If so, will you be found faithful? Or are you weary ready to faint? (v. 3). Westcott: "The final failure comes from continuous weakening. The moral strength is enfeebled little by little." We must pay attention to the cloud around us, the race in front of us, and most of all the One who finished long before us. In Him, we shall faint not.

"A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction – the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*