

Faith + Love = Service: The Mind of Christ in Hebrews 11:1-3

By Jonathan Houting

This weekend we have heard from the rest of the leadership team about the mind of Christ in the way He served people. We saw his humility, practical ways to serve, and a couple of examples of the ways others served like Christ did. I believe that the last passage we will be speaking on this morning is a culmination of all of these ideas.

Hebrews 12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. 2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Chapter 11 of Hebrews is what is known as the Hall of Faith. It goes through Old Testament characters like Moses and Elijah to show how their lives were used by God through their faith. And our faith should grow as we read the Old Testament (and for us living in the 21st century, we can also look at the New Testament heroes, as well). The things God did through Enoch and Noah, Jacob and Rahab, He can do these same things, and even greater things through your faith. So be encouraged as you read your Bible.

The Greek wording of this first verse is not so much telling us that these dead Jews are physically witnessing us live our lives from Heaven, but they witnessed God's powerful work through their faith they had in Him as they lived their lives here on Earth. They are 'past runners', to use the language of the next verse. Romans 15:4 puts it this way: "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope". So the purpose of this verse is to be encouragement to us as we run with the same faith that our forefathers had so we, too, can witness God's power. Reading their stories strengthens our faith and gives us hope because we have attained what they were looking forward to, that is, God's salvation of humanity through the coming Messiah.

This passage calls us to follow their example by putting a stop to our sinful, selfish desires. Firstly, we must throw off *anything* that keeps our devotion to God from growing. Namely, that which distracts us from time spent in communion with Him. Yes, the distractions! Our country is full of them. The time we waste on television, movies, music, videogames, Facebook, etc. I'm apprehensive to promote the idea that there is room in a Christian's life for entertainment. There is a time and a place to relax, but they need to be in proportion to the time given for the work of God, and to the morality which He has laid upon our hearts. There must be a healthy balance. Our time is so valuable! Why are we wasting it on non-eternal, unimportant toys? Consumerism is one of the greatest dangers to Christianity today. An hour in front of the television and computer at the end of the day may not hinder us, but from 5 or 6 hours every work night, and 12 hours during the weekend will most definitely put to death any progress we may have in living a life of faith, love and hope. And it is no wonder that we ask ourselves where the public's sense of spirituality and relationship with our Creator is when we ask on internet forums and seek and receive half-truth answers in religiously-themed movies and music. For many of us, this can hinder our race more than sin! With sin, we know when we cross the line. But these worldly avenues for secular thought can slowly, quietly eat away at what God has created us for without our realization. We wonder why we feel so distant from God as we are checking our Facebooks with the TV

on in the background, listening to our iPods and sending a text message. We have our excuses: "I know that God doesn't think watching ESPN is bad, so another hour won't hurt." "I NEED to set apart the whole day to clean the house, because it needs it". What a boring day! All there is to do is just hang out on the internet". All those hours that could be used to nurture our relationship with God. Reading, praying, worshipping... we trade in gold for dirt. Free time without Jesus is no free time, at all! I am extremely guilty of this! But every minute counts with God. Let's not compromise with the world and its offerings! Let us throw off our laziness, procrastination, and all that which the world so eagerly sells itself to distract us of what's important.

The other thing which hinders us is not so much sin, but the guilt and the sense of worthlessness we feel inside when we disobey God. Genesis 3:8, 10: Adam and Eve hid from God, and they were afraid of Him. In this world, we have a natural inclination to hate ourselves, to get down on ourselves when we disobey our Lord. We feel disgraced, literally, as if God has removed his grace from us because of a sin. But at times, our thoughts should not so much focus on quitting sinning, although we do strive for such things. We fear the punishment of a God who seeks to forgive a people incapable of reconciliation. But Christ has reconciled us and has quenched God's thirst for justice! Amen! The Holy Spirit will change us as we seek after God in humble repentance (also through confession and self-forgiveness). When we do make self-effort our focus, we can not focus on loving others. That's the trap that monastic monks get caught in. They seek the perfection that God already gives them through Jesus Christ. No, I believe that since we, as Christians, are now under God's grace (Romans 7:25-8:3, 8-10, 12-14) our concern is to live a life of love, not introspectiveness. Throw off the worry, the fear, the guilt, the shame, the worthlessness, and throw off the self-condemnation. It is OK to forgive yourself. God will; you can, too. Read 2 Corinthians 2:5-8, and apply it to yourself.

Sin frustrates our faith. But the opposite is also true. As faith increases, our sins decrease. It is an amazing thing to see a new Christian change as their faith in Christ grows from someone reveling in their anger and disobedience toward God to a joy and submission towards Him. But when sin creeps back in as it often does, life grows more difficult and tougher to get through.

If you have been hindered by distractions, and entangled with sins, today is a new day. **THROW THEM OFF!** Start over. Throw away that beer and those drugs; that anger, that prejudice and replace them with Jesus Christ. Take your eyes off those things, and fix them onto Christ, who has given you a new life, a better life than anything here in this world, including your friends, your family, your job, or anything else, can offer you.

We need to stop worrying about our own salvation. It is a great obstacle to your faith if you daily wonder and doubt if He has really forgiven you of all your sins. It is not having faith in the power of God and His love shown through Jesus Christ's death. The fact of the Bible is that there is no sin great enough to break the relationship with God, and there is no number of times that sin can be committed that can tear you from your salvation. Investigate your faith in the saving power of Jesus Christ and his lordship over us, and, once having done that, you can move on with your life without any reservation of God's complete love for you and your perfection in Him!

And now that we are sure of His neverending promise to us, let us now speak of how God's power works in us to fulfill His good plan. These works do not get us saved; that would be religion. Our good works and goodness as Christians do not get us into Heaven, but they do bring joy and peace into our lives. Through this lifestyle of service, our lives are changed through experiencing the love of God firsthand.

We are now asked to run this race we call life with perseverance, but what, exactly, is this race? Let us look to scripture:

-John 6:29: the work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.

-John 15:10 - 12: My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you...

-Gal 6:2: Love is the law that Christians are now under.

John 22:37-40: “The whole law is wrapped up in these two commandments: Love God, love others” – what does this look like? Desiring unity, sacrificing oneself for another, and forgiving beyond reason (Forgiveness is not fair. But I am eternally thankful for it. God’s reason for His forgiveness is beyond our comprehension. I don’t understand why God would chose to forgive me, so who am I to chose to hold my judgment against someone else? We do not need a reason to forgive the worst of sins. We truly are no better.)

We see this played out in Acts 2:42-47, Ephesians 4:32-5:2, 10, and 1 John 3 & 4. It is the Lord’s desire for us to live in close communion with one another with His love flowing through our conversations, our actions, and our character. We have already begun this, starting a year ago with our Life Groups. We have begun loving others. The beginning was a little awkward, wasn’t it: the uninteresting and awkward conversations, or befriending the difficult-to-love, or even putting up with the noisy babies were a little tough to get through... but if it is done in genuine love, it brings us closer to God as his church, bringing us greater peace and Him greater joy.

“Everyone in our life is a gift from God” – Shawn Johnson

This race isn’t going to be easy, however. All Christians are called to endure hardship in one form or another. Whether it is struggle within from the effects of our own or our brothers’ sins or the outward persecution of sinful men who want Christians killed, every book in the New Testament speaks of continuing in your faith through he difficult times. So we must call for God in all situations.

We have two options:

We can run the rat race, which the world is enticing us to do, bringing isolation into the world, instilling pride in our hearts and dishonoring God, or we can run the race that God has already marked out for us, which brings peace to the world, love into our hearts, and glory to God.

Now, the only way we can run this race, is stated so clearly; “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.” Our running, our love and faith, is all in vain if our eyes (and thoughts – Hebrews 3:1) are not fixed, glued, staring at Jesus Christ. Our eyes were fixed on Him when we were saved, so continue to do so, not drifting our eyes for something or someone else to continue your salvation.

Do not fix your eyes on the person, wisdom, or work of the president or Oprah or any book they or anyone else has written. Not on me or Pastor Curt, or even the apostle Paul; not on Muhammad, Joseph Smith, Buddha or the Dali Lama, either. Neither should we fix our eyes on ourselves! Not on our own abilities, pursuits or knowledge. Have you ever seen a runner looking at himself in his race? No way! It would not be long until he stumbled, got dizzy, or ran into something. Our lives can get the same way if we don’t fix our eyes off of ourselves. Why do certain people fall away from the faith? It is because their eyes are not fixed on Jesus Christ, but on something else, a different path, a distraction, a lie. The reason we get hindered and we sin is because we lose sight and take our eyes off of the end goal, or we forget what the end goal is: unity with Christ, a closer and joyful and more meaningful relationship with our Creator and Savior.

But look to no one other than the creator and perfecter of our faith, the only one possible to bring us salvation. Follow his examples of love and wisdom, follow Him as our King, as our older brother, as a friend. Emulate his reverence for right and wrong; follow his authority over the creation, and his heart and joy for all people (1 Corinthians 5:15-16). His sympathy, his honesty, his humility, his patience, his priorities, his submission, and reverence towards God... adopt these TODAY! He is our greatest example of how to live a Godly life: His prayer, His evangelism and compassion for the unsaved, His fasting, His fellowship with the believers, His relationship with God the Father, and His knowledge of God’s Word. To be a Christian we MUST fix our eyes on Jesus! He is the most perfect example for our lives in any situation. We are to seek His pattern for living which ever way we decide to live our lives. His life is applicable in any situation.

In the Gospels...

Jesus is more compassionate toward the poor than any Mother Theresa.
Jesus is more in tune with humanity's needs and desires than Oprah or any other self-help guru.
Jesus is smarter (wiser and more intelligent) than any university professor.
Jesus has more power and authority than any king, president, or ruler.
Jesus has more love for humanity than any social worker today.
Jesus has a stronger relationship with our God than any isolated hermit monk.
Jesus is more creative than any artist or musician, past or present.
Through his miracles, Jesus knows more about nature than any scientist.
Jesus protects his children more than any parent can.
Jesus knows more about the Bible than any famous preacher or theologian since...
Jesus died for his enemies like no body could ever desire to...
And Jesus rose from the dead into eternal life like only His followers will be able to do.
That is the great leading example we have in Jesus Christ

Christ is the goal of our faith, but He is also the means through which we attain this goal. He is the author *and* finisher of our race. He has already run the race we are running, but with perfection. With all the other religions and philosophies out there offering a different race but saying, "Good luck on attaining the goal", the gospel of Jesus Christ says, "I ran the race for you and I have received the goal, so love each other and be joyful in the way I had created you to do." And how He ran the race! Marked with torment, ridicule, and indignity. It was the price to pay for our sins.

Jesus had an abnormal view of his death. His mother wept. His disciples were frightened. And his followers had moved on. But Christ knew the big picture. Christ saw what his death would accomplish, and that shaped His attitude towards it. He saw the love His death would bring; the unity and the restored relationship between God and Man that would come about through His suffering. His death brought us life. That is how Jesus Christ could have this view towards his own painful death. He looked through the pain and suffering and death and humiliation, and saw eternal joy in the unity of God and His children. "Death swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor. 15:54).

When I Survey The Wondrous Cross

"Sorrow and love flow mingled down,
did e'er such love and sorrow meet
Or thorns compose so rich a crown"

The cross was a punishment reserved for murderous slaves and the like. It was a public execution to display the seriousness of the crime and the worthlessness of the criminal. The process was painful beyond all imagination. If Mel Gibson wanted to make a true Passion film, it would've been X-rated. The beatings by the Roman guards had left him too weak to carry the cross that he asked his followers to carry. He was likened to the man on the road to Jericho from one of his own parables. But there would be no Good Samaritan. They ripped out his beard and the only relief that gave him was bitter vinegar to drink. Artists through the years have given our Lord a little dignity by placing an imagined loincloth around his waist, but in reality, he was completely bare, naked, to add to his shame. What's more, the soldiers mocked him further by casting lots for his clothing right in front of him after they had stripped them off of his bloodied frame. Pain from every body part, most likely including a migraine beyond compare; the horrible crown of thorns, the nails, the gathering pool of blood at the bottom of the cross... Were it not for the severity of the beatings he had already received, He most certainly would have eventually died of asphyxiation, too weak to lift himself from his hanging position to take a breath. This was the price paid for every sin committed by every individual.

In our 'civilized' Western tradition, we do not understand shame as much of the world has come to know it. We do not throw ashes or tear our clothes to symbolize our internal struggle, and neither do we commit suicide so our families are not looked down upon because of our actions. The cross was a

very shameful and painful symbol. But, for better or worse, somewhere along the way it lost its pain and shame. It hangs on our necks as a sign of nobility and pride in 24kt gold leaving the embarrassment and agony of it misunderstood.

So we really have to look deep into the cross to understand its shame. Read Matthew 26:66-27:50, Mark 15:15-37, Luke 22:63-23:36, and John 18:22-19:34 for further insight into Jesus' persecution. How many times was he hit, slapped, beaten, or flogged? How many times was he mocked? They were beyond disrespectful, they didn't listen to his defense, and they laughed at him often. Laughing at His cries and His prayers. 'Humanity mocking divinity' is how Charles Spurgeon puts it. There were other ways to kill a criminal, and other ways to treat a criminal. But Christ was hated by Roman guards, men who only "knew" him from the false accusations. The Jewish leaders wanted the worst punishment possible at the worst time possible. "Everyone is cursed who hangs on a tree" (explained in Galatians 3:13) during the Passover, a time where thousands and thousands of Jews came to Jerusalem. They most certainly heard of the criminal who claimed to be the Messiah, to be their king, to be the Son of God. "What a fool! Leave him up there a little longer" might've been heard scattered around the city.

But can we get a glimpse into his emotions for a moment? Have any of you been to the doctor's office and been asked to disrobe? Maybe for a physical or a surgical procedure... Now, for me, at least, there is a certain level of embarrassment; an uncomfortable vulnerability in standing there unclothed with strangers around you. You remember how your body looks in the mirror and just want to get it over with. But now imagine they forced you on a gurney out to Downtown Plaza and put you on display. Your friends and family are there, watching this. Now the teasing and mocking comes, the torture and all eyes are on your bare, dying body. The whole pubic there getting out their cameras, throwing insults and spitting on your bleeding body. At what point would you begin to cry? And how you would plead with the crowd of onlookers? "Take me down!", "please stop, what ever I did, I'm sorry!", or in anger, "shut up!!!"...

I believe Jesus Christ was God because only He could give these words about a murderous mob: "Father, please forgive them". His purpose was to take the full brunt of the effects of our sins, the temporal and eternal consequences of our sins. Guilt focuses on what we have done, Shame focuses on who we are, Fear focuses on what others have done, and Jesus Christ endured it all. This is why I live for God, because I want this same unreasonable, incomprehensible, immeasurable love that looks through human hatred and comes out forgiving. Whatever pain, trial, and inconvenience we may experience now, we can be assured that Jesus had it much worse. We fix our eyes on Jesus while we race, but as Jesus ran, as he was beaten and hung there on the cross, His eyes were on us! His eyes were fixed on the life of His enemies. We are not worth dying for. Enemies do not die for their victims. Saddam Hussein would've never died for an Iraqi civilian. Hitler would never die for a Jew. Napoleon would never die for an Englishman. And visa versa, no victim would voluntarily die for their assailant. But Jesus Christ did. God came into Earth to die for the very person who has wronged him over and over and over and OVER again. You and me.

The Book of Hebrews is a book of 'Jesus is better than _____: angels, Moses, priests, sacrifices, the temple, etc. In context, we are focusing on the fact that Jesus is the better *witness* to God's power through His faith than those laid out in the previous chapter. The interlude in verses 13-16, as well as the last two, 39 and 40 of chapter 11 explains that the Old Testament 'heroes of faith' were running for something that had not yet come. But with Jesus, his running ushered in the new life they were seeking and that which we can be satisfied in. He was the fulfillment of their faith. And as much as his life of service and his painful execution brought Him death, his death and glorious resurrection brought Him a peaceful rest beyond human understanding. Earlier in Hebrews the author has applied this idea us. Hebrews 4:9-12 says this, "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his work, just as God did from His. Let us, therefore, make

every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fail by following their example of disobedience.” Also, in 6:12, “We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised”. Romans 8:17: “Now if we are (God’s) children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs of Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” It is strange for us, in 21st century America that the way these authors encourage their readers to continue in their faith and growth is by telling them that our life is a tough race, and that there will be suffering. But through this suffering, we will enter the same peaceful rest He is now enjoying.

But where there is no work, there is no rest. And where there is no pain, there is no relief. Many Christians live their lives devoid of any meaningful work or meaningful pain, therefore experiencing no intervening healing from the Creator. But if we are to seek rest we must first do something to worth resting from. The faith we have, and the love we show, and the hope we preach is what we do to enter our rest! So, our hope is that this rest will be more relaxing and peaceful than any rest we can have here on Earth. When we just need a break from working, don’t take a break into the world, going to see a movie or playing video games or putting those weights back on that we are trying to take off. But rest in God’s word. Rest in prayer or fellowship with another believer or as a witness to someone who is not saved. Work in Christ, and rest in Christ!

Soon, Pastor Curt will be presenting us with an opportunity to learn how we can most satisfactorily serve Jesus Christ. Find out what your gifts and passions are, and use them until you are exhausted, so you may rest in His loving, patient arms. Let us be about our Father’s work. Let us empty ourselves into each other, united as one, as in Philippians 4. The Holy Spirit is living inside us. Let us be of use to Him, allowing Him to do the work He needs to do. Christ emptied himself for you, someone who never loved nor cared about him; died specifically for you. How much MORE should you empty yourself for Him, for someone who loves and cares about you, even though you are not worthy of his love. We have given up our rights and entitlements as humans. We are now Christians, a new type of creation, owning only the gift of God’s grace and owing only the debt of love and forgiveness to all, sacrificing every single thing we believe we owe to ourselves.

So look back to Christ, and look forward to Christ. As we live this live of service, remind yourself of what Jesus did and how He did it as our example, of how Jesus is currently sustaining us through the work of the Holy Spirit, and also to what He has promised and that He is with us always. Jesus Christ is the beginning, the sustenance throughout, and the end prize of our faith. When you think that Christian living is getting difficult, remember that the cross would be far worse, but you are promised the goal because Jesus has already gotten you there. He, by enduring the Cross, has removed your heaviest weights and by His death has destroyed your entangling sin. Through the redemption of the cross, Jesus Christ has saved us from an eternal internal and external torment, a self-chosen torture, forever holding the knowledge that we are most certainly isolated from the loving, forgiving Creator whom we have refused to trust in. He can give us a new birth and make us a new creation with a new nature by His resurrecting power and save us from the dominion of sin by His glorious reign.

D. L. Moody

“Faith makes all things possible; love makes all things easy.”

Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full into his wonderful face,
And the things of this world will strangely dim
In the light of his glory and grace.