

“What God Values”

Matthew 5:1-12; Hebrews 11:32-12:4 ¹

The picture you see on the screen is of what used to be the Southwest High School in Atlanta, Georgia. That’s where I went to high school, and that church across the street is where Jill was baptized. I believe that it’s also where Thelma Holliday’s grandson, James McGraw, was baptized many years later.

The house in which Jill grew up is just beyond the picture on the left, but I didn’t know her then. I’ve spent many an hour in marching band on that football field, because it was required that we be in the marching band in order to be able to play in the concert band, which was what I really wanted to do. But there’s something else important about that football field—actually, it has to do with the track that circles the field.

Three of us in the band, Hulitt Gloer, Phillip DePoy, and I, often ran around that track in the afternoons after school. As life went on, Phillip became a well-known author and playwright in Atlanta, while Hulitt and I became pastors and seminary professors in other places—but that’s not really my point. As we ran around that track, the three of us, non-athletes all, chanted over and over in three-part agony, “Perseverance . . . is the better part . . . of valor.” **Perseverance is the better part of valor.** Hold that thought. We’ll come back to it later.

The New Testament book that we call the letter “to the Hebrews” has long been one of my favorite books in the Bible. The letter is sometimes attributed to Paul, but the truth is that we don’t know who wrote it. Whoever the author was, he or she has given us an elegant essay in which every chapter—indeed, nearly every paragraph—sparkles with well-chosen words that beautifully frame eternal principles. Hebrews makes compelling reading. If you’ve never read it all at one sitting, that might be a good way to spend this afternoon. It’s less than twenty pages.

One of the best-known parts of Hebrews is chapter 11, frequently called “The Faith Chapter,” or “The Roll Call of Faith.” You might want to turn back to that chapter as we look at it.

Hebrews 11 begins with the powerful affirmation that “*faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see*” (v. 1). The chapter goes on to give examples of persons throughout the Bible who lived lives of faith, building case upon case, life upon life. The roll call of the faithful ends by saying, “*All of these people we have mentioned received God’s approval because of their faith, yet none of them received all that God had promised. For God had far better things in mind for us that would also benefit them, for they can’t receive the prize at the end of the race until we finish the race*” (Hebrews 11:39-40, NLT).

That last clause intrigues me: “**for they can’t receive the prize at the end of the race until we finish the race.**” The writer is referring specifically to the heroes and heroines listed in the “roll call,” but I think the statement is also true of all the disciples of Jesus who have crossed over into eternity.

Jesus told us that if we are His, physical death brings us immediately into the very presence of God (Luke 16:23, 23:43), but, as we’ve seen recently as we considered what the Bible tells us about the New Heaven and the New Earth, while death brings great reward to those who are in Christ, what the faithful departed have received to this point is something less than and other than the New Heaven and the New Earth, which are yet to come.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on November 8, 2015.

The verses at the beginning of chapter 12 build on the image of a foot race such as a marathon. The picture is that of an Olympic stadium, filled with these believers who have gone before us . . . not just those persons listed in “the faith chapter,” but our own grandparents, parents, sisters, brothers, husbands, wives, sons, and daughters. Everyone who has gone before is in those stands, watching us—watching you—run.

The question then arises, how do we run? Our text tells us to run as though we were Olympic athletes, stripping off every weight that slows us down, running with perseverance, and keeping our eyes on the finish line, where Jesus Himself waits for us.

Jesus has already run the race. That’s how He got to the finish line. The race is not easy for us, but it wasn’t easy for Jesus, either. While we run with our eyes focused on One who loves us, Jesus ran toward one who hated Him, with His eyes focused on cosmic battle on the Cross.

But here’s the best part. Why did Jesus do that? Why did Jesus run such a race? Why did Jesus choose to suffer the agony of the Cross, when He didn’t have to do it? Hebrews 12:2 tells us that Jesus “*was willing to die a shameful death on the cross because of the joy that he knew would be his afterward.*”

Well, what sort of joy could that possibly have been? The joy on the other side of the Cross wasn’t simply being with His Father, because Jesus had that joy before He came to earth. The joy beyond the Cross wasn’t just receiving the honor due Him from all the heavenly hosts, because He had that glory before He became one of us.

What joy could have possibly been on the far side of the Cross that Jesus had not known on this side? Listen closely now. As far as I can tell, there was only one joy that the Cross gained for Jesus, and when Jesus ran His race, He looked beyond the Cross to this one joy, and this one joy is what kept Him going. And what was that joy? ***It was the joy of spending eternity with you.*** Let me say that again. ***The yearning that brought Jesus to earth and that took Him to the Cross was the yearning for the joy of spending eternity with you!***

You and I could never have experienced healing and release from the awful brokenness of our sin, could have never known the joy of forgiveness, could have never known the gladness of hearts set free, unless Jesus had run that race. ***You are what God values. You are his joy. Jesus ran the race for you!***

The Bible tells us that ***what God values above everything else is spending eternity with us.*** No, that doesn’t make sense, but when was the last time that love made sense? We are loved! You are loved! And what God values next after opening the Door that takes us Home is teaching us how to pass through that Door. The laws, the commands, the principles that we find in the Bible are there for only one reason: to bring us Home to God.

So the question remains, *how are you and I to run the races of our lives?* While everything Jesus said and did was intended to prepare us for this Race, one of Jesus’ most focused teachings on the subject is found in the eight verses we know as the “Beatitudes.” Turn back with me to Matthew 5.

It takes a lifetime to grow into these eight verses, and countless thousands of pages have been written about them. We’ve spent two months looking at them, one by one, in previous sermons. All I’m going to try to do this morning is to give you a quick overview of these eight character qualities that Jesus says will help us to finish the Race and to receive the rewards that accompany each quality at life’s Finish Line. You have these qualities and rewards in a small table in your order of worship. Let’s look at them quickly.

Character Quality #1: DEPENDENCE→BELONGING. “*God blesses those who realize their need for him.*” From the Garden of Eden forward, we humans have struggled against being dependent on our Creator. We try to insulate ourselves from dependence in many ways: we collect money, we collect marriages, we collect children, we collect houses and lands, we collect honors and degrees, but none of these can fill our emptiness or heal our souls. It’s only when we kneel before God and submit our lives to God’s healing and forgiveness that we’re granted membership in the unseen, eternal Kingdom. Only then do we belong, and only then do we truly have a secure Home in the universe.

Character Quality #2: VULNERABILITY→COMFORT & HOPE. “*God blesses those who mourn.*” Mourning is grief, and grief is sorrow over loss. Mourning, grief, and sorrow are experiences that only come to those who experience the vulnerability of love and concern. Sometimes we try to protect ourselves from the pain of vulnerability by refusing to love, but those efforts also prevent us from being loved. When we choose to open ourselves to the vulnerability of being loved by God, we also open ourselves to God’s tender care and comfort (Ps. 103:13; 2 Cor. 1:3-4), and we no longer grieve “*like people who have no hope*” (1 Thess. 4:13).

Character Quality #3: HUMILITY→OWNERSHIP. “*God blesses those who are gentle and lowly.*” When was the last time you saw someone put “gentle and lowly” on their résumé? Humility stands over against our human desire for power, and gentleness stands over against our tendencies toward arrogance. Interestingly, the *reward* for humility is the very thing that arrogance and power vainly promise to deliver: ownership of the whole world—and perhaps the entire universe—as we become children of its King.

Character Quality #4: RIGHTEOUSNESS→CHARACTER. “*God blesses those who are hungry and thirsty for justice.*” To “do justice,” to act in righteousness, is to do that which is right, that which is fair and just, that which brings the greatest good to the most people, irrespective of how that action affects us personally. If we live by this commitment, our own character becomes more and more like the character of God (Micah 6:8).

Character Quality #5: MERCY→MERCY. “*God blesses those who are merciful.*” Mercy is the other face of justice. Righteousness has to do with acting on behalf of those who are not able to act for themselves, while mercy means refraining from exacting penalty even though justice allows it, especially when we ourselves are the offended. Jesus told us that we must offer mercy to each other if we are to have any hope of mercy from God (Matthew 18:21-35).

Character Quality #6: PURITY→VISION. “*God blesses those whose hearts are pure.*” Jeremiah wrote that “*The human heart is most deceitful and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?*” (17:9). Hebrews warns us that “*Nothing in all creation can hide from [God]. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes. This is the God to whom we must explain all that we have done*” (vv. 12-13). One of the frightening facts about life is that we tend to get what we really, really, really want. Those who really, really, really want to see God, and who guard the purity of their hearts, thoughts, and desires, will indeed see God’s glory at the end of the race.

Character Quality #7: RECONCILIATION→ADOPTION. “*God blesses those who work for peace.*” Many translations render this verse as “peacemakers.” Notice that Jesus didn’t say “peace hoppers” or “peace wishers.” Being a “*peace maker*” is sweaty soul work indeed. As Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin put it not long before his assassination, “Peace is not made with friends. Peace is made with enemies.”²

² *Newsweek*, September 13, 1993, cited in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 37, no. 12.

I sometimes hear people say, “I’ll forgive, but I won’t forget.” That attitude is not forgiveness, and it won’t lead to healing. The “forgetting” of forgiveness is choosing to act toward the forgiven one *as though the offense had never happened*. The “forgetting” of working for peace is choosing to never bring up the offense again. If we choose to live in this way, the time will come when we really don’t remember the offense any more, and when that day comes, we’ll truly be children of God, “who blots out our sins for his own sake and never thinks of them again” (Isaiah 43:25).

Character Quality #8: INTEGRITY→REWARD. “*God blesses those who are persecuted because they live for God.*” What does it mean to be persecuted because we live for God? Are we supposed to live in the world as long-faced, contrary, judgmental people whose every action is an invitation to battle? Hardly. Living with integrity simply means knowing what we believe and why we believe it, and then choosing to live and speak in ways that are consistent with those beliefs. When we live with Christian integrity, there is sometimes a price to pay for even quiet choices (John 3:18-20; 2 Corinthians 2:15-16).

But there is something else that happens when we live with Christian integrity. For those who come to the end of the race with integrity intact, the Master will say, “Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in running the race, so now I will give you much, much more. Let’s celebrate together!” (Matthew 25:23). Our reward is the Kingdom of Heaven itself.

Well, we’ve talked about Christian perseverance in the race of life, and we’ve looked at some of the characteristics that we need to finish the race. As we near the finish line—of this sermon, at least—I want to tell you a story that may help hold all this together. This week is Veterans’ Day, so we need . . . a Navy Story.

Some of you will recognize the name of Carl Brashear. Carl Brashear is one of my heroes, and his life was chronicled in the film, *Men of Honor*,³ where his part was played by Cuba Gooding. If you haven’t seen the film, you really should watch it.

Carl Brashear joined the Navy not long after it was desegregated, and he decided that he wanted to become a Navy Diver. Navy Divers are an elite group, and as the first African-American to enter diver training, Brashear was persecuted unmercifully, both by his fellow students and by his teachers.

Carl persevered with grit and courage, and he did become a Navy Diver. Later, in January, 1966, two Air Force planes collided off the coast of Spain, causing the loss of four nuclear bombs. Three were recovered, but one was lost at sea. After ten weeks of searching, Carl’s ship located the missing bomb and was raising it from the sea floor when a cable broke and created a deadly situation on deck.

Carl pushed another sailor out of harm’s way, but his own left leg was nearly severed. For this action, Carl received the Navy and Marine Corps Medal, the Navy’s highest award for non-combat heroism, but his leg had to be amputated.

After receiving a prosthetic leg, Carl wanted to return to duty, but the Navy intended to discharge him as disabled. Through perseverance and dogged determination, Carl eventually

³ *Men of Honor* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2000), written by Scott Marshall Smith, directed by George Tillman, Jr.
www.answers.com/Q/Was_Master_Chief_Billy_Sunday_from_the_movie_Men_of_Honor_a_real_person
www.chasingthefrog.com/reelfaces/menofhonor.php; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Brashear

became strong enough to return to duty, but the Navy still wanted to discharge him. The climactic scene in the movie—which is basically but not precisely accurate—shows Carl’s final test to see whether or not he is able return to duty.

The prescribed test was that Carl had to don the standard 290-pound diving suit and take twelve steps unsupported. Unexpectedly, one of Carl’s former teachers and persecutors,⁴ who had been won over by Carl’s courage and competence, bursts into the courtroom to urge him through the test.

The courtroom is tense. Two sailors come forward to lift the copper headgear and fasten it to Carl’s body suit. They start to help Carl to stand upright in the suit, but the officer in charge forbids it. Chief Sunday, Carl’s mentor, takes his position in front of the court, and shouts, “Navy Diver, stand up!”

Carl struggles to his feet while the Chief continues to bark orders. Carl painfully lifts his leg to take the first step. When Carl’s foot thuds on the hardwood floor, Chief Sunday marks the count, “One!” Carl takes his next painful step as Sunday continues his tally, shouting, “Two!”

Carl is sweating. His breathing is labored, his pain intense. The weight of the unsupported suit is terrible. Chief Sunday continues to shout and command: “Three! . . . Four! . . . Five! . . . Six! . . . Seven! . . . Eight!”

Carl begins to stagger, and the onlookers gasp. Many call for the test to be ended, but Chief Sunday shouts, “Brashear, move yourself! I want my twelve steps!”

“Nine! . . . Ten! . . . Eleven! . . . Twelve! Well done, Brashear. At ease!”

Through sheer grit and determination, Carl Brashear returned to active duty, and he later became the first African-American Master Diver . . . and with a prosthetic leg.

So here’s my point. As you sit here this morning, your life is probably no bed of roses. You may be going through some tough times. You may not know how you’re going to finish the course. You may feel a lot like Carl Brashear with a prosthetic leg in a 300-pound diving suit.

But, as Chief Sunday stood at the end of the course shouting encouragement to Carl Brashear, Jesus of Nazareth, our Lord Christ, stands at the end of your course, shouting encouragement to you. **You are what God values.** That’s why the author of Hebrews could write these words:

“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, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:1-3).

“So put on the armor the Lord has provided, and place your defense in His unfailing care. Trust Him, for He will be with you in battle, lighting your path to avoid every snare. Be strong, be strong, be strong in the Lord; and be of good courage, for He is your guide. Be strong, be strong, be strong in the Lord, and rejoice for the victory is yours.”⁵

⁴ This character, “Billy Sunday,” is a composite of several people.

⁵ Linda Lee Johnson, “Be Strong in the Lord.”

My sisters and my brothers, **perseverance is indeed the better part of valor**, and Jesus Himself waits for you at the end of the track.

Run! Run!! RUN!!!