

“The Power of Personal Preference”

Hebrews 12:1

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We will be looking in Hebrews 12 for this study. We will read the first two verses and the first verse starts out with the word ‘therefore.’ Let me indicate that there is a good bit behind that word. It is an indication of everything that has been said up to that point but particularly Hebrews 11. In Hebrews 11 you have the most outstanding and humanly speaking astounding content that you’ll read in most anywhere in the Scripture, where you have been given by the provision of the Lord through the inspiration of His writers an accounting of people who have accomplished phenomenal things by faith in Him in the Old Testament period. He gets to the point in Hebrews 11 where he runs out of time and says ‘time prevents me from...’ and then he lists person after person. He talks about people who put up with life threatening and life taking situations and even refers to some who were sawn in asunder. That is the background to the word therefore.

Then he introduces, not by explanation, the idea of race. He talks about the things that have to be dealt with or shucked away in order to effectively run this race with success and winning. Hebrew 12:1–12 says [1] *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses* (referring to all mentioned in Hebrews 11), *let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, [2] looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.* Then Matthew 16:23 says [23] *But he (Jesus) turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”* This is an explaining verse in which I hope you’ll come to understand as we take a couple of words from Hebrews 12:1.

The context surrounding Matthew 16:23 is when Jesus had explained to His disciples what was going to happen to Him and they didn’t like that. They pushed back and Peter, particularly, as he normally did. Peter said ‘no’ and made some explanations as to why that shouldn’t happen. Christ centered in on him and pointed out that his preferences, ideas and wishes were contrary to the very purpose for which Christ has come.

Transitioning here, let me say I’m particularly thankful for the theme for this pulpit in this coming year, being focused on the authority of Scripture in the believer’s life, the family life and in the church. We have come somewhat full circle again after thinking we had this one to some degree put to bed, we have come to realize that it has to be redealt with and I’m thankful for that.

I won’t have time to exhaustively look into this passage from Hebrews 12 but I want to introduce one of the opposing elements to the realized authority in the believer’s life. I want to say one more introductory thing that I hope will be memorable as I go along because this will help explain some of the things I’m going to talk about. Some things in our lives are so obvious that they actually become invisible. They are so obvious that after a while we just don’t see them anymore. They are a part of who we are and how we conduct ourselves but we don’t think about them so in that sense they

become invisible. They are still influential and working their results but we don't think about them. That's the idea from the passage I read from Hebrews 12.

Hebrews 12:1 says [1] *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.* In other words, run this race with as little as you can have on and still be decent or whatever else would get in the way of running this race effectively. Then he lays on the big one when he says 'the sin which clings so closely.' There is where we'll focus for this study, that entangling sin.

I understand that in some cases there would be more than one but I think we'll come to realize that one entangling sin is common to all of us. I'll explain what it is in a few moments. Let me state the issue by quoting a paragraph and then making a remark about a couple of places in it. The paragraph starts with a question.

Can you predictably, clearly and consistently distinguish the difference between what you want and what God wants? Our knee jerk answer is likely to be 'yes I can' but I believe however that honest investigation which show that the answer should be 'no.' This is because we don't naturally and intentionally invest in discerning the difference between His will and the power of our preference. There you have a title of a sermon which is the Power of our Personal Preference.

We subconsciously protect, promote and defend our personal preferences. We draw conclusions and establish actions more by the motivation of personal preference than any of us realizes. In fact, it's not very unusual for our personal preference to trump the truly objective consideration of documentable truths in our decision making. Our default reaction to whatever competes with our personal preference is to discount that competitive element by putting it into the back of our mind and tabling its consideration indefinitely. We simply change the subject in our mind. This is because our personal preference is one of the strongest drives and at the same time one of the most subtle influences in our very being.

It is the sin that so easily entangles. I have just read a paragraph with a couple of remarks as to what it is and introduced how we need to think about it. Let me give you a little interpretive history of these couple of words – the sin that so easily entangles. Some have taken a certain position and I used to be one of them that this was referring to the weakest point in a believer's relationship with the Lord so that if Satan couldn't get to us anywhere else he could get to us at this point predictably. When we work with trust and confidence and take advantage of the redeeming, ransoming, victory power that we have in Christ we would overcome that but then that and then we'd work on the next weakest point and so it would go in the sanctification process.

I no longer think that is what that means. I think the things that were said there are true where we do have some weakest points. We do have areas in our life where we're more vulnerable than we are in other places. In a study a couple of years ago I heard Pastor Reeder deal with this passage and these couple of words and he pointed out the prominence and importance of the definite article, the – *The* sin which so easily entangles us.

What is the sin? It would be easily understood quickly if I referred to original sin. In other words, the sinful nature in which were born. How is it that, that expresses itself? It expresses itself in a manifold number of ways but I think everyone of us, though it has become invisible to us and maybe don't think about it as consciously as we should

and could, have failed to realize that, that is a description of our preferences. I'm referring here to preferences that are contrary to the will of Christ, to the content of Scripture, to the content of the authority of the Word of God and the call of God in our life. Because of the deliberateness of the definite article, which is brought out in the NAS translation more than the ESV translation, it is the sinful nature in which we were born, the original sin with its self-centeredness in the place of God-centeredness which makes itself known by the preferences we allow, the ones we promote and to the ones we acquiesce.

A number of years ago my sister was riding in the car when my youngest niece was maybe 9 or 10 years old. She asked a question that made my sister's heart leap. She said "Momma, what is sin?" My sister thought here is a teaching moment. I will hopefully be able to explain to her in a successful way what the problem is that she needs to aware of and we all need to work on as far as our relationship with Christ is concerned. So she tries to put into words her daughter can understand, what sin is. A moment later my niece interrupts her and says "Sin is any want of conformity to or transgression of the law of God." My sister had forgotten that she had been in catechism class and that is a major, clear, precise, accurate definition of what sin is.

Do you know what it is boiled down to the vernacular? Sin is self-centeredness as opposed to God-centeredness. That's what it is. NonChristians are bound by this. What do I mean by this? I mean the same thing that is stated in I Corinthians 2:14 which says [14] *The natural person (referring to the unconverted person) does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.* They are only understood by the Spirit. So nonChristians are bound by this. A nonChristian has no choice but to sin. That doesn't mean everybody is as bad as they could be or should be but it means until the redeeming work of Christ affects that person's life, they have no choice but to sin and to follow inclinations that manifest or reveal self-centeredness as opposed to God-centeredness.

Christians on the other hand are certainly temptable and we do give in and we do yield but the good news is that we don't have to any longer. So when we hear a passage like the one in Hebrews 12:1, which says *let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely...* we can remember that we have the benefits of the redeeming work of Christ.

What are those benefits? The redemption of Christ is that ransom payment that He made in His suffering and death process that took us out from under, that is those of us who would and have trusted in Him to be our Savior, the dominance, bondage, power, control and lordship of sin in our life. That is what is referred to in Romans 6:11-14 when it says [11] *So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.* [12] *Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.* [13] *Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.* [14] *For sin will have no dominion over you (sin will not be master over you), since you are not under law but under grace.* This is something to give thanksgiving to God for because of the reality of it.

What about this matter of personal preference? Remember when I said some things become so obvious they become invisible? Every one of us has weak points and

this is one of them but this isn't one and the same time the area which will show up in our preferences as consistently and predictably as anywhere else. Once we begin to realize and recognize this we can work on it. We can trust the Lord and ask Him to control our preferences so that we want what He wants for us. When Christians fail to capitalize on the liberty that we have in Christ it's partly because we're not knowledgeable of the realities of the power of personal preference.

One of the powers of personal preference is that it skews our objectivity in our consideration particularly of anything that has to do with our spiritual welfare. It doesn't always win but it is one of the areas where Satan will come at us predictably. If we know that then the invisibility goes away and we know what to look for and be cautious about. Our personal preference can skew our objectivity in everything, even our interpretation of the Scripture.

Matthew 10 is an example. Here Jesus is using some of our most wonderful human relationships, that is family relationships and to point out that even those must not get in the way of our being, doing, and accomplishing what He wants. We would prefer our families but there are times when He would direct us otherwise. Here is what He says in Matthew 10:37–39 says [37] *Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.* [38] *And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.* [39] *Whoever finds his life will lose it* (someone who finds satisfaction on his own terms, even in the Christian life, will find it flighty and passing sooner or later), *and whoever loses his life for my sake* (Christ's terms) *will find it.*

Here's another paragraph I want to quote to you. We don't recognize nor scrutinize our preferences for what they really are because we don't consciously take into consideration where they actually originate – self-centeredness, original sin manifested in self-centeredness. They are so much a part of us that we assume that they are acceptable to Christ but the true truth is that a high percentage of our preferences are the product of our exposure to culture and the influence from that culture which seeps unexamined and therefore unfiltered right into our very souls.

The question then is what are some of the preferences in your life which if undealt with on a Psalm 139:23–24 basis (*[23] Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! [24] And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!*) will poison our appetites? It's alright to want things but when the poison comes in and tries to take advantage of the alrightness to want, so that we want things that are contrary to what He wants us to want, then that's a problem. They will poison your appetites, corrupt your attitudes, leaving you centered on yourself and actually paralyzed after a while in personal sanctification. That's the statement of the issue.

What are some historic manifestations of this in the lives of people and in some areas of some ages? I have a long that I don't have time to go through but let's just go over a few. Let's start with Aiken when God told Joshua not to take any of the spoils from Jericho. The walls fell, they went in and everybody obeyed except for one man. He couldn't take it. He looked around and saw things where his preference took over. He thought 'what a waste.' The Scripture describes these things as shekels of monetary value – gold, silver, goodly Babylonian garment. He decided to take some of this stuff

and bury it under the floor of his tent when he got back home. When the heats off then some of this stuff will have use and not go to waste.

The next battle was with Ai, a push over town that they ought to have just walked through, but Ai defeated the army of Israel. Joshua was astounded and he comes to God and says "What's wrong?" God says "there is sin in the camp" and by a process that God had provided Aiken was discovered. He was called before the people and was caused to acknowledge what he had done. He gave it all out in full detail. Then God caused Joshua and the leaders of Israel to kill him, all his family including his livestock then and his possessions by burning it all. Do you think God was making a statement? What was that in Aiken? There wasn't anything less or more than the power of his personal preference. In this particular instance it had to do with his wanting of things and that can show up in a number of other different ways as well.

Let's look at Jonah. Why did Jonah just decide overtly, obviously go in the opposite direction than that which God had called him to do? He thought he had a pretty good reason for it. Nineveh was the enemy of Israel. Jonah is on record for saying 'I know what kind of God you are' and he figured if he went to Nineveh to preach to them to repent and they repent then God will forgive them but they will continue to be the enemy of Israel because sooner or later they may relapse. Then Israel will be under their threat again. So he said he wasn't going. So he paid the fare and went in the opposite direction. There are various ideas as to where the destiny was but I think he was headed to the coast of Spain. I'm not absolutely sure on this but that's what I think which was a long way away in overt disobedience. It was because Jonah thought he had a better idea. He thought he had justifiable reason not to do this. So his preference was that Nineveh would not be forgiven even for a period of time. That is the power of personal preference.

What happened to the Pharisees? Why did the Pharisees come to be the people that we know them to be in Jesus' day? It was because of a little addition here and a little subtraction there. People who tweaked the law here and untweaked it there because they either thought this would improve it or they wanted it to say something slightly different and after a while you couldn't recognize the Law of Moses in the most diligent of the Christ age Pharisees.

If you think that can't happen look further on in history, closer to where we are today and you may remember a man by the name of Charles Taze Russell. He had a preference of his own. He preferred that there be no hell and he began to put together a belief system that did away with hell. We know it today as the very international Jehovah's Witnesses. That got started by the fact that he preferred that there be no hell and so he wrote it out. Just like I think the Pharisees wrote some things in and wrote some things out because they thought it needed to be different. What was that? It was the power of personal preference.

I have an acquaintance who is committed to someday being a minister of the Gospel. That would make a smile and cause me delight except for the fact that this person is not qualified Biblically to be a minister of the Gospel. I won't go into why but this person is committed to being a minister of the Gospel and there have been various attempts to explain that they are not qualified. Even a member of this individual's family went to this person one day and said "If I could prove to you and get you to recognize from the Scripture that your ambition to be a minister of the Gospel is not Biblically

permissible what would you do?" This person to their credit said "I would have a very, very hard time with that." What is that? It is nothing less and nothing more than the power of personal preference which can get out of hand. It can become so present in our lives and so obvious that it can become invisible.

What's the solution? We have given the issue. We have talked about some the manifestations of the issue so what is the solution? The solution is first of all that we have saving faith in Jesus. I don't mean that we have to run around being afraid that we haven't for we'll know whether we have but that is a way of saying that if you're reading this now and haven't committed your life to Christ then that is what you need to do. You need to ask Jesus to be your Forgiver, Savior, the Master and Controller of your life. Then from that point on you and we who have known Christ already, we need to pursue and practice practiced intimacy with Christ, intentional intimacy with Christ.

Psalm 37:4–7 says **[4] *Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*** **[5] *Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act.*** **[6] *He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday.*** **[7] *Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices!*** Psalm 37:4 is not a formula for what we want or for us exercising our personal preferences on our terms. That is a promise from God that if we delight ourselves in Him then there's the key.

If we become so preoccupied with Him that we can actually describe it as intimacy with Him, if we become so practiced in our intimacy with Him what will happen? He is going to change our wants. He is going to give us new preferences. He is going to give us new desires. That means the same thing you find in John 15:7 which says **[7] *If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*** If you abide Me and My words abide in you then I'm going to change you. I will give you new desires.

Luke 9:23 says **[23] *And he said to all, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.*** Does that mean we can't ever have anything we want? No but it means our wants, our preferences have to be permissible to Him. We have to want what He wants for us. This is spelled out pretty particularly in James 1:14–15 which says **[14] *But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire (lust).*** **[15] *Then desire (lust) when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.***

Because of our culture and the way things are in the world today, every time we hear the word lust we associate it with sexual desire and that certainly is obviously in there but this word can also be used to deal with other desires, preferences and wants. Realize that it is broader than just the way we would culturally by knee jerk reaction refer to it. We need to realize that Satan can't tempt us in an area where we don't already have an inclination. He can't tempt us to fall in a direction where we aren't already leading.

I have absolutely no temptation for tuna fish casserole. Something just goes chemically and diabolically wrong when you put those contents together and heat them into a casserole. Now with pecan pie I lean to point of falling frequently where that is concerned. The idea is that there are things that we can want that are fine but we want to want what He wants for us. We don't want the power of our preference to take us into areas where we would be quenching the Spirit and adding complication to our lives.

The final passage I want to share with you is Galatians 5:16–17 which says *[16] But I say, walk by the Spirit (have intimacy with Christ), and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. The word desire here is the same word that interprets into lust and translated as lust in the James passage. [17] For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.*

The solution then is knowing Christ and exercising practiced intimacy with Him. How do you do that? You do that with unhurried, worshipful, meditative communion with Him before His face (Coram Deo) on a regular basis. Don't be in a hurry. Wait, for that word comes up over and over again in the Scriptures. Wait on the Lord. I know it also means hope but there are overlapping and the translation of wait is to be unhurried in His presence. Give Him time to reshape the preferences and desires of your life. Meditate means to mumble out loud something that is important that you're considering and trying to understand. It is unhurried, worshipful, meditative communion with Him before His face.

I love the passage that says *[4] Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.* (1 John 4:4) This is referring to all of us. Greater is He that is in me, the Lord, that is in me than he who is in the world. Greater can be the preferences for our love for Him than the preferences that would quench the Spirit and cause us to be an increasing complication and out of sorts, fruitless, Spirit quenching believers. None of us would be that way long because the Holy Spirit would reach out and do whatever it takes shakenly to bring us back to that relationship that He wants us to have.

I will close with this. God promises that He will forgive our sins. I John 1:9 says *[9] If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* He does not promise to protect us from the damaging complications that will come to us naturally as a result of our sins. Sometimes He does protect us but doesn't promise to do so. Sometimes He lets them come on in, in order to have us learn the hard way. This is the power of personal preference and the need for practiced intimacy with Christ in an unhurried, worshipful, meditative communion with Him. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Our Father we ask now that You would give to each of us a realization of the importance of our preferences, the little ones, the big ones, the medium sized ones and help us to be careful with what we want. Help us to be careful with positions we take. Help us to be careful, not paranoid, and in our intimacy with you we pray that You will inform us and increase the protection that You install within us so that we will not become victims of the power of bad preferences but we will prefer You and love You. Show Yourself in and through us, through evangelism and the recognizable presence of the fruit of the Spirit, in Jesus' Name, Amen.