Sermon Title: A God-Pleasing Goal for 2025

Text: **Hebrews 12:1-3 -- 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, 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. 3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted**.

Introduction: Roy Robertson was a soldier at Pearl Harbor in 1941: He tells this story: "My ship, the West Virginia, docked at Pearl Harbor on the evening of **December 6, 1941**. A couple of the fellows and I left the ship that night and attended a Bible study. About fifteen sailors sat in a circle on the floor. The leader asked us to each recite our favorite Scripture verse. In turn, each sailor shared a verse and briefly commented on it. I sat there in terror. I couldn't recall a single verse. I grew up in a Christian home and went to church three times a week, but I sat there terrified. I couldn't recall a single verse. Finally, I remembered one verse **- John 3:16**. I silently rehearsed it in my mind. The spotlight of attention grew closer as each sailor took his turn. It was up to the fellow next to me. He recited **John 3:16**. He took my verse! As he commented on it, I sat there in stunned humiliation. In a few moments, everyone would know that I could not recall from memory even a single verse. Later that night I went to bed thinking, ***'Robertson, you're a fake.'*** At **7:55** the next morning I was awakened by the ship alarm ordering us to battle stations. Three hundred and sixty planes of the **Japanese Imperial Fleet** were attacking our ship and the other military installations. My crew and I raced to our machine gun emplacement, but all we had was practice ammunition. So, for the first fifteen minutes of the two-hour battle, we only fired blanks hoping to scare the Japanese airplanes. As I stood there firing fake ammunition I thought, ***'Robertson, this is how your whole life has been - firing blanks for Christ.'*** I made up my mind as Japanese bullets slammed into our ship, ***"If I escape with my life, I will get serious about following Jesus***." He survived and Roy Robertson did get serious. In fact, he became the first missionary of "***The Navigators***" and did a lot of work with **Billy Graham** as well. His inspiring testimony creates a question for us to consider this morning: **Are we growing mature in the Lord or are we firing blanks for Christ**? This morning, I want to challenge you with a God-Pleasing goal for 2025. We all know that it is possible to grow older without growing up. Certainly, in my experience, I've known some very mature adults, but also a handful of immature ones. If maturity isn't something that just happens to us as we age, how does one grow up? Well, that's what we're going to attempt to answer this morning. HOW DO WE GROW TO MATURITY IN CHRIST?

Let's begin by defining maturity. **Maturity** = the state or quality of being mature (**American Heritage Dictionary**). We say that a savings bond has matured when it has completed its full term. That's the way the word is translated in the New Testament. It means "***of full age***" or "***completion***." As it pertains to the Christian life, **maturity is the process whereby we learn to trust God with the details of our lives so that we consistently walk in obedience to His will**. It is a process that begins the moment we trust in Christ as Savior and Lord and continues until He calls us home. The Apostle Paul said it like this in **Philippians 3:12-14 -- Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect (mature), but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own.**

But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Maturity, then, at least according to the author of nearly half the books of the New Testament, is not measured by the number of birthdays we've celebrated, but by our increasing ability to exercise faith in God. Turn with me to **Hebrews 12** and let's see what the writer of this letter has to say about it. He starts with this …

LOOK AROUND for Examples of Maturity (**Hebrews 12:1a -- Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,)**. In the chapter that precedes this one, the author of Hebrews has just called to mind a host of witnesses who demonstrated faith in God in a variety of different contexts. The Greek word from which the word '***witness***' is a form of the word "***martus***." You may recognize its similarity with our word "***martyr.***" Originally "martyr" referred to one who witnessed or testified on behalf of another. It didn't take long, however, before it was used in reference to those who died as witnesses of Christ (**See Acts 22:20 where it mentions the blood of your marty Stephen; Revelation 2:13**). In fact, the concept of martyrdom goes back to Old Testament days when Israel killed the prophets who bore testimony to the words of God given to them for His people (**See 2 Chronicles 24:20-21; Jeremiah 26:22-23**). In **Hebrews 11**, the prophets are mentioned as well as a host of others who were able to trust God for the seemingly impossible. People like **Noah**, who began constructing an ark because God told him to even though it took another hundred years for the flood to occur; and **Abraham …** He left his extended family at God's command in spite of the fact that he didn't know where he was going (**remember -- faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen**). Then, after God promised to multiply his descendants like the sand on the shore, in obedience he offered his one and only son Isaac as a sacrifice to God believing that He would raise him from the dead; and **Moses**…who by faith denied any privileges he might have enjoyed as Pharaoh's daughter, and instead led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt and through the Red Sea on dry ground; or **Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego** who were thrown into the fiery furnace by the great King of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, because they refused to worship the golden image he had set up. Instead, they trusted God to deliver them one way or another; and how about **the Shunamite woman** who received her son back from the dead (**See 2 Kings 4:27-37**)? All these men and women (*and many more that could have been mentioned*) ***proved faithful because they cultivated a deep trust in God***. Their testimonies, found in **Hebrews 11**, are meant to inspire us to trust God as we run with endurance the race (*i.e. a metaphor for the Christian life that called to mind the Isthmian Games which took place every two years in Corinth*) marked out for us. Just as God was with them, we can be confident that He is also with us (**Hebrews 13:5 – I will never leave you or forsake you**). He is worthy of our trust for things not seen.

LOOK WITHIN for Hindrances to Maturity (**Hebrews 12:1b -- 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**). Another factor in staying in the race of the Christian life to completion or maturity is identifying and overcoming anything that might interfere with our goal. These obstacles can manifest themselves in two ways in our lives.

- **Let us lay aside every weight. This is a reference to a burden that could possibly weigh us down**. That's what the word '***hindrance***' means here. It refers to **something weighty** that may not be sinful or bad, but could keep us from running as well as we can. Keeping with

the metaphor of a race, the outer garment typically worn by an athlete when he wasn't training would have hindered his performance when competing by weighing him down. That's why it had to be removed if the race was to be won. The Bible mentions the following as a few of the potential hindrances that can have the same effect upon us: **family** (**Matthew 10:37 -- 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**); **wealth** (**1 Timothy 6:9-10 -- But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils**); **alcohol** (**Proverbs 23:31-33 -- Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. 32 In the end it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder. 33 Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart utter perverse things**); **idleness/leisure** (**2 Thessalonians 3:6 -- keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us**). **NOW LET ME SAY SOMETHING ABOUT THESE PURSUITS. NONE ARE TO BE AVOIDED BECAUSE THEY'RE SINFUL. THE THING TO REMEMBER IS THAT THEY CAN BECOME AN ISSUE FOR US WHEN WE ALLOW THEM TO HAVE TOO MUCH IMPORTANCE IN OUR LIVES. THE BIBLICAL PRINCIPLE IS THAT WE MUST NOT LET ANYTHING GET IN THE WAY OF SEEKING AFTER THE LORD.** A while ago, I attended a swim meet to watch two young people compete. It was the first swim meet I have ever seen. I noticed that swimmers in general do everything they can to minimize any hindrance to swimming as fast as they can. They wear special suits that produce the least amount of drag. They shave their bodies for the same reason. You may not know this, but in the Olympics, several of the competitors wore two bathing caps, one to cover their hair, the other to cover the straps on their goggles. All of this is done to enable them to go as fast as they can with the hope of winning. In the Christian life, we would be wise to follow their example and be on guard against anything that might weigh us down and prevent us from attaining to spiritual maturity.

- **And sin which clings so closely to us**. A greater weight that keeps us from maturity is sin. The reference here seems to be to sin in general though all sin at its root is based on unbelief. Doubting God and therefore living life independently of Him puts us in a situation where we are tripped up (entangled) by our unbelief (**See Matthew 14:25-31**—*Doubting resulted in Peter going under the waves instead of walking on top of them*). If we're going to grow in our faith we must learn to trust God even when He's asking us to attempt the impossible and only He knows how everything is going to turn out. (**Review: Look around for examples of maturity; look within for hindrances to maturity**.)

LOOK UP to See Perfect Maturity (**Hebrews 12:2-3 -- 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. 3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted**). In running, as in most sports, it is important to look where you're going. As Christians, we're told to fix our eyes on Jesus (lit. "***looking to Jesus***") so that our faith matures. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that this requires that we remember these two things:

A. **Jesus is the Pioneer of faith.** The examples of faith listed in Hebrews 11 are helpful, but the best model of complete trust in the Father comes from Jesus Christ Himself. ***He is called the pioneer*** (**this is the RSV translation of Hebrews 12:2**) ***and perfecter of our faith***. This means that Jesus was the first to express unqualified obedience to the will of God in a fallen world

when He offered Himself as a sacrifice never once deviating from His Father's will (**John 6:38-40 -- For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. 39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. 40 For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day; John 8:29 -- John 8:29 -- And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him**).

B. **Jesus is the Perfecter of faith. He is the One in whom faith has reached its perfection and so has become the perfect example for us to follow.** We are commanded to consider Christ's perfect faith and then to emulate it in our lives. Amid the hostility He endured, the cross that awaited, and the joy that He knew would follow, Jesus never failed to trust His Heavenly Father. So, we are expected to respond in a similar fashion. **Our progress, then, is not only a matter of observing Christ's example** (*as the pioneer of our faith*) **but of following His example by trusting God in the very same way**. Listen, believers do not stumble into this kind of faith. If Jesus learned obedience from the things He suffered (**See Hebrews 5:8**), then how can we expect to learn it any other way? **Maturity** (**as in learning to trust God with the details of our lives so that we consistently walk in obedience to His will) is the by-product of persevering faith**.

Let me wrap this up with the following observations about immature and mature Christians:

- ***Immature Christians do not suffer for their faith in Christ***.
- ***Immature Christians do not serve in the cause of Christ***.
- ***Immature Christians do not witness to their faith in Christ***.

- ***Mature Christians reflect on the example of others***.
- ***Mature Christians remove anything that inhibits growth***.
- ***Mature Christians resolve to persevere in faith just as Christ did.***

Conclusion: A familiar Mother Goose rhyme goes: ***Pussycat, Pussycat, Where have you been? I've been to London to visit the Queen. Pussycat, Pussycat, What did you do? I frightened a little mouse under the chair***. Unfortunately, like that cat, some Christians settle for petty involvements and trivial pursuits (like chasing mice) when they could be spending time with royalty (the King of Kings). So, instead of remaining content with minimum daily requirements, I'm asking you to deepen your faith in God and grow into an even more mature Christ-follower in 2025. Are you up to it?