

jPerseverance: Never Give Up!

In our New Testament reading, Paul defends of his apostolic ministry against his critics. Paul shares somewhat his own testimony, and encourages the Corinthian believers to persevere in life and faith. Follow as I read I Corinthians 4:1-18:

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. ² We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ¹¹ For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you. ¹³ But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and so I spoke"—we also believe, and so we speak, ¹⁴ because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. ¹⁵ Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, ¹⁸ because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

On October 29, 1941, in the midst of World War II, during the critical period when he was inspiring his British countrymen to continue to resist Nazi aggression, Sir Winston Churchill visited Harrow School. The Prime Minister had come to his alma mater in order to hear the traditional songs he had sung there as a student and to speak to the student body. Within his speech Churchill gave these memorable, oft-quoted words of encouragement:

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“Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense.”

In words that frame our text, in verses 1 and 16, Paul says “we do not lose heart.” The verb can be variously translated as “we do not neglect our duty,” or “we do not get tired.”

Paul’s enemies, the “Super Apostles” who had weaseled their way into the church at Corinth, were discrediting Paul’s apostolic authority and ministry. Their goal was to discourage Paul from continuing his ministry, not only at Corinth, but wherever he had leadership in the churches. These enemies of Paul were saying that he lacked credentials as a philosopher and as a speaker. This humble servant leader known as Paul (Greek “paulos,” meaning “small”) was unimpressive and unworthy of the following of the Corinthians, with all their pride in knowledge and wisdom.

Nothing depletes my spirit and enthusiasm like criticism. Regardless of how many kind words of appreciation I receive after preaching a sermon, just one word of criticism wipes out every positive affirmation. For hours and even days, I continue to obsess on critical and unkind words, regardless of how credible the critic or viable the criticism. It seems I need fresh words of encouragement and affirmation to restore enthusiasm or even enough self-confidence to persevere in my tasks.

Paul, however, remained undaunted and undeterred by his critics. He expresses his persevering spirit and said he was not giving up, even though he was resisted and being tested on every hand. He gives us great reason to never give up and to persevere in faithful living and serving. Christ conveys the light of the knowledge of God, and his light bursts upon the scene with an irrefragable impression that causes the unbeliever to believe in Christ and to repent and surrender to his Lordship (6). Even faith itself is the gift of God. The gospel reveals the righteousness of God, and offers that gift of righteousness to the repentant sinner. And Paul says it is a righteousness “that is by faith from first to last (Romans 1:17).

No doubt, as he is writing our text to the Corinthians, Paul is thinking of his own conversion on the Damascus Road. The light blinded him, and the light was the light of Christ. Paul also is using the language of creation from Genesis 1:3. Just as the light of creation overcame the darkness of the chaos, so God’s light in the face of Christ overcomes the darkness of sin. To Paul, this miracle of faith is every bit as spectacular as the dawn of the creation.

We must never give up sharing Jesus, because God honors his powerful message. Saul of Tarsus was the most unlikely candidate for conversion in

the Jewish world and the Roman Empire! Yet even he could not overcome grace, because God had marked him out for his own purposes. You may be daunted by the prospects of ever seeing your unconverted spouse, fellow worker or classmate who seem indifferent or even hostile, come to faith in Christ. Yet, if God may purpose to convert one or all of them for his glory, he will do it! Your part and my part is to simply be a faithful prayer warrior and witness.

Paul reminds us that we have this treasure of the gospel message in these bodies of ours, which are like jars of clay. Eugene Peterson paraphrases “jars of clay” as “the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives” (*The Message*). Paul is not downgrading the importance of the body as the temple of the Spirit, nor is he talking like a Greek Gnostic, who dissociated the body from the spiritual part of a person. Our mortal bodies are temporal, and our lives take on tremendous meaning and significance as conveyors of the message of Christ Jesus. We are destined for the resurrection of our bodies, which will be glorified temples of the Holy Spirit. But in the meantime we are carrying around in these temporal, fragile bodies of ours the glorious treasure of the gospel.

One of the industries in first century Corinth was the manufacture of inexpensive yet necessary earthen lamps. In stark contrast to these practical, inexpensive lamps are the ornate, pricey Waterford crystal lamps of today! These Corinthian lamps were simple containers of oil and wick, and were used at night for pragmatic reasons. Unlike our Waterfords, they were not considered decorative. Their only value was in their function.

Whenever we could afford them, Nancy and I would occasionally give our kids expensive and sophisticated toys for Christmas and their birthdays. After thoughtful and extensive deliberation we would buy just the right toys. You know, the ones that were educationally and developmentally appropriate, and just plain fun! Imagine our chagrin when, after opening the boxes containing the delightful toys, our kids would occasionally proceed to play with the box instead of the expensive toy! In essence, Paul says in our text, “I don’t want the world to miss the fact that all I really have to offer is Christ within me. Don’t be impressed with the container.” Paul encourages us to persevere through all kinds of adversity, in the confidence that God always honors his messengers.

Abigail Smith Adams (1744-1818), devoted wife of John Adams, colonial patriot and second President of the United States, was a tower of strength and fortitude throughout her years, which were marked with persistent difficulties and grief. In a letter to her son, John Quincy, who was reluctant to accompany his father to Europe, Abigail enjoined him to seize this opportunity that would be replete with difficulties but also great advantages:

"These are the times in which a genius would wish to live. It is not in the still calm of life, or the repose of a pacific station, that great characters are formed. The habits of a vigorous mind are formed in contending with difficulties. Great necessities call out great virtues. How this mindset contrasts with the 21st Century American ideal of seeking comfort and pleasure and avoiding pain at all costs!

Paul's testimony in verses 8 and 9 conjure an image of a boxer who is being punched around by a fearsome opponent. Like a prizefighter who has been knocked to the mat, and before he is counted "out," he pulls himself up to continue the fight. The only reason he survived is the grace and deliverance of God. The Super Apostles argued that Paul's sufferings proved his weakness that disqualified him as a leader and teacher. Paul countered that his sufferings reflected the sufferings of Christ, and witnessed to the resurrection power of Christ at work in and through him.

As God's children and witnesses, we may never suffer physical persecution, but we ought to be willing to demonstrate God's power to honor his messenger in the face of difficulty. I'm reminded of what I heard some believers in North Korea testify. They called themselves "God's nails." They said that they were often beaten by their communist persecutors. But like nails, the harder they were hit, the deeper they would go. In times of difficulty God's grace uniquely enables us to radiate Jesus. Paul was no masochist. He suffered for a reason, that Christ might be seen in him. We're simply the "empty boxes" which God fills with himself. We are the jars of clay that God can use as lamps of the light of Christ.

I recall back in the 80's a slogan printed on the back of semi tractor-trailers of a certain moving company. This company had the contract to transport the artifacts of the Egyptian King Tut, which were displayed in various cities throughout the country. The slogan was, "We move the treasures of a king." That's our calling as well, to convey the treasure of the gospel of Jesus Christ, King of kings. We are to dispense the Good News of salvation as well as display the presence of the indwelling King. And, Paul is saying in our text, we must never give up in faithfully "moving this treasure of the King." A paraphrase of Paul reads, "So we're not giving up" (*The Message*, 16). Paul says the old container won't last much longer, but inwardly, we are getting newer and better every day!

Whatever happened to that cult out in Arizona I read about 25 years ago? They claimed that they were denying the aging process, and their adherents had found the secret to staying forever young. I'll bet they are dying off! Their leader said he was 50 but had the body and vitality he had at 20. Wonder if he's still saying that today at 70-something?

Paul brings this whole aging thing into perspective, and even the concept of suffering. Paul says we never give up because we are God's pilgrims. We're on our way to God's Eternal City. It's this glorious destination that makes us God's indomitable people. *"For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure."* (17).

Brian Harbour addresses the importance of perspective when he tells about a college girl, after 3 months at school, who wrote her parents saying,

*"Dear Mom and Dad,
Please forgive me for not writing sooner, but all my writing paper was destroyed when the dorm was burned down by the demonstrators. I'm out of the hospital now, and the doctor says my eyesight should be back to normal in about six months. The kind young man who rescued me from the fire offered to share his apartment with me until the dorm is rebuilt. We are married now, and I hope to see you soon.
Love,
Judy"*

Then she added a postscript at the bottom of the letter which said,

"P.S.: Please disregard the above practice in English composition. The dorm did not burn down. I've not been in the hospital, and my eyes are fine. I'm not married. In fact, I don't even have a boyfriend. But I did get a D in French and an F in algebra, and I wanted you to know how much worse it could have been."

We need to see how much worse it could have been. We need to keep our present circumstances in perspective. How are our ordeals and trials impacting our faith? Are they driving us closer to God's grace, or are we despairing of hope and resenting God's providence? Are they making us better or bitter? When we keep in view the glory and holiness God is producing in us, our troubles seem small and brief. That's the perspective of faith.

And, we need to see how much better it's going to be. Paul says if we could mound up all the bad things on one side of the scales, and put the glory God has waiting for us on the other side, there would be no comparison. Through these comparably light and momentary trials God is at work in us to prepare us for an eternity of heavenly glory. This is the perspective of hope. It's the perspective that reminds us that things will get much, much better.

In our living and serving we need God's perspective of eternity and kingdom values. As God's missional people, called to live faithfully for him, we must never, never, never, never give up!

