

KEEP WORKING HARD
James 1:2-4, 12

March 8, 2024

My students, after receiving their test back, would say, “Mr. Childs, you gave me a ‘C’ on my test.” My reply was always the same, “No, you earned a ‘C’ on your test. I do not give grades. I only record the grades based on the work you did. Your test revealed your strengths and weaknesses. If you want a higher grade, you must reinforce your strengths, learn from your weaknesses and keep working hard. If you do, you will achieve the grade you expect.

James made a very confusing statement, “*Consider it all joy when you face tests and trials.*” Where is the joy in test and trials? Who even wants to go through test and trials, and when you do, you are told to consider it joyful? James answered in the following verses, “*The testing of your faith produces endurance or perseverance, which after it has completed its work, makes one mature and complete.*” The testing of faith reveals spiritual strengths and weaknesses and highlights the areas we need to apply more work to produce the endurance that leads us to become a mature and complete child of God. The blessing of persevering is receiving the crown of life.

No one desires to face tests and trials. However, when we understand that our tests reveal to us where to reinforce our strengths and where to learn from our weaknesses, we can appreciate considering the joy in our tests. Do you desire to be a mature and complete child of God? Learn from your weaknesses and keep working hard. As you persevere, your blessing is the crown of life.

KEEP RUNNING RIGHT UP THE MIDDLE
Revelation 2:8-10

March 9, 2024

Before I understood the game of football, it did not make sense why the running back received the ball from the quarterback and ran up the middle, only to be met by then tackled by the defensive line. In my view, it seemed more reasonable to run to the left or to the right where there were fewer opponents. I later learned that the play was designed for the offensive line to block the defensive line and open a hole that would permit the running back clear access up the middle. To execute the play properly, he had to press forward, up the middle, against the opposition, to achieve the victory.

John wrote to the church in Smyrna acknowledging the persecution, suffering and opposition that they had and continued to endure. John encouraged them, “*Do not fear what you are about to suffer.*” It would have been easy for them to run to the left or right. Instead, John continued, “*Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.*” They had to press forward, up the middle, against the opposition to receive the crown of life.

The opposition against us can sometimes be overwhelming. It appears the easier path is turning to the right or to the left. However, to execute the play God has designed for us properly, we must press forward, up the middle, against the opposition to receive the crown of life. The good news is God’s heavenly host makes up our offensive line. They are very good at blocking our defensive opposition to permit us clear access up the middle.

The graphic is a black-bordered box containing a pyramid of virtues on the left and church information on the right. The pyramid has seven levels, each with a white label: LOVE, Brotherly Kindness, GODLINESS, PATIENCE, SELF-CONTROL, KNOWLEDGE, VIRTUE, and FAITH. To the right of the pyramid, the text reads: PILGRIM REST BAPTIST CHURCH, 2024, LENTEN DEVOTIONAL, ADDING TO YOUR FAITH TO PRODUCE AN EFFECTIVE AND FRUITFUL KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS, and March 3 – March 9, 2024.

ADD TO YOUR SELF-CONTROL – PERSEVERANCE

ADD TO YOUR SELF-CONTROL – PERSEVERANCE March 3, 2024
2 Peter 1:6

It is halftime of the championship game. Your team is 20 points behind and your star player is injured. As your team is assembled in the locker room, the coach walks in and all heads turn to the coach awaiting words of inspiration and motivation. As the coach’s mouth opens, can you imagine these words coming out, “As you know, we are behind and our star player is sidelined. Therefore, since we know we are not going to win, I suggest we take off our uniforms, give them the win and shut it down for this seasons.”

Of course, no coach is going to say that at halftime, no matter how challenging the situation looks. Rather, the coach is going to do everything possible to encourage and motivate the team to persevere and continue fighting to the end, while being 20 points being and the star player sidelined.

There are times when we feel like giving up. There are times when we look at the information before us and conclude it is not worth continuing the fight. There are times when everyone else has resolved that the window of success has passed and we are foolish to continue to commit our time and energy to the effort. However, our coach, Jesus, the Christ, enters the locker room of our souls and proclaims a message of encouragement. Jesus declares that it is not over and inspires us to persevere and continue fighting to the end.

Unlike human coaches who can only see the game in the present, our heavenly coach is already in the future encouraging us to persevere towards the victory that is already ours. Remember, “When God gives you something to do, God is already in the future watching you do it.”

Adding Perseverance to Self-Control empowers us to continue living out who we are called to be independent of what is happening in and around us.

YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO ENDURE
Matthew 10:16-22

March 4, 2024

One of the responsibilities of an employer is to provide the employees what they need to successfully perform their given assignment. No doubt, everyone would condemn the injustice of an employer holding accountable and reprimanding an employee for not fulfilling an assigned task when that employee was not equipped with the proper resources to fulfill the task.

Jesus shared with his disciples that he was sending them out as sheep among wolves (*"I send you out..."*). Additionally, Jesus shared that they would go through various forms of persecution because of their relationship with Jesus and their faithful fulfillment of their call from Jesus (*"You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake..."*). However, Jesus also promised that he would equip them with what they needed to perform their assigned task. Jesus promised, *"But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."*

Many know the feeling of being sent out as a sheep among wolves. Many also know the persecutions received from your faithfulness to Jesus' call. As you know these, also know that Jesus has promised to equip you with what you need to perform the task. Jesus promised, *"The one who endures to the end will be saved."* Yes, the wolves are there and will do what wolves do. Yes, they will persecute you because of your faithfulness to Jesus. However, Jesus has equipped you. You have what it takes to endure to the end.

CONTINUE DOING WELL AND RIGHT
Galatians 6:9

March 5, 2024

An amusing aspect of children assisting adults with gardening is the children's lack of understanding that there is time, a lot of time, between planting and harvest. Because the harvest is not immediate, children can become weary and lose interest. They are so focused on eating at the time of harvest, that they cannot appreciate the benefits of the growing season.

Paul borrowed from this imagery of sowing and reaping to encourage the Church in Galatia to persevere in doing what is good and right although it may appear that their doing good and right is not reaping a positive benefit. Paul understood the discouragement associated with doing all of the right things the right way for the right reason, then receiving complaints and criticisms. Paul encouraged the Galatians to know that just as it takes time for the seed to become a fruit bearing plant, it takes time for our good works to produce.

Yes, it is discouraging to do all of the right things the right way for the right reason, then receive complaints and criticisms. Even worse, the ones we assist the most sometimes complain the most. Nevertheless, we do not do good and right to receive their affirmations. We do it because it is the good and right thing to do. Therefore, whether they accept and appreciate it or not, we continue persevering in doing good and right, anticipating a bountiful harvest.

EXAMPLES OF FAITHFUL PERSEVERANCE
2 Timothy 2:1-7

March 6, 2024

When I coached Little League, there were three foundational things that I focused on to ensure the children were successful at learning and playing the game. First, remain focused on the most important thing – the ball. Whether infield, outfield or at bat, "Keep your eye on the ball." Second, know the rules of the game. To play the game, one must know the game. Third, hard work pays off. Working hard in practice leads to victory on game day.

Paul motivated Timothy, his son in the ministry, regarding the necessity of being strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus so he can take what he learned from Paul and teach others who will also teach others. Paul also gave Timothy three examples of faithful perseverance: a good soldier who remains focused on pleasing his commanding officer, an athlete who knows and competes by the rules and a hardworking farmer who is entitled to be the first to eat the fruit of his labor. Accordingly, Timothy should remain focused on Jesus who called him, know and live by the standards established in the Bible and work hard, anticipating much fruit from his labor.

We, too, are held to these three examples of faithful perseverance. Are you focusing on Jesus, your commanding officer, who called you into service? Do you know and are you living by the standards established in the Bible? Are you working hard and anticipating a fruitful harvest from your labor? As you faithfully persevere, you can expect success in your calling.

LIGHTEN UP AND RUN TO WIN
Hebrews 12:1-3

March 7, 2024

When you observe runners at track and field events, they wear the bare minimum; the least amount of clothing as possible because their desire is to have the least amount of weight on them as possible. Consider their shoes for example. The average basketball shoe weighs 13.3 ounces. Compare that to the average sprinter shoe, which weighs 6 ounces. Notice the sprinter shoe is one-half the weight of the basketball shoe.

The writer of Hebrews presents an image of the saints to whom he is writing on a track at a coliseum running a race. The saints who have died and gone to heaven before them make up the great cloud of witnesses who are in the stands cheering them on. Since the goal was to run an effective race, they were encouraged to set aside every weight that would hold them back or slow down, and run with endurance the race that is before them while looking to Jesus as a model of one who ran an effective race in this world.

Imagine mama, daddy, big mama, big daddy and every that you know who has died in Jesus in the stands cheering you on as you run this race of life. How effectively do you desire to run before them? Show them that you learned the lessons they taught. Show them that what they poured into you was not in vain. Lay aside the worldly weight designed to slow you down and run to win while looking to Jesus as your model of one who ran well.