



In Conclusion...

PERSEVERE

II Timothy 3:1-5, 10-17 (AFBC 2/17/19)

This morning, we turn to the 3rd chapter of II Timothy—which leaves only the final chapter of Paul’s last letter—the chapter where he says to Timothy, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (4:7). That’s next Sunday.

For today, “In Conclusion...,” part five. There’s hardly a day that goes by that I do not learn of someone who’s lost a loved one, or been admitted to the hospital, heard a troubling diagnosis from their doctor, or received bad news about a job, a child, or something! Most of you know what I’m talking about.

After a while, this begins to weigh on us. It would be so easy to just give up on life and give in to despair; but our Lord sees us through these difficult times in our own lives and also helps us to travel alongside others as they experience them.

In our text for today, though, Paul is speaking of challenges we face--not simply because we’re members of the human race, sharing in the same sadnesses and frustrations as everyone else—but he’s talking here about the challenges that come our way specifically because we are followers of Jesus Christ.

Have you ever been in a work environment where you spent much of your day with non-believers? Or this could happen in a school setting, or a neighborhood or some social setting where, either intentionally or not, the people surrounding you made it difficult for you to live out your faith and stay true to your convictions.

Well, **Paul and Timothy lived in a time and place that made it dangerous to be a follower of Christ.** As he wrote this letter,

Paul's commitment to his Lord was about to cost him his physical life. He would soon be martyred.

Every follower of Christ faced these dangers, but especially someone like Timothy, who was a leader—a pastor--in the early church. Given such challenging conditions, what would it take to remain faithful to Christ and His Kingdom's work?

In our passage today, I hear several guidelines offered by the Apostle Paul that would help Timothy and the church he served, guidelines that will also help you and me, to persevere. Listen for these in our our text for today, **II Timothy 3:1-5, 10-17:**

¹But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. ²People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, ⁴treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— ⁵having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.

Paul continues to point out the difficult challenges that followers of Christ Jesus will likely face, but then he offers us help for such times. Take a look at what he says, beginning in verse 10:

¹⁰You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, ¹¹persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹²In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

¹⁴But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

1. So, what will it take **to Persevere**: first, **Don't Be Caught Off Guard**. Paul wants to make Timothy and all the rest of us aware

of what we may have to face. Again, **II Timothy 3:1: "But mark this: there will be terrible times in the last days."**

This begs the question: **was Timothy already living in "the last days?" And then, how about us?** Are we living in the last days? Well, I believe the answer to both questions is... "yes."

Some people understand "the last days" to refer to a brief period of time just before the return of Christ. In other words, when the last days come, Christ will quickly return. There are a few Scriptures that use the phrase "last days" to refer to God's final judgment.

Many other passages, however, use "the last days" to describe a much longer period of time. The prophet Joel, for instance, said, **"In the last days,' God says, 'I will pour out my Spirit on all people...'" (Joel 2:28).**

Later, at Pentecost, Peter stood before the crowd and announced, "This is what Joel was talking about—in other words, these are the last days—the gift of God's Spirit is now ours through Jesus Christ" (Acts 2:16ff).

The writer of Hebrews began by saying: **"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these 'last days' he has spoken to us by his Son..." (Hebrews 1:1-2).** "The last days," in these passages and many others, **refer then to the period of time between Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension and His return, His second coming.**

So, yes, we are living in the last days. But so were St. Augustine and Martin Luther and those who founded this church nearly **198 years ago. **And so, too, our brothers and sisters in the faith who'll come after us here—and this will continue until** that last day, known only to the Father Himself, when **Christ comes again.****

Paul doesn't pull any punches when telling us what life will be like in the meantime. He says "There will be terrible times in the last days." In vv. 2-5, he describes what will make them so terrible (reading now from the New English Bible translation):

"Men will love nothing but money and self; they will be arrogant, boastful, and abusive; with no respect for parents, no gratitude, no piety, no natural affection; they will be

implacable in their hatreds, scandal-mongers, intemperate and fierce, strangers to all goodness, traitors, adventurers, swollen with self-importance. They will be men who put pleasure in the place of God, men who preserve the outward form of religion, but are a standing denial of its reality.” (II Timothy 3:2-5, NEB)

Does any of this sound familiar—painfully familiar? Paul has painted for us a terrible picture of a world that increasingly resembles the one we’re living in. It is a lousy, last-days world that Paul is describing; and friends, if we’re honest, we have to admit that Paul’s depiction... hits pretty close to home!

Look at just the first phrase of this: “Men will love nothing but money and self.” Does this not describe our distorted values?

We’re created to love God supremely, but our capacity to love gets turned inward on ourselves and outward on money and pleasures that we’ve been deceived into believing will **make us happy. Let’s take a closer look at this (the love of money and self):**

A. MONEY: Jesus said more about money and possessions than any other subject. Why? He wasn’t a fund-raiser. He had no budget to support or building debt to retire. Jesus was motivated by something else--his concern for people; **his awareness of how we can be so captivated by money that it shrivels our souls.**

B. SELF: Jesus commends a healthy self-love. He tells us to love our neighbor *as* we love ourselves. But we forget that, **according to Jesus’ teachings, love for self is “hard-wired” to love for our neighbor. When this is lacking, what we call “self-love” becomes ugly and destructive;** and it makes life together almost unbearable.

When the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston found itself with a priest shortage, they decided to advertise to encourage young men to consider the priesthood. A local ad agency donated their time to lead the campaign. But how would they go about this?

Now, don’t hear this as an endorsement of what they did; but I do find it interesting how they went about attempting to spark interest in being a priest.

The ad they developed began with a blur of images—one right after another--all of them related to wealth: a gold watch, a diamond bracelet, champagne, cocktails, pearls, poker chips, and caviar.

Then the screen went black (IMAGE), followed by this tag line: "A world that doesn't deny itself anything... could use a few men who do." Then it ended with the hands of a priest holding up a communion wafer.



To their credit, they came up with an approach that was true to the Christian message. **Denying one's self in order to serve others is at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.**

In Baptist life, we rightfully take this a step further by **talking about "the priesthood of every believer."** We understand that this is a decision--a commitment--that our Lord asks each of us to make.

There's a higher calling for us than the kind of love of self and substance that strives to have it all and hoard it all for just ourselves. Jesus said, **"What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Mark 8:36).**

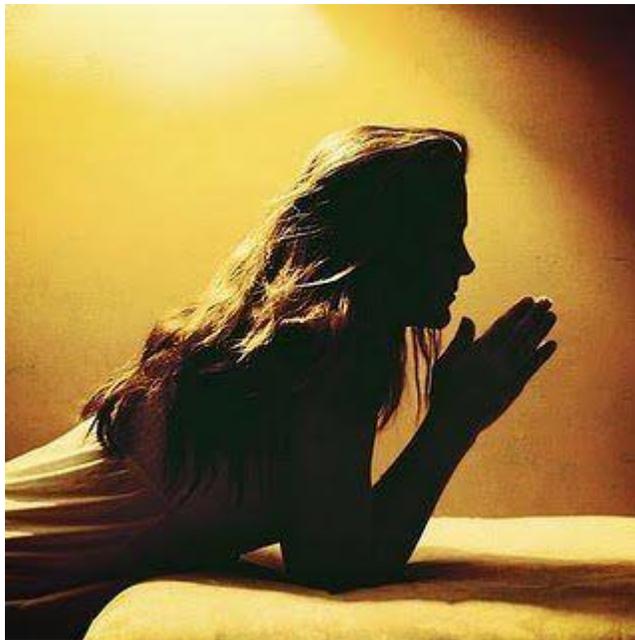
These aren't popular ways to live. They weren't when Jesus first introduced them; and they're not now! The call to self-giving is not one that many will choose to answer.

But it is how we who seek to be faithful to Christ try to live--which means, to the extent we are successful, we will be different from much of the world around us. Sometimes we forget this.

Here's what I think Paul is getting at. **Just being aware that these differences exist and that the gulf between believers and non-believers is growing can help us persevere.** We won't be caught off guard when people see us as being strange and maybe send a few insults our way. This happens when we choose the way of Christ.

2. So, what else will it take to Persevere? Remember You're Not Alone. Not being caught off guard helps, but we'll still need help to get through the challenging times we'll face.

There was a cartoon (IMAGE) in a friend's church newsletter. A woman is talking—you can only see her head. She begins: "So far today, Lord, I haven't criticized or found fault with anyone. I haven't spread gossip—I've tried to see only the good in people. I've been patient and kind—my thoughts have been loving and caring."



Then the picture widens, and we see the woman still in her night gown, sitting on the edge of her bed, saying, "but now that it's time to get up, Lord, I'll need all the help I can get." She's right!

Paul gives us some pointers on how to persevere. First, he tells of his own experience. Beginning with **v. 10**, he says, **“You... know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured.”** Then he confidently states: **“Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.”** (II Timothy 3:10-11)

Paul persevered. He went through the tough times and kept the faith. He finished his race.



You know, there are **lots of Christians who are great at 90-yard dashes**. **The problem is the finish line is a hundred yards out**. The final ten can be the toughest! You know how we are—we get tired. We want to quit. **Let somebody else run this race for awhile!** (IMAGE and CAPTION)

Who do you know, who do you look up to, because of the way they endured to the end? 1) Maybe they experienced great adversity, but maintained a radiant Christian witness through it all. 2) They made a costly commitment for the sake of Christ, and persevered.

3) These are the faithful souls who could use all the same excuses the rest of us do for not staying true to the Lord’s calling in their lives, but they don’t. 4) They go way beyond mere survival in their Christian walk, experiencing an abundance of life and joy in Jesus.

They have a confidence that they're not alone in their struggles. The Lord is with them, and by the grace of God, they persevere! What a blessed assurance this is, friends: "I can do all things through Christ who gives me the strength."

3. Where do we find this kind of confidence for our living? In his final words to us, the old Apostle encourages us to **(To Persevere) Draw Wisdom and Strength from Scripture.**

Listen to what Paul says in **verses 15 and 16 of chapter 3.** He speaks of **"...the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness..."**

One of our Lord's good gifts to us is Holy Scripture. Bible study—getting into the word of God and absorbing its truths because we understand that this Book is **a letter from God with our names on it. (IMAGE and CAPTION)** Knowing the Bible and believing its truths helps us persevere.

Years ago, I read a book on leadership by Max DePree, a very successful businessman. In the introduction to his book, DePree stated, **"You can read this book quickly, but I hope you cannot finish it quickly."** This was a book about business, but I had the thought, what a great description of the Bible.

God's word cannot be finished quickly. In fact, **a whole lifetime devoted to reading it and studying it will not finish it—for,** you see, as the written word of God, **the Bible never finishes with us!**

We have a tradition of giving all our first graders Bibles. Listen: if they're still studying those Bibles when they're ninety (and I trust they will be)—they still won't be finished. Paul is letting Timothy know—and us too—that we need to study God's word to persevere.

A growing, maturing knowledge of the Bible, received and incorporated into our lives by faith, sustains us! Providing, that is, we don't stop at knowledge alone. Paul issues a warning here that what we know about God and His word must also be acted upon.

4. So we arrive at a concluding word concerning perseverance, and here it is: **(To Persevere) Keep On Doing What You Can.**

Why do we study the Bible? Yes, for personal growth and knowledge; but there's more to it than that. Look at **v. 17: "so that the man of God (male or female) may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."** This, friends, is knowledge that's acted upon, and it's another vital aspect of perseverance.

We don't mention the names of our heroes as often as we once did, but one of our Baptist heroes is Annie Armstrong. She was a strong and tireless advocate for missions. On her tombstone is inscribed this simple epitaph: **"She hath done what she could."**

That's all the Lord expects of any of us—but listen: He does expect this! **The Lord calls all of us to do what we can with the life and strength, the gifts and abilities, the resources and opportunities He gives us.**

First Baptist Church, **the Lord has equipped you to do good work**—to do every good work that's needed—for our lives and for this church to be strong and effective for His glory. Each of you must decide what this means in your life—and then do it—and keep on doing it, as long as God gives you life and breath and strength. **The challenge is to keep at it, to not fall short, but to persevere to the end. God's word promises us** we can. It assures us **that He will sustain us until our race is finished, and our victory won!**

It won't always be easy—be aware. But know also that God will sustain you by His grace. He will enable you to do what's needed.

So remain in God's word, and stay committed to the work He's called you to do in His Kingdom, until, as Paul says it in our text for next Sunday, "the time for your departure is at hand."