

PERSEVERE TO THE END

The following quote is attributed to Calvin Coolidge.

Calvin Coolidge: Press on. Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not: nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not: unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not: the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.

More important for succeeding at what matters most
than talent, genius, education, luck, or good fortune
is the determination to persevere.

Refusing to
quit too soon,
give up too easily or
turn back because the obstacles are too great –
persevering when others give up
is a trait you will find in all truly great lives.

Nearly 2000 years ago a man named Jesus was coming to the conclusion of
his earthly life.

He had come into the world to do the Father's will.

And it had not been easy.

He was
misunderstood by the masses,
opposed by the powerful,
disappointed by those he trusted,
and ultimately,
deserted by those he loved.

Finally, he was nailed to a cross to die the most painful and shameful death
the Roman Empire could devise.

Look how he goes out.

John 19.28-30: Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Faithful to the end.

Faithful to his calling.

Faithful to his Father.

So faithful that he could

draw in a final breath,

push his feet down on that Roman spike, and

cry out triumphantly,

"It is finished."

"All that I was given to do,
all that my Father wanted,
all that humankind needed –
it is finished."

Why does Jesus continue to inspire men and change their lives
2 millennia after his death?

Not just because of his teachings,

but because of his triumph: he was faithful to the end.

The tendency is to quit too soon,

to give up when it gets tough,

and to give in when it gets costly.

Those who see it through,

who at the end of their lives can say

not just "It's over,"

but "It's completed, it's finished" –

those who remain faithful to the end are rare,

but those are the ones who live lives that are great –

lives that look like Jesus.

That's the calling of God upon your life –
 to be one the few who can say,
 “My responsibilities as a father,
 my vows of marriage,
 my calling,
 my mission,
 my life –
 completed,
 fulfilled,
 finished.
 Faithful.”

With this lecture we conclude our series,
 The Rules and When to Break Them.

Our last rule is this: Persevere to the end.

We learn this lesson from the example of Jesus,
 and also from the Scriptures.

Hebrews 12.1-2: Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And **let us run with perseverance** the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

James 1.12: Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

1 Timothy 4.16: Watch your life and doctrine closely. **Persevere in them,** because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Galatians 6.9: Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest **if we do not give up.**

It's a rule.

And it's important.

To live the life we are called to live and
 to accomplish all that God has given us to do,
 we must persevere.

Here's where we're going.

First, we're going to look at why we quit before we're finished.
And then I want us to look at when it's a mistake to persevere.

Why We Quit Before We're Finished

1. Pain

To finish what God has given us to do will be painful.
It will in some way be costly and
it will require some measure of suffering.
It will require that we say "no" to the easy way
and say "yes" to a way of life that is hard and difficult.
Nothing truly great has ever been accomplished without sacrifice.

Is there any way to be a godly father without paying a price?
Is there any way to be the husband you're meant to be
without putting your wife's needs before your own?
Is there any way to follow Christ
without taking up a cross and denying yourself?

Is there any way to live as an alien and stranger in this messed up world
and fulfill your calling
without being misunderstood, misjudged and mocked by others?
If there is, Jesus didn't know about it.
It got him all of that and a cross, as well.

What kept Jesus faithful to the end?

His mission.

Jesus was in the world to accomplish
something that mattered,
something that was truly important,
something he believed was absolutely essential.

His life was not about himself, his comfort, his happiness.
His life was about his mission.

He described that mission in a number of ways.
Here's one.

Matthew 20.28: The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

The opposition, the mockery, the attacks;
the persecution, the scourging and ultimately the cross –
why endure it all?

Because the mission was worth it.
To Jesus, the mission of saving us from our sins
was worth the pain he had to endure.

A survivor of the Nazi death camps,
the neurologist and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl said

Viktor Frankl: He who has a “why” to live for can bear almost any “how.”

If you want to persevere to the end,
you need to determine your “why” –
why are you here
and what do you believe you are here to do.

Are you here for the pleasures, the prizes and the approval of the world?
Or do you exist for a mission God has given you –
something that matters –
something that is truly important.

It may be small in the eyes of some.
Or even unseen by others.

But you know your why.
You exist to please God,
serve others,
bring people to faith in Christ and/or
or relieve their suffering.
You are here to father your children well
and/or to love your wife the way she deserves to be loved.

It's important that you know your mission.

Life will be painful.

To live it and to finish it well,

you will need a power that is greater than your pain.

And that power often comes from having a godly "why" –
a God-given mission you believe is worthy of your life.

Another reason that can keep us from persevering to the end is

2. Frustration

When it seems like

our efforts are not appreciated,

nothing we do is making a difference, or

no matter how hard we try,

we're not getting the results we want,

it's easy to give up

before we're finished.

Did Jesus ever feel this way?

I bet he did.

In John chapter 6,

he starts teaching some deeper truths,

and what happened?

John 6.60, 66-67: On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. Jesus asked the twelve, "You do not want to leave too, do you?"

People have listened to Jesus;

they have seen him perform miracles;

they have benefitted from his teaching.

And now he says something either they don't like or understand,
and they turn away from him.

I don't know if you feel how poignant this is,
but Jesus sees these people deserting him, and
he turns to his closest followers, and
he asks, "You're not going to leave me, too, are you?"

You give yourself to others,
you pour yourself out for them, and
they don't like something you say,
and all you've done for them –
it's like it never happened and they leave you.
That's more than frustrating.
It's discouraging.

Near the end of his life,
James and John get their mother to
come and ask when Jesus
if they can they have the places of honor
when he comes into his kingdom.

Three years of ministry,
teaching about humility and being a servant, and
three years of living that way as an example, and
they just don't get it.

The night before his crucifixion,
all twelve of his disciples are too proud to wash the others' feet.
So, Jesus does it.

His three closest followers,
he takes them with him to the garden that night,
and says, "I need you to pray for me, this is the toughest hour of my life."
And what do they do?
Three times they fall asleep on him.
And when the soldiers come to arrest him,
they desert him.

If I'm Jesus, I'm thinking what difference have I made?
 They don't understand;
 they don't care;
 they haven't gotten it;
 they don't care,
 they're the same losers they were 3 years ago
 when I met them.
 What difference will dying make?

These are tough moments.
 You try your best;
 you give all you've got.
 And you see no difference in your kids, in your spouse, at your job.

And it seems pointless
 and you want to throw in the towel and give up.

In those moments it's easy to feel,
 "Fine, then, I'll start thinking about myself.
 You don't appreciate me,
 you don't want what I have to offer, fine.
 You go your way;
 I'll go mine.
 And we'll see how well you do without me."

Why did Jesus see his ministry through to the end?
 Because he knew his task was to be faithful.

John 4.24: Jesus said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work."

Jesus knew that his purpose was to do the Father's will.

Whether people followed him or walked away.
 Whether his disciples got it or not.
 Whether what he did seemed to make a difference or
 even if it didn't.
 He couldn't control those things.

But he could do what he had been sent to do.
He could do the Father's will and fulfill his calling.

There are two times when it's really wrong to make
a huge, life-changing decision.
One is when you're on top of the world,
you're feeling ecstatic and
you think you have no limits.

The other is when you are frustrated and discouraged.
When you're down and disheartened,
it's very likely that you'll make a decision to give up and stop
long before you're finished.

Don't do that.
Take a break if you need to.
Get some rest.
Find a way to clear your head
and calm your heart.

But don't quit because you're frustrated.
Everyone who has ever accomplished anything of significance
has been discouraged and frustrated.
Persevere.
Be faithful.
Leave the results to God.

This last one is similar but a little different.

We can stop before we finish because of

3. Failure

Frustration is more about
people not responding or
not getting the results we want or
success being harder than it seems like it should be.

Failure is
 not performing,
 not getting the job done,
 making a mess of things,
 making a bad decision
 and now having a real problem on our hands.

Of course,
 you know this before I say it,
 failure is how we learn.

The problem is not that we fail;
 the problem is that we don't learn from our failures.

If we try to do anything worthwhile,
 anything of significance,
 it will be difficult and
 there will be a learning curve –
 which is a nice way of saying,
 we will fail.

Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers* talks about the 10,000-hour rule.
 It seems that to accomplish real mastery at a truly challenging enterprise,
 it takes about 10,000 hours.

He tracks the career of people like Bill Gates and the Beatles and chess
 grandmasters – people in all kinds of fields,
 and it takes about 10,000 hours of committed practice and activity
 before you become truly good at something.

Here's a brief clip from a talk he gave at the London Business Forum.

He has just used Fleetwood Mac as an example.

How they struggled for years to become the band
 that some of us know and appreciate.

Their greatest album, *Rumors*,
 he says, was their 16th.

That's when they really hit their stride.

This isn't the best quality, sorry.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPCOMtJL6vA>

0.4:13 (“This is actually something”) – 05.44 (Concerto #9, 271).

So, if that's the case,
 if to become a master at something it takes 10,000 hours
 and several years,
 there's going to be a lot of mistakes, bad performances and failures,
 before we get there.

Look at this quote from former Secretary of State
 and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of staff,
 four-star General Colin Powell.

Colin Powell: There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard
 work and learning from failure.

Failure is never fun.
 But that's part of its value.
 The unpleasantness of failing provides the impetus
 for getting better.

When we fail,
 we can lose heart or we can learn a lesson.
 We can become discouraged
 or we can become motivated.

People who improve, become successful and persevere to the end –
 whether it's at their job, doing God's work or
 being a husband and a father –
 they see failure differently than those who don't.

They don't think of failing as the problem.
 They realize that paying the price of failing
 and getting nothing back in return –
 that's the problem.

CEO – bad decision

You were created to live a great life.
 That doesn't happen quickly.
 That doesn't occur because you had early success
 or you knocked it out of the park once or twice.

It happens only if we are faithful over a long period of time
and we don't let pain, frustration or failure stop us.

So, should we always persevere?
I don't think so.

Times When We Should No Longer Persevere

1. When It's Not Working

When what's not working?
Your strategy for
changing your life,
fulfilling your mission, or
getting what you need.

When your strategy isn't working,
stop doing what you're doing and
change your strategy.

I don't mean
you're finding life to be difficult or
you're in a time that's going to be hard
because the road before you is long and challenging.
We're not looking for a quick or easy way out
of the struggle and the suffering that a great life requires.

I'm not saying,
You're not happy so you should
leave your marriage,
quit your job and
forsake your responsibilities.

I am saying,
if what you're doing isn't creating a truly full and successful life,
you should stop doing what is unproductive and change your strategy.

I heard John Maxwell in a seminar on church growth
 talk about a church that decided
 they were going to call 5000 people in their town and invite them to
 church.

They wanted to reach people and grow;
 and that's the strategy they came up with.
 This was when small towns had phone books
 with all their residents listed.
 And they did it.
 It took them a year,
 but they called 5000 homes.

When Maxwell asked them how many people came because of the calls,
 the answer was "two."
 He asked them what they were going to do in the future.
 Their answer was,
 "I guess we'll have to call 10,000 people next year."

No – it's not working.
 So, don't do more of it.
 Do something else instead.

You know the statement,
 If the horse is dead, dismount.

There's a difference between persevering and being hard-headed.
 Being hard-headed is thinking,
 "We've always done it this way,"
 or "it should work,"
 or "this is the Methodist or the Baptist or the Renfroe way –
 it's how we do things."

Persevering is working hard in spite of obstacles, challenges and opposition.
 Being hard-headed working the same way in spite of no results and no
 prospects of results.

Sometimes a parent will say to a child,
 “Son, when are you going to start doing what I’ve asked you to do.
 If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a hundred times.”

Let’s see.
 You’ve told the child what you want him to do a hundred times,
 and he hasn’t changed.
 And you think he’s the problem.

Evidently,
 he’s doing what he wants to do
 and getting away with it.

It’s you that has the problem
 and it’s you that isn’t getting what you want.
 And you think,
 if you tell him one more time,
 the same old thing the same old way,
 this time, time number 101,
 this will be the one that makes the difference and changes everything.

It’s not working.
 Don’t persevere in what you’re doing.

If you’re not getting what you want with your children, your wife, your job –
 if your life isn’t changing so that you’re more like Jesus,
 if you’re still anxious and depressed,
 if you’ve tried to stop drinking, looking at porn, spending too much,
 eating too much but nothing has changed,
 stop thinking if I just keep doing what I’ve been doing –
 louder, harder, more sincerely –
 things will get better.

Don’t persevere with that bad strategy any longer.
 Do something different.

That leads to don’t persevere

2. When You Need to Reflect and Learn

Your life will probably not change
 if you think about the same thing the same way – only harder.
 To see real change,
 you will probably need to think about the same thing
 in a way that's different.

See the problem the same way,
 ask the same questions about it,
 and you'll end up in the same place.

I have a bit that I do about asking “what” instead of asking “why.”
 It's a pretty good bit.

When you have real trouble in your life,
 asking “why me, why this, why now;”
 asking “why did you do this, God,
 or allow it to happen;”
 asking, “why do I have to go through this” –
 I tell people,
 getting stuck asking “why”
 will keep you stuck.
 Keep looking backwards asking “why”
 and you will stay back in the past.

But if you want to move forward,
 you need to ask, “What?”
 What can I do,
 given the circumstances?
 What's a positive step I can take forward?
 What would you have me do, Lord?

That's how you move forward.
 You stop asking why and you start asking what.

It's a decent bit
 and it makes a good point.

But there are times when we need to ask why.
When we have a recurring problem or issue in our lives,
we need to ask why,
reflect,
learn,
grow and
change.

I spoke with a woman last week.
She was getting divorced from her husband.
She was describing the problems in her marriage.
She said he was self-centered, controlling and verbally abusive.

In the middle of it she stopped and said,
“You, know, he was just like my first husband.
Basically, I married the same guy twice,
just with different names.
You probably think I’m stupid.”

No, I don’t think she’s stupid,
but I do think she needs to do some reflecting.
Why is she attracted to this kind of man?
Why does she have a need to be treated this way –
or at least a willingness to repeat this pattern.
Why was she unable to learn from her first marriage?

When we see a dysfunctional or destructive pattern going on in our lives –
or even a pattern that simply isn’t working –
we should stop and figure out what’s going on in us.

I know there’s something we used to call analysis paralysis.
It’s possible to spend so much time trying to figure out a situation
or engage in emotional naval gazing,
that we get stuck and never move forward.

But if we’re making the same mistake over and over –
or if we’re doing the same things and getting the same negative results –
we need to stop doing what we’re doing,
and take some time to reflect, learn and grow.

We need to ask the questions:

why am I repeating this pattern when it's obviously not working,
 how can I see this situation in a new way, and
 what can I do differently?

And it may be we need to talk to others

who can give us a different perspective or some fresh ideas.

Or even some new questions to ask about the situation.

You know the line,

keep doing what you've always done

and you'll keep getting what you've always gotten.

But it starts with:

keep thinking how you've always thought.

Even if you think more and harder,

if you keep thinking how you've always thought,

you'll keep doing what you've always done and

you'll keep getting what you've always gotten.

Don't think harder.

Think different.

Think better.

Do not persevere,

repeating the same behavior and getting the same negative results.

Instead, stop what you're doing,

spend time reflecting,

ask some new questions, and

learn a new way to handle the problem.

Do not persevere

3. When You Need to be Renewed

Some of you are good about life balance.

You work hard,

but you take time off to recharge.

Others of you,
you work hard,
nose to the grindstone,
and you don't take time to recharge and renew.

You may even be proud of that.
In fact, you may even look down on people
who don't work as hard as you.
They're not as tough as you
or as committed as you.

Or you may honestly believe the only way you can succeed
is to outwork everyone else.
So, you don't dare take much time off.
You've got no balance
and you're running on a deficit most of the time.

That's how people implode.
Do not persevere in that pattern.

Sometimes people will say,
"He was preaching to the choir."
Well, I'm preaching to the preacher.

I'm not really one to teach this point
about not persevering, nose to the grindstone,
because this is my pattern
and it has been for 38 years.
Working six or seven days a week,
and more weeks seven days than six,
probably 48 weeks every year.

So, I'm not one to teach this point,
except to say, it's not fun and it's not healthy,
and I'm in the process of making some changes.

Do you remember this passage from week 1 of this series?

Luke 5.15-16: The news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

People are coming to Jesus.
They have real needs.
They are diseased and lame
and they are asking Jesus to heal them.

And he says,
I have to take a break from people
so I can take care of myself.

I need to be refreshed and strengthened.
I need to be renewed spiritually and emotionally.
If I don't do this,
I won't have anything for others.

If Jesus could take a break,
you and I can take a break.
If Jesus **needed** a break,
you and I need a break.

Jesus took time for himself
to be renewed and recharged.
Not because he was selfish,
but because he was healthy.

We need to do the same thing.

Finally, do not persevere

4. When It's not for You

Not everything is for everybody.
You're not called to do everything.
You're not going to be good at everything.

You shouldn't try to do everything.

Here, I'm talking about how you serve God.

God has a mission for you,
a purpose for your life.

It's something truly important that you are meant to give birth to
and bring into the world.

And it's ok to say no to requests and opportunities to serve
that get in the way of your fulfilling your mission.

Buckingham and Clifton wrote a great little book titled
Now Discover Your Strengths.

It helps people understand how to succeed in their professional careers.
But the principles they teach apply to us and the kingdom work that God has
for us to do.

Buckingham and Clifton: To excel in your chosen field and to find lasting
satisfaction in doing so, you will need to understand your unique patterns. You
will need to become an expert at finding and describing and applying and
practicing and refining your strengths.

Look at that again from a spiritual viewpoint.

“To excel in your chosen field” –
to be fruitful, to be successful, to see real results
as you serve God and others

“And to find lasting joy in doing so” –
serving God in such a way that
you come alive inside –
for this to happen, you will need to do what?

“You will need to understand your unique patterns” and
“You will need to become an expert at knowing and employing your
strengths.”

If you are serving God
 and seeing no fruit, no real results;
 if you are serving God
 and experiencing little joy –
 it could be that you don't need to persevere in that form of service.

Ain't everything for everybody.

God has made you for a mission.
 He has given you gifts to be effective in that mission.

If you're serving and trying,
 but seeing no fruit and experiencing no joy,
 it could be you need to keep trying and get better.
 But it's also very possible
 that what you're doing isn't for you.
 It doesn't build on how God has gifted you
 and it's not his calling on your life.

If you're an introvert,
 it's ok to say no to a ministry that needs an extrovert.
 If you're gifted as a speaker,
 it's ok to say you don't do counseling.
 If you're great at administration and making things happen,
 it's ok to say you're not a teacher.

If you're passionate about working with children,
 it's ok to say you don't want to work with seniors.
 If you have a heart for missions,
 it's ok to say you're not going to spend much of your time
 doing anything else.

If you find yourself doing God's work in a way that's not a good fit for you,
 do not persevere out of a sense of duty or obligation
 doing something that's not you.

Find what you were made for,
 what God made you for,
 and do that.

Here's a quote from Howard Thurman,
one of Martin Luther King's mentors
that speaks directly to what I want to get across this morning.

Howard Thurman: Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself
what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs
is people who have come alive.

God has something for you to do
that will make you come alive and
that will bring his kingdom into the lives of others.

It will fit you because it will come out of who you are,
out of who God made you to be.

