The Practice of Growing
1 Corinthians 15:58
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I was so pumped about our Christmas Eve services that I arrived early and parked on the grass on our new property to make sure we had enough spaces available for our guests. When I drove in I stayed to the right like I was supposed to but then decided to hang a left. When I did I felt my front left tire begin to sink. I did what any cautious person would do and accelerated, thinking I could drive through the water-logged bog. Not a good plan. My right tire, not wanting to be left out, joined in the fun and sunk as well.

Since I was raised in the frozen tundra I decided to rock the car back and forth like you do when stuck in snow, putting it in drive and then in reverse. It didn’t work so well. I was going nowhere fast. I had created deep ruts and there was no way out.

I looked around to make sure no one was watching and headed to the building. I realized I couldn’t do anything about it so decided to leave my car until after the services were over. As some of our servants started arriving, I noticed a number were grinning at me. I thought they were just excited for the service. But then someone high fived me and complimented me on my park job and I knew the word was out.

I then saw one of our burly guys serving in the parking lot and discreetly handed him my key, begging him for help and asking him to keep it quiet. He smiled and said, “Sure thing!” It didn’t take long for the picture to be posted on Facebook with its own hash tag - #becarefulparking.

I was in a tough spot. I was stuck and was spinning my wheels. I couldn’t go forward or backward. I had created deep divots that were threatening to capsize my Cobalt. I was in a rut and there was no way out.

Do you feel a bit like that? Are you stuck in a rut? Just spinning your wheels? Are you embarrassed by your efforts, hoping no one will notice the situation you’re in?
Last weekend pastor Dan took us to 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 where we were reminded that most people live mediocre lives. Instead, we’re called to be motivated, to sacrifice, to stay focused and to live with discipline.

During the month of January, we’re going to focus on our second key value of our 4Gs – Gather, Grow, Give and Go. Today our title is “The Practice of Growing” from 1 Corinthians 15:58. Next week, we’ll look at “The Paradox of Growing.” In two weeks we’ll celebrate the sanctity of life from Exodus 1-2 in a message entitled, “The Posture of Growing.” The following week I’ll be out in California to visit two of our Go Team partners – John and Tiffany Markum with Life City Church in San Jose and Manuel and Kim Contreras in Fresno. Pastor Tim will be preaching on “The Purpose of Growing” and the following week on the “The Process of Growing.”

Let’s stand and slowly read our passage together. I’ll read it first so you can pick up on the pauses. 1 Corinthians 15:58: “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

We’re going to honor God’s Word by walking through this verse phrase-by-phrase. I spoke on this passage at the Appreciation Banquet for Pregnancy Resources last month and will be using the same outline. As we unpack this gift from God, I pray that you will be encouraged and motivated to continue your selfless service for our Savior in 2016.

The word “therefore” refers to all that is written in 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul spends 57 verses dealing with the reality of the resurrection and the certainty of our salvation. Just one verse earlier he says, “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” And the very first verse of chapter 15 introduces his argument: “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand.” He carefully defines the gospel and now at the end of the chapter he describes what gospel-centered living looks like.

Doctrinal declarations always lead to dutiful directives. Or to say it another way, we rise up and serve because Jesus rose from the grave. If Jesus was not resurrected, then nothing in life really matters. We see that in verse 14: “And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.” But since He did conquer death, Satan and sin, then serving Him matters
more than anything else. Belief must always affect our behavior; and our behavior is based on that which we believe.

Next, he refers to his readers in very intimate terms: “my beloved…” It’s amazing that Paul was so filled with so much love for this church when they had so many problems. They had personally dissed him, they were fighting with each other, they were tolerating sin, they had messed up the Lord’s Supper and they were misusing their spiritual gifts.

“Beloved” is from the root agape, and was spoken by God the Father at the baptism of Jesus: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.” In the little letter of Jude, we see this word used twice in the opening three verses. It’s an expression of endearment and refers to someone you are deeply devoted to. Friends, you are beloved by God. You matter to Him.

Notice the next word: “brothers.” This is from the Greek word adelphos. The prefix a speaks of unity and interestingly; delphos is the word for womb! We are brothers and sisters with the same Father and because of the new birth; we are from the same womb.

When I spoke at the Pregnancy Resources banquet I asked people to go around the room and shout out the name of the church they’re part of. Bill Orris kept track of the count and when we finished there were 40 churches represented. I then said: “So, 40 churches are here tonight, right? Let me do the math again. I call for a recount because that number isn’t accurate. While we’re part of a number of local churches, we’re actually members of one church!” I then leaned forward and said this: “Beloved brothers and sisters, we’re from the same womb as we stand up for life in the womb!”

I love encouraging and resourcing pastors because it reminds me that we’re on the same team. On Christmas Eve morning I sent a Facebook message to 16 of my evangelical pastor friends, more than half of whom minister in the QCA, encouraging them to preach the gospel boldly because we’re all in kingdom work together.

Earnest Exhortations

After writing, “Therefore, my beloved brothers,” Paul then gives us three earnest exhortations.
• Stand firmly
• Be stubbornly faithful
• Sacrifice fully

1. **Stand firmly.** Notice the little word “be.” This means to “come into existence, to cause to become, to prove yourself to be.” We’re being called to action. We see this in the command to “be steadfast.” It’s a present imperative, which means we’re to “keep on becoming steadfast.”

It refers to something settled and secure, not fickle or wavering. Because of gospel certainty we’re called to stand our ground. Paul writes something similar in Philippians 4:1: “Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.”

I read a post this week that was very helpful called, “10 Marks of a Mature Christian.” Here are four that stood out to me as it relates to standing firmly.

1. **The highs and lows of life don’t impact your relationship with God.**
2. **You find value in the daily-ness and trivial seasons of life.**
3. **You are at peace with situations beyond your control.**
4. **You understand Christianity does not have an on/off switch.**

This reminds me of the song, “Like a River Glorious.” “Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are fully blest, finding, as He promised, perfect peace and rest.” Are you stayed upon Jehovah?

We’ve heard a lot of bad news recently about how our society is sliding south and how believers are bailing on their faith. Last month seven of us attended a worship and technology conference in Nashville. One of the highlights for me was a session that Ed Stetzer led on missional living. Ed is the Executive Director of *Lifeway Research* and Senior Fellow of the *Billy Graham Center* at Wheaton College.

I learned that the religiously unaffiliated now make up 23% of the population. And there are three “categories” of people who call themselves Christians today—cultural, congregational and convictional. He pointed out that most “cultural” and “congregational” Christians are way more secular than Scriptural in their outlook.
They may self-identify as “Christians” but don’t order their lives around their faith convictions.

Convictional Christians strive to live according to Scripture. While “convictional” Christians once enjoyed “home field” advantage, our society has shifted. Christians have now been marginalized and classified as narrow-minded and judgmental, often by cultural and congregational Christians. I really liked his perspective when he said these words: “Though the sky is not falling, the ground is shifting.”

So, what do we do? We stand firm. And we live on mission by reaching out to others who are marginalized. Christians have always done better without home-field advantage anyway.

Sweet servants, steadfastly stay who God has made you to be. Students, as you prepare to go back to school or college, don’t blend in. Be bold. This next semester is a fresh start for you. Continue to live out your convictions. That leads to the next exhortation. When you stand firmly, you will be tested, teased and maybe even tortured…

2. Be stubbornly faithful. We see this in the word “immovable,” which has the idea of maintaining balance when a bunch of trouble comes your way. We’re not to be shaken when misunderstandings and the tides of culture come against us.

Studies show that those who read the Bible daily are more likely to become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. I’d go a step further and say that you won’t grow if you don’t know God’s Word. 1 Peter 2:2: “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation.” If you’re not reading the Scriptures regularly you’re basically saying that you don’t want to grow spiritually.

How many of you completed your goal of reading through the Bible in 2015? It’s not too late to start in 2016. We have reading plans on our website listed under the “resources” tab and printed copies in the racks off to your left as you leave today. If you have the YouVersion app on your phone or tablet, there are literally hundreds of plans to choose from.

I’ve read through the Bible many times but this year I’m doing something different. Here’s how it works:
2. Read it in its entirety.
3. Repeat step #2 twenty times.
4. Repeat this process for all the books of the Bible.

I’m reading the Book of Jude right now and when I’m finished I’m going to camp in the Gospel of Mark for a period of time. I’m asking God to make me fruitful and not frantic in 2016. Charles Spurgeon once said, “The way to do a great deal is to keep on doing a little. The way to do nothing at all is to be continually resolving that you will do everything.”


Here are some highlights: “Productivity is not what will bring purpose to your life, but what will enable you to excel in living out your existing purpose...you are not the point of your life. You are not the star of your show. If you live for yourself, your own comfort, your own glory, your own fame, you will miss out on your very purpose. God created you to bring glory to him.” I really like how he defines productivity: “Productivity is effectively stewarding my gifts, talents, time, energy, and enthusiasm for the good of others and the glory of God.”

We must stay grounded in God’s Word. Colossians 1:23 says, “…If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel…” I’ve been challenged to read my Bible in the morning before checking Facebook or my Twitter feed. I need to put my face in God’s book before scrolling through Facebook. Anyone willing to make that same commitment?

Dearly beloved believers; thanks for standing firmly in the gospel and for being stubbornly faithful. That’s leads to the final imperative: sacrifice fully.

3. Sacrifice fully. Look at the next phrase, “Always abounding in the work of the Lord.” “Always” means at all times, perpetually and continuously. “Abounding” refers to going over the top, to serve in excess. It’s the idea of exceeding the requirements, and was used of a river overflowing its banks (that’s happening right now, isn’t it?). 1 Thessalonians 3:12: “And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you.” To always abound means we’re to serve as much as we can, as often as we can, for as long as we can. And then serve some more.
How many of you have made New Year’s Resolutions for 2016? How many have already broken them?

LifeWay Research has found that when Americans make New Year’s resolutions, a better relationship with God ranks almost as high as better health. And for many groups, faith actually outranks health. Older Americans, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Christians are all more likely to say they’ve made more resolutions about their relationship with God than about health.

Every year I pull out Jonathan Edwards’ 70 Resolutions and marvel at how deep and profound they are. He made a practice of reviewing them once a week. I’ve posted them on the sermon extras tab on our website if you want to check them out.

Here’s his humble introduction: “Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God’s help, I do humbly entreat Him by his grace to enable me to keep these Resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to His will, for Christ’s sake.”

Here are just 6 of them:

1. Resolved that I will do all I think or say to the glory of God and not to take into consideration my own comfort, profit or pleasure.
2. Resolved if ever I shall fall and grow dull so as to neglect to keep any of these resolutions, I shall repent when I come to my senses again.
3. Resolved, never to do any manner of thing, whether in soul or body, less or more, but what tends to the glory of God.
4. Resolved, to live with all my might, while I do live.
5. Resolved, never to lose one moment of time; but improve it the most profitable way I possibly can.
6. Resolved, to study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.

This makes me think of Martin Luther’s resolve [show PPT]: “Resolved: that every man should live to the glory of God. Resolved second: that whether others do this or not I will.”

Let’s go back to our verse. Notice that we’re to always abound “in the work of the Lord.” Here are two thoughts.
• **We’re called to work.** Serving the Savior is not always easy. The word “*work*” refers to exerting energy.

• **It’s the Lord’s work.** We’re doing the work of the Lord; we’re not simply working *for* Him. He’s doing the work and we get to join with Him in what He’s doing! I like what Henry Blackaby says: “Instead of just asking God to bless what you’re doing, find out where God is at work and join him there.”

My dear brothers and sisters, I’m so moved by the depth of your devotion and your unwavering commitment to the work of the Lord! When I’m personally tempted to slow down or coast, the Lord brings Jeremiah 48:10 to mind: “*Cursed is he who does the work of the Lord with slackness.*” Romans 12:11 says: “*Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.*” Wherever you are, be all there!

D. A. Carson posted a profound quote this week: “*People do not drift toward holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.*”

It was Jim Elliot who said, “*He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.*” Missionary David Brainerd made this commitment: “*O I longed to fill the remaining moments all for God...I wanted to sit up all night to do something for God...Oh, how sweet it is to be spent and worn out for God!*”

This verse ends with a promise that we can *know* with certainty. The word “*knowing*” refers to being sure of something, to know intuitively, beyond a shadow of a doubt. What is it that we can be certain of? “*Knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.*” What we do *in the Lord* will last forever. The saying is true, “*Only one life, ‘twill soon be past, only what’s done for Christ will last.*”

We’ve already seen that we’re to abound in the “*work*” of the Lord and now Paul uses the word “*labor,*” which refers to distress and trouble and toil to the point of exhaustion. It initially meant to “*chop, cut down or strike.*” Paul uses this word in
his next letter to the church at Corinth in 2 Corinthians 11:27: “In toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.”

Super servants, as you serve the little, the least and the lost, know that your labor in the Lord “is not in vain!” As you live on mission in your home, to your neighborhood, at your workplace and in the community, you are making a difference! When you gather, grow, give and go you are bringing glory to God and doing good to others! Listen to the message given to King Asa in 2 Chronicles 15:7: “But you, take courage! Do not let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded.”

The word “vain” means “empty, aimless and hollow.” Solomon used this word 38 times in Ecclesiastes to show that life lived “under the sun,” from a human or horizontal point of view, is empty and futile. One of the saddest things to me is when someone gives his or her life to something that is aimless and ultimately empty. But a life lived under “The Son,” in full submission to Jesus Christ, is fulfilling and rewarding and worth living. There will certainly be pain in your labor, but if’s in the Lord, it will never be in vain!

Sometimes when we serve, we don’t get thanked. Some of you are serving in secret, but nothing is secret to the Savior. Several Mondays ago I came to church early in the morning and found Carl Jamison, one of our trustees, sweeping and mopping the kitchen floor. I thanked him and asked how often he did this. He smiled somewhat shyly and said, “I come in early every Monday morning.” My mind went to Luke 17:10: “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants, we have only done what was our duty.’”

If you’re wondering if it’s worth it, allow the words found in Galatians 6:10 to pour over you: “And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary.” Think of the words of reward when Jesus will say to you, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” No service for the Savior goes unnoticed by Him.

My fellow faithful teammates, I applaud you. Press on.

• Stand firmly
• Be stubbornly faithful
• Sacrifice fully

And so, my beloved brothers and sisters, “be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

Do you want to get unstuck in 2016? You’re going to need some help. If you don’t reach out you’ll stay in the same place. You’ll be stuck in a rut [show rut]. I needed help to get my car out. You’ll need some help as well. Friends can be helpful but the only way to be freed from the slop of sin is through a saving relationship with Jesus Christ!

When the guys got my car out they also took it to a car wash and then parked it in a space near the building. When Jesus gets you unstuck, He will also wash you from your sins, put you on a new foundation and change the direction of your life.

With Christ, forgiveness is instantaneous. And the ability to change course is also immediate.

What about you? Are you in a rut? Do you want out? Ask Jesus to save you from the muck and mire of your sins right now.

If not now, when?

Invitation

When I ended the message at the banquet I asked people to turn to the person seated next to them and read this verse as a blessing. I asked them to personalize it by using the name of the person: “My beloved [Ethel], be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” It was actually pretty funny because the guys really struggled saying “Beloved” to each other. I heard “Buddy” and “Friend” but not too many “Beloveds.”

I want us to end the same way right now. You may need to ask for the name of the person sitting next to you… and if you want to say Buddy instead of Beloved, that’s ok with me. I’ll keep the verse up on the screen so you can glance at it as you bless your neighbor.
Let’s leave with this verse on our lips, echoing in our ears, embedded in our hearts and then lived out through our hands and feet to the glory of God.

“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

And all God’s people said…AMEN!