

Praise Service – Sunday 12th July 2015
Newton Flotman – 7pm

Philippians 3:12-16.

Perseverance

Dictionary definition....

Continue steadfastly

Persist

Other ways to describe what we mean....

Keep on keeping on

Stickability

We experience ups and downs, dry seasons – times of doubt in certain areas
(current series addressing the doubt issue)

But how do we really prepare ourselves for the long haul? Or as Eugene Peterson puts it: 'A long obedience in the same direction'

Check our commitment

I took a wedding in Norwich yesterday. I know the couple fairly well. The groom works with Tim and we've been out with them socially...

As they pledged to remain faithful to one another until parted by death and then made their vows, they echoed words spoken by countless couples over the years - in churches throughout the land

They are relatively few words

they are simple words

easy to understand

But a huge commitment.

When we commit our lives to Jesus – it isn't usually done in quite so formally or in such a public setting – I prayed a prayer of commitment alone in my room (Baptism often as a baby – so no memory of it – and that's an occasion when promises are made on our behalf)

Confirmation gave me the opportunity to express those vows with my own lips in a public and formal setting.

What is our commitment?

We commit our lives to following Christ,
it's a 24/7 thing
a for better or for worse
in sickness and in health kind of vow and promise

Christian marriage is a picture of the relationship between Christ and the Church

Commitment in marriage is closely linked with love. In our culture people tend to fall in love before deciding to commit to one another in marriage. In cultures where arranged marriage is the norm (and it still happens!) the couple marry - often as strangers – they've never met before - but it is their obedience to the commitment made in marriage that often becomes the vehicle for the development of genuine love.

So a chicken and egg situation maybe... the point is that whether we come to Christ in the flush of (if you like) romantic love, or whether our faith has grown out of love which grew through obedience to Christian lifestyle, principles and moral teaching – either way we need to nurture the relationship through paying attention to both 'romance' – ie worship and commitment – obedience – faithfulness.

We must be resolved to stand by our vows no matter the obstacles and no matter the cost. With that decision firmly settled in heart and mind we are ideally placed for the journey ahead.

Get real with God – we cannot keep up a long term healthy relationship unless it is real.

The psalms often include shockingly angry outbursts against enemies or even against God. And we often excuse them for being pre-Christian.... written before the birth and teaching of Jesus....

However, the psalms were written by those who had access to the writings of the Torah

You shall not hate your brother in your heart....you shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself

Leviticus 19:17-18

If you meet your enemy's ass or his ox going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the ass of one who hates you lying under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it, you shall help him to lift it up.

Exodus 23:4-5

He had Proverbs

Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles

Proverbs 24:17

Not that different from Jesus teaching to 'love your enemies'

So we shouldn't make excuses for the psalmist's vindictiveness. Instead we should admire its energy (for that's a sign of life!) and boldness in being totally open and real before God. This is raw honest emotion. And when we express such feelings – one thing is certain – we believe God is there. We are engaging with God – in the heat of the moment. And that can be really helpful!

It is apathetic and sluggish neutrality that is death to perseverance and acts like a virus in the bloodstream, bringing a creeping paralysis to the muscles of discipleship.

If we always make excuses for hypocrisy (our own or others) and regularly rationalise the actions of the wicked – we will be in danger of losing a sense of opposition to sin. We will erode the sharpness of conscience until it becomes a smooth and reassuring talisman of self-righteousness instead of an uncomfortable dig in the ribs – the flashing red light which warns of sin.

Let's be careful we don't abuse grace so that it becomes a means of losing our edge and slipping into bland belief and half-baked holiness.

It is in the things we care about that we are capable of expressing anger. A parent sees a child run out into the road and narrowly miss being hit by a car. They yell angrily at the child and at the driver. The anger may not be the most

appropriate expression of concern – but it is evidence of concern – of love. Indifference would be somehow inhuman.

So with the psalms. They are not sung by perfect pilgrims. They made their mistakes. Just like we make our mistakes.

Perseverance does not mean 'perfect' – perseverance means that we keep going. We don't give up when we realise that we're not yet mature and

there's a long way ahead of us...

Our yelling is often (though not always!) an indication that we care. And if we need to express our concerns/frustrations/anger to God – then we remember that he can take it – and it will never catch him by surprise since he knows the secrets of our hearts and every word we utter before it reaches our lips.

Perseverance is not a desperate resignation – putting up with the way things are – staying in a rut or being a doormat.

Perseverance is a journey from strength to strength.

The occasional outburst is not necessarily unwise.

We don't learn perseverance by swallowing our outrage – burying heads in the sand in devoted denial. Nor do we make fantastical excuses for sin as if it were totally harmless... instead we offer our anger and outrage to God who trains us in love and grows perseverance in us.

Beware apathy – spiritual sloth

This is not about physical laziness but spiritual listlessness. joylessness when faced with God as our supreme joy... the blahs in a big way. Sloth can be a crippling spiritual disease. The church at Laodicea was infected with it:

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

Rev 3:15-16

Apathy causes a rupture in our relationship with God. It isn't like pride – which responds to God with a defiant “No” – sloth responds with a quiet but deadly “yeah – whatever”

The initial glow of coming to faith has faded. The road ahead looks long, dusty and tedious. The realisation sinks in that walking with Jesus for the long haul is going to take quite a bit of inconvenience not to mention discipline. The raw reality of spiritual life hits and rather than pushing through this tedium and resisting it – the slothful person looks for a way around it.

Some of the symptoms of a slothful “whatever” lifestyle...

Restlessness – beware restlessness!

One of the signs of Christian maturity is stability. A readiness to remain fruitful and attentive to God right where we are. Psalm 1:3 likens this person to a tree “planted by streams of water” ...

In contrast the slothful/apathetic believer often has a restless or rootless spirit. Sloth produces a dislike for the place where we are (maybe our church, small group, relationship or job) and contempt for the people in that place. The slothful person then blames those people for his/her own lack of spiritual progress and starts to dream of the ideal place, where everyone will be energising and inspiring...

This is a shifting of blame – an avoidance of responsibility for our own spiritual development and maturity.

Sometimes God does prompt us to move on – but be careful that we’re not making excuses – that the lacklustre experience we’re having isn’t just a test – if we choose to stand firm and take the test – and we’re successful then we will have made progress – which means we get awarded a degree! (We move from one degree of glory to the next!)

Beware addiction to busyness!

We often immerse ourselves in a frenzy of activity. But sloth can sometimes trick us by disguising itself under a rush of physical activity. I think that’s called ‘avoidance tactics!’

Mary’s sister, Martha is a classic example. Her activity became a distraction, a flurry of fluff that propelled her backward in her journey with Jesus. Rather than focusing on the Lord, her tasks became her priority. Jesus rebuked her and gently told her to imitate her sister’s attention to His presence.

We need the spiritual disciplines – spending time at Jesus feet, listening to his teaching as we read the Bible and pray. We need to do this regularly and often. Maybe investing a fair amount of time in this waiting in His presence.

Funny how other demands seem to grow when we need to seek solitude and silence to be with God.

Perhaps we could consider crafting ourselves a 'Rule of Life' – a simple outline as a basic discipline for our spiritual life.

It could include the time or times of day we will give to Bible reading and prayer

It could include a Bible reading plan – daily

Maybe a goal to aim for – such as an increase in our giving or some area of service

Maybe a list of Christian books to read

Something tangible to aim for.

Just as some people find it helpful to have a visual aid for prayer – candle, icon, beads – so having a formalised Rule of Life can motivate us to keep on keeping on – and develop our devotional habit so that it really is habit – and will take us through the dry times

The key to success

The real secret weapon is to be determined to work through difficulties rather than running from them. We need stick-to-it-ive-ness – hang in there!

Eugene Peterson says:

Everyone is in a hurry. The persons whom I lead in worship, among whom I counsel, visit, pray, preach, and teach want short cuts....they are impatient for results.

That is actually the spirit of sloth. Resisting it requires the cultivation of its opposite – a spirit of patient endurance. Peterson calls it 'a long obedience in the same direction'

James reminds us how blessed are those who persevere (stand firm/remain) under various trials:

The testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything....blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

James 1:3-4,12

The author of Hebrews instructs us to shake off a spirit of sluggishness.

We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

Hebs 6:11-12

Thankfully it isn't our job to go it alone. God himself is the one who can strengthen us with his power through the Holy Spirit. We only have to ask and we will receive.

By persevering we may be on the edge of a new level in our spiritual journey.

The early saints who battled spiritual sloth – apathy – said its conquest brings 'deep peace and inexpressible joy'

God promises:

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

Gal 6:9

As we walk through our struggles and stick with our God-given callings, we experience a joy that Jesus likened to a great banquet.

So even if – at this point in time – your commitment to Jesus, your devotions, your Christian walk, don't feel like a feast, stick with it. Don't run away or be tempted to go around the edge. Be faithful to God's call and he will lead you to the banquet table – there is a place set for you.

Amen