

Crosswalk: How To Live As Followers Of Jesus Christ

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.
(Romans 12:1 ESV)

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
(Ephesians 4:1-3 ESV)

Persevere

August 19th, 2018

1 Corinthians 15:1-2

Hebrews 3:7-4:13

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to 1 Corinthians 15:1-2; that's on page 961 in your pew Bible. This is our 8th week now talking about life on the other side of the cross and we've been operating under this assumption that we see frequently in the Bible that how you respond to the message of the cross reveals whether or not you have properly received the message of the cross. If you have really and truly experienced the forgiveness of God in the cross of Jesus Christ then you are going to be impacted by that – you are going to be propelled by that in the direction of showing grace and mercy to other people. We talked about that. Forgiven people forgive.

And if you have really experienced the LOVE of God in the cross of Jesus Christ – that's going to make an impact on you too. That is going to PROPEL you in the direction of showing love, compassion and care to other people. Loved people love.

The cross of Jesus Christ makes an impact.

It changes you and it propels you necessarily and inevitably in certain predictable directions.

Today we are talking about the last of those – we are talking about perseverance. In this passage we are going to read Paul says that if you get the Gospel then you persevere in the Gospel. If you see Christ on the cross then you press through your various difficulties and you endure in the faith by which you were saved.

That's what he says; let me read it to you. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 1:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, 2 and by which you are being saved, **if you hold fast to the word I preached to you**—unless you believed in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:1–2 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

So according to the Apostle Paul there is such a thing as a false start in the Christian life. There are people who hear the Gospel and seem to respond positively to it. They raise their hand. They come down the aisle. They sign the commitment card. Maybe they even get baptized. They attend faithfully for a month or even a year or even two – but in the end, under pressure, they fall away. If they do then according to the Bible that proves that they believed in vain – they believed UNSAVINGLY. They did not get it and we know that because they walked away.

Jesus taught the same thing in the parable of the sower. He talked about people who made a good start but then because they had no depth in themselves eventually they fell away.

This is not a controversial teaching – and this has nothing to do with Calvinism. As Roy Ciampa says here:

“Those who believe in the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints and those who reject that doctrine both agree that people who do not persevere in the gospel have no true claim on its promised blessings and benefits.”¹

So we're not getting into the controversial stuff today – we are dealing in middle of the road Bible basics. In the Bible – according to Paul and according to Jesus – there is such a thing as a false start in the Christian faith. Such false faith – initial faith – non-persevering faith – is not saving. If you walk away from the cross of Jesus Christ then you didn't get it because if you get it

¹Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 744.

– if you understand what just happened there – if you understand what Jesus purchased for you there – if you understand what Jesus ENDURED for you there – then you persevere. You press through come hell or high water.

That's what the Bible says.

So what does that look like and what can we do to grow it, nurture it and protect it in our Christian lives? Those are the questions I want to work our way through in the time that we have together.

First of all then, what does it look like?

What Does Perseverance Look Like?

How can we tell the real faith – the persevering faith from the one that falls away? I think the first thing we'd want to say is this:

1. It presses through initial challenges and difficulties

When you first become a Christian there are always some challenges to be overcome. Maybe it is a relationship that needs to be adjusted. Maybe you are living with your boyfriend and you need to decide whether you are going to get married or go your separate ways. That's difficult. That's hard – there's no way around it!

Or maybe it's a destructive habit or activity. Maybe you were a drug user before you came to Christ and now you need to let that go and that can be a real challenge too.

Here's all I'm saying: real believers press through that stuff. They do what needs to be done. They've found the pearl of great price and so they let go of lesser things in order to hold onto that which is of infinite value.

The second thing I think we would want to say about persevering faith is that:

2. It processes offense, drama and disappointment within the family of God

As a new believer – and even as an older believer – the sheer silliness, clumsiness and sinfulness of brothers and sisters within the Christian community can be overwhelming. New believers often come into the church and expect to encounter highly sanctified, very mature, exceedingly wise men and women of faith. And instead they tend to meet me and you. Right? Deeply flawed, tragically broken, constantly erring fallen human beings. Welcome to the Family of God! The church is not a Museum for Perfect People – it is a hospital for sinners in process and real believers get that. Eventually – after some initial disappointment – real believers get that.

But false believers don't.

Offense takes out more false believers than just about anything I can think of. I can't tell you how many people I've met people who have left the church and left Christ because they were disillusioned by all the flawed people that they met in church. Now listen – I'm not giving us permission to be sinful – and I'm not saying that our hypocrisy isn't a real burden to the growth of new believers. It is. We should know that. The slower we grow as members here – the harder it will be for the new folks coming in. So you and me getting ourselves in order is an act of compassion on the new people.

But even still – a real believer will not be fatally affected by flawed brothers and sisters. They will realize pretty quick that those people are here because like you they are terrible sinners in need of mercy, grace and help from Jesus Christ. They're here for the same reason you're here – so chill out. Be patient with us – like you we're coming from way off the tracks. We have a past, we have problems, we have issues and we are in process. So it can get messy in here – but real believers find a way to press through that.

The third thing I think we would want to say about persevering faith is that:

3. It grows through trials, tribulation and even personal trauma

Jesus never said that becoming a Christians would shield us from the general brokenness of the world. On the contrary, he said:

In the world you will have tribulation. (John 16:33 ESV)

You will have difficulties. You'll get sick. You'll experience tragedies, set backs and disappointments. This is a fallen world and you are saved in it but you are not saved out of it – not yet. For now we are saved people in a broken world and therefore we are not exempt from human suffering.

Very practically, that means that Christians get cancer at the same rate as unbelievers.

Christians have babies with birth defects at the same rate as unbelievers.

Christian teenagers die in car accidents at the same rate as unbelievers.

All creation groans, Paul says in Romans 8 and we ourselves groan along with it.

The cross does not exempt us from suffering.

The cross is not about being avoiding pain.

The cross is not BUBBLE WRAP or an AIR BAG or A GET OUT OF JAIL FREE CARD.

The cross is about wiping away sin so that you can be again a son or a daughter of God – first in this world – and then in the next. The cross actually seems to promise suffering for the saved man or woman. When Jesus said take up your cross and follow me – it doesn't sound like he is promising a pain free life. It sounds like he is showing us a way through pain, through suffering, through trauma and up into blessing and glory on the other side.

You see, real faith actually gets stronger through personal suffering. Real faith reaches out for strength to endure and receives it. Paul says it is pressed but not crushed. It is perplexed but not driven to despair. It is struck down but not destroyed – why? Because it is:

always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. (2 Corinthians 4:10 ESV)

Are you hearing that? The real believer has internalized the cross of Jesus Christ – they GET IT – and therefore they grow through it when pain and suffering comes their way.

Real faith – persevering faith – presses through – GROWS THROUGH trials, tribulations and even personal trauma.

The fourth thing I think we would want to say about persevering faith is that:

4. It sorts through confusion, distortion and false teaching

I want to say this very carefully: I don't think that false teaching "unmakes" a new Christian – rather I think that false teaching reveals a non-Christian. That seems to be what Paul is saying in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12. He says:

The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 ESV)

Are you hearing that? Paul says that God allows a certain amount of deception, distortion and false teaching in order to ensnare those who refuse to love the truth. In essence he gives them what they want in order to reveal them as they are.

I think what the Bible is saying here is that if you love the truth then you won't be taken in by error.

And I think that makes sense if you think about it. If you GET the cross – if you LOVE the cross - then you aren't going to be taken in by the Prosperity Gospel are you? I mean, how could you look at the cross – where Jesus died NAKED, DESPISED and ABUSED and turn from there to embrace the message that God only wants his people to be happy, healthy and prosperous. I mean how do you go from NAKED AND POOR to HAPPY AND RICH? How does that even make sense? How are those things logically connected? That's a lie that is so stupid you have to really want desperately to believe it.

And that is what Paul is saying here. God permits these deceptions so as to ensnare those who do not love the truth. If you love the real Gospel then you won't be falling for that nonsense. Real faith – persevering faith – is going to sort through that stuff and discard anything that does not naturally conform to the cross of Jesus Christ.

Then lastly, the 5th thing I think we would want to say about persevering faith is that:

5. It survives insult, injury and formal persecution

Right now in Canada we are just getting onto the on ramp of religious persecution. Most of us are still living down at the insult stage. We have to press through a little bit of mockery, disdain and marginalization. But real injury is coming – some folks are experiencing it already. Some doctors, some lawyers, some teachers, some Foster Parents – we are just starting to pass through insult into injury – and already the ranks are starting to thin out. You are starting to hear the reports – church attendance is going down across the country – people are starting to duck and cover. Makes you wonder what will happen if we pass from injury into full blown formal persecution.

The reality is that God periodically allows the church to go through seasons of serious pruning. It has happened all throughout our history. Sometimes persecution only makes us stronger. We love the stories of how the early Roman Christians endured horrible brutality under Nero and then later under Domitian. They were eaten by lions and put on the rack and set on fire in Caesar's Garden and STILL they held fast their faith and love for Christ.

It was remarkable. It was inspiring!

But it hasn't always been that way.

There are bad stories too.

Not many people know that Egypt was once one of the major centres of gravity within the Christian world. There was a large, vibrant Christian presence there right up until the 14th

century, but then it collapsed - almost overnight under intense pressure and formal persecution.

Historian Philip Jenkins puts it this way. He says:

“The events of 1354 reached an alarming new intensity. Mobs demanded that Christians and Jews recite the Muslim profession of faith upon threat of being burned alive. The government struck at churches and confiscated the estates of monasteries, destroying the financial basis of the Coptic Church. And unlike in previous conflicts, the persecution now reached the whole country, rather than being confined just to Cairo. Under increasingly violent conditions, many Christians accepted Islam, in a massive wave of conversions.”²

We don't tell that story very often, but it is, unfortunately, true and it begs the question: why did some Christians sing the praises of Jesus from the very fires of persecution while others converted to Islam under the exact same terms and conditions?

And the answer, according to the Bible is simple. Because some faith is real and some faith is false. Some faith is heart deep and some faith is skin deep and persecution, very often, is the only thing that shows you which is which.

Jesus said that this would be the ultimate test of our claims to have faith in him. He said:

“they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake.... But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Matthew 24:9–13 ESV)

According to the Bible – according to Jesus – saving faith is persevering faith. It is faith that goes through the fire.

So how do you know if you have it?

Now of course you never know if you have it until you are tested. God gives us the grace when we need it – not when we don't. So you can't just sit here and look inside yourself to discover whether you have faith to go through the fire. We can't know that – and we won't know that until we're tested.

Our job then is to make sure that we are growing, cultivating and encouraging that kind of faith in this place.

² Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History Of Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 97-98.

Now maybe some hyper-Calvinists will be offended by that kind of talk. They'll say "Pastor, you are speaking crazy here. Perseverance is a gift from God! He gives it to all who are truly saved. So you either have it or you don't and there is no point in talking about how to grow it or protect it because we can't do what only God can do."

Maybe you are thinking that – and if you are let me tell you, politely and lovingly that you are wrong. Even John Piper – today's most famous Calvinist spokesperson – argues that we need to do what we are about to do here today. In his book the "Five Points" – which sounds pretty Calvinistic – he says this:

"The ministry of the gospel in every local church must contain many admonitions to the church members to persevere in faith and not be entangled in those things which could possibly strangle them and result in their condemnation."³

So John Piper – the very Calvinist John Piper – agrees that we need to be doing what we're about to do now. We need to talk about what we can do to develop, grow and encourage persevering faith in this place.

How To Nurture And Develop Christian Perseverance:

All of these suggestions are drawn from the Book of Hebrews, chapters 3 and 4. You should probably turn there now. We don't have time to read the whole section but I am going to pull all these points, in order, from that text so if you want to have it open I think that would probably be helpful.

The first thing you can do as an individual is this:

1. Guard your heart

Look at verses 7-8 of Hebrews 3; the Apostle says:

7 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice,
8 do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness,
9 where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years.

³ John Piper, *Five Points* (Geanies House: Christian Focus Publications, 2013), 69.

10 Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.'

11 As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.'"

12 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. (Hebrews 3:7-12 ESV)

The Apostle there is referring to a story in the Old Testament about when the Israelites were in the desert and the drinking water was running short and the people began to grumble against the Lord. They quickly forgot how he had set them free from Egypt. They quickly forgot all his power as demonstrated in the 10 plagues, they quickly forgot how he had led them safely through the Red Sea and they started saying in their hearts: What have you done for me lately?

That's all in the past Lord – I'm talking about today!

Where is my blessing today God? Where is my healing today God?

I need it now and if you don't deliver it then I won't believe.

Wow! According to Hebrews – that is a very dangerous thing to say in the privacy of your own heart.

So, brothers and sisters, make sure you never think things like that.

Make sure you never sit in judgment on God.

Make sure you never think that he works for you – because he does not. He is God in the heavens. This is his world. You are his creature. And he can do whatever he pleases.

A hard heart is an arrogant heart. A judging God heart. A not being thankful heart. A not remembering your place heart. A not seeing the cross heart.

Don't be like that.

Guard your heart and be careful what you allow yourself to think because according to the Bible falling away – starts right in here.

2. Remain in close community

Look down there at verse 13:

But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Hebrews 3:13 ESV)

Work together on this! Encourage one another! Correct one another! Perseverance is a group project, so remain in close community.

The people who pull away generally don't persevere – that's been my experience as a pastor. Maybe they pull away because they were offended, maybe it was because their kids got super involved in a Sunday morning sport, maybe it was because they bought a cottage – I don't care and the devil doesn't seem to care either. He doesn't care why you leave the herd he just sees that you did and like the lion that he is he preys on the weak and the foolish.

So you need us friend and we need you. Perseverance is a team sport, so commit to close community.

3. Keep pressing forward

In Christianity you are growing or dying. You are pressing forward or you are falling away. There is no coasting. There is no off season. There is progress and there is death. So make your choice. Look at chapter 4:11:

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. (Hebrews 4:11 ESV)

Oh you say, “Pastor, I am a Christian – I'm a person of faith. I don't do striving.” Hmm. Well then you don't do Jesus, because Jesus said:

“Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.” (Luke 13:24 ESV)

Many will fumble about looking for the door but then get tired and take a little break and sit down for a bit – and GET BLOWN AWAY. There is no sitting. There is no break. There is no summer off. There is striving and there is dying. You press forward or you fall away. That's what the Bible says.

4. Submit to the scrutiny of the whole Word of God

Look at chapter 4:12:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12 ESV)

Wooh! That sounds invasive doesn't it? It means to. If you want to survive, if you want to grow and move forward and persevere in your Christian faith then you need to submit to the scrutiny of the whole Word of God. It's like an X-ray machine. You've got to read all of it, you've got to sit under the preaching of it so that it can press into you and poke you where you are out of shape and out of line.

And God won't tie you down. You need to hold yourself in place. So don't run when it starts to hurt. It supposed to hurt sometimes. The Word of God wounds in order to heal. You submit to the process or you die from the poison that resides deep inside the human heart.

That's the deal and there's no way around it.

Then fifthly and lastly, if you want to persevere then meditate faithfully on the person and work of Christ.

5. Meditate on the person and work of Christ

Look at verse 14 of chapter 4:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. (Hebrews 4:14 ESV)

Man oh man, he says, think about what Jesus did for us. Think about what he is doing for us right now. Think about what he has opened for us through his life, death, and resurrection and ascension – think about that. And then tell me friend, why would you ever even dream of going anywhere else?

Because of some trouble? Because of some tribulation? Some disappointment? Some affliction? Some fire even?

You don't need to turn away because of those things – you need to draw near. That's what he says and that's where we'll end. Look at verse 16 of chapter 4:

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:16 ESV)

Are you going through a hard time? Are you feeling pressed, persecuted and harassed? Don't let go of the cross. Don't walk away from Christ.

Draw near.

Press in! Come boldly to the throne of grace that you may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. The Lord knows what you are going through, he knows what you are dealing with, he understands that pressure and he knows how to hold you fast.

That's a promise! That's a certainty because this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!
Let's pray together.