

Galatians 6:6-10

Jan. 30, 2022

1 Cor. 1:4-9, 26, 30-31

Hebrews 10:19-25

Plod On

Two weeks ago, I spoke about starting the New Year right - with determination to trust the Lord as we move through an uncertain future. God's strength is available to us for each day we face ... every kind of day we face ... and to the end of our days.

Last week we were reminded that putting our faith in Christ means to focus on the one thing needful which is to remain fixed on the heavenly goal of life in Christ. St. Paul said, *...one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus*, Phil. 3:13-14. It's not 20 things I do, but the one thing of prime importance - a "holy aspiration" to be made anew and whole in Christ Jesus. That is how we end well.

The author of the letter to Hebrews says this: *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...* Hebrews 12:2. This concentrated gaze steers us to arrive at the right place. In my elk hunting experiences I learned that I walk in circles. I discovered when I walked through thick woods, where I couldn't see distant landmarks, that if I didn't regularly consult my compass I was veering to the left. Without that compass I'd miss my rendezvous with fellow hunters.

Ever feel like your life is going in circles? What direction are you headed? To realize our rendezvous with Christ requires a holy habit of soul. What fills your gaze? What occupies your time? The disciplines of worship, Bible reading, prayer, attending a small group for study and support, all serve as a compass to keep our gaze on Jesus amid the many distractions of life.

Sharing His Victory

We have to begin well in order to end well. Start by realizing in your own life the eternal value of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, freeing you from the bondage of sin. Theologians speak of this as the "finished work" of Jesus Christ - meaning that on the Cross He completed God's work of redeeming us from our fallen, sinful state. St. Paul writes *...And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him*, Ephesians 2:6. From God's point of view we already share in the victory He won through his death and resurrection. And someday when we see Christ, all that is His will become ours because we are "joint-heirs" with Jesus.

But what about now? In between the beginning well and the ending well is the "keeping on" part. That's often the hardest part. Many of you have seen a grave stone in which is chiseled the name of the deceased; below you will see his/her birth and death dates. The dash between the years is what I'm talking about (and in coming weeks) - the "in between" part of this Christian life. How we live between our birth and our death makes all the difference in the world and really steers our course in life.

Keeping On

Do any of you feel raised up or seated in heavenly places? It's hard to believe when most of us are slogging through the mud of daily reality. But that's where our faith in Christ meets the test.

Sometimes we can grow weary of the Christian life. These days it seems as though many people in N. America are losing interest in the Christian faith and life. There are a number of reasons for this growing apathy. One reason may be due to the short attention span that permeates our culture. When so much emphasis is placed on instant and immediate results and gratification, the Christian life that rests on a long-term yearning and striving for life in Christ, does not appear attractive. Communion with the eternal God, the timeless One, does not find completion in a matter of minutes, days, months ... but more likely in a lifetime of seeking His glorious face.

St. Paul wrote to the Philippian Christians about pressing on to what lies ahead. If you're like me it's more like "plodding on." Nevertheless, if I'm headed in the right direction I'll get there. One of my favorite Bible verses, one whose repetition has inspired me to keep plodding on for Christ, is Galatians 6:9, *Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we shall reap at harvest time if we do not give up.*

John Wesley once said, "The mind does not see either the beauties or the terrors of eternity, because they are so distant from us. It is as if they had no existence. Meanwhile, we are wholly taken up with things present till our nature is changed by grace." In other words, we are easily consumed by the immediate cares of this world and hardly give a moment's thought to eternity. But once we realize our salvation in Christ and the Holy Spirit's work to reshape our souls, we begin to see God's hand in our daily struggles; we begin to choose things of eternal value rather than fleeting pleasure; and we begin to understand how God is renewing our nature in our ordinary days. It's not just that in Him we can be exonerated of our misdeeds ... it's more ... it's that in His strength we can resist the temptations to sin and gradually be renewed into a nature more like His. That's a long haul!

"The truth is this: The march of Providence is so slow and our desires so impatient; the work of progress so immense and our means of aiding it so feeble; the life of humanity is so long, that of the individual so brief, that we often see only the ebb of the advancing wave and are thus discouraged. It is history that teaches us to hope,"- Robert E. Lee. Much of what we read in the O. T. is history - the history of God's involvement in human affairs and especially with a people He chose to witness to His purpose. We still read the words of the O. T. prophets because they speak of God's actions in history on behalf of His people. Their words are a source of hope, as we remember how God works in human history to shape us toward His perfect purposes.

Christian Vocation

Theologian Charles Cummings wrote a book years ago (1982), aptly titled, *The Mystery of the Ordinary*. In it he writes about Christian faith in relation to hearing, seeing, walking, resting, standing up, eating and drinking, and even hurting.¹ The Bible, the foundation for Christian theology, makes this link with stories of personal, everyday experiences where God is involved. Still, many Christians struggle to reconcile their

¹Charles Cummings, *The Mystery of the Ordinary* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1982), vii.

professed belief with their daily lives. Can jobs, careers, families and home life be the places of calling to the purposes of God? Few people experience a dramatic call from God to be engaged in their work, maybe leading them to think that God is not really interested in what they do.

We clergy are partially to blame. We haven't always fostered a strong sense of Christian vocation. We're commended for having laity who are active in "church craft," but rarely so for equipping laity for ministry in the world, which is much harder to observe and measure. We can easily be consumed by the details of maintaining an institution. Both clergy and laity have bought into a false notion that "ministry" and "calling" is for church professionals.

But why should teaching Sunday School one hour a week be "spiritual," while teaching in public school all week is not? Why should participating in a Church Council meeting be "spiritual," while time in a business meeting is not? A compartmentalized faith, making it only private and personal, separates our Christian living from daily life and relationships. I know that for some, church is an escape from an ugly world, while for others, being accountable to God in daily life might raise difficult questions. (Wealth and success, for example, the world's rewards, are questioned by the gospel.). Additionally, others labor in what might be called a hostile workplace.²

Nevertheless, the gospel truth is that life is a partnership of service with Jesus in all arenas of living. God's intention to redeem the world is worked out through all who respond to His call, wherever they may be.

"Vocation" today is used to mean any job or occupation, as in "vocational training" or "vocational education." Yet it was originally a theological term reflecting a rich heritage and body of biblical teaching about work, family, society, and Christian life. "Vocation" comes from the Latin for "calling" (*vocatio*). The job is not just a job, but a part of one's faith journey. It is in daily work that God's call is either first heard, or clarified, and then acted upon. God's call is always incarnational, meaning that the Christian life must be lived out in daily life and work.

The Bible contains numerous examples of those who did God's work in the secular world. In the O.T. Bezalel and Ohaliab (craftsmen responsible for building the Tabernacle; Exodus 31:1-11; 35:30-36:2). Esther (beauty queen who used her royal favor to save her people from genocide; Esther 3-8). Daniel and his friends (they held civil service positions in Babylon, having been selected for their posts because of ability; In difficult circumstances, they held fast to their faith and became witnesses for God. Daniel 1-6). Nehemiah (official in the Persian court, prayed for an opportunity to return to Jerusalem; The Persian king sent him to Judea as governor and to rebuild the city Nehemiah 1-2). In the N.T. Tabitha (Dorcas) (a widow, was a business woman, a designer and maker of clothing, and also known for helping the poor; Acts 9:32-43). None of these people had a prophetic call – a direct, divine summons – yet their work was in no way inferior to that of the prophets.

²Edward A. White, "The Sunday-Monday Gap: Resistances in Church and World to Connecting Faith and Work," in *Faith Goes to Work*, ed. Robert J. Banks (New York: The Alban Institute, 1993), 7.

Recognizing God's presence in the office, shop, school, or on the road might seem an oxymoron, but that's where He meets us. Church attendance reinforces and refocuses our souls so that we may better recognize God in those other places.

Most of us do not achieve fame and fortune in this celebrity fixated culture. Sometimes we run through life, sometimes we skip, sometimes we walk, and there are times when we crawl (if you will), through all that we find before us. Many of our days are about simply putting one foot in front of another – podding on. And it is just as challenging to stay our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, to steer straight ahead to the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. In the midst of the daily, mundane, and uneventful, God is calling each of us forward to His kingdom. In God's eyes our work can be more than drudgery and doing all things for the glory of God can be more than a platitude.

Keep Faith to the End

When it comes to following Him, Jesus said, *No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God*, Luke 9:62. How do we avoid quitting ... drifting away from Him ... getting off track? (I'm afraid that has happened with many during this COVID pandemic. Those who once attended church, to fill their "faith tank," are now filling it elsewhere and not with Jesus.) How do we keep the faith to the end while we're slogging away down here?

I'm not talking about keeping faith in Christ during a crisis – many reports, especially from Christians who live under persecution, attest to the resilience of faith under duress. I'm talking about keeping faith in Christ through the long and uneventful days that most of us experience as life: all those days of getting up and going to work, or school; the many days of raising our children, saving for college, or retirement; all those times we go to church, maybe participate in a small group and seek to be closer to God. But through all that time we do not experience great spiritual highs – no angel chorus, no being "caught up to the third heaven," or "hearing inexpressible things" (see 1 Cor. 12:2,4). Very few of us have spoken in tongues, or had ecstatic spiritual experiences on a regular basis. So, here's some advice as you journey through your life situations:

1) Look always to our Redeemer as a model and encouragement... Jesus, "author and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2), one of us (Phil. 2: 6-8), went from the Mt. of Transfiguration (a great spiritual high) down the dark valley and to the Cross (Matt. 17:1-9), before the glory of resurrection.

2) Know that we are "being saved" in and through our daily struggles and boredom (1 Cor. 1:18; John 10:10 "life to the full").

3) Put your faith to work ... Don't stand still waiting for heaven to descend. God can't steer a parked car. You may not be a race car, or a muscle car, or a luxury car, but you can be the Lord's car. Help those in need at work or in the community. Welcome God into your home ... pray before meals, ask for God's guidance, make Sunday worship integral to your week. Those who still have children in the home can prepare them to hear God's call. You are shaping the world for your posterity.

And as we get past this COVID pandemic I hope we can revive community service projects among our small groups, and the entire congregation.

4) Share your faith... do something with your faith in Christ that expresses it and share why you do it. If the Lord has given you hope and a new life don't be afraid to tell others; you'd want them to have that too, wouldn't you? It might start with a neighbor, or a friend, or associate ... as God may lead you. So, plod on...

He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ, 1 Cor. 1:8.