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## GOING THE DISTANCE

1 Timothy 6:11, 12

By

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Lesson 23

Going The Distance  
1 Timothy 6:11, 12

Question: What do diets, exercise programs, marriage, and the Christian life have in common? Answer: It's fairly easy and even fun to begin, but it's not so easy to hang in over the long haul. Eugene Peterson, in his book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (IVP, pp. 1112), writes,

One aspect of *world* that I have been able to identify as harmful to Christians is the assumption that anything worthwhile can be acquired at once. We assume that if something can be done at all, it can be done quickly and efficiently. Our attention spans have been conditioned by thirty-second commercials. Our sense of reality has been flattened by thirty-page abridgments.

It is not difficult in such a world to get a person interested in the message of the gospel; it is terrifically difficult to sustain the interest. Millions of people in our culture make decisions for Christ, but there is a dreadful attrition rate. Many claim to be born again, but the evidence for mature Christian discipleship is slim. In our kind of culture anything, even news about God, can be sold if it is packaged freshly; but when it loses its novelty, it goes on the garbage heap. There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness.

The Christian life is not a hundred-yard dash; it's a marathon, a "long obedience in the same direction." Starting well is easy; finishing well is another matter. We all will encounter numerous hindrances. But, like Bunyan's Christian, those whose burden has been lifted at Calvary will persevere.

In the final section of this letter, Paul tells Timothy and us how to go the distance. Timothy found himself in a difficult situation that was seemingly not suited for his timid personality. He had

to confront the false teachers who had arisen among the Ephesian leaders by refuting their errors and by teaching the truth. No doubt he was catching flak from many in the church who had been led astray by these men and their errors. So Paul, like a coach at half time in a rough game, reminds Timothy of the game plan and challenges him to hang in there, even though it's not easy. He gives four commands in verses 11 & 12 that are pillars for perseverance: Flee; pursue; fight; and, take hold:

To persevere, a man of God will flee worldliness, pursue godliness, fight for the faith, and take hold of eternal life.

The Greek text of verse 11 begins with the emphatic contrast, "But you, O man of God, flee these things." In contrast to the false teachers and those who follow them in their love of money, you must run in the opposite direction. The title, "man of God" is used in the Old Testament of men like Moses, Samuel, Elijah, David, and a few prophets. It means a man who belongs wholly to God, who follows God's Word in every aspect of life. A man of God has a certain dignity and aura about him so that when you're with him, you sense the presence of God, because his life is so entwined with God. There's no greater title that any Christian can covet for himself or herself than to be called a man or woman of God.

But it doesn't happen automatically! "Some (v. 10) ... but you (v. 11)!" To be a man or woman of God, you must resolve to stand against the tide. You must flee worldliness, pursue godliness, fight for the faith, and take hold of eternal life.

1. To persevere, a man of God will flee worldliness.

(When I say "man of God," forgive me for not being politically correct, but I'm including women.) Right off we're struck by the irony of what Paul commands Timothy: "But you, O man of God, flee!" You would expect, "But you, O man of God, stand firm," or "fight." Real men don't flee, do they? Can you imagine a football coach saying, "Listen, team, the men on the other team are big and tough. When they come at you, I want you to turn tail and flee!" You don't win by fleeing, do you?

But Paul knew that there are times when the way to victory is to flee, not to fight. We're commanded to flee immorality (1 Cor.

6:18), idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14), youthful lusts (2 Tim. 2:22) and, here, to flee the love of money and false doctrine; but, James 4:7 tells us to resist the devil and he will flee from us. So we need to know when to fight and when to flee.

All the commands to flee can be summed up by saying, "Flee worldliness," what John calls "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the boastful pride of life" (1 John 2:16). The lust of the flesh refers to the strong desires to gratify ourselves by living by feelings rather than by obedience to God. The lust of the eyes refers to the desire to increase pleasure by acquiring things and outward status rather than by developing godly character. The boastful pride of life refers to self-centered living that focuses on this life in disregard of God and eternity.

Satan used these three avenues to tempt Eve. Scripture says that she "saw that the tree was good for food" (Gen. 3:6)--it would satisfy the desires of her taste (appealing to "the lust of the flesh"). Also, "it was a delight to her eyes"--it looked good outwardly (an appeal to "the lust of the eyes"). And, "the tree was desirable to make one wise"--she wouldn't need to rely on God's wisdom any more if she had her own (it appealed to "the boastful pride of life").

Each of these temptations is a differently veiled form of exalting self: the lust of the flesh, to gratify self; the lust of the eyes, to enhance self, both in one's own eyes and in the eyes of others; and, the boastful pride of life, to increase reliance on self and decrease the need to depend totally on God. The false teachers, whose doctrine and way of life Timothy was to flee, were into self. They were puffed up with pride (6:4); they didn't submit to Scripture, but rather used it to promote their own selfish views, but without holding to its truth (6:4-5); they were into religion for personal gain, not for godliness (6:5).

I am ashamed to say that earlier in my ministry, I promoted some of false teaching on self-esteem that has flooded the church. God graciously opened my eyes to it, in part, through my reading of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The entire work is edifying, but he has two wonderful chapters that would get us back on track if we would read and follow them: "The Sum of the Christian Life: The Denial of Ourselves"; and, "Bearing the Cross,

a Part of Self-Denial” (Book III, Chapters VII & VIII). To quote him briefly,

There is no other remedy than to tear out from our inward parts this most deadly pestilence of love of strife and love of self, even as it is plucked out by Scriptural teaching.... Let us, then unremittingly examining our faults, call ourselves back to humility” (ed. by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles [Eerdmans] III:VII:4).

Whenever a teaching appeals to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes or the boastful pride of life, we need to take off as fast as we can in the opposite direction. To persevere in the Christian life, the man of God must flee worldliness, especially the love of money that simply furthers the love of self.

2. To persevere, a man of God will pursue godliness.

We aren't just to run from worldliness, but also to run to these six character qualities. The word “pursue” is sometimes translated “persecute”; it has the nuance of eagerly going after something. It implies effort, diligence, and determination. In other words, you won't accidentally attain these qualities by hanging around church buildings long enough. You've got to go after them deliberately over the long haul.

A. Pursue righteousness:

Here the word refers to conformity to the standards of God's Word. When we trust in Christ as Savior, God declares us righteous in our standing before Him based upon the atoning sacrifice of His Son. It is a judicial action in which God puts our sin on Christ and He credits Christ's righteousness to our account. This is called “justification”; as Paul argues in Romans 3 & 4, it is by faith, not by works.

But, having been justified (declared righteous) by faith, the Christian must then pursue a life of righteousness. As John states, “Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; ... By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother” (1 John 3:7-8a, 10).

Obviously, Christians sin (1 John 1:8, 10). But the pursuit of the Christian is not toward sin, but toward righteousness. During a Monday night football game, an announcer observed that the Chicago Bears' running back, Walter Payton, had accumulated over nine miles in career rushing yardage. The other announcer remarked, "Yeah, and that's with somebody knocking him down every 4.6 yards!" A Christian may get knocked down by sin every few yards, but he gets up and keeps moving toward righteousness. It's his pursuit.

B. Pursue godliness:

The word is closely related to righteousness. It has the nuance of reverence or awe in God's presence. A godly person lives with an awareness of God's holy presence, and so he fears God and flees from sin. As we saw in 4:7-8, we must discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness. You won't roll out of bed some morning and find out that you magically attained it overnight. You won't get it by going to a spiritual conference or having some emotional experience. You have to diligently discipline yourself to pursue godliness.

C. Pursue faith:

Some commentators understand it to mean "faithfulness," that dependability which is a fruit of the Spirit and should be present in every believer (Gal. 5:22). But it also can refer to the trust in God that consciously relies on Him in every situation of life. As Hebrews 11, the great chapter on faith, shows, men and women of faith believe the promises of God and live in light of them, even in the face of not receiving what is promised, because they trust that God will fulfill His sure word in heaven if not in this life (Heb. 11:13-16).

Again, you need to pursue faith. You don't wake up some morning with vigorous faith any more than a guy with bulging muscles went to bed one night as a 98-pound weakling and woke up looking like Mr. America! How do you pursue faith? By trusting God in the frustrations, irritations, and trials that He sends your way. You deliberately humble yourself under God's sovereign hand and cast all your anxieties on Him through prayer, knowing that in spite of how it may seem, He does care for you (1 Pet. 5:6-7).

Instead of learning to trust God with the little trials, many Christians grumble and chafe under them. They flatter themselves into thinking that if a major trial ever hits, they'll trust God then. But it's the small irritations that God uses to build our faith as we submit to Him and seek Him each day. We need to pursue faith in our daily circumstances.

D. Pursue love:

We often have the mistaken notion that love just flows effortlessly. If we have to work at it, it must not be love. But why would the Bible so often command us to love one another if it didn't require diligent effort? In our day of self-focused Christianity we're being told that we must learn to love ourselves before we can love God and others. But the Bible assumes that we all love ourselves quite well. The command to love our neighbor as ourselves is built on that premise. Calvin notes,

And obviously, since men were born in such a state that they are all too much inclined to self-love--and, however much they deviate from truth, they still keep self-love--there was no need of a law that would increase or rather enkindle this already excessive love. Hence it is very clear that we keep the commandments not by loving ourselves but by loving God and neighbor; that he lives the best and holiest life who lives and strives for himself as little as he can, and that no one lives in a worse or more evil manner than he who lives and strives for himself alone, and thinks about and seeks only his own advantage (II:VIII:54).

E. Pursue perseverance:

The word is not "patience" (KJV, putting up with difficult people), but perseverance or steadfastness, which means bearing up under difficult circumstances. We only can pursue perseverance by daily trusting in God as we hope in the promise of His coming and the blessings we will enjoy throughout eternity with Him.

F. Pursue gentleness:

The word doesn't mean meekness in the sense of weakness. Timid Timothy wouldn't need to pursue that quality, since he seemed to have plenty of it! Rather, it means strength under control. The root word was used of Alexander's horse, a mighty and

powerful animal, but completely broken, responsive to its master's commands. As the very next word shows, a gentle man must fight. But he doesn't fight for his own way, out of self-will, but for God's way in submission to God's will.

To persevere, the man of God must flee worldliness and pursue godliness as expressed in these six qualities: righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness.

3. To persevere, a man of God will fight for the faith.

The Greek reads, "the faith," meaning the Christian faith as revealed in the truth of God's Word. As we've seen, sound doctrine is essential for sound Christian living. So Satan attacks sound doctrine, often with subtle errors and truth out of balance. So the Christian must, in the words of Jude 3, "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."

The history of the Christian church consists of repeated battles where the enemy introduces destructive heresies, those heresies are confronted, and the truth is clarified and proclaimed. That's what Paul is doing in First Timothy. Many other New Testament letters have the same polemic thrust. The great church councils and creeds, while not carrying Scriptural authority, were attempts to correct false teaching and to set forth sound teaching. The Reformation consisted of godly men like Luther and Calvin combatting the corruption and false doctrine that had permeated the Roman Catholic church and setting forth the great truths of Scripture.

In every age, there are peace-lovers who promote unity, love, and tolerance as the chief Christian virtues. They say that we shouldn't attack false teachers or expose their errors. If you dare to say you're right and someone else is wrong, they accuse you of pride. So in the name of humility, we're supposed to tolerate every kind of error!

But, as J. Gresham Machen, who stood valiantly for the truth earlier in this century, observed, not only was Paul a great fighter, but also all the great men God has used down through the centuries: Tertullian fought Marcion; Athanasius fought the Arians; Augustine fought Pelagius; and Luther and Calvin fought the popes. He concludes rightly, "It is impossible to be a true soldier of Jesus Christ and not fight" (cited in *Fundamentalist Journal* [3/83], p.

34). To persevere, we must flee worldliness; pursue godliness; and, fight the good fight of the faith. Finally,

4. To persevere, a man of God will take hold of eternal life.

You may be saying, "I thought Timothy already had eternal life. Why does Paul tell him to take hold of it?" To grasp Paul's thought, we must note three aspects of the Christian experience set forth in this verse:

First, God calls us to salvation or the obtaining of eternal life. Salvation never begins with man, but with God. We all were dead in our transgressions, not only unable to call on God, but hostile and opposed to God, objects of His wrath (Eph. 2:1-3). If you have eternal life today, it is not because you first decided to call upon God, but because God, being rich in mercy, first called you and imparted eternal life to you as His free gift, according to His sovereign purpose (Eph. 2:4-10).

Second, we respond to God's call and His imparting life to us by faith. Faith is a matter of the heart, but it is expressed outwardly through a public confession in baptism. Paul reminds Timothy of when he "made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses," a reference to his baptism.

Third, we take hold of the eternal life God has graciously imparted to us. This refers to the process of laying hold of that for which we were laid hold of by Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:12). God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (Eph. 1:3), but we must take hold of those blessings, first by discovering them in God's Word, and then by implementing them in daily life through faith.

## Conclusion

Mario Cuomo, governor of New York, tells of a time when he was especially discouraged during a political campaign: "I couldn't help wondering what Poppa would have said if I told him I was tired or--God forbid--discouraged. A thousand pictures flashed through my mind, but one scene came sharply into view."

The Cuomo family had just moved into a new house, their first house with some trees. One tree, a great blue spruce, stood about 40 feet tall. But one night, less than a week after they moved

in, they came home in a terrible storm to find that tree fallen, its roots pulled almost entirely from the ground. The family was dejected as they stood looking at this fallen giant. But Poppa, who stood barely five feet six, was determined. He declared, "Okay, we gonna push 'im up!"

"What are you talking about, Poppa? the roots are out of the ground!" "Shut up, we gonna push 'im up!" You couldn't say no to him, so they got a rope and stood, pushing and pulling in the rain, and eventually got that great tree back in the hole, and then propped and staked upright again. Poppa declared, "Don't worry, he's gonna grow again."

Cuomo reports that if you were to drive past that house today, you would see a straight, 65-foot blue spruce, pointing up to the heavens, with no hint that it once had its nose on the asphalt (cited in *Leadership* [Winter, 1993], p. 49).

Maybe as a Christian, like that tree in the storm, you're fallen and discouraged. God wants you to stand upright again and to sink down roots so that you can weather the storms ahead. The roots that you need to persevere are to flee worldliness, to pursue godliness, to fight for the faith, and to take hold of the eternal life to which He has called you. Easy? No! Fleeing, pursuing, fighting, and taking hold all imply hardship and effort. But with Paul, Timothy, and many others who have gone before, God will give you strength to go the distance as you seek to obey His Word.

### Discussion Questions

1. Some teach that if you're struggling or exerting yourself, it's the flesh. What verses show this to be false?
2. Can a Christian expect to reach a point where the Christian life is an effortless victory or must we always strive against the world, the flesh, and the devil?
3. Was Paul loving the false teachers by fighting against them? When is it loving to fight rather than unite?
4. How can you know when to flee (v. 11) and when to fight (v. 12)?

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