

The “Grace Gift” of Tenacity

Commencement Address, Nazarene Theological College,

Manchester, England

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A Salvation Army officer graduated several years ago from Mount Vernon Nazarene University with a Master of Ministry degree. She wrote to me following a class I taught in the program. Among other comments, she stated, “I cannot get away from the discussion of Paul’s admonition to Archippus in Colossians 4:17, *“Do not walk away from the assignment God has given you.”*”

The officer continued, “The hardest orders I have received . . . have been those to stay in my assignment and continue God’s work for me there.” She concluded, “Staying orders were a lot harder to swallow than marching orders.”

Who is this Archippus to whom Paul admonishes? There are only two references to him in the New Testament: Colossians 4:17 and Philemon 2. The Colossian passage tells Archippus, his friend, to complete the work God has given him to do. Philemon 2 implies that he is a leader in a house church; possibly the pastor of the church of Laodicea.

The message from Paul to Archippus is clear: “Do not walk away from the leadership assignment God has given to you.”

Paul’s message to this rather unknown Christian leader is my final word to you before you graduate from the Nazarene Theological College, Manchester. Never give up on a God-given assignment until He releases you from the responsibility.

Don’t fall apart with the first round of disappointments or problems, when your co-workers are grouchy, or the boss expects too much. Don’t quit when the pressure is on, when others are encouraging you to jump ship or change churches, and when other opportunities seem so inviting. Don’t give up!

If God has given you an assignment, led you to a job, or called you to be a faithful

pastor or lay leader in a local congregation – be tenacious in that assignment or responsibility until God releases you.

For years, I had this poem hidden in my office so only I see it:

Don't Quit

“When things go wrong, as they sometimes will, when the road you're trudging seems all uphill. When the funds are low and the debts are high, and you want to smile but you have to sigh. When care is pressing you down a bit. Rest if you must but don't you quit! Life is queer with its twists and turns, as everyone of us sometimes learns. And many a failure turns about, when he might have won had he stuck it out – Don't give up though the pace seems slow – You may succeed with another blow. Success is failure turned inside out – The silver tint of the cloud of doubt. And you never can tell how close you are. It may be near when it seems so far. So, stick to the fight when you're hardest hit – It's when things seem worst that you must not quit” (John Greenleaf Whittier, date unknown).

Why not quit? Because in these assignments, it is the Lord Christ whom you are serving, not people! As love and faith go together, so does service and perseverance!

As Nazarene Theological College graduates, be tenacious in pursuing God's will and way in your home, on the job, with those in need, and with your local church. Never, never, never, never give up!

Remember the admonition of the Apostle Paul to Archippus, *Do not walk away from your work until God releases you from it.*

Recently I've been thinking about tenacity. It is always needed, often painful, and a gracious gift. Permit me to elaborate for a few moments on these thoughts.

1. The Need for Tenacity

Audacious tenacity – God inspired and empowered tenacity - spiritual tenacity, if you will - is needed in the home, on the job, with others in need, in the local congregation, and at Nazarene Theological College, Manchester. We don't know why Paul was compelled to speak these words to Archippus. However, Paul's words to his friend

cause us to question why we are so often tempted to give up on a project, an assignment, a responsibility, or a calling before genuine release comes from the Lord.

Why are we tempted to give up as Christian workers? For sure the enemy of our soul wants to defeat the Christian worker. *“Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of the dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”* (Ephesians 6:12).

Another reason we give up is that the problems facing us at times seem insurmountable or impossible to solve. In the book, *Mastering Ministry* (1992), Ortland and Ortland talk about the three time periods all problems have.

Zone A is called “Desire to Achieve” and is characterized by idealism, perhaps naiveté, and maybe apprehension.

Zone B is called “Desire to Quit” and is characterized by confusion and conflict when problems arise. This is the danger zone: problems need to be separated, spelled out and tackled one by one. Zone B will end in one of two ways: we will quit and abort the project, or we will persevere with “bulldog” tenacity, resisting the temptation to drop out.

We can choose to believe that, the God who has promised never to leave us or forsake us is present, even in a seemingly impossible situation. We can choose to believe that, by the grace of God, there is a way through, over, under, or around the confusing situation.

This leads us to Zone C. Zone C is called “Achievement and Growth” and is characterized by faith and personal satisfaction, a sense of realism, maturity, and expectation.

We also give up because of misconceptions regarding the Christian life, work and ministry. These misconceptions encourage us to give up before the job is done. Have you heard of them?

Some people believe that progress is only being made when things are running smoothly or that moving to another assignment will make things better. Others think that bigger is better, or that a difficult problem cannot be solved. Some believe that

success is gaining everyone's approval, or that suffering cannot be of God. Still others feel that failure is final or that I don't count. One of the greatest misconceptions is that good and godly people do not differ or make mistakes.

Graduates, as you pray and believe for God's leadership in the next phase of your life, be known as one who has spiritual tenacity – God-given tenacity - in your graduate studies, on the job, in Christian service, and in your local church. Do not jump from job to job or from church to church. **The real test of a person's character is what it takes to stop her or him.**

Let the characteristic of "stick-to-itiveness" infect you and hold you steady. The Need for Tenacity Is Great!

2. The Pain of Tenacity

The tendency, I believe, is to move on when pressure builds, we do not get our way, or the recognition we receive isn't what we desire. To stay in the situation in the midst of conflict, uncomfortableness, misunderstanding, power struggles, conflicting situations and inappropriate expectations until God releases us from these assignments is painful, very painful.

Enduring hardship through extraordinary times and situations requires a resolute faith in the God who has placed us in these assignments. And in these painful experiences, we must intensely believe that we remain where God has placed us until he releases us, because we serve *Him* in these painful times, not the people who sometimes inflict the pain.

Paul's journeys, as outlined in the latter half of the book of Acts, were filled with similar experiences! Listen again to Acts 27:25, "*Keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as He told me.*"

After being in jail for two years, Paul and others were on their way to Rome. Paul's admonition to the men on board the ship was spoken in the middle of a typhoon, a shipwreck, and no food for 14 days. But God had earlier told Paul "he would *testify of God's grace in Rome*" (Acts 23:11).

In the midst of the pain of getting to Rome, the jail experience, typhoon, shipwreck, and

no food, Paul stated emphatically, “. . . *keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.*”

For sure, there is often pain in staying with the call of God until He releases us from the assignment He has given to us.

There is a need for Tenacity, even in the midst of often great pain in tenacity. Now let me testify to:

3. The Gift of Tenacity

This gift of “stick-to-itiveness” – endurance or perseverance – (*Cambridge English Dictionary*) is not a gift we give to other people. By no means. Rather, the gift of tenacity is a grace gift from God to us . . .for the spiritual growth, Christian maturity and personal development we experience in the midst of staying with it until God releases us!

On many occasions while leading Mount Vernon Nazarene University, I stated, “leading the university is the greatest journey of faith I have ever experienced.” In exercising tenacity – staying power, I became the greatest beneficiary. In choosing to believe that God was in the midst of a process, problem or confrontation, I grew spiritually. I matured in Christ significantly.

Why? Because I had to lead from my knees in dependency upon “the One who had called me to the assignment, believing He would complete in me and my work exactly what He had designed!” I prayed many times during the 18 years I served the university, not just that the Lord would be with me and give me wisdom for my work, but that He would carry me through the difficult times.

Remember Moses and his excuses before God? God said to Moses, “*I am sending you to the King of Egypt so that you can lead my people out of Egypt*” (Exodus 3:10). Moses said, “*Who am I that I should go....*” (Exodus 3:11). He continued, “*O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue*” (Exodus 4:10). God responded to Moses, “*I will be with you!*” (Exodus 3:12).

He says to us. It is I – the great ‘I am’ who calls, empowers, keeps and carries us. We are the blessed, graced, gifted and called children of God! God reminds us through Paul,

“My grace is sufficient for you, my children, for my power is made strong in your weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Remember these prison words of Paul, *“I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through Him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:21).*

IV. Tenacity, With Contentment! What A Profound Gift from God to Us and in Us!

God enables us to “stay the course” until He releases us from an assignment! And who benefits the most? Only God knows. But, for sure, we who endure by God’s grace are blessed. Tenacity is a grace gift from God to us!

He can work in us to become the change we may desire to see in others. Though we do not have the power to change others, change can take place within us! In the midst of experiencing honest and intense differences between some good and godly people with whom we work, the leader, by God’s amazing grace, can be changed and transformed! What a gift of grace to us who endure in the assignments we believe God has given to us.

I close this commencement address with a reminder of Paul’s words to Archippus: Do not walk away from the assignment God gives you! Remember this thought:

“When the valley is deep, when the mountain is steep, when the body is weary, when we stumble or fall; when the choices are hard, when we’re battered and scarred, when we’ve spent our resources, when we’ve given all --- In Jesus’ name, we press on. In Jesus’ name, we press on” (Burgess, date unknown).

Again, I congratulate the graduates. You have completed your program of studies at Nazarene Theological College. There will be other seemingly impossible situations in your work of ministry. In those times that will most certainly come to you in the months and years ahead, as they will for each one of us in this service, press on, and be transformed by the grace of God.

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Questions for personal and/or group reflection:

1. How can you discern between a God-ordained release from a responsibility and the Zone B “Desire to Quit”?
2. What phrase(s) of the “Don’t Quit” poem most resonates with you when reflecting on a time when you tenaciously held on? What phrase most speaks to you if you are experiencing a time when it is difficult to hold on?
3. How can you intentionally stress the importance of tenacity for those you are modeling and mentoring in leadership character?