

Grit in the Midst of Grace

Selected Texts

Introduction

In 2014, Psychologist Angela Duckworth delivered a TED talk on what she found to be the “most significant indicator of success” among new West Point cadets. As Duckworth stated, “By the time a cadet reaches the campus at West Point, they have earned it.” She continues, noting that “roughly 14,000 people apply, but only 4,000 get the nomination.” Of those 4,000, only 2,500 cadets meet the rigorous academic and physical standards. Of those 2,500, only about 1,200 are finally admitted.

In other words, if these cadets were in a classic rock band, they would have joined Eric Clapton, Ginger Baker, and Jack Bruce in *Cream*, which was aptly though arrogantly named because Clapton, Baker, and Bruce were confident that they were, as the French would put it, the *crème de la crème*, the “best of the best.”

Obviously, these cadets are some of the highest quality individuals, yet, the military was puzzled as to why 1 in 5 of these highly-qualified individuals would not graduate from West Point. What Duckworth’s research found was that the greatest indicator of successfully graduating from the demanding West Point was not ACT or SAT scores, nor was it genetically superior athletes, but rather, it was, as one cadet put it, a “never give up” attitude.

This “never give up attitude” was a combination of “passion and perseverance” that Duckworth described as “grit.” According to her research, grit was the single most important indicator to predict the success of West Point cadets. Since this discovery, Duckworth has applied her research in other branches of the military and beyond in civilian industries and found that her thesis holds true. It is not superior, innate physical ability or intellect (“being a genius”) that predicts success, but rather, a passionate perseverance that refuses to “give up” or “give in.”

As with many things, Duckworth’s research and the subsequent studies of others on the impact of grit are just now catching up to what students of God’s Word have known for centuries. While you likely will not find the word “grit” in your English translations (not yet, at least), we repeatedly find commands like “remain steadfast,” “stand firm,” “endure,” and “persevere.” In other words, while the world seems to have just discovered the utility and the importance of persevering during difficult times, God has been preparing His people through His Word for thousands of years.

Over the past few weeks, our Preschool and Kid Ministries volunteers have been teaching our children about this idea of Grit, about persevering when life is hard by trusting in God. They have reminded our kids that God is worthy of our trust, even during the trial.

So, for our family service message, I want to briefly consider this idea of Grit in the midst of God’s grace and what it means for us as followers of Christ this morning...

Exposition

I. **God calls us to persevere in spiritual habits** (Luke 18:1-8)

In Luke 18:1-8, Jesus tells the story of the persistent widow, who would not stop making her request to the judge until she got justice. Jesus used the story to teach us about the need to pray with perseverance. Jesus' point was not that God is unwilling or reluctant to hear and answer our prayers. His point was that if an unjust judge responds to the powerless, marginalized widow, how much more will God, the just judge respond to the prayers of His children? This is an example of an argument from the lesser to the greater. Jesus' story aims to inspire our perseverance in prayer because of God's attentiveness to His children.

Admittedly, the main point in this passage is related to prayer, but I also think there is a principle here for us regarding all spiritual habits that aim to know God in an experiential and deep way. There will be days when you do not "feel" like praying or meditating on God's Word. There will be days when you do not desire God as you know you ought. There will be days when you do not want to worship God in spirit and truth. There will be times when you do not feel like gathering with God's people on Sundays or whenever your small group meets. There will be times when sharing the Gospel with your neighbor or co-worker or family member feels nearly pointless. There will be times when being generous to others feels disingenuous.

But our call is not to practice these spiritual habits when we feel like it. Feelings are important, but they are not determinative. Feelings need to be attended to, but they should not be the sole factor determining what we do and do not do on a given day. If we are a slave to what "we feel," we will rarely do what we need to do. Thus, we must persevere in good things. We must "not grow weary in doing good," as Paul told the church in Galatia. If we want to develop healthy spiritual habits, then we need grit. We need to trust that the things that God has called us to are good for us, even when they do not feel good to us.

By pressing on with those spiritual habits and by persevering in these good things, God intends to bless and strengthen His people, which leads us to our second point...

II. **God calls us to persevere in Christian service** (1 Corinthians 15:58)

1 Corinthians 15:58 appears at the end of a glorious chapter about the resurrection of Jesus Christ and its implications for the Christian life. As Paul drew his argument to a close in chapter 15, he saw an opportunity to apply the truth of Jesus' resurrection to the situation of Christians serving the Lord.

Because Jesus has broken the power of sin and death over the believer, they should stand firm, persevering in Christian service because their labor was not in vain. One of the reasons that Paul notes the need to stand firm is because Christian service is rarely easy or glamorous. In this life, serving Christ can be difficult and costly. Jesus even warns his disciples of this in John 16:33, where He tells them that “in this world, in this life, you will have trouble.” Yet, He also promises them that He has overcome the world; therefore, we can know His peace in the trouble.

Persevering in Christian service is not easy, but it is always worth it. When I think about perseverance in God’s call to Christian service, I am reminded of a story I read about William Borden. As the story goes,

In 1904 William Borden graduated from a Chicago high school. As heir to the Borden Dairy estate, he was already a millionaire. For his high school graduation present, his parents gave him a trip around the world. As the young man traveled through Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, he felt a growing burden for the world's hurting people. Finally, Borden wrote home to say, "I'm going to give my life to prepare for the mission field." At the same time, he wrote two words in the back of his Bible: "No reserves."

Indeed, Borden held nothing back. During his college years at Yale University, he became a pillar in the Christian community. One entry in his personal journal that defined the source of his spiritual strength simply said: "Say no to self and yes to Jesus every time."

During his first semester at Yale, Borden started a small prayer group that would transform campus life. This little group gave birth to a movement that spread across the campus. By the end of his first year, 150 freshmen were meeting for weekly Bible study and prayer. By the time Bill Borden was a senior, 1,000 of Yale's 1,300 students were meeting in such groups.

Borden also strategized with his fellow Christians to make sure every student on campus heard the gospel, and he was often seen ministering to the downtrodden in the streets of New Haven. But his real passion was missions. Once he narrowed his missionary call to the Kansu people in China, Borden never wavered.

Upon graduation from Yale, Borden wrote two more words in the back of his Bible: "No retreats." In keeping with that commitment, Borden turned down several high-paying job offers, enrolling in seminary instead. After graduating, he immediately went to Egypt to learn Arabic because of his intent to work with Muslims in China. While in Egypt, he contracted spinal meningitis. Within a month, 25-year-old William Borden was dead.

Prior to his death, Borden had written two more words in his Bible. Underneath the words "No reserves" and "No retreats," he had written: "No regrets."

To be fair to history, some have questioned whether William Borden ever wrote these words in His Bible. To the best that we can tell, his Bible was not recovered, so these six words, “No Reserves, No Retreat, No Regrets,” are based on the testimony of others. Yet, here is the undeniable thing. William’s life exemplified these words, whether he ever wrote them or not.

He persevered in Christian service according to God's call. Some would look at William's life and think, "What a waste!" Yet there is no such thing as a wasted life in service to King Jesus. Because of what Jesus has done, we ought to stand fast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the LORD, knowing that our labor is never in vain!

Finally, we come to our final point this morning...

III. **God calls us to persevere in difficult trials** (James 1:2-4)

In James 1:2-4, we encounter a statement that sounds like it came from another world. James encourages us to "consider it pure joy" when we are "faced with various trials." Why in the world should we do this, James? He tells us that it is because perseverance in trials" is one of the key ways that God brings about spiritual maturity in believers.

God uses the difficulty, the trial, and the testing, to strengthen and purify our faith. For, it is in the midst of the trial that God demonstrates His power and faithfulness to us. So, while Satan intends to use the trials in our lives to "destroy our faith," God intends to use the trials in our lives to "grow our faith" into maturity. Yet, this is not how we tend to think about trials and difficulties. As one pastor noted in an article about spiritual adversity, we have a tendency to want to avoid the trials and difficulties instead of "counting them pure joy," as James tells us. The pastor went on to tell a story about a hypothetical exercise that Psychologist Jonathon Haidt often walks people through in his sessions with them.

Imagine that you have a child, and for five minutes, you're given a script of what will be that child's life. You get an eraser. You can edit it. You can take out whatever you want.

You read that your child will have a learning disability in grade school. Reading, which comes easily for some kids, will be laborious for yours.

In high school, your kid will make a great circle of friends; then one of them will die of cancer. After high school this child will actually get into the college they wanted to attend. While there, there will be a car crash, and your child will lose a leg and go through a difficult depression.

A few years later, your child will get a great job—then lose that job in an economic downturn. Your child will get married, but then go through the grief of separation.

You get this script for your child's life and have five minutes to edit it. What would you erase? Wouldn't you want to take out all the stuff that would cause them pain?

If you could wave a wand, if you could erase every failure, setback, suffering, and pain—are you sure it would be a good idea? Would it cause your child to grow up to be a better, stronger, more generous person? Is it possible that in some way people actually need adversity or setbacks to reach the fullest level of development and growth?

To be sure, I don't think that Haidt is suggesting that any of these things are good or that they should be wished for. Instead, I believe the point is that we are prone to think that a life free of "trials and difficulty" would be best, but that is not what God has called us to.

And that is not because he does not love us. No. God does not bring us through trial and difficulties because He doesn't love us, but rather because He loves us and intends to bring about a persevering, mature faith that stands firm until the day that Christ returns. Only with such a perspective will we be able to count our trials as pure joy, because we know what they are working toward. Something bigger and more lasting than life in this world.

Transition - This is all fine and good, but how do we persevere? Where does this type of grit, this type of steadfastness, this type of perseverance come from? What is it grounded in?

Conclusion

Perseverance in spiritual habits, Christian service, and difficult trials comes by “fixing our eyes on Jesus” (Hebrews 12:1-3). The strength to persevere, the grace we need for the grit, is not found within us, but in the One who has gone before us, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, who, for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, and despised the shame, so that we might run the race set before us with endurance.

God's grace is not opposed to our effort, so long as we understand that our effort does not precede our reception of His grace. God's grace comes first and remains. God's grace saves us and sustains us so that we, as those who have put on Christ by faith, might live and grow in greater conformity to Christ.

Our efforts, our endurance, is not against God's grace, but empowered by God's grace. The apostle Paul knew this grace well, when he wrote, “By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me” (1 Corinthians 15:10)

If we would be a gritty people, a people who persevere, a people who do not give up or give in when things are hard, we would be a people filled with faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1-5). Our perseverance might not result in the world thinking that we are successful. People might not study our endurance with intrigue or be fascinated with Christians being steadfast in spiritual habits like prayer or Christian service, but God has promised that those who endure to the end will receive the “Crown of Life” (James 1:12) and one day hear those beautiful words, “Well done, my good and faithful servant, come share your master's happiness” (Matthew 25:21).

But this will only happen by God's grace. We will only endure, we will only hold on, if we have experienced the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Have you experienced God's grace in the midst of all your efforts?