

**“Live Strong”  
Luke 18:1-8**

So a duck waddles up to a bar and says, “Hey, got any grapes?” The bartender says, “Of course I don’t have any grapes. Now get out of here!” The duck waddles out. A little bit later he waddles back in and says, “Hey, got any grapes?” The bartender says, “No, I told you already, and if you ask me again, I’m gonna nail your feet to the floor!” So the duck waddles out. Five minutes later the duck waddles back in and says, “Hey, got any nails?” The bartender says, “No.” The duck says, “Good, got any grapes?” Life’s about perseverance. Even ducks know that!

I love the Good News Bible’s translation this Proverb: **“A nagging wife is like water going drip-drip-drip on a rainy day.”**<sup>i</sup> Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*, a more recent translation and gender inclusive. He reads: **“A nagging spouse is like the drip, drip, drip of a leaky faucet.”** However I like the GNB’s translation better!!

I’ve had two opportunities to view the Grand Canyon but only from the rim looking out at its unbelievable beauty. But any time I’ve seen a travelogue when the camera is on the level of the Colorado River, I appreciate whoever said, “In the confrontation between the stream and the rock, the stream always wins – not through strength but by perseverance.”

Luke introduces one of Jesus’ parables so we don’t miss the point: **“Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.”** Now some translations are more helpful than others. Of the ten English translations I use for comparison, six read, “pray always and not “faint,”<sup>ii</sup> or “never become discouraged,”<sup>iii</sup> or “lose heart” as in the New Revised Standard Version printed in your bulletin.<sup>iv</sup> They reflect the meaning of the Greek word behind them, but they are passive words, things over which we have no control. If I faint, and I have, I’m not in control. If I become discouraged or “lose heart,” those are feelings over which I haven’t control. I cannot turn it my feelings on or off at will.

I don’t think Luke or Jesus’ parable means – “pray always and don’t let yourself get down.” I think the thrust of Luke’s introduction and the parable itself means, “pray always whether you feel up to it or not.” Other translations lean in that direction, as does the New International Version which you find in the pew Bibles. **“Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.”**

Interestingly, the New Revised Standard Version which translates the Greek in this passage as “lose heart” translates the same Greek word in Galatians this way: **“So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.”**<sup>v</sup> I guess it’s a translator’s choice. I’m sorry, I know this is more information than you asked for. Maybe I’m hung up on semantics, but I believe one of the best ways to study scripture is to compare translations. This passage is about praying and not giving up.

When Luke wrote his gospel many years after the death and resurrection, Jesus' followers presumably had been praying **"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."** The kingdom hadn't come and still hasn't, not in its fullness. In many ways, life for the followers of Jesus was getting worse, not better. We can only imagine why they might be discouraged or disheartened. But Luke doesn't lay an additional burden on them by saying, "pray and don't be discouraged." Don't tell me to buck up if I'm feeling down, or not to feel discouraged if I'm discouraged, or not to feel sad if I'm sad. But when I'm feeling sad, or discouraged or down, do tell me of the need to always pray and never to give up. With all due respect to the beloved hymn, I wish the second line of the second verse did not read, *We should never be discouraged,*<sup>vi</sup> but rather, *Should we ever feel discouraged, take it to the Lord in prayer.*

It's about persevering in prayer. Jesus illustrates with a story about a poor widow and a wicked judge. He refused to hear her case but she pestered the daylights out of him until he did. No, God is not like the wicked judge. God is not our opponent. Elsewhere Jesus asked, **"Is there any among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"**<sup>vii</sup> Therefore, if a widow's persistence can move a wicked judge to respond, how much more will our loving God respond to our need when we follow the Biblical admonition to be constant in prayer.<sup>viii</sup>

Nor does constancy in prayer mean beating God over the head. Frederick Buechner writes, "Be persistent in prayer--not because you have to beat a path to God's door before he'll open it, but because until you beat the path maybe there's no way of getting to your door."<sup>ix</sup> Don't keep God at arm's length – always pray and never give up praying!

Evidence of those who have persevered abounds. The recent movie, *Amazing Grace*, recounts the story of William Wilberforce who, as a member of the British parliament in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, mounted a campaign to abolish the slave trade. Opposition, his own ill-health, war, political maneuvering – there were many reasons that would have made someone of lesser stature give up, but he stood his ground.

How can we think of Wilberforce and not remember Abraham Lincoln who faced defeat throughout his life. He lost 8 elections, failed twice in business, experienced the death of his fiancée and suffered a nervous breakdown. With that track record, you and I probably would have quit, but Lincoln never gave up. Although he couldn't get elected to the U. S. Senate in 1856, four short years later he was elected President.

Mother Teresa has been in the news lately. Tom Long, who is a Presbyterian teacher of preachers, tells a story about her visit to Edward Bennett Williams, a legendary and powerful Washington criminal lawyer. He at one time owned the Washington Redskins and the Baltimore Orioles and he was the lawyer for Frank Sinatra and Richard Nixon, among others. She approached Williams while raising money for an AIDS hospice. Williams was in charge

of a small charitable foundation that she hoped would help. Before she arrived for the appointment, Williams said to his partner, "You know AIDS is not my favorite disease. I don't really want to make a contribution, but I've got this Catholic saint coming to see me, and I don't know what to do." Well, they agreed that they would be polite, hear her out, but then say no.

Well, Mother Teresa arrived. She is small in stature and seemed even smaller sitting on the other side of the big mahogany lawyer's desk. She made her appeal and Williams said, "We're touched by your appeal, but no." Mother Teresa said simply, "Let us pray." Williams looked at his partner; they bowed their heads and after the prayer, Mother Teresa made the same pitch for the hospice, word for word. Again Williams politely said no. Mother Teresa said, "Let us pray." Williams, exasperated, looked up at the ceiling, "All right, all right, get me my checkbook!"<sup>x</sup>

Perseverance doesn't always bring a favorable outcome just as perseverance in prayer does not mean you get whatever you ask for. The current issue of *Newsweek* features a story about a book the purports to have discovered a dark side to Charles Schultz, creator of the *Peanuts* comic strip. Wherever the truth lies, Schultz did have a difficult childhood – neglected by his parents, bullied by classmates, his cartoons were rejected by newspapers time and again. He became known as a loser and so did his alter ego, Charlie Brown. But every Spring Charlie tried to fly his kite which invariably got caught in a tree; and every Fall Lucy would hold the football for Charlie to kick and everyone but Charlie knew that she would jerk the ball away at the last second and he would fall on his posterior. Charlie wasn't very wise, but maybe he knew of something more important than wisdom. Perhaps he was encouraged by this verse from the Bible – **"Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us..."**<sup>xi</sup>

One of the most celebrated stories of perseverance in recent times is that of Lance Armstrong. A professional cyclist, he entered his first Tour de France in 1995 at the age of 24. The next year he was diagnosed with testicular cancer that would eventually spread to his lungs and brain. With chances of recovery at less than 50%, Lance began a course of treatment that would include two surgeries and chemotherapy. Just 5 months after his diagnosis, he was back on his bike regaining the strength he had lost. In time, the treatments began to work and he was on his way to a full recovery and has since then won the Tour de France 7 consecutive times. Things would have been much different, however, had it not been for his perseverance and take charge attitude.

Now his energies are directed toward *Live Strong*, the foundation he created for cancer research and support of cancer survivors.

If perseverance is so important in making it through life, it is even more important for our life with God. Remember the parable about the persistent widow. Remember not only William Wilberforce, Abraham Lincoln, Mother Theresa, Charlie Brown, and Lance Armstrong, but also the unsung heroes known only to you who are incarnations of perseverance and whose lives show **"the need to pray always and not give up."** AND, **"Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith..."**<sup>xii</sup>

I'd like to end this sermon in a very unusual way. The ushers are going to distribute to everyone a yellow wrist band with the words *Live Strong* printed on them. I realize we're supposed to think pink this month. I don't mean to compete and I would never suggest that cancer is the only fight requiring perseverance. Maybe you won't want to wear it, but put it somewhere to remind you of whatever issue begs for your perseverance – a health issue, a relationship issue, a faith issue, or maybe your active in some justice - peace issue that impacts the nation and the world. Where are you tempted to give up and where do you need to hang in there? Let the wrist band remind you of the need **“to pray always and not to give up,”** and to live strong!



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- i. Proverbs 27:15
  - ii. King James Version
  - iii. Good News Bible
  - iv. And also the Jerusalem Bible, New English Bible, J. B. Philipps.
  - v. Galatians 6:9 (NRSV)
  - vi. “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” Joseph Scriven, c. 1855
  - vii. Luke 11:11-13
  - viii. Romans 12:12
  - ix. Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking, (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) p. 70.
  - x. 30GoodMinutes.org, October 7, 2007
  - xi. Romans 5:3-5

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xii. Hebrews 12:1-2