



July 16, 2017 ~ Pastor Sheldon Ball
Love Does Part 2

Last week we started a brand new sermon series entitled Love Does.

We introduced the idea that for love to be really effective then it has to be doing something, but more specifically, that each of us needs to pay attention to what God is saying to us and to then respond in obedience to that calling.

Every week this summer, during the course of the series, we are going to introduce a weekly challenge to help you step out of the comfortable and into something that might push you a little.

The goal of these challenges will be to move you to action, because love isn't idle.

This week's challenge is to *Commit Random Acts of Kindness*.

Do something out of the ordinary that will lift up a person's spirit and put a smile on their face.

Today we are going to continue by looking at the theme that Andrea introduced for us in video, which in a lot of ways is a continuation of last week.

We need to look at what our response needs to be when we start to walk in obedience and we are faced with an obstacle that prevents us from moving forward.

Make no mistake, this is going to happen; anytime we begin to take steps of faith we are going to face resistance.

Some of it will be just life, some of it will be learning opportunities that we will be presented with, but we also need to understand that we have an enemy that will actively resist our progress.

The Bible makes it very clear that we are in a war.

Many people don't realize this because when we live in our lukewarm, comfortable Christianity we don't face this pressure because we aren't doing anything of consequence to affect our world with loving actions.

When love does, when love acts, when love moves and influences those around us through our obedience, our enemy will stand up and take notice.

A problem with human nature is that we like being comfortable, so if we ever get to the point of being willing to act, when the first obstacle presents itself the tendency is to give up and go back to being comfortable.

Last week we talked about devoting ourselves to action, but that devotion also requires us to persist, to endure, until what we have been called to do is accomplished.

So how do we do that, understanding that this is the reality we face is a start?

If we move into obedience, understanding that we will face push back, it makes it a lot easier to resist the temptation to quit and give up when it comes.

But it has to be more than just a mental prep game, because the mind can be so easily swayed.

I think I can say with confidence that there isn't a lot of people here that have *always finished everything* they have started. We have all quit at some point in our lives, and for a variety of different reasons.

If God desires for us to be successful in what he calls us into, *and He does*, then there must be something more that we can put into place to ensure success when love hits a wall.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:58, "So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless."

What we have been called to do is incredibly important.

If we don't stand up and show what true love is, how true love acts, and how true love responds to difficult situations, then our world is lost.

Each calling in this room, each one of us that has accepted Jesus as our saviour and has devoted ourselves to respond to that call, is valuable.

We all have things we are supposed to do, but if we don't persist, nothing gets done.

Even more than that, if we don't persist, people lose out on knowing the incredible life and gift that is Jesus Christ. People lose out on love.

The writer of Hebrews talks a lot about the value of persistence to the calling, but I want to focus on one specific passage that outlines three specific things we can draw on in the middle of obedience so we can continue to move forward even when it gets hard.

Please turn with me in your Bibles to Hebrews Chapter 12.

If you are new to the Bible, you will find Hebrews near the back of the whole book. Last week I outlined that you can start at the back with Revelation and move backwards through the short letters until you get to James. Hebrews is the letter right before James.

Starting in verse 1, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down,

"...especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.

"We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith.

"Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne.

"Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won't become weary and give up.

Then skip up to verse 12.

"So take a new grip with your tired hands and strengthen your weak knees.

“Mark out a straight path for your feet so that those who are weak and lame will not fall but become strong.” (Hebrews 12:1-3, 12-13)

The first thing we see in this passage to help us persist is...

Inspiration

There is no doubt of the power of a story.

It is why we read books, or watch a show on television, or go to a movie, and can then be captivated and drawn into what is before us, even at a deep emotional level.

When we engage with one of these stories, it can cause us to be empowered, to change, or to do something new.

Author Janet Litherland writes, “Stories have power. They delight, enchant, touch, teach, recall, inspire, motivate, challenge. They help us understand.”

Let me give you an example.

Once upon a time a daughter complained to her father that her life was miserable and that she didn't know how she was going to make it. She was tired of fighting and struggling all the time. It seemed just as one problem was solved, another one soon followed.

Her father, a chef, took her to the kitchen. He filled three pots with water and placed each on a high fire. Once the three pots began to boil, he placed potatoes in one pot, eggs in the second pot, and ground coffee beans in the third pot.

He then let them sit and boil, without saying a word to his daughter. The daughter, moaned and impatiently waited, wondering what he was doing.

After twenty minutes he turned off the burners. He took the potatoes and the eggs out of their pots and placed them in separate bowls. He then ladled the coffee out and placed it in a cup.

Turning to her he asked. “Daughter, what do you see?”

“Potatoes, eggs, and coffee,” she hastily replied.

“Look closer,” he said, “and touch the potatoes.”

She did and noted that they were soft. He then asked her to take an egg and break it. After pulling off the shell, she observed the hard-boiled egg. Finally, he asked her to sip the coffee. Its rich aroma brought a smile to her face.

“Father, what does this mean?” she asked.

He then explained that the potatoes, the eggs and coffee beans had each faced the same adversity– the boiling water.

However, each one reacted differently.

The potato went in strong, hard, and unrelenting, but in boiling water, it became soft and weak.

The egg was fragile, with the thin outer shell protecting its liquid interior until it was put in the boiling water. Then the inside of the egg became hard.

However, the ground coffee beans were unique. After they were exposed to the boiling water, they changed the water and created something new.

“Which are you,” he asked his daughter. “When adversity knocks on your door, how do you respond? Are you a potato, an egg, or a coffee bean?”

Let me ask you a question, and I don’t expect a response, but I do want to show you the power of a story.

Who, upon hearing this story, immediately started reflecting on the question of which of these three ways you typically respond to adversity, problems or obstacles in your life?

And how many of us thought to ourselves we would really like to be the coffee the next time we are faced with a wall that holds us back from what we have been called to do?

One last question, who here, like me, felt reaffirmed in their understanding that coffee is one of God’s greatest creations?

There is power in a story.

The thing we need to understand is that we are constantly surrounded by stories that can inspire us to keep going.

The writer of Hebrews said this very thing.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith...”

If we look back at Chapter 11 of Hebrews, it is a list of every major figure throughout the Bible and what they accomplished when they chose to not only obey, but also to push through the obstacles they faced.

And it doesn't end there – every person in this room has a story of when God answered a prayer, when God provided a breakthrough in their lives, when God opened an unexpected door of opportunity and blessing.

Even if you don't realize it yet, God is creating opportunities, and giving good gifts, to those that believe, devote themselves to action, and persevere.

This incredible volume of stories, of testimonies of His faithfulness, should inspire us to keep going.

Seek them out in the Bible. Seek them out in the lives of others, and seek them out in your own life.

One of the greatest ways we can overcome is to pause and reflect on those moments in our past when God has made a way for us, because he will do it again.

Don't be afraid to share your story either. You never know when what you have to say might be exactly what somebody needs to hear to keep going.

The power of our life's story when we follow Jesus is shown so clearly in Revelation 12:11 when it says, “And they have conquered him [that is Satan, our enemy] by the blood of the Lamb [that is Jesus' sacrifice for each of us on the cross] and by the word of their testimony...”

In those moments, in those seasons of adversity, be inspired and inspire others.

The second thing that we see in Hebrews 12 is...

Preparation

Back in 1986, Jim Henson and George Lucas made a movie called Labyrinth. In the movie, a teenage girl is given 13 hours to solve a labyrinth to rescue her baby brother.

In one of the scenes, the girl is in her bedroom with a little, old Muppet woman who keeps piling her possessions on her back, but as she became weighed down with all of the stuff she began to forget her mission and purpose.

We aren't that different from that poor, old Muppet woman, because the things that we choose to hold on to become the main reasons why we don't accomplish what God has called us to.

They become hindrances to us as we weigh ourselves down with past failures and sins that limit our future effectiveness.

Instead of hanging on to these things, we need to ask God how we can release and move past them so that they don't prevent us from showing love.

This is what the writer of Hebrews is telling us to do: "...let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up."

The word *weight* here describes a burden or something so heavy and cumbersome that it impedes a runner from running his race as he should.

This word was particularly used in the athletic world to signify the actions of an athlete who would deliberately strip himself of excess weight before participating in a competition.

This stripping process included the loss of extra physical weight through dieting and exercise, similar to what boxers or fighters will do now a days in preparation for their weigh ins.

Then on the day of the actual competition, he would strip off all or nearly all of his clothes so no extra weight would slow him down.

Aren't we all glad that is not the way competitions work now?

But he had his eye on the prize, so he was determined to strip off all his weight that might potentially keep him from being the best athlete he could be.

This sends a pretty strong message to us, as we have to choose to prepare. We have to intentionally remove anything from our lives that would hinder our ability to act.

The athlete of the ancient world didn't lose weight by accident; he dropped all excess weight on purpose.

He dieted, he exercised, and he shed every other unnecessary weight he could find to get rid of.

The process demanded his attention; his daily decisions were determined by his devotion to the goal, which was to win the event.

What if those athletes had tried to run their race or compete in their competition with loads of extra weight?

They certainly wouldn't have been able to compete very well.

This is exactly what happens when we choose to hold on to things that we are supposed to release. If you don't remove them, they will eventually weigh you down and prevent you from persevering in your calling to love the world.

The Holy Spirit is urging you and me to take good care of our lives, to work towards holiness by accepting His wisdom, which leads us to live more like Jesus in our daily lives.

And more than that, when we do make mistakes, when we sin, we need to be honest and humble enough to seek forgiveness; to remove everything that holds us back, weighs us down, and keeps us from a life of obedience.

Now this topic could be an entire sermon all on its own, and I just don't have the time to go into it in depth.

But at some point in time we have to learn this; we have to learn to let go and let God.

When we hold on to whatever is holding us back, what we are saying is that we are more important than God; that we have things under better control than he does.

But when we let Him in, He guides us on how to release.

Different things will require different steps (there is no cookie cutter plan for moving beyond those things), but nothing is possible without the first step of giving up personal control and allowing his wisdom to guide you towards forgiveness and freedom.

Paul writes of his own decision to do this in his life when he writes to the church at Philippi.

“I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection.

“But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me.

“No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing:

“Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race...

“...and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.”

(Philippians 3:12-14)

He understood the need to pursue God’s call on his life, and so he was willing to be in a constant state of preparation to ensure that he would still be standing at the end of his life having achieved his goal.

Preparation for each of us means taking daily moments to seek God out and to ask him to reveal to us what areas we need to release so we too can endure over the long term.

What is God asking you right now to strip off and set aside?

We need to be vigilant in our preparation, just as the athlete was, if we want to show God's love in our lives.

In fact our ability to do this is one of the ways that we will do just that, as people will see how the mistakes that we make don't become hindrances in our lives.

Hebrews outlines that we can use inspiration and preparation, and finally we need...

Determination

When I was in high school, I was part of the long distance track team. The shortest race I would run was the 1,500 metre, but my favourite race was the 5 kilometer cross country race.

I liked it because it wasn't on a track, going around and around, but instead we would be running through difficult, ever changing terrain.

But as distance runners will tell you, there is always one incredibly uncomfortable moment during the race where you 'hit the wall'. The name is very appropriate.

This is the point where your body decides that it has had enough and it tries to tell you in some *very interesting* ways that you're done.

It's here that your mental training comes in to play, as you have to deliberately decide if you are going to give up, or are going to keep going.

Often it is just sheer determination that pushes you through, but once you are able to get past that point, your body shifts into a natural rhythm and you are able to keep running the race.

I usually found that once I pushed through this wall that the rest of the race was relatively easy, and I would actually go faster after this point despite having already been running for a lengthy period of time.

How we deal with the 'walls' that we face in life is not much different.

Each of us has to determine in our minds that we are going to push through when they come, because they will come.

Hebrews says, "...let us run with endurance the race God has set before us."

The definition of endurance is the ability or strength to continue or last, especially despite fatigue, stress or adverse conditions.

How we do this in real life circumstances is based entirely on where we choose to place our focus.

If we decide to place our focus on the short-term, we become pawns to the emotional roller coaster that comes from the normal highs and lows of life.

But if we determine to set our focus on the long-term, then the short-term has far less impact on our ability to keep going.

In racing this means the focus needs to be on the finish line, but in life it really means that we have to keep our focus on Jesus.

We see this in the very next verse in Hebrews.

"We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith."

Some translations will say the author and perfecter of our faith.

When we determine that our focus will remain constantly on Jesus, we gain the assurance that the call to love that we live every day is a worthy endeavour.

This assurance comes from the fact that Jesus is the one who started it and the one who is faithful to see it through to the end – that is what author and perfecter means.

Philippians 1:6 says, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion..."

In our reading from *Love Does* today, Bob Goff wrote this – "I once heard somebody say that God had closed a door on an opportunity they had hoped for. But I've always wondered if, when we know something is right and good, God places that desire deep in our hearts because he wants it for us and it honours Him. Maybe there are times when we think a door has closed and, misinterpreting the circumstances, God wants us to kick it down."

This has definitely changed my perspective.

And I know that the next time I face a wall that stands in my way I am going to take the time to determine, in God's wisdom, whether he is redirecting me somewhere else, or maybe it is just a wall that needs to be knocked down.

Because for me, inspiration, preparation and determination lead me to one very important understanding, and that is that *Love's ability is determined by my tenacity.*