

## Sermon Notes – September 12, 2021

### *“Don’t Give Up”*

(Mark 8:34-38 & II Corinthians 4:16-18)

As most of you know, it’s been a hard week for me – I had two funerals this week, had to have some stitches taken out of my mouth and twelve more put in, youth confirmation, and a lot of other things going on. So, I had a hard time thinking this week about the sermon – what am I going to do today? I want to combine some of the scripture from our lectionary reading in Mark’s Gospel and a passage in II Corinthians 4:16-18 and talk about it for a few minutes.

Have you ever felt like life just beat you down? Charlie Brown (in the Peanuts cartoon) and Linus were talking one day and Linus looks at Charlie Brown and says, “Charlie, do you ever feel like life is just passing you by? Do you ever feel that way, Charlie?” He said, “No, I just feel like it knocked me down and walked all over me.” Sometimes we feel like that, don’t we? Life is just coming at you and there’s so many things that happen and you feel like you just want to quit – you want to go somewhere else. That’s the way we feel sometimes because there’s so much going on in our lives right now.

I want to remind you of somebody named Jim Valvano, who was the late basketball coach for NC State. Jim Valvano was diagnosed with cancer in 1992. About eight weeks before he died, he was to speak at the ESPY Awards Ceremony, in which he was to receive “The Arthur Ashe Courage and Humanitarian Award.” That night he announced the formation of his V-Foundation for cancer research. He wanted the foundation to research cancer until they found a cure. The motto for the new foundation became, “Don’t give up. Don’t ever give up.”

I want to tell you about somebody else that said, “Don’t ever give up,” and that was Dr. Winston Churchill. Years and years ago, right before his death, he was asked to go to a prestigious university in England and speak to the graduating class. He got up to speak and he said three words: “Never give up.” He waited a minute and there was a long pause, and then he said, “Never give up.” He walked down the stage, off the steps, out the door, and they wondered, “What in the world?” But, that

was his motto during World War II to the soldiers and to England. “Don’t ever give up,” and he told those graduates, “Don’t ever give up on your goals and your dreams. Never give up.”

In II Corinthians today, the Apostle Paul said, “Don’t lose heart.” There are times in our Christian lives that we want to give up -- we get discouraged, we doubt, we’re confused. There’s a lot going on in our world right now and we definitely feel confused. We sometimes get discouraged, and Paul is saying, “Don’t get discouraged.” If there is anybody in the scriptures that we read about that doesn’t seem to get discouraged, it’s the Apostle Paul. He never seems to give up; he doesn’t get discouraged. He just keeps right on because he keeps his eyes fixed on Jesus. Most of you know that the Apostle Paul was a persecutor of Christians. He was steeped in Judaism. He persecuted people who became Christians, until one day, on the road to Damascus, he had this experience with God and he became a strong Christian. After that, he was persecuted for being a Christian. He was beaten and left for dead; he was ship-wrecked; he was put in prison and even was martyred for his faith. The Apostle Paul was criticized by people inside and outside of the church and he never got discouraged. You can’t help but wonder, “Did he want to give up?” But, he kept his eyes fixed on Jesus and he didn’t. He had a strong faith and that’s what kept him going.

In our gospel lesson in Mark today, Jesus is giving his disciples (and us) three nuggets of truth about Christianity: He says, “Take up your cross,” “Deny yourselves,” and “Follow me.” When he said, “Take up your cross,” the Romans knew what that meant – that meant, if you were a criminal or a slave, you were going to be crucified on a cross. It also meant that you would have to carry your cross to the place of execution – that meant it was a symbol of your allegiance to the Roman government; Rome was in charge of you – you had to submit to their power and authority. ***When Jesus says to us, “Take up your cross,” he’s talking to us about submitting to his leadership and his authority -- let him be #1 in your life -- you’re not in control, he is – and he’s asking us to give ourselves to his allegiance. And then he says, “Deny yourselves” – let go of your selfishness and pride – become “other-centered” and “God-centered.” And then he says, “Follow me” – follow Christ and his example of***

***service and sacrifice.*** He gave himself for us – he gave his time, his talents, his body for us – and he called us to serve one another. So, he says, “Follow me.” Three nuggets, if you want to live for Christ: Submit to his leadership, deny yourself (become less self-centered and proud), and follow his example of service and sacrifice.

Sometimes, when you and I are following him, we get real discouraged and just want to quit. The Apostle Paul says, “Don’t lose heart” – because there’s a greater purpose for each of us. Our bodies are deteriorating, but our spirits are to grow stronger and stronger in the faith and to serve God all our lives. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. Keep your eyes on the goal – that’s there’s eternity to go to. God is with us. God’s eternal kingdom starts here on earth and it continues after we die. He says, “Keep your eyes on that.”

Dr. Vance Havner was a great Bible teacher of years ago. He said there are three things that we go through as Christians – three levels that we walk through every day: ***There’s the mountain-top days, the ordinary days, and there’s the dark or difficult days.*** Most of us like the mountain-top days – the world is bright, we feel like we’re on top of the world, and everything is going our way. But, we don’t have a lot of those. Most of us live in the ordinary days – the hum-drum of life – work and going to school. We’re not overly elated, we’re not overly depressed – it’s just an average day – and that’s where most of us live. But, he said, the dark days (the difficult days) come to all of us at some point in our lives. Those are the days that test our faith. We may be confused; we may be in chaos; we may think that whatever that difficulty is we are going through is a test of our faith – and sometimes it lasts for days, sometimes it lasts for weeks or months. Then, all of a sudden, you find this sense of relief and victory. God’s brought you through it because you’ve learned to lean on him, to depend on him, and realize you are not in control and life is unpredictable. God’s brought you through that one thing and it gives you the strength to face the next difficulty. Now that God brought you through that one, you have the confidence to go through the next one.

John Sargent was a great painter of years ago. He painted a beautiful portrait of roses. When the painter-critics looked at his painting, they said, “It’s perfect, John! It’s perfect! Can we buy it?” He said, “No, I’m

not selling that one.” They asked, “But, why?” He said, “Because I’m keeping it at home to remind me that on the days when I’m discouraged and doubt my abilities, that I did that. I painted that.” So, when we as Christians go through those difficult times, and we come through one and get ready to face another, we can look back and say, “I got through that. God got me through that one, and he’ll help me through the next one.”

Dr. Vance Havner says, “*Not only do dark and difficult days give us an opportunity to grow in our faith, they also give us an opportunity to be a witness to our faith and to empathize with other people.*”

Pastor Richard Gribble tells a story about a man in his church who was in his seventies before he became a believer in Jesus Christ. He was a retired Veteran. After he became a Christian, he tried to think about his gifts and abilities, and how he could serve God. He finally decided to serve God in an Army hospital – a Veterans hospital. He would go there and read scriptures to people, pray with them, and just visit. He’d take them something that they needed – whether a toothbrush, deodorant, etc. He would visit, read scriptures, and pray. His eyesight began to deteriorate. One day he went to the ophthalmologist and they told him that he had an eye disease, and he would be blind within a year or two. He got discouraged and thought he was no longer going to be able to go to the hospital and read to the patients. Finally, he decided that he was going to read the scriptures and memorize them. He was going to read the gospel and memorize the stories of Jesus so that he could go back to those soldiers and tell the stories from memory, and still pray for them. About three months later, he went back to the hospital and he asked for the Chaplain. He told the Chaplain, “I’m sorry that I haven’t been here in a while, but I’ve been reading the scriptures because I’m going blind. I wanted to commit the gospels to memory so that I could share with all those men I meet and tell them about Jesus. God has taught me empathy for all those veteran patients who are blind and have lost an arm, or a leg, or two legs. God wants me to continue sharing with them.” What an inspiration that man was!

***You see, God will take whatever you and I go through and use it to bless, touch, and inspire other people – not only to grow us spiritually,***

***but to help others and to teach us empathy and compassion for other people.*** I can't tell you the number of people (men and women) that I have seen go through surgeries and sicknesses and different things, and watched how God taught them empathy and compassion for other people when they went through the struggles of life.

God will use all that we go through and bring something beautiful out of it. There's a story about an architect in the Middle East who was commissioned to put some mirrored walls in the royal palace of Tehron. He ordered mirrors from Paris to go on all the walls on the inside of the royal palace. When they got there, the shipment was all shattered pieces of glass. His maintenance crew was going to throw it all away. Finally, the architect looked at it and said, "I've got a bright idea! Don't throw it out." He went to one of the walls in the palace and he put glue all over the wall. He went back out to a box of broken glass, poured it on the concrete, took a hammer, and broke all of the large pieces into smaller pieces. Then, he began to glue those pieces on the wall - different shapes, different sizes, everything. He made this beautiful montage of light. It was like a prism of light coming through. Everybody admired this beautiful wall with all this broken glass. One man looked at it in awe and said, "Broken to be beautiful." Sometimes we feel broken, but God can take the mess in our life and turn it into a message. He can turn our trials and tests into a testimony. God takes the brokenness in our lives and transforms it into something beautiful that he can use for his glory.

I want to encourage you that whatever you go through in life, God is with you - in the good times, the ordinary days, the mountain-top days, and even in the dark, difficult days when you don't feel him - he is still there and he loves you. He wants us to keep our eyes focused on him and on our life of eternity with him. Don't give up when you get discouraged. Keep staying true to the faith and to God and make a difference in the world until eternity. Amen.