

February 5, 2017

Authentic Christianity
How Perseverant are You?
2 Timothy 4:6-8

Opening words: Webster defines “authentic” as: genuine or real; not false or copied. The issue of being authentic is important. Our world will tolerate many things, but our world will not tolerate a fraud. It is true in the secular world and it is true in the life of the church. In the life of the church, there is no room for hypocrites. It is not enough to know the words of the creeds; we must live a life worthy of Jesus. We must be authentic Christians.

This is sermon number five in my eight-part sermon series, *Authentic Christianity*. True Christianity is designed to be life-altering. It should affect your actions and opinions. We are looking at characteristics that should be within you. Three weeks ago, we looked at compassion. Two weeks ago, we looked at hope. Last week, we looked at faithfulness. Next week, we look at love. This is my question for you today: *How perseverant are you?* Our scripture reading for today is 2 Timothy 4:6-8.

2 Timothy 4:6-8 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

Scottish Politian Walter Elliot once said, "*Perseverance is not a long race; It is many short races one after another.*" If you think you can remember that quote, say, **"Amen!"**

How many of you know the name Robbie Kelly? You may not know his name, but you may have seen his story. He is on the United States Ski Team and was competing in Austria last month. Just short of the finish line he fell, and everyone thought his race was over. They were wrong. Kelly got up and side-stepped in his skis to the point where he fell and finished the race. Thousands cheered him. Not because he won. They cheered him for the way he finished. I think there is a sermon in there. Robbie Kelly reminds us that how you finish is the only thing that really matters. That leads us to our question of the day: How perseverant are you? If you are ready to answer that question, say, **"Amen!"**

We find ourselves today in the second letter to Timothy. It was written during Paul's second prison incarceration in A.D. 66 or 67. He wrote this letter for three reasons. First, Paul was lonely. Each one of us is a social being. We were not designed to live in isolation. Second, Paul was concerned about the welfare of the church. I have been

away from the Cleveland area for over twenty years, but I still find myself worrying about former parishioners. Third, he wanted Timothy to pass this letter on to the church at Ephesus. That congregation had a special place in his heart. The thing that makes this letter unique from all the rest is the fact that Paul knows his death is near. His best days are behind him, and the only thing for him to look forward to is heaven itself. That fact makes verse eight so potent. Remember, a man near the end of his life penned these words:

Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

Those are powerful words. Let me ask you two questions.

First, have you ever stopped and pondered all the things Paul endured in service to the Lord? That list is not short. Second Corinthians says, he was shipwrecked, beaten and flogged. He was exposed to the elements and even left for dead. Yet, in spite of all of that, he remained faithful to the Lord. He didn't just endure. He persevered. Through the eyes of God, the beginning of his life didn't matter. The only thing that mattered to God was the way Paul ended his life. The same is true for us. How you started your life doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is how you finish. Have you ever stopped and pondered all the things Paul endured in service to the Lord?

Second, have you ever stopped to consider all the things you have had to endure in your life? You may not have been shipwrecked, beaten and flogged, but you have not skipped painlessly through life. This world is not an easy place. Just think about it for a moment. Has anyone here ever lost a loved one? Has anyone here ever buried their own child? Has anyone here had to face a life-threatening disease? Has anyone had to face financial disaster? Has anyone's life here been victimized by an addiction? Has anyone here been a victim of crime? There is no need for me to go on. You get the point. Yet, despite all this hardship, you have endured in the faith. After all, you are here today. I find that to be very impressive. How you start doesn't really matter. The only thing that matters is how you finish. This is the question you must answer today: How perseverant are you? If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

It was just last Sunday. It was about 12:30 and I was putting my coat on to go home. I was looking forward to a sandwich and a nap. When the church phone rang unexpectedly, I looked at the caller ID. I recognized the name. It was Helen Thellman's son-in-law, Bill. I picked up the phone and his emotional words told me the sad news. Helen was dying. Instead of going home, I went to Copeland Oaks in Sebring, where Helen had been living the last couple of years. As I drove, I thought about my experiences with Helen. Two things popped into my mind. First, Helen loved her family. She prayed and sacrificed for each one. Second, Helen loved to sew. She could sew anything, but she was known for making Barbie clothes. She gave them to everyone. She gave Kathryn and me some and we took them to the orphanage in Russia. I always

wished Helen could have heard the little girls squeal with excitement when they received them. Thinking about Helen made my time in the car go fast. When I arrived, I walked in the front door. There was Bill. With red emotional eyes, he hugged me and thanked me for coming. A few steps later we were in her room. It was dark and stuffy, crowded with her family. Each one trying to comprehend the moment. I took my coat off and sat on the bed next to Helen. Bill wasn't wrong. The end was near. Helen's daughter tried to explain her medical condition. I didn't really understand, but it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that Helen was passing. Not really knowing what else to do, I asked everyone to take a hand so we could pray. When I prayed, I prayed about two things. First, I thanked God for the love she shared with her family. Second, I prayed about heaven. Helen was clearly on her way. When I finished the prayer with an Amen, everyone dropped their hands and fought back the emotions. One by one, I heard their stories, but soon it was time to go. I returned the next day and her condition had declined. Alone, one more time, I sat with Helen. Once again, I prayed with her. This time I ended by saying, "Helen, I will see you again in heaven." Helen was the first person to admit it. She was not a perfect person. Yet, no one questioned her salvation, because she endured in the faith. Like Paul, she had fought the good fight. She had finished the race; she had kept the faith. Helen was perseverant! She passed later that day. That is Helen's story. What is yours?

How perseverant are you? Life is hard and it would be easy to walk away from the faith. Don't do it! Never forget, how you started your life doesn't matter. The only thing that really matters is how you finish your life. Walter Elliot once said, "*Perseverance is not a long race. It is many short races one after another.*" And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**