

Title: Hold Tight (and never let go)
Text: Hebrews 10.19-25
Theme: Keeping the faith
Series: Hebrews #27
Prop Stmt: Holding fast is rooted in the faithfulness of God

Read Text:

This text is a call to perseverance and faithfulness. Two weeks ago I addressed the fact that commitment is almost completely gone from the consciousness of the 20-something age group. We live in a culture of “what’s-in-it-for-me-right-now” thinking. If a job is too demanding, we quit. If a class is too hard, we quit. If a relationship is too difficult, we quit. If a church is too boring, we quit. If an advertisement is too long, we zap and quit. If an internet conversation is too awkward, we click and quit. One of our favorite buttons is “delete.” We are delete favorites, we delete songs, we delete preference and we delete people. We are, in essence – quitters. And this affects all sorts of things. Trends no longer last a few years, they last a few days. Nothing, it seems endures. But, yet we want the reward of endurance without the work of endurance. We look for the easy way out, the “what’s-in-it-for me” way. Now, some of you are in school, and something happens around here in the winter that is called snow. And when it snows, even agnostics pray for snow days. And I ask – why? Why, if you are a student would you ever want a snow day? If you don’t go to school, you don’t learn. Do you really want a diploma that says you were registered for school but did not have to go because of weather? What good would that be? Or students in signing up for classes want to know who the easiest teacher is? Why? We want the reward without the work. We want the diploma without the knowledge that the diploma is supposed to represent. Does that make any sense at all? And, by the way, do you want a brain surgeon or oncologist whose life and work is characterized by doing the least amount possible?

A week ago, I ran a marathon. Well, I ran most of it, as there were a few parts of it, I walked. But, at one point, the course made a turn and came back the way I was going. (This is always disconcerting to see how far ahead some people are, and I so wanted to be at the point where they were in the race, rather than at the point where I was) This meant that if I simply turned around, I could save myself a bit of grief and get the reward without all the work. Or could I? Would I not be disqualified if caught? And worse yet, if I was not caught, I would only be pretending to finish, and the reward would only be a pretend reward since my short-cut would tarnish the true value that the finishers medal actually represents.

I addressed this two weeks ago, but failed to make the connection between our culture of commitment-adverse, short-cutters and quitters and this text. The language of this paragraph is that of commitment. This entire paragraph is counter-cultural. It speaks to a resolve, a long obedience in the same direction that we, as the people of God, are to put on display and in that display we showcase what true culture is supposed to look like. I know that the air that we breathe of this present age has very little “stick-to-it-tiv-ness”

we are in, but we are not of this present age. We are the people of God who belong to a different age, with a citizenship in a different country and an allegiance to a greater kingdom. We are followers of Christ. We are followers of Christ, “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Heb. 12.2) Do you see the connection between that statement that is yet to come and this paragraph?

This paragraph is a summary, a call and connection, all at the same time. The summary is reflected in the two statements that start with “since we have”. They are followed by 3 commands that each begin with “let us.” I preached on the first “let us” two weeks ago and this morning, we are looking at the second one, which is found in v.23. This “let us” statement, just like the first is built upon all that the AH has explained to us so far, which is summarized in verses 19-21. I will not repeat all that I said two weeks ago on that, except to show you the connection between this and to what is to come. What Christ accomplished through his life and death secured our redemption. This was the single greatest act of God in all of eternity that God has ever done and will ever do for his people. This was the greatest trial, the greatest struggle, the greatest sorrow, the greatest sacrifice which helps us see that his death for us is the greatest gift and greatest treasure. The greater the treasure brings the greater risk, because the greatest risk brings the greatest reward. Since the greatest endurance was the perseverance of Christ going all the way through death on the cross, what does that say about the greatness of him, the glory of him and the greatness of the reward?! There is none greater! There is none higher!

Now, it is very important that you make this connection, so listen carefully. Church, we are followers of Christ. We exist to make much of him. We exist to reflect him and put him on display. We make much of him, we value him, and we treasure him by living in a way that honors him. He persevered to the end, so we persevere to the end. But, our perseverance is not in order to earn our salvation, for he already earned that. We live lives characterized by commitment, resolve, by not taking short-cuts and the easy way out, because doing hard things the right way and being true to our word and being people of endurance makes much of Christ. I am not going to preach this call to endurance by simply showing you the benefits of sticking it out and appealing to you to be faithful because of what’s in it for you as a result. Granted, there are many benefits to faithfulness and commitment, but I want to hold up before the ultimate goal and that is, to help you see that when we hold fast the confession of our faith without wavering in spite of persecution, misunderstanding, discouragement, distress and even deserters or other winds that blow against our sails, we show that the real value of the treasure is not because of what get from it right now, but that Christ is truly treasure!

So, yes, commitment is not understood very well in this culture, but we are counter-culture in contrast to this present age, and we are to be a reflection of what life is really supposed to look like. God has called us, the church to be a people whose lives are marked by holding fast to that which matters. Hold tight and don’t let go, for in your holding tight, you put Christ on display.

1. What does it mean to “hold tight?”

The ESV translates it as “hold fast.” Here, the word “fast” means tight, which is seen in pieces of hardware known as “fasteners”. A fastener, fastens, that is, it holds something to something else.

Now, this past week, I took one of the three weeks that you graciously gave me for my 20th anniversary here and went on a trip. I am a bit of a civil war nerd and (speaking of perseverance) I dragged my poor wife to 9 different civil war battlefields that we toured in 4 days (Gettysburg, Richmond, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Wilderness, Spotsylvania, Manassas 1 and 2, and Antietam). Here is what I learned. There are thousands of monuments that have seemingly sprout in oft-forgotten fields speaking of bravery and heroism of soldiers from 150 years ago. Some of these soldiers died not like the monuments depict, but in fear and in cowardice. Some died to disease, never firing a shot or being hit by one. I saw no monuments to those who died of dysentery or diarrhea, yet horrible sanitary conditions took out thousands of soldiers, whose means of demise apparently does not motivate monument makers. So, this explains why my illustrations for the next several weeks may be a bit influenced by military history. The Civil War was thought to be a rather short affair. The might of the North, would meet, match and crush the hicks of the South. Game, set, match. Then, this nonsense of succession would be ended. The two armies first met in force at a place called Manassas. There, on the morning of the first battle, the predictions looked to be true. The north broke the confederate lines and was confidently pursuing them across the field. Panic was written on the face of the south, except for one man. A general from Lexington, VA, named Thomas, sat on his horse in a reserve position to the battle. As panicked troops rushed his way, he simply remained calm and in essence said to his men, “We are from Virginia and we don’t run.” That afternoon, he held tight and did not let go. And in that moment, the entire tide of the battle changed. The certain defeat of the south changed into a rout of the north, as they hit a man and his men who refused to budge, earning that general, Thomas Jackson, the nickname, “Stonewall.” Instead of making quick work of the south, the northern army literally ran back to Washington D.C. that day littering the path with guns, bedrolls and uniforms. It was a humiliating loss occasioned by the tenacity of one man who held tight and would not let go.

I am moved by that resolve. I applaud that tenacity, but I disagree with much of the reasons for the Civil War. On the one hand, I understand the anger by the south of the perceived power grab by the Federal Government that trumped states rights but on the other, how can anyone in the name of God, the gospel and the most basic view of humanity tolerate the institution of slavery as it was practiced in our country? There were leaders on both sides who were twisted opportunists that would give any mother pause before sending her son off to be killed. And yet, in the midst of that messy war, 600,000 soldiers died, many of whom held tight to a belief that was reflected in them holding tight to a position of land on a bloody field. The shame of it, is that some of them held tight to the wrong belief. Are states rights a cause worth dying over? Is it worth sending your son to enlist under a general whose primary motivation is to achieve notoriety in order to gain political power? These are not easy questions to answer. But I am not asking you to sign

up and persevere for that. I am saying that if, in this world, men and women will “hold tight” for lesser causes, how much more should we be people who “hold tight” seeing that we have the greatest of causes? Hold tight and don’t let go, but... (#2)

2. What is “the confession of our hope?”

To “confess” has the idea of agreement. The confession of our hope is a wonderful translation that seeks to reflect both aspects of this phrase. There is an objective aspect to it, meaning the actual confession itself. And there is the result of that confession, that is, ones who hold to this confession actually have real hope. In other words, let us hold tight to what we believe (confess – agree to) since what we believe and agree to is what God has revealed to us through Christ. Then, look at what happens for those who believe, who confess Christ! They have an inheritance that can never be taken away. That which we as believers agree to, based on the Scriptures is our hope and is actual hope. The AH is summarizing all that Christ has accomplished for us and has shown it to be of ultimate value because Christ alone paid the penalty for your sin when he took your place on the cross and died as your substitute. But, he was not only the greatest offering; he was and is the greatest priest all at the same time. And now he stands before the Father’s throne on my behalf and not only intercedes for me, but guarantees that he is going to bring me home safe. There is nothing greater than that. If you are going to hold on to something, hold on to that.

3. What does that look like?

It means that you 1) Understand what Christ has done on the cross in order to secure your pardon, accept that has the only basis for your forgiveness and righteousness and throw the entire weight of your life upon the gospel of Jesus Christ. And it means 2) that you now follow Christ and you don’t look back, no matter what. It means that you do not let anything else get in the way of following Christ. It means that you have no other King, no other love that competes for his supremacy, no other goal that vies for your ultimate affection. It means that no matter what the enemy may throw at you, that you stand on the ground of the gospel and you don’t move.

4. How can we practice that?

Life is the sum total of daily decisions. If you don’t want to move or wilt in the face of adversity, then practice perseverance because it doesn’t come natural. We practice persevering in the gospel, by being people of our word. If you make a promise, keep it. Keep it, even if it costs you. If you say you are going to be some where, be there. If you say you are going to do a job, do it. If you say “I Do” then do it. If you say, “I will” then will it. I know that this is almost a foreign language in our culture, but look at the opportunity that we have. We live in a world of fine print on the bottom of contracts, and exception clauses and word-smithing that makes language almost meaningless. When you speak the truth and do what you say you are going to do, you put Christ on display. When you follow through and do hard things that cost you and you love in a way that is inconvenient, you make much of Christ. So, my counsel to you is to practice doing, on a

daily or regular basis, difficult but good things that demand self-denial. Instead of living for the day when you can do nothing but whatever you want, practice doing things that demand a long obedience in the same direction, so that you cultivate an attitude of perseverance, resolve, determination and never letting go.

5. **Why are we given this challenge?**

We need to be reminded of the supremacy of Christ in all things. We need to be reminded that he is worth it because lesser things crowd our minds and seek to steal our hearts from loving him who is supremely lovely. We need to look again at the cross and look again at our sin and look again at his grace and look again at his place next to the Father. We need to see his faithfulness and resolve again to stay the course. We are given this challenge because none of us, does this perfectly. For all of my bravado and cheer about being a person of your word, I am painfully aware of how often I have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and broken the trust of people that I care about, but don't care about perfectly. My life and perhaps yours too, is littered with too many examples of saying, "I will do this" and not doing it. It is so easy for me to start a task and not finish it. I have to fight this.

I need to regularly look to Christ, not only as one who persevered, but realizing that in his persevering, he paid for my broken promises. And instead of living in denial, or living in defeat, I can face the truth about my failures, be forgiven and with fresh grace press on, for perseverance is not only seen in faithfulness, it is seen in responding to failure including your own.

We are also given this challenge because we are tempted to let go. That is exactly what described the people who first received this letter. They were tempted to quit. Persecution from the political authorities in Rome, combined with the ongoing rejection of their own ethnic people and now seeing some defect was almost too much. So the AH takes them back to Christ and back to the gospel and says, if you quit what will you go to? There is nothing else.

6. **When are we most tempted to "let go"?**

We are most tempted to let go when we are worn out. When you are sick for a long time and there is no end in sight, or hungry (I mean like not eating for 40 days hungry, not being the last table called to the buffet line hungry) , or when we are exhausted, not having slept in 36 hours exhaustion, we are tempted to let go and give in. Even then, look to Christ whose endurance of the cross was set into motion by his endurance of Satan who tempted him in the wilderness. When I am worn out, I need to preach the gospel to myself.

We are tempted to let go when we are alone. When we are alone we tend to listen to ourselves. When we are alone it is so easy to think that it does not matter what we do, that our lives are no big deal, that others don't really care, that we are just one little, inconsequential person. If I quit, they will never miss me. Someone else will take my

place. There are others who are better than me. Now, this may not be your case, but in my case, if I quit, there probably are some people who would not care, and who would not miss me. There definitely would be many who could take my place and would certainly do a better job than me. But that is not the point!!! We don't persevere because we are irreplaceable; we persevere because it makes much of Christ. And when I am alone I can forget that, which is why we were never called to live in isolation but in community as we will see next week. Notice again the "us".

We are tempted to let go when life seems unfair – aren't we? This isn't fair! I trust Christ and my child gets sick. I follow Christ and can't pay my bills. I follow Christ and another person gets the contract. On and on it goes. This again, is why we need to look to Christ. He died because life is not fair. If life was fair I would be in hell and he would never have gone to the cross. But, looking to Christ helps me look to the end, not just to the circumstances at the moment. We ain't home yet.

We are tempted to let go when others let go. The truth is, what others do, affects us. You see it in marriages, people quit and it becomes an epidemic. You see it on sports teams and other organizations. But, when it happens in the church and people bail out on the gospel, we are deeply troubled and should be. But that is even more reason to "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering." Sometimes, they come back.

We are a church which means that we are a club. We are an exclusive club in that only sinners can join. If you are perfect and have no troubles, you need not apply. As a club of sinners, we have a messy history. There have been times when we have not acted like the gospel that we have professed. There have been times when we have said things and done things that did not make much of Christ. But, we have learned and we continue to learn and the reason why we have learned and continue to learn and grow in grace is because he who promised is faithful. Some of you have been here for over half a century and longer. You have seen good days and lean years. Your perseverance matters, not only because God has seen fit to build upon that foundation for what Cornerstone has become, but because your perseverance through leanness stands as a monument through time testifying of the truthfulness of the gospel. In fact, it is when others are quitting or running in panic that your resolve says it even louder! We are believers. We don't run.

Today, you can visit the very place at Manassas where Stonewall Jackson stood with his men and made a stand. You can walk the trail that he took his men on one night in his infamous flanking move that turned the battle at Chancellorsville. You can visit the very spot where in the confusion of darkness and an unsecured battlefield he was mistakenly shot by his own men. You can visit the place where he was taken, and where he eventually died. The same bed is there. Even the same clock sits on the same mantle and continues to tick away the time. You can visit the place where he was buried. Fact is, you can visit the place where his amputated arm is buried, which is different than where his body is buried (Cathi and I declined that one), all of which speaks to the impact that one person can make who holds fast in the face of adversity and refuses to let go. But for what? To what end? In the end his army still lost. His cause was inconsistent at best.

Beloved, we have the greatest cause, the greatest message and the greatest leader. We also have the greatest guarantee of the outcome. So, hold tight and never let go.

7. **How can we do that “without wavering?”**

The answer is found in the final phrase – “for he who promised is faithful.” You see, it is impossible for God to lie (6.17-18). God’s promises are either fulfilled or going to be fulfilled. God cannot lie. Isn’t that the heart of this admonishment? God made a promise to us through Jesus Christ. Our promise to God and to each other is based on that promise. God cannot lie. God cannot go back on his Word, there is nothing in all of life more certain, more complete, more precious and more important than believing God’s promise of the gospel. So, hold fast and don’t let go for anything, knowing that He holds on to you and will not let go. It is not easy and it is not always fun. But holding on in times like that is what makes so much of him.