

## **WE DO NOT LOSE HEART**

2 Corinthians 4:13 - 5:1

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7 June 2015

The New York Times columnist David Brooks has written a new book entitled, The Road to Character. In this book, Brooks distinguishes between two kinds of virtues. There are resume virtues, and these are the ones most highlighted in our world -- the virtues you talk about when you go for a job interview, the qualities that might help you attain financial success or climb the corporate ladder. But there are also what Brooks calls “eulogy virtues” -- the ones that are talked about at your funeral. Kindness, bravery, faithfulness, honesty, and the capacity for great love.

It can be hard to achieve resume virtues. It may involve going back to school while working full-time, working long hours, making sacrifices. But most people would admit that life’s real work is found in that list of eulogy virtues. How do we build our character? How do we live in such a way that we maintain our integrity? How do we face the challenges of our own personal lives with courage? How do we live in this world and not feel sometimes defeated by it or overwhelmed by what seem to be endless insurmountable problems?

The people of the fledgling church in Corinth were told simply this, “We do not lose heart.” It wasn’t spoken as a command: “Thou shalt not lose heart.” It wasn’t a pleading: “I beg you not to lose heart.” It was spoken as a matter of fact. This is who we are, as people who bear the name of Christ. We are people who do not lose heart.

We don’t lose heart because we follow one who lived with heart. Jesus lived with compassion, a life that was all heart. He wasn’t available to people 24/7, he

regularly took some time to recharge his spiritual batteries, but he never became hard-hearted. He never became cynical. He looked at a hungry crowd and said, "If we all share, I think we can all be fed." He looked at a crowd clamoring for his healing touch, and he took a deep breath, and began working his way through the long line. He acted in love and out of love even at great personal cost.

He is our role model and so we too are told, "We are people who do not lose heart." But we don't have the patience of Jesus. We try but we don't have his store of spiritual energy. How do we do it? How do we live in this world, and keep our hearts intact?

Well, for one, we can remember that Jesus paid attention to the needs of his own soul. He knew when he needed time away, time apart, time alone, time with God. When his own inner life was becoming depleted, he restored himself. We were created to experience Sabbath one day out of every seven. What do we do to return our hearts and souls to health and wholeness? What are our regular practices of renewal?

Another way to think about how we can develop larger and stronger capacities for compassion is to consider what it is that causes us to lose heart. I talk to a lot of people who are facing life crises. Financial difficulties, bankruptcy, unemployment. Cancer, MS, a loved one with dementia. Grief, divorce. Some people are able to cope with adversity without being shaken at their core, and others find themselves completely undone. One of the differences is mindset, and expectation, and frankly what I think of as false teaching. Some people believe that life should be fair, that bad things will never happen to good people. That if you work hard and keep your nose clean you should succeed, that if you cheat the system you should get caught. They

expect life to follow these rules. If I exercise and eat broccoli I won't get cancer. If I treat my loved ones well they will not disappoint me.

The expectation that life will be fair is a false and dangerous teaching. It's not in the Bible. Oh, justice is a biblical virtue, and one for which we are all to be working. But it's not an eye for an eye type of justice. It's a justice which allows for plenty of grace. If simple justice were all the Bible cared about, we never would have had Paul. Saul who was out persecuting Christians would have had something terrible happen to him - he would have been put in prison or struck dead or been visited by a horrible disease. Instead, God changes the direction of Saul's life, gives him a new name and a new vocation, and uses his energy for good. Saul becomes Paul, and we have this good word for today, and we have the growth of the church. God is interested in all kinds of resurrection and new life, far more than simple tit for tat justice.

People who expect life to follow certain rules find themselves totally lost when life disappoints them. They become angry, bitter and confused. All their coping mechanisms fall away. They lose heart.

A more appropriate and helpful and biblical mindset is one that says, "Life will sometimes be hard and things will happen that I don't understand, but God will be with me through every long night. God will give me the resources I need to face every challenge, and I will ask and receive help from others." That mindset is the key to the ability to not lose heart.

And often we find that it is the most challenging times in our lives which teach us the most. Once we have come out on the other side of a crisis, we can see that we are not broken but are actually stronger.

Scientific studies have been conducted which confirm these hunches we have about surviving difficult times. It's been found that the experience of adversity can increase our compassion for others who are going through similar circumstances or others in general who are suffering. The experience of pain can help people relate to others with empathy and compassion – cultivating within them a capacity to connect with others, to see opportunities for compassion where they had not done so in the past.

How much heart work is involved in changing our expectations of life and of ourselves? We will make mistakes and we will encounter adversity. And we do not have to let those experiences define us.

Bernie Ogan's daughter-in-law has written a book called Choosing Wisdom: Strategies and Inspiration for Growing Through Life-Changing Difficulties.

Here is the story of one of her research subjects. "Jane is a vibrant 76-year-old woman who took some time to recount all the emotional and physical pain she has lived through. In addition to a son severely injured in an accident, she has had to deal with back injuries and an inflammatory condition herself that causes severe muscle pain and fatigue. She writes this: "My son was in a very bad automobile accident. Don't know whether it was anger, but something was really hard on me through that. With all the disappointments and the trials that come into your life, I think writing helps, talking with friends helps, being grateful for what you have rather than what you don't have – just that mindfulness. It's a little like prayer, but it's more of a grateful heart."

Psalm 4 contains this verse: "Tremble but do not despair; attend to your heart." Attend to your heart.

We are people who do not lose heart. We care for our own souls through healthy spiritual practices. We pay attention to right teaching, knowing that God will strengthen us through every challenge. We let our own difficulties open us up to others in empathy and compassion. We notice which of life's experiences make our hearts shrink and which make them expand.

Those of you who volunteered this week at IHN found your hearts softening and expanding. Next Sunday night when our 96 youth and adults return from New Orleans, they will not be the same. Their hearts will not be same as when they left this morning. They will see things, hear things, do things, feel things that will change them.

We do not lose heart. Let us pray.