

I Trust: 3. I Give
Galatians 6:7-10
November 21, 2021
Pastor Steve Richards

Did you hear about Julia “Hurricane” Hawkins? On November 6, she set the world record in the 100 meter dash. If that’s all you heard, that in itself is a remarkable accomplishment. But then I heard that Julia only took up competitive running five years ago when she was 100. And two weeks ago, she set the world record for someone over 105 years of age. Watch this [video]. I’m 65, and I have 40 more years to try to beat her record. But she isn’t finished yet. She still hopes she can get her time under one minute. The articles that I read didn’t describe her faith. But when she was interviewed, she said: *“People keep telling me that I inspire them. That’s the goal for my life. I’m staying alive to be an inspiration for a few people... If I’ve done nothing in life, I’ve shown people that you can keep going. Don’t give up.”* The video of her race has been seen by millions of people around the world. She’s had her greatest impact after the age of 105. Keep going, and don’t give up.

This morning, let me begin with a verse from Psalm 33:22 **May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you.** I want to begin this morning with a word about hope, because I think hope and trust are interconnected and in a broken world, it can be hard to hang on to either – to keep going and not give up. If you have ever placed your hope in something or someone and whatever that was came crashing down, you know the struggle.

If you have ever stood at the altar and said, *“as long as we both shall live”* and it turned out to be only until someone else came along and your marriage came crashing down – you know about hopelessness. You understand the struggle of trying to maintain hope and love in a relationship in a hopelessly broken world. If you were promised something at work and you did your part – in fact, you worked your butt off evenings and weekends, and your hope was in a promotion or a new opportunity and suddenly you felt the despair of realizing it was not going to happen as you hoped. Or you were sent home; *“We don’t need you anymore.”* You know the struggle. How do you maintain hope in a hopelessly broken world? Or you had your health. You ate the right food and exercised. You did everything you thought you were supposed to do to insure a long and healthy life, but one morning you discovered a lump and now even the doctor says it does not look good for you. Everything you thought you could count on was not enough and you know the struggle. How do you find hope in a world that feels broken and hopeless? Maybe you had aspirations for your son or your daughter but then they got connected with the wrong group and now they are everything but what you hoped for them, and you can’t fix it and turn back the clock and it seems hopeless in what seems a hopelessly broken world. And if you have not experienced the struggle, you will. It is what the Christ mystics have called *“the dark night of the soul.”* When we wonder why. Why try? Why keep going? Why do the right things? What’s the point of loving when people treat you like dirt? What’s the point of committing if it doesn’t mean anything? How do you maintain hope in a world that is broken?

Last Saturday, I took the ladder from our garage and leaned it against the roof in order to clean out the gutters. And I remember a few years ago when a neighbor did the same thing, and either the ladder was not secure, or the angle was too steep, but he fell backwards landing headfirst on his driveway. I came running outside when I heard a helicopter landing across the street to airlift him to the hospital. In an instant, a normal activity on a beautiful afternoon turned into a struggle between life and death. He eventually recovered, but now whenever I climb a ladder, I wonder – is my ladder secure enough? Will it hold?

When you were born, you leaned the ladder of your hope into your parents. It was not a conscious decision. You were dependent on them. As you got older, you moved your ladder from your parents' commitment to you to your desire to take care of yourself. You leaned into your ability, your accomplishments, your ability to get into college or your ability to establish relationships with others. We make decisions to lead our ladder on something we think will support our vision of the future. Everyone listening today has placed their ladder – their hope in something or someone. Most of us don't even think about where our ladder is leaning until what? Until we feel hopeless or helpless. And whatever I'm leaning against is not coming through for me. I'm not going to have children, and I thought we were. I'm going to be 40, and I'm still single. I'm not going to be able to retire when I thought. I did everything that I thought was right, and now look what's happened. Only when we are falling, when I realize where the ladder is leaning on something or someone I could not trust – only then do we suddenly find ourselves in the struggle of a broken world. Now is a good time to remember Psalm 33:22. **May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you.**

Today's scripture is found in the book of Galatians, chapter 6, beginning with verse 7. Paul was writing to Christians who also faced struggles in life. **Make no mistake, God is not mocked.** In other words, God knows. God provides direction. God shows us where to lean our ladder. Maybe you already believe that, but what matters is whether we live that – God knows.

Then Paul provides a picture of planting and harvesting. **A person will harvest what they plant.** We are living in the harvest of what we have planted. If you want pumpkins, don't plant corn! **Those who plant only for their own benefit will harvest devastation from their selfishness,** When what we plant is to satisfy our pleasures, we experience devastation. If we feed our passions and our desires, spending on the pleasures of ordinary life then all we will have to show for it will be corruption and decay because everything in this world ultimately dies. Everything living eventually dies. We know that, but do we know the reason? Remember the Genesis story. Adam and Eve thought they knew better and when they realized they had free will, they leaned their ladder on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thinking life was all about satisfying their pleasures, and in that moment, paradise was lost. Everything decays. I look in the mirror, and I think something is wrong – it's called decay! Everything is decaying even relationships and wealth, but we think I'm not going to decay. I've got good genetics. I'll be the exception. It will never happen to me. I remember when Mother Teresa died. I thought, she can't die – look at all the good she did, but what happened to her body, to her heart of compassion – it died. If she could not beat the system, there's bad news for me. Now it's not that taking care of our bodies – exercise, eating right, good living is wrong – just don't lean your ladder there, thinking you can beat the odds.

But there's good news: **but those who plant for the benefit of the Spirit will harvest eternal life from the Spirit.** The key word is eternal. It's not just life in heaven. It means quality of life as well as quantity of life. God is in the harvest business, and we are in the planting business. And what we plant today will bring a harvest tomorrow. **Let's not get tired of doing good, because in time we'll have a harvest if we don't give up.** We do not give up, because we lean on God and only there will we be secure. We live out God's values. We love even when we don't get love back because our hope is not in this broken world, but God's kingdom. That's where we lean our ladder. We serve even when no one says thank you, because our hope is not in this world, it's in God's kingdom. We forgive even when people don't forgive back – and we don't lose hope because hope is not in this world, it's in God's kingdom. We lean our ladder. We live – we plant to please God – that's eternal hope.

Recently, I spoke with someone who described one of the most heart-wrenching and life-altering experiences I have ever heard. And after describing the experience, she said, “As a result, I no longer believe in God. I don’t believe in anything anymore. I have nothing to live for.” And I said, “Don’t give up. The worst thing is never the last thing.” But what I want to say to you is when you give up on God, you give up on the source of hope. That’s why in good times, we build our relationship with God, so that in bad times we have a relationship to lean on. In the words of hymn: *My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus’ name.* God still has a plan. And that plan is us! God puts God’s trust in us! You and I are God’s delivery system to bring hope to a broken world.

Here’s how this works. More than twenty years ago, when this church realized it was located in a neighborhood where there was a need for childcare and that child care would bring hope to parents who could not afford child care but needed a better tomorrow. Someone should do something. Surely God could bring hope to a broken world. And God did. God used you – and twenty-one years later with more than a million dollars in scholarships, God brought a better tomorrow to children and families. Ten years ago, when a small group in this church recognized an unmet need as a result of several trips to Kenya – teenaged girls left pregnant and without hope – someone should do something. And today, Imara International is bringing hope and showing what that hope looks like in a broken world. A few months ago, we saw images of panicked people desperate to get out of Afghanistan and maybe as you looked at the terrified faces of human need, you thought someone should do something. And today, a small group of people are coming together and asking for your help to relocate one of those families. A thousand families are waiting to find a home in Minnesota – and there are people here at Messiah who are saying, we will do something. We cannot do everything to alleviate suffering and bring hope, but we can do something. It’s how God brings hope in a broken world.

I want to show you what you have been investing in during 2021. [video] This is what God can do when God’s people lean their ladders on the hope that is found in Jesus Christ and then are deployed by God as purveyors of hope in a broken world. God is ready. All God needs are the hands and feet to bring God’s hope in a broken world. The way you are bringing hope and serving as God’s hands and feet continues to go beyond what I imagined possible. Over and over again, you have leaned into God’s promises and allowed God to use you to bring hope and be that hope the world desperately needs.

At the end of this service, I am inviting those in this room to walk forward to bring your offering and your commitment to this Covenant Box. But most of you are not in the room, so I’m inviting you to click on the box on your computer screen that says commitment card. I’m inviting you to say yes – I want to lean my life on the solid footing of God’s promises and let God use me to bring hope to others. I want to be God’s hands and feet in this world. Wherever you are, join me in opening our hearts and hands to God... *“Lord, you have blessed us with so much. Let this commitment be a small reflection of our love for you, our gratitude for these blessings and our desire to be used by you to bring hope to others. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”*

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of November 21, 2021

Weekly Prayer: Thank you, God, for everything. Thank you for life, for relationships, for the resources we have received. Most of all thank you that you are always faithful and always at work in our lives. Help us to see our lives and everything we have as a trust from you to be your hands and feet in this world. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Monday, November 22

Scripture: Matthew 19:16-30

A man approached him and said, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to have eternal life?” Jesus said, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There’s only one who is good. If you want to enter eternal life, keep the commandments.” The man said, “Which ones?” Then Jesus said, “*Don’t commit murder. Don’t commit adultery. Don’t steal. Don’t give false testimony. Honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.*” The young man replied, “I’ve kept all these. What am I still missing?” Jesus said, “If you want to be complete, go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come follow me.” But when the young man heard this, he went away saddened, because he had many possessions.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “I assure you that it will be very hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. In fact, it’s easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God’s kingdom.” When his disciples heard this, they were stunned. “Then who can be saved?” they asked. Jesus looked at them carefully and said, “It’s impossible for human beings. But all things are possible for God.” Then Peter replied, “Look, we’ve left everything and followed you. What will we have?” Jesus said to them, “I assure you who have followed me that, when everything is made new, when the Human One sits on his magnificent throne, you also will sit on twelve thrones overseeing the twelve tribes of Israel. And all who have left houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children, or farms because of my name will receive one hundred times more and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last. And many who are last will be first.

Observation: Jesus invited the young man in this story to reset his priorities, to change the focus of his life. The young man chose not to do that. That he went away sad suggests that he really wanted to follow Jesus—but not if following Jesus meant actually making Jesus central to the way he lived his entire life.

Application: This story confronts us with the difficult question, “Which of my possessions, if any, are so precious to me that I’d choose them over Jesus?” We know the young man’s answer to the question. What is your answer? The disciples thought prosperity always showed God’s favor on a person. Jesus’ perspective on wealth and poverty turned their world view upside down. In our sometimes upside-down financial world, how will you strengthen your trust in God and live out of the abundance that you have?

Prayer: God, I am grateful for all that you have done for me. I want to follow in the way that Jesus taught. And yet, it is challenging to live in this world with so much available to me. Help me to stay close to you. Amen.

Tuesday, November 23

Scripture: Matthew 6:1-4

“Be careful that you don’t practice your religion in front of people to draw their attention. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. “Whenever you give to the poor, don’t blow your trumpet as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets so that they may get praise from people. I assure you, that’s the only reward they’ll get. But when you give to the poor, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that you may give to the poor in secret. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

Observation: Sometimes we find that even our generous acts come because we feel the need to put on a performance for others—to make ourselves feel better, to get others to think better of us. Jesus pointed to the fact that God is leading us away from ways to prove ourselves while drawing close to God’s unconditional love.

Application: When you give to others, in what ways (if any) do you identify with this text? Ask Jesus to give you a vision of serving an audience of One and allowing God to fill the empty places inside you. Have you ever done something generous, and purposely tried to make sure no one else knew about it? If not, try it this week and see how it affects you inwardly. How does it feel to act anonymously, knowing that you will not receive the credit? Give credit/thanks to God!

Prayer: Loving God, you gave me life. There is no greater gift. Of the infinite possibilities, you chose me. Let my worth rest in your unfailing love. As you have done for me, let my actions be an expression of your love for others. Amen.

Wednesday, November 24

Scripture: Matthew 6:19-24

“Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don’t eat them and where thieves don’t break in and steal them. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

“The eye is the lamp of the body. Therefore, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how terrible that darkness will be! No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Observation: In today’s reading, Jesus reminds us that there can only be one most important focus, one top priority, in our life. It is not possible to make God and the values of the unseen kingdom of heaven most important if our priorities are ruled by the values of the tangible life and culture around us.

Application: Jesus says you cannot serve two masters. Who or what is the master you are you serving, as measured by where you put the most energy, time and focus? In what ways, if any, have you experienced the power of money to control and direct your life? What forces besides purely financial ones (e.g. social prestige, children) can become your treasure, more important to you than God? How do you find that living in God’s kingdom makes you a better parent, citizen, friend, etc., if at all?

Prayer: Thank you, God, for everything. I am grateful for so much. Most of all I am grateful for the One who makes it possible to have so many other “gratitudes” in my life. Let thanksgiving for everyone and everything else find its source in you. Amen.

Thursday, November 25 (Thanksgiving Day)

Scripture: Psalm 136:1-9

Give thanks to the LORD because he is good.
God’s faithful love lasts forever!

Give thanks to the God of all gods—
God's faithful love lasts forever.
Give thanks to the Lord of all lords—
God's faithful love lasts forever.
Give thanks to the only one
who makes great wonders—
God's faithful love lasts forever.
Give thanks to the one who made the skies with skill—
God's faithful love lasts forever.
Give thanks to the one who shaped the earth on the water—
God's faithful love lasts forever.
Give thanks to the one who made the great lights—
God's faithful love lasts forever.
The sun to rule the day—
God's faithful love lasts forever.
The moon and the stars to rule the night—
God's faithful love lasts forever!

Observation: The psalmist located the center of our gratitude to God in the refrain he repeated over and over in this psalm: "God's faithful love lasts forever!" Above all else, the grand story of the Bible is the story of a God who loves us with a tireless, durable, embracing, never-ending love. What a promise! "Give thanks to the Lord!"

Application: Reflect on the greatness of God and the blessings you have experienced in the past year. Have a joyous Thanksgiving Day! In whatever way you mark the day, and with whomever, consider reading this psalm, or singing a favorite thanksgiving song, as a way of deepening your sense of gratitude on this day.

Prayer: Lord God, in wonder, love and praise I thank you that all you do in my life springs from your unchanging love. Amen.

Friday, November 26

Scripture: Philippians 4:10-13

I was very glad in the Lord because now at last you have shown concern for me again. (Of course you were always concerned but had no way to show it.) I'm not saying this because I need anything, for I have learned how to be content in any circumstance. I know the experience of being in need and of having more than enough; I have learned the secret to being content in any and every circumstance, whether full or hungry or whether having plenty or being poor. I can endure all these things through the power of the one who gives me strength.

Observation: From a prison cell (Philippians 1:13), Paul reflects on his inner response to gifts he had received from the Christians in the city of Philippi. He gives us some challenging and profound insights to consider as we think about the relationship of what we want and what we truly need.

Application: Paul does not glorify poverty or hunger in these verses—he expresses heartfelt gratitude for what the Philippians had sent. How did those gifts represent God's care for Paul's needs? In what ways are you able to be God's physical presence to bless someone else who is in need? Paul had learned to be content in every situation. How does he express his "secret"

(verse 13)? Is it difficult to find contentment when dealing with plenty? If so, how does God help?

Prayer: Generous God, all that I have springs forth from you. Help me to see that I am blessed for a greater purpose. I offer my life to you so that you can use me to bless others with acts of compassion, mercy, and love. Amen.

Saturday, November 27

Scripture: 1 Timothy 6:6-10

Actually, godliness is a great source of profit when it is combined with being happy with what you already have. We didn't bring anything into the world and so we can't take anything out of it: we'll be happy with food and clothing. But people who are trying to get rich fall into temptation. They are trapped by many stupid and harmful passions that plunge people into ruin and destruction. The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some have wandered away from the faith and have impaled themselves with a lot of pain because they made money their goal.

Observation: We remain hopeful in a world where so much seems uncertain. Today's reading was written by Paul. Remember he was a traveling preacher and tentmaker (Acts 18:1-4) with little money and no retirement plan—yet he talks (again) about “contentment”!

Application: Do you find the principle Paul states in verse 7 (you can't take it out of this world) a source of contentment, or does it trigger other feelings in you? What would it take for that principle to become a cause for contentment in this world? Have you at times in your life felt trapped in “the rat race”? What is godly contentment worth to you (or, if you don't have it, what would it be worth to you)? Open your heart to God in prayer and ask for divine help in incorporating contentment and true joy into all of your life.

Prayer: Gracious God, you made this day and my life possible. You promised to remain with me now and forever. Help me to be worthy of your trust and listen for your direction each day. Amen.