

Steadfast

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2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith"

Reformation Sunday

Movement 1 – Compromise

Life is compromise. We hedge our “no’s” and we temper our opinions so that we can get along with others. Life is compromise. We bend and we twist to meet other’s demands, like a sea of reeds bending to the winds of life so that we can find that place where we can stand at whatever angle we may find ourselves and be at rest with all those around us. Life is compromise.

I had an acquaintance in college who had a dream and was set on his dream. He dreamed that he would travel to every country in the world at least once, and he was sure that he was going to fulfill this dream. He talked about it all through college; he had planned out his route and was already saving money for his first trip. It was his dream and he was devoted to making it a reality. Yet before he graduated from college he hit one snare in his plans; he fell in love. He fell in love and put his dreams on hold for a while to be with his mate. He postponed his trip a little longer as he settled down in his marriage. He postponed his trip even longer after he had his first child. And I remember talking to him, ten years and three children later and gently asking about his dream to travel and the possibility of seeing that dream into a reality. He looked at me, with an infant in his hands and a toddler tugging at his pant leg and said, “Life is compromise.”

We know this truism that life is a compromise. Marriage is about compromise, otherwise the husband and the wife would end up butting heads more often than not. Raising children is about compromising things like bedtimes, snacks, and sanity. As you grow up you compromise bit-by-bit depending on the circumstances. How many of you had long hair in your younger days and claimed that you would never cut your hair? Why did you cut it? The great statesman Henry Clay, the “great compromiser” was right when he said, “Let him who elevates himself above humanity...say, if he pleases, ‘I will never compromise’; but let no one who is not above the frailties of our common nature disdain compromise.” Clay was known for his brilliant vision for common ground through compromise. Life is compromise.

The early Christians were faced with issues of compromise. Peter felt that Paul was compromising the Gospel when he preached to the gentiles. Issues of how to deal with divorce, how to deal with taxes, how to treat government officials, how to handle other religious practices, if one could serve in the military, take military oaths and still be a Christian were all issues that seemed to demand some kind of compromise. They were struggling to integrate with the larger society, to integrate with the Jews, and to avoid persecution, and to share the Gospel with the world. Their struggles brought about questions of compromise. In 303 the Roman Emperor, Diocletian issued an edict against Christianity, condemning many to death. While many Christians held to their faith (around 3,000 were killed) others renounced their faith in order to live, justifying their actions as keeping the faith alive. They compromised. This was not the first compromise to avoid persecution. Paul had seen others bend with the wind to avoid pain and death.

Nero had blamed the burning of Rome on Christians, and was persecuting Christians to offer a scapegoat to placate the people. Christians could have been quiet about their faith could have hid their faith in order to keep their lives and keep their religion alive or they could still be bold in sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It was a question of compromise.

Life is full of moments and decisions of compromise. Life is about bending like that reed in the wind so as not to break. Life is compromise.

Movement 2 – The Gain and the Reality

Through compromise we can gain much. Compromise is not necessarily a negative thing, but a reality that can lead to good; sometimes it pays to compromise. This is the way life is, we are faced with choices that we have to make in order to survive, and when we make these choices it seems that we find opportunities to thrive. It is the reality of life and it is a smart reality to compromise, to bend with the wind and to find ways to survive in our world.

Have you ever watched a child try to fit a square peg into a round hole? The child wants the peg to go in that specific place. The child cannot imagine the peg going anywhere else, and begins to get more and more frustrated because he or she is not getting her way. It may not seem like much to us, but the child needs to learn to look for other options, and other possibilities; the child needs to learn to compromise. The moment your hand guides the child's hand to a different hole, to a different place you are helping that child to look for other options, for other possibilities and to compromise goals and ideals. The ideal is no longer to fit the peg in that particular hole, but to fit the peg in any hole. The child learns to compromise and finds the value in such an approach.

Think of the church. The church has had to compromise from time to time. We have had to make decisions within the history of Christianity. We support governmental institutions from which we find no precedent from Christ. We spend meetings talking about money and survival strategies which has little to do with the Gospel. We shorten our services, we offer amenities and options so that people can easily make it to worship and will not be unduly burdened by the idea and practice of being a Christian. When conflict occurs in the world, we send money, but not people. When oppression occurs we pray but do little more. We are the reed bending in the wind doing what we think is necessary to bring people into the doors and to keep them within our institution. We compromise, and through our compromise we can be assured sustainability and survival. Not all of this compromise is bad, but is a reality. In order to survive, in order to be sure that we can be a presence and that we can reach people here, we must do what is necessary, and we must compromise.

This is the reality of life that we need to compromise. It is that moment when you realize that you won't be able to keep your job unless you change your appearance or attitude and you compromise to assure that you will still be gainfully employed. The moment when you realize that half a loaf of bread is better than none and you share and compromise. Moments when you realize the value and the good to compromise. It was Henry Clay's compromises that keep the Union together during a very fragile time in the history of our country, and these were compromises that many would not have preferred in a perfect world. It is compromises that ends or avoids military conflict between nations. It is the utilitarian compromise that considers the greater good of the society over the good of the individual – thanks to John Stuart Mill for that insight- and that allows a

small group to suffer for the sake of many (read: Patriot Act). It is a reality of life, and we must wonder if it is necessarily a bad thing. Compromise can lead to survival to longevity and to mutual benefit. It is not perfect, it is not ideal, but it works and keeps us alive. We compromise in order to survive, and it is not necessarily a bad thing.

Movement 3 – The Loss

Yet through compromise there is also much to lose. This is the nature of compromise, you must be willing to give and let go; to take a little and give a little. You must be willing to bend and to grow like water finding its path down a mountain. You must be willing to lose, and at times in compromise we lose much.

Think of Terry's brother Charlie in the movie, *On the Waterfront*. Terry was the character played by Marlon Brando, the prizefighter (contender) and Charlie, his brother, has compromised much to receive a cushy job with a mob boss. Charlie has compromised much for his lifestyle. He pushed his brother to throw a fight, he turns the other way when illegal actions occur, and he even pulled a gun on his own brother to keep him quiet concerning the actions of the mob. Charlie compromised his own relationship with his brother to keep his cushy job. He gained money and material comforts but in the process lost his brother. There is much to lose in compromise.

We know this every time we compromise. We go through life changing to meet the demands and expectations of society, and then one day we look in the mirror and no longer recognize the person we are looking at, we realize the cost of compromise. Every time we look at our living conditions, our surroundings and say, this isn't what I wanted we realize the cost of compromise. You wanted to live in the city, but moved to the suburbs for the schools. You wanted to live in the country but moved to the city for a job. You wanted to live close to your parents, but moved across the country because the possibility of starting a good life was there. What do we lose in compromise? Every time we remember our dreams and realize that they are beyond any hope of reaching we realize the cost of compromise. What do we lose in compromise?

The church has compromised again and again for the sake of longevity, for money, of power and of land. A major part of the story of Christianity is one of compromising and bending to the whims and demands of society. The early Christians who denounced their faith in order to survive may have claimed longevity but at what cost. The contemporaries of Paul, who denied Christ, even if only for a moment, may have avoided the burning stakes of Nero but at what cost. The early church grew and grew and needed to structure itself, thus came the hierarchy. The church needed funds to continue to grow and survive and thus the church began to sell indulgences, prayers for a buck. The coffers were filled, the tradition was passed on in the institution, but at what cost? The rise of denominations came out of a need to organize and streamline ministries, yet in 1813, when the Baptists were considering to organize and become a denomination, Francis Wayland said protested claiming that the landscape of Christendom was already full of the festering carcasses of dying institutions. The denominations formed but at what cost? Martin Luther King's letter from a Birmingham jail was to preachers who said they had to compromise their demand for civil rights in order to keep the churches together. They compromised their values for the sake of survival and at what cost? Churches that conform to the demands and desires of culture, that change their focus, their structure and

identity to continue to live and survive may be able to keep its doors open but at what cost?

Utah Phillips once said to a crowd of recent college graduates, warning them of compromising their values and identity and being used for the sake of profit "...you've got to stand up for yourself because profit follows the path of least resistance and the path of least resistance makes a river crooked." These graduates could acquiesce to the demands of the markets and allowed themselves to become a clog in the machine and be used for profit, and maybe gain some profit, but at what cost?

Think of your faith. How often do you say, I'll speak up as a Christian later? How often do you promise to give your life, your whole life next week? How often do you put off prayer, scripture reading, and time with God for some other time? Do you compromise your faith? Do you stay silent in the face of oppression, of evil, of violence and destruction? Do you turn from the one who is hurting, justifying in your head that you do not have the time or the words to help? Do you keep silent with the gospel because you are afraid of embarrassing yourself? What are you losing when you compromise your faith?

Life is full of compromise, but in all compromise we lose something, we miss something, and something diminishes. Through compromise we lose much.

Movement 4 – Steadfast in Faith

Then there is Paul. Paul is an example; his life is poured out to us as an offering for how we can and should live as Christians. Paul calls us to claim that there are some things we should not compromise. There are some lines we should not cross, some places where we should not go. There are some things we should not compromise.

There are moments when we need to be steadfast and to keep from compromising. There are moments when we need to say, enough, and to hold to our beliefs. There are moments when we should not compromise, and there are moments with our faith that we must stay steadfast and strong. This is what Paul is reminding Timothy of in this section of his letter. Paul is reminding Timothy that regardless of the temptations, regardless of the lures and the indictments, Paul remained steadfast to his faith in Jesus Christ. He was not swayed to institutional longevity, he was not swayed to ideological camps, but held to the Gospel of Jesus Christ with a stubborn conviction, with a steadfast standing in his faith that would not let go. Paul is writing to Timothy during a time when he realized that his life was not going to last long, and Paul was offering his life as an example. He kept the faith. He held to his convictions. He did not compromise even though his life was in danger. Paul's life is an example of the steadfast faith we are all to have.

When his unit was captured, Col. Nicholson (played by Alec Guinness) was steadfast and resolute in holding to the rules of the Geneva Convention that he and his officers could not be required to work. He would not bend or fold even as he was thrown in the "hot box" for days, he was steadfast in his convictions and eventually achieved the results he desired (from *Bridge on the River Kwai*).

Martin Luther saw the corruption of the Catholic Church due to compromise and said enough is enough. This Augustinian monk could no longer rest with the corruption, with the indulgences, with the theology focusing on works. No doubt many told him to stay quiet. No doubt he was warned of the dangerous ground he was treading upon. No doubt many suggested that he take a softer and gentler approach, but Luther could not

stand back any longer. In 1517 he became steadfast in his conviction as he posted his 95 thesis, his complaints and suggestions to the church and held to his faith.

We have a history of Baptists who went to jail and were even killed for their convictions and their steadfast approach. Thomas Helweys returned to England and died in prison because of his belief of baptism, religious liberty, and the importance of the community in the Baptist movement. John Lealand was repeatedly whipped in Virginia and in other states because he refused to get the acceptance and the approval of the state to preach. His conviction towards religious liberty led to his own persecution, and yet he held steadfast in his faith.

Yet this is such a struggle in the church. In the church we are easily lured into the trap of compromising for the sake of saving the church. As Luther said, when God gave us the church, the devil built a chapel, and it is easy to find ourselves trying to keep the chapel and neglecting the church. This is what happened to the Catholics. Many of them were sincere in their faith, but found themselves spending more on the chapel than the church. This is what has happened to many churches, institutions, and denominations. We have compromised for the sake of acceptance and survival. What are we willing to lose to stay true to our faith? Who are we willing to upset to stay true to our faith? How will we stay steadfast to our faith? Will we demand justice for all of God's children? Will we demand an end to poverty? Will we work to take care of the children, the mothers, the fathers and all those who have been pushed down by our society? Or will we stay silent when a child dies from malnutrition? Will we stay silent when Christians are persecuted in other countries? Will we stay silent when the basic human rights of individuals are neglected because of who they are? Will we stay silent when Christ is spoken of in a negative way?

Can we be steadfast in our faith?

Movement 5 – Avoiding the Lion's Mouth

There is a risk to such a steadfast conviction. We read of Paul's persecution. We know about Andrew and Peter's execution. We remember Stephen and we know about the risk. Martin Luther King Jr., was assassinated, Oscar Romero was murdered, we know about the risk. Can we stay true to our faith in the face of this risk? Even when it brings us into the face of danger? Even when we find ourselves in distress and difficulties are we to be steadfast? For this would be the main reason to compromise. This would be the major reason for our holding back – to protect ourselves and our families. It is a risk, a big risk to speak up, and it may be a risk that we are not sure we can take.

Paul calls us to consider him as an example. Paul speaks of his trials when he was disserted by all others, when he found himself alone, and it seemed that no one would support him. Yet Paul looked to the Lord. Paul said that the Lord stood by him, and gave him strength. Paul even claims that he was saved and protected by the Lord so that he no longer had to fear the lion's mouth. Paul says that he has kept the faith. He has trusted in God, he has held to God's promises and that gives him strength. Paul did not fear persecution or death. Paul trusted in the Lord.

Think of Daniel, praying against the desires of the king of Babylon. Think of Daniel making the decision to keep from bowing to a statue and giving allegiance to an idol. Daniel knew the risk he was taking, and yet stayed steadfast to his faith. Even when he was arrested and taken to be questioned by the King, Daniel stayed steadfast, and you

can almost hear and taste his trust in the Lord. You can almost feel his trust as he was literally led into the mouths of lions, into the lion's den. I am sure Daniel was scared, but the conviction of his faith overcame his fear and he was steadfast.

The Christian martyrs went to the animal pits singing and praising God because they knew they were not alone, but walked with God and looking to see the Lord. Even in this letter, which seems to be written in moments of persecution, Paul is not pleading for his life. Instead he is looking forward to seeing Christ. He is not afraid, for he knows the Lord is with him, and will see him through the difficulties to glory.

We will face conflict, we will face difficulties and discomfort, yet we need to trust in God. We need to have faith. The word “trust” is found within the word faith. Have faith, believe in the presence of God and trust that you will not be alone. The temptation to compromise will be strong, stay true to the Lord. The temptation to change and bend will be powerful, but trust in the Lord. Trust that the Lord will stay with you and support you no matter what. Keep the Faith. Keep the faith; trust in God, even in the difficulties and the challenges.

Movement 6 – Steadfast Victory

For ultimately we will find victory with Christ. This is the goal that Paul is looking forward to. This is the telos, the end that calls and drives Paul, the victory with Jesus. The crown of righteousness is a righteousness that is not earned but is given by God. It is a righteousness that is promised to us through Jesus Christ. It is a crown that says we are worthy of the Kingdom, we are worthy to be with our Lord now and forever – to this we stay steadfast. This means we keep longing, not for the day when the church is full, not for the moment when we find that it is easy to be a Christian, but for the moment when we are with our Lord. We yearn to be with Christ, for there we will have joy, and we call others to look forward to that day as well. Paul did not fear hardships or trails or beatings or even death, because he knew he was going to be with Jesus. Paul was looking forward to that moment and was calling others to experience that grace and life as well. He was waiting for the victory with Jesus.

So let us be steadfast to our faith and call others to be steadfast. Let us be bold and demand that the world conform to Christ and experience his glory. Let us be brazen and expect that the church will continue to conform to the gospel. There will be times when our stubbornness will cause us to brush against the institution of the church. There will be times when we will be at odds with our own Christian brothers and sisters looking to compromise and play it safe. The institution will seek out longevity, we must seek Christ. Luther said, *sola scriptura*, claiming that the scriptures are the primary places where we find Christ and we must be sure that no institution gets in the way of the scriptures. Luther said *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*, reminding us that the church must always be looking to reform, to get closer and be more true to its calling as a community as Christians. We must be steadfast to Christ and call for that necessary reform.

There is a victory we are looking forward to. It is that time when all of God's children are in the presence of Christ. It is that time when all of God's children have accepted the righteousness, the grace of our Lord. There is a victory we are looking forward to. Let us be true to our faith, and we will find the victory in Christ. Let us be

steadfast in our conviction and we will find victory in Christ. There is victory; there is
victory in Jesus Christ!
AMEN