

Sermon—June 12-13, 1999
Powerful Encounters in
The Book of Acts
Acts 16:11-40

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Things to Think About When You Feel Like Quitting

On September 6, 1995, there was an unforgettably emotional game played between the Baltimore Orioles and the California Angels at Camden Yards in Baltimore. The Orioles won the game 4-2, but that's not what made the game unforgettable. The sellout crowd in Baltimore and the millions of people who saw the game live on television had the opportunity to witness one of the truly remarkable achievements in the history of American sports.

Because, it was on that night in September in 1995 that Cal Ripkin, Jr. played in his 2,131st consecutive game, breaking Lou Gehrig's 56-year-old record that seemed at one time to be totally unassailable. Of all the many records that have ever been achieved in baseball, the one that seemed that would never be broken was Lou Gehrig's 2,130 consecutive games. Especially in a day when ball players pulled themselves out of the game for minor bruises and scrapes. And when a ball player just the other night said the reason that he didn't dive to make a catch was that he wasn't wearing sleeves and was concerned about getting a rug burn on the astro turf field that he was playing on.

Cal Ripkin Jr.'s 2,131 consecutive games stand out as a bright and shining achievement. The biggest outpouring of emotion came at 9:20 p.m. when the game became official. The crowd didn't stop cheering for over 22 minutes—a 22-minute standing ovation. Not for someone who was the greatest homerun hitter of all time, like Mark MacGwire last year. Not for somebody who had the highest batting average or someone who could slam-dunk a basketball, you know, with a 360-degree pirouette like Michael Jordan.

Cal Ripkin was cheered for wildly for 22 minutes not for an athletic achievement but rather for an achievement of endurance. For 14 straight years, playing in every single game of every single season, Cal Ripkin just showed up and did his job. And there are so few people anymore that just show up and do their job that for a brief period of time in the month of September in 1995, America stood back and cheered. It was an amazing scene during that 5th inning of the Orioles game.

The members of the Orioles bullpen jogged in from left field, the crowd's roar became deafening when the huge illuminated numbers hanging on the warehouse beyond the right field wall were flipped to 2,131, sparklers were lit on the roof of Camden Yards. Fireworks were set off. Ripkin alternated between sitting in the Orioles dugout and being shoved onto the field by teammates to take curtain calls. He took 8 curtain calls. He walked over to the seat behind home plate where his wife Kelly and his children (who had thrown the night's ceremonial first pitches to their father) were seated. He looked up at the box high above the field where his

father, Cal Ripkin, Sr. was watching the game. His dad, this old grizzled baseball man, was crying.

But the best was yet to come. When Cal tried to go back into the dugout, his teammates wouldn't let him in. They pushed him out on the field for a victory lap around the field on the warning track. And there with 46,000 fans screaming themselves hoarse, and fireworks going off, and sparklers and millions of people at home wiping away the tears, Cal Ripkin slowly walked around the field at Camden Yards, shaking hands with fans and police officers and field attendants and the opposing team. A thunderous tribute to a man who simply showed up and did his job day after day.

You'd better believe he was tired. During many of the games that he played in over the 14-year stretch: he strained his knee a few times, sprained his ankle, had head colds and headaches like the rest of humanity. He experienced some prolonged hitting droughts, some real failure and discouragements along the way, had lots of people suggesting that he was hurting the team by persisting in his streak. But, Cal Ripkin, Jr. never gave up, he never quit.

I've been doing a series from the Book of Acts, and today as we continue to look at some of the supernatural occurrences from this wonderful book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit, my message is titled "Things to Think About when you Feel Like Quitting." Looking at Acts Chapter 16. Let's pray.

We read in Acts Chapter 16, the passage we looked at last week, beginning in verse 6: “Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.”

This is a scene of extraordinary guidance by the Lord through visions, prophetic words, closed doors, opened doors. I do want to underline again for all of you that God continues to use all these means today to guide people into His will for their lives. God continues to give people visions and he continues to lead people through giving them prophetic dreams from him. And God does guide through the use of prophecy, through deep inner impressions that a person cannot shake, along with the counsel of others in the church and good strategic planning.

And in our created, inborn desires, God uses a variety of methods to guide us. But, we must not undersell God’s use of supernatural means to guide people into his perfect will. There are many Christians today and many churches today who neglect teaching about such things as prophecies and dreams and visions as legitimate

methods of guidance. They say those kinds of things were done for the apostle Paul but we should not expect them for us today in the church. Frankly, I think that what is operative in much of Christianity worldwide and much of our own Christianity is a post-enlightenment naturalism.

We are opposed to the supernatural, not because of anything that's in the Bible or any statement in the Bible that says that we should not expect visions and dreams and prophecies like Paul got. It is simply a worldview issue. We have been taught to not believe in these things. And, so we read our unbelieving, modern philosophy back into the Bible. We can't say, "Well, those things are just for the apostle Paul but not for us," because we in the church today are called upon to imitate the apostle Paul. He writes in 1Cor 4:16, "Therefore I urge you to imitate me as I imitate Christ."

And we have no right to simply imitate Paul in his evangelism and in his character and his faith and his hope and refuse to imitate Paul in the supernatural dimensions of his life—things like healing and deliverance and spiritual gifts and visions.

Indeed, I've often thought that if the apostle Paul needed this stuff to guide him, how much more do we in the modern church need to hear from God. If Paul needed visions and prophetic words to guide him into making right decisions for God, don't you think you do? Why would you not ask God for these things?

And the suggestion that this is just for the spiritual elites, ("Well, this is just for apostles and for the great saints in the Christian church.") That suggestion is

completely repudiated by Acts 2, a text that we started this series from the book of Acts on, where we read in verse 17, “In the last days God says, ‘I will pour out my spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophecy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my spirit in those days and they will prophecy.’”

Visions! Dreams! Prophecies! Supernatural guidance is given regardless of ones spiritual status. These things are part and parcel of being new covenant believers. For everyone who is ushered into a new covenant by virtue of their faith in the blood of Jesus Christ and their receipt of the Holy Spirit in the born again experience, God promises prophecy and visions and dreams. If you are a new covenant believer, you ought to expect these things to happen in your life. You are to ask God for these things. They’re not just for the old but Acts 2 says they’re also for the young. They’re not just for men; they’re also for women. There’s no social or economic or class distinction. They’re for men servants and maidservants. They’re for everyone.

And it was the result of this extraordinary guidance by the Lord that the gospel providentially ends up being based in Europe. Christianity takes root in Europe. It doesn’t go north and east to Asia but rather west to Europe where Europe becomes the home base of Christianity for the next 18 centuries. It does matter whether we hear from God. These few verses are the turning point of Christian history (Acts 16:6-10). Where Christian history was going to be based for 18 centuries turned on

Paul receiving prophetic words and dreams and visions. This stuff matters and it matters whether we listen to God.

Now, last week I told you that as a result of this supernatural guidance, we would have expected immediate success. We would have thought that Paul was going to go to Europe and instant revival would break out. But instead, as we read down the rest of Act 16, we find the apostle Paul encountering a spiritually cold environment, lots of opposition from the demonic world, unfair treatment at the hands of the government and business leaders. And, yet, like Cal Ripkin, Jr., Paul never gives up. He doesn't quit. He hangs in there.

Have you ever felt like quitting? Throwing in the towel on your marriage? Waving the white flag on your job? Giving up on God because of an illness or the loss of a loved one or the status of your single life that you want to escape from? Ever feel like quitting, just saying "enough is enough?" It seems to me that the Apostle Paul, like every other human being, must have had a dream when he was sailing on the ship over to Europe. Must have had a dream about what his life was going to be like, and when he got to Europe, his dreams were shattered. I don't know if there's anything that causes a person to want to quit more than the shattering of their dreams.

We all go into situations with an idealized view of what that circumstance will bring. Marriages are built on hopes and dreams. The reason people get married is because

they think their life is going to be better with this person than without them. They have a dream of a happy life, a dream of romance and communication, a dream of children. It's the shattering of the dream through constant fighting or neglect or the discovery of an affair that causes one to want to quit.

Some of you single people had a dream that by your age, you ought to be married and that dream that you have of marriage is often underlined by your well-meaning parents or well-meaning friends who come along and regularly say, "Gee, you seem so attractive; I can't understand why you're not married." What they're really saying is, "I don't see something abnormal at the surface, what's wrong?" Why is the American dream not fulfilled in your life?

Some of you have an illusion or a dream about what college is going to be like, what school is going to be like and you get there and it's a lot harder. It's a lot more challenging than you expected, especially if you have to work and earn your way through college. You're living with tremendous stress. It's easy to just say, "I'm going to throw in the towel, I'm going to quit."

You know, the ultimate thing that we're going to discover as a result of our study of Acts 16 is that the apostle Paul endured everything because he was fundamentally persuaded that God was in control of his life. See, I believe that the question of God's control over your life is the fundamental dividing line of faith. There are basically just two approaches to life especially when you encounter a shattered dream.

You either approach life like Job who believed that God is in control no matter what, no matter how difficult the current circumstance is or your approach life like Job's wife. You say, "chuck it, I knew that Christianity didn't really amount to anything at all. I knew it was hollow and empty and just talk. No one is really running the show. All of my circumstances are totally random, chance meetings, random events." Like the bumper sticker, you know, "poop happens, then you die." There is nothing more important for you in terms of just sticking it out in life than this one fundamental conviction: God is in control.

Where you come out ultimately in terms of your own inner peace, your ability to sleep at night, your confidence in the future, your ability to just hang in there turns on whether you believe that God is in control of your life and has ordered your steps up until this present moment. Do you know that you can't call Jesus "Lord," without believing that he is in control? That what you experience in your life, in your marriage, in your workplace, in college, is not the result of some random set of events that just happened to you but is rather the result of the unfolding of a plan set in motion by God. It's a working out of his purposes.

God has a destiny in mind for you. He has a plan. Your life has a plot. And there are times in life where you just need to say, "Lord, I don't know what's going on here. My dreams, my illusions have been shattered. Life is not proceeding according to my plan but I'm going to trust Eph 2:10 which says that we are "God's workmanship,

created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.” And “Lord, I had other good works in mind when I got in this situation, but I’m going to trust that the good works that you had in mind for me are the ones that you think are best.” Do you believe that God is in control?

I’ll tell you friends, all of the counsel that you’re receiving concerning your shattered dream, all the friendly advice, all the books that you read. All of your stewing in the middle of the night will never bring you any farther than you can be brought by a simple conviction point drilled into your heart—that God is in control. And I can rest in that. If you’re single, then it’s because God has not, up till now, provided you with a partner and he knows best. And, likewise, with all of life’s ups and downs and losses and difficulties and pains, no amount of counsel will ever substitute for simple faith in God’s sovereignty and his control.

Well, we read in verse 11, “From Troas we set out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.” The writer of Acts joins the team in verse 10 where it says, “After Paul had seen the vision, we...” and you can circle the word, “we, got ready at once to leave for Macedonia.”

For 16 chapters the writer has been speaking in the 3rd person. They did this and they did that. And apparently Luke, the writer of Acts, joins the team in Troas, and

so for a part of the rest of the book of Acts, what we have is an eyewitness accounts. Thus in verse 11, it's "from Troas"--that's in modern Turkey—Luke tells us that they're sailing across the Aegean to Macedonia. Macedonia of course right now is divided up between the Macedonia that is a part of Greece and the Macedonia that is a part of Yugoslavia.

They were sailing across the Aegean to the Macedonia that was a part of Greece. They land at Neapolis, which is a part town in Macedonia on the Aegean, and there was a famous Roman road made up of massive stones that went across the whole Greek peninsula from the Aegean to the Adriatic Sea. Paul would have walked on this Roman road 10 miles inland. It says, "from there we traveled to Philippi." They would have walked on this road 10 miles inland to Philippi; it was a major city named for Alexander the Great's father, Philip of Macedon.

And what occurs when he gets to the city? The apostle Paul encounters a spiritually cold environment. "On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. 'If you consider me a believer in the Lord,' she said, 'come and stay at my house.' And she persuaded us."

Now why do I say that it was a spiritually cold environment? It seems like Paul encountered some success with Lydia the seller of purple cloth. Well, you need to understand how contrary to Paul's strategic planning this encounter at the riverbank was. You see, normally when the apostle Paul went to a city, the first place that he would go would be to the local synagogue. Paul always went to the local synagogue to preach before he went out into the streets but in Philippi, apparently, there was no synagogue. Perhaps there were not even 10 Jewish men that were a prerequisite to form a synagogue.

According to rabbis, if you didn't have 10 Jewish men, no amount of women could compensate for the absence of even 1 man. You could have 9 men and a thousand women and not be able to build a synagogue in those days. And so when there was not synagogue often in a city, the unofficial place for prayer was by a river and that's what Paul does. He goes out to the river. Now what do you do when you encounter a spiritually cold environment? A place where there is no church? There's not tons of believers just waiting to hear from you, tons of believers to encourage you and fellowship with you.

What do you do when you encounter a spiritually cold environment? And what do I mean by that? I mean, perhaps your workplace is dominated by lewd comments, it's a sexually charged atmosphere at work, and the dominant ethos is lewd and crude. Maybe that's the case in the dormitory you live in. Or perhaps your work environment is not lewd and crude, but it certainly isn't a spiritual environment. It's

dominated by, you know, a drivenness toward sales goals and all day long its push, push, push. Everybody is under pressure and under a gun to produce.

Maybe your family shows hostility to the gospel. Certainly a spiritually cold environment might be found in a college classroom or a high school classroom where the professor gets on his soap box or a teacher gets on her soap box and rails against Christianity for the period while they advocate freedom of thought. It's freedom for everything other than Christian faith. What do you do when you encounter a spiritually hostile environment? Instead of quitting, instead of throwing in the towel, you might do what the apostle Paul did. Make the best of a bad situation.

He comes to town, he says okay; there aren't ten Jewish men to preach to. There is no synagogue as I expected. There aren't a bunch of people here waiting with open arms, but I'm not going to leave town, I'm going to make the most of the moment. I'll talk to the one person that God is at work in. You know, friend, I believe that in every situation that God has you in, there is an opportunity to be seized for the kingdom if you have eyes for it. It is perhaps true in your life that the vast majority of the people that surround you are cold and hostile to your Christian faith.

But, there is someone who is not. There is a Lydia in your life and you need to have eyes for that person. The one receptive person that will give you a reason to not quit. That you have a purpose where you're at in ministering to that one individual.

You see, Paul went always to the most receptive, the people who were nearest to God. If it wasn't the Jews, then it would be the God-fearers, the gentiles who had not yet been circumcised but who had an interest in God, who were spiritually open.

And, as you're trying to make the most of the moment and seize God given opportunities, the way to do that is not to run your head consistently into the wall with those who are closed to God, but go to the one receptive person. I know why some people throw in the towel. Because they spend all of their time trying to reach the absolute hardest people in the world. Many of them think of it as a spiritual challenge, you know, this nut is so hard, I'm sure that I have the nutcracker to crack this hard nut.

After 25 years of trying to crack nuts, I have come to the conviction that I can't convert anyone and I can't motivate the spiritually unmotivated. And you can't convert anyone and you can't motivate the spiritually unmotivated, either. We are called to pray for everyone, hard shell or soft shell. We are called to love everyone and relate to everyone, however hard a nut they are. But, your investment, where you put in your spiritual strokes, it's in those people and places where you see God doing something. Invest yourself in the spiritually receptive and you'll never be tempted to quit.

Let me ask you a personal question. Do you think about where you're investing your time? Who you have over for lunch? Who you talk with at work? Who you

talk with in your class? Who you talk with in your dormitory? Do you think about where you're putting your efforts in terms of relationship building? If you're sharing with a Muslim person, perhaps the first person you talk with ought not to be, you know, the Ayatollah of Iran or the head of Taliban in Afghanistan. Perhaps the first person to talk with ought to be a spiritually open Muslim. Friend, this is one of the laws of the harvest.

Think about it this way with me. If you had 2 fields side by side and one of the fields was barren and rock and hard, and the other field was brimming with very ripe tomatoes and you were a very smart farmer, where would you send the field hands to work that day. Oh, you might send one or two field hands over to the barren rocky field to help clear the field for future planting, future cultivation.

But wouldn't you send the bulk of your workers to the field that is ripe for harvest so that the harvest isn't lost and your tomato crop doesn't rot on the vine before it gets to the market? We are about to have a summer harvest. It's an annual event that we do here in the church, actually a series of events. This year, it's going to be taking place in just a couple of weeks, Wednesday, June 23rd through the weekend of the 26th and 27th. There's going to be a teen concert, we're going to have a couple's dessert, a men's luncheon, a women's breakfast and then a weekend of services in which we're encouraging you workers to go out into the fields around you and who should you be inviting? Invite those who are ripe for harvest! Go after the spiritually receptive!

You say, “who are the spiritually receptive? How do I know if I’m spending all my time in just a barren, rocky field, running my head continually into a wall?” Well again, friend, we can’t make someone receptive. We can’t open up somebody’s heart but God can. In one of the key phrases in the Book of Acts, it says in verse 14, “One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. The Lord opened her heart.”

The spiritually receptive are those whose hearts are being opened up by God. Who are those people? You say, “Rich, I don’t know whose hearts are being opened by God. I don’t have spiritual X-ray vision to see inside someone’s heart. How do I know whether this or that person is receptive and I should be investing my time in inviting this particular person to summer harvest? How do I know whose heart is being opened up by God? Very often the person whose heart is being opened by God are those who are currently experiencing the stress of life. God uses the stress of life to pry open people’s hearts to himself.

A number of years ago somebody came up with a scale for measuring stress and they assigned points for various life stresses, everything from getting a new job to getting a traffic ticket, moving to a new home, getting married, having a baby, going through a divorce, discovering an illness, losing a spouse. The bottom line of stress is that somebody is in transition. They’re experiencing change—even good things

like marriage or having a baby are stressful. And bad things like separation or divorce are particularly stressful. Friends, whenever somebody is experiencing stress, good stress, bad stress, there God is opening the heart.

A person at work is going through a divorce—that's a person to invest in and a person to invite. A person at school is breaking up with their girlfriend; there's a person to invest in and a person to invite. A person in your family has just gotten married, or just had a child; there's a person to invest in and a person to invite to summer harvest. Do you know that nearly every major Christian revival that's taken place in the 20th century took place on the heels of a major societal stressor?

Korea went through a devastating civil war in the late 1940's and early 1950's and immediately after that the Gospel spread like wildfire throughout South Korea. China went through a communist revolution; society was turned upside down from 1949 on and the Gospel spread like wildfire throughout China. Argentina suffered a humiliating defeat in the Falklands war with Great Britain and the Gospel spread like wildfire throughout Argentina. Guatemala suffered a devastating earthquake in the 1980's and again God used this stressor to open peoples' hearts and make them receptive.

Friends, it is not up to you to crack hard nuts. We preach, but God is the evangelist. God opens the heart. And he opens the heart by using life as his nutcracker. Well, Paul could have thrown in the towel because of the dashing of his dreams. He could

have quit when he encountered a spiritually cold and hostile environment. Surely he was tempted to give up as he was chased around town by a demonized girl.

Let's look at verse 16: "Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune telling. This girl followed Paul and the rest of us shouting, 'These men are servants of the Most High God who are telling you the way to be saved.' She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, 'In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her.' At that moment the spirit left her."

You know, if satan can't disqualify someone through sin he tries to discourage them through opposition and much of the church today is completely blind to the reality of the demonic. Why are there so many spiritual casualties littering churches of America? Why are there so many Christians who are quitting on their marriages? And so many Christians who have given up the pursuit of sexual purity? Why are there so many Christian men searching the internet for pornography? And so many so-called Christians having affairs. What is going on?

Much of the church is blind to the reality of the demonic. Now, anytime we deal with the demonic we always are going to deal with 2 extremes. One extreme doesn't believe that anything is demonic. They believe that everything has a natural explanation but the other extreme, the super spiritual extreme sees demons where

demons aren't. There are many people who are unwilling to take personal responsibility for their own actions. For example I've seen parents who lack clear standards in child raising. There's constant fighting in the home, husband and wife are clearly at odds regarding the standards to be applied to their children's lives.

One of the spouses is very laissez faire, very lackadaisical in their discipline and the other is a strict, almost harsh disciplinarian. They wonder why their kids have turned out to be rebellious. It must be a demon. No, it's lack of agreement. Lack of a healthy marriage in the home. Some people do attribute all psychological and physical problems to demons in a way that causes folks to expend an enormous amount of spiritual energy pursuing deliverance when deliverance isn't the answer. When psychological treatment or medical treatment is the answer. It really saddens me when I see people running around calling something demonic when it's not, trying to deliver somebody from a problem that is not spiritual.

The church just has historically gone to two extremes but we cannot, we dare not try to explain everything away as simply physical or psychological. Paul here encounters a young girl who has a spirit literally, it says, she has a "python" spirit in verse 16. She has the spirit of a serpent, the spirit of a snake. Now it took Paul several days before he cast the spirit out of the servant girl. Why? Well, I think that Paul—the text doesn't say it—but I believe that Paul was genuinely puzzled regarding the source of this girl's preaching. She was running after them saying

‘these men are servants of the Most High God who are telling you the way to be saved.’

And, I’m sure there was something troubling Paul right from the beginning about her preaching. Something didn’t seem right. But, sometimes it’s not immediately apparent what’s wrong. You sense as you interact with somebody that something is wrong. The words that they’re speaking may be all right. The words that they say may be all true. But, you have an unsettled sense about them. Very often when you are dealing with a person who has a demon, you’re confused initially by what you’re observing. There is the observable behavior, but then below the surface there’s something else going on and you’re not quite sure what is going on.

Therefore, we must, like I believe the Apostle Paul did, pray for discernment; the ability to see through the outer appearance down to what is really motivating the behavior or motivating the words or motivating the conflicts. We pray, “God give us discernment.” One of my frequently uttered prayer is “Lord, reveal the foundations.” If I see something that just doesn’t seem right, I say “Lord, smoke it out, reveal the foundation, show me what’s going on. I don’t have the ability to see spiritually unless you reveal it, Oh God.”

And God has been very faithful over the years to answer the prayer that he would reveal the foundations of someone’s life. I would encourage you if your are confused about a situation or confused about an individual and you suspect that perhaps

there is something demonic going on or there's something that's not quite ethical or not quite honest, but you're not sure. Ask God to reveal it, to bring it to the light. Whatever is being done in secret, to pull the cover back and God will.

So I believe Paul prayed that prayer, "God, pull the cover back, show me what's going on here." And this girl had what is the most difficult kind of spirit to discern. She had what I would call a "religious" spirit, where there's lots of God talk, there's lots of Christian talk, there's lots of religious activity. Many of the things a person is saying are true, many of the things they're doing are good things, but you sense that something is wrong. Underneath all the God talk, all the good things, all the religious activity, this is not being motivated by the Holy Spirit but it's being motivated by something else.

It's quite confusing; they're talking about Jesus, they're involved in Christian "service," but something seems off. Something feels odd—how do you know if it's a religious spirit? Let me give you some of the marks. When I've dealt with somebody that had a religious spirit, they were folks that had an unnatural drivenness about their religious activity. This woman is running after Paul for days, shouting behind him. There is a drivenness to the activity. There's a frenzy often in their spirituality, a frenzy almost to the point of complete exhaustion.

Some people mistake frenzied activity for spiritual passion. The two things could not be farther from each other. Jesus had passion for God in abundance, so did the

apostle Paul; they had passion for God in abundance but there was not frenzy in their activities. Jesus and Paul had the ability to slow down, to talk with one person when it was necessary, to go to a party, to rest, to be alone in prayer. Whenever you see frenetic spiritual activity or frenzied activity, there might be a religious spirit that's motivating that.

So if you see someone who is, you know, running to clean another person's house at 3 a.m. and they're getting up at 5 a.m. to knit booties for Children's Hospital and they're going and going at this just mad pace without the capacity to have some rhythm in life or rhythm of rest, a rhythm of friendship, that's not the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul tells us the mark of the Spirit, in Romans 14:17, "The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." If there's an absence of righteousness or an absence of peace and joy, it's not the Holy Spirit. No righteousness, no peace, no joy, no Holy Spirit—it's some other spirit.

And not only is a religious spirit marked by frenzied, frenetic activity, but there is also with a religious spirit a tendency to draw attention to ones self and away from Jesus and the gospel. When the gospel is preached and someone begins to shout loudly in tongues or when somebody is trying to preach and another person is there clapping their hands and waving their arms about worshiping, when attention is drawn to the self, as it was in the case of this woman's preaching; she was a distraction from the preaching of Paul. Then it's probably not the Holy Spirit.

Finally, regarding a religious spirit, you often see a harsh, condemning attitude, almost always there's going to be some kind of legalism where people who encounter this religious spirit come away feeling condemned. Paul had high standards; Jesus had the highest standards of all. But, people who encountered Jesus and encountered Paul, experienced grace in their presence. They may have been convicted of their sins by being around such holy people, but there was always a hope of salvation.

Yes in their presence I feel somewhat ashamed of who I am and what I've done, but they've given me a hope that I can change, a hope that God will still accept me and love me and show me mercy. No so with a religious spirit. In the presence of a religious spirit, all you feel is condemnation; you're not doing enough, you're not serving enough. You're not giving enough. If you're really committed, you'd be doing what I'm doing.

And, very often we discover later on that the person has a secret life, a double life, that was, you know, hidden for years but then God revealed the foundation, showed what was going on. How do we deal with this opposition in life so that we're not tempted to just throw in the towel and quit? We meet somebody who's harassing us, somebody who's in our face, somebody with a religious spirit, or we feel targeted by the enemy. How do we deal with that?

Well you know, this servant girl said something true about the apostle Paul and I think he dealt with all kinds of opposition because he knew his fundamental identity. He was a servant of God. It says in verse 17, “This girl followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, ‘these men are servants of the Most High God.’” You can deal with a great amount of spiritual opposition if you live out of an identity of being a servant of God.

Listen to me, see if we don’t perceive ourselves as servants of God then every single bit of opposition and every stress in our life comes to us by way of an unreasonable demand, and unfair challenge. Then you feel like, you know, I don’t deserve this and I’m going to quit on God. Last month my wife Marlene and I went to Colorado Springs for a conference and there was a storm in Chicago that caused our plane to be cancelled so we needed to be rerouted through Denver.

The short of it was that there was going to be significant delay in our travel plans and we tried a number of different ways to get to our destination on time. We tried different plane flights, we tried rental cars—we wanted to perhaps rent a car from the Denver airport to drive to Colorado Springs—and with each conversation with a ticket agent and rental car agent, I was getting increasingly frustrated, carrying my bags from one place to another. I was praying that God would open it up, but I was praying in frustration, praying angrily, like “God make this happen already,” until finally it occurred to me that I was a servant of God.

I don't know how it occurred to me, but the thought popped into my mind as I was dragging my bags and clenching my jaw, "I'm a servant of God." As I meditated on that thought that I was a servant of God in that airport, all of my frustration and my anger melted away because it occurred to me that, as a servant, I didn't own my time. That I wasn't on my clock, I was on God's clock and if God wanted me to spend not my time but His time anyway that He chose, then that was okay with me.

I actually experienced great joy in the airport. I said, "Okay, God, if you want me to spend your time this way—not my time—your time, then that's okay with me."

And this flood of thoughts washed into my heart, "God has all the time in the world." He's not sweating me taking a little bit of his time in this airport; he's not upset apparently that my flight is delayed, that I don't arrive at a certain destination. If God wants you to spend some of his time doing what you didn't plan to do, if God wants you to spend some of his money, not your money, his money fixing your air conditioning that blew on the hottest day or fixing your car, or fixing something else. If God wants you to spend some of his time and his money why do you sweat it? You are a servant. He owns you and everything about you including your moments and your money.

Last thing—Paul faced the challenge of shattered dreams, he faced the challenge of a spiritually cold environment, he faced the challenge of spiritual opposition and he faced the challenge of unfair treatment. It says "When the owners of the slave girl

realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas, dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

Isn't it interesting that we always make things sound better than they are? People never come clean and say "I'm really upset because you cost me a little bit of money." Rather they say, you know, "This person is acting in an unpatriotic way." You never hear the abortion industry saying in their commercials, "What we're really after is more clients for our abortion mills." Do you ever hear somebody say "The reason we're in favor of abortion is because we make so much money off of women," or because "we want free sex without the consequences." No, the ads show these women with All-American faces standing in front of a waving American flag with patriotic music, celebrating our constitution. Oh, we always make things sound better than they really are.

I'm not upset with you wife because we're not having sex tonight, I'm just angry because you've not been romantic recently. I'm not angry husband with you because you can't read my mind or you won't cater to me when I want to wallow in self-pity. I'm upset with you because you're insensitive. It says "The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he

put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.”

Paul and Silas were treated unfairly. There was a lie circulated about them regarding their advocacy of customs that were unpatriotic. They were stripped and beaten without a trial, even though they were Roman citizens. Have you ever been treated unfairly? Corrected for something that wasn't your fault? Been fired from a job even though you were performing well? Doing everything that you were asked to do? Have you ever been treated unfairly? Been hauled into court by an ex-spouse on an unfair charge? Had an unfair court ruling come out against you? Have you every gotten an unfair grade on an exam or in a class?

I don't mean, you know, the typical student “Oh, this is unfair, I didn't study and the teacher had the nerve to fail me.” I mean that you did everything that the professor asked you to do but they really had it in for you. They were upset, perhaps, by your Christian faith. How do you keep on going without quitting when you're treated unjustly?

Well, certainly Paul knew that God was in control. Certainly Paul knew that God would right the scales in eternity, but knowing things in your brain and getting your emotions to conform to the things you know are two totally different things. And you know I think Paul gives us the secret for dealing with unfair treatment. In verse

25 where it says “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.” Praying and listening to worship music is a time-tested way for you to deal with unfair treatment or for you to deal with depression or despairing feelings.

When you’re tempted to quit, I don’t know if there’s a better weapon than singing and listening to worship music. Many of the Psalms were written from the depths of despair and their experience of unfair treatment. Sometimes you can’t produce words of your own to say to God what you feel like you need to say. Sometimes it’s hard to find God in the midst of a very painful reality. The benefits of worship are that in a time of distress, you might know the truth up in your brain but your feelings are unaffected.

And, when you worship, there’s that crucial 12 inch drop where the truth goes from your head down to your heart, the truth about God being in control, the truth about eternity settling all the accounts, the truth about God’s reward of the righteous and His punishment of the unrighteousness. The truth that you know in your head, those truths that work down into your heart when you worship.

How do you keep from quitting? Let’s review some of the lessons. You have a choice of faith in every difficult circumstance, to believe like Job that God is in control or to give up on God and curse God and walk away.

How do you keep from quitting? However cold your environment is, however hostile your situation, make the most of every opportunity. Go after the one person who is spiritually receptive. The one situation that will promote the kingdom of God.

How do you keep from quitting? In spiritual opposition, pray for discernment and see yourself as a servant of God spending God's money and God's time.

How do you keep from quitting when you feel like throwing in the towel? Despite all that you know and all the truths, pop in a worship CD or dial up to your remembrance a worship song and sing with all your heart to God until the truths of the song are real in your feelings.

You know, success in life is often just about showing up day after day, not throwing in the towel even though it's hard. It's the ones who persevere who are blessed by God.

Let's pray.