

Immerse

YES, AND

On the Go Devotional Guide

By Rev. Peter A. Thompson

Pastor- First Presbyterian Church (Lynchburg, VA)

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A note from the author...

As a former athlete seeking to play at a very high level, with all the expectations of coaches, scouts, parents, teammates, and even those I didn't know; a parent of three children who love to get out and go and do; a pastor of a very active, mobile, and passionate congregation; and a convicted believer of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit; I get that the balance between our call to church/ faith and extracurricular activities (all the other things we get involved in) is tense. If you don't think it is, either you balance life beautifully and are doing all the right things, or you aren't paying close enough attention to one or the other.

Throughout the course of the last 17 years, since my deep encounter with God and baseball through Athletes in Action the summer of 2001, when I had the privilege of playing in the M.I.N.K. Collegiate Wood Bat League out of Kansas City, Missouri, I have become increasingly aware of the compartmentalization that exists in having God in a box on one side and my other activities in a separate box on the other. I don't think it was intentional. As a matter of fact, I am almost certain it was just the natural flow of things around me. I participated in church and my faith was strong, but I wasn't cognizant of my faith playing a part in the other things I was doing. I had a time for this and a time for that, but they didn't mix. They were like oil and water.

My experiences that summer, of having God be the foundation and gift giver of all the other things I was doing, enriched my life and my experiences far beyond anything I could imagine. I loved baseball and on top of that I had become a good ballplayer, but with God, my experiences on the field, in practice, with my teammates, and even in wins and losses, became so much better. What I was pleased to discover was that I didn't need to stop what I was doing to recognize and worship God. God was already involved. I just needed to open my eyes to see and my heart to feel just how present God was. God was with me on the field as much as God was at church on Sunday mornings. It was up to me to grow in my awareness and understanding.

Since that summer, I have juggled transitions from being a potential top draft pick, getting hurt during a career year, bouncing back, graduating college, being given another shot in trying out for the big leagues, falling in love with coaching, falling in love with the church, walking away from playing the game, being called to seminary (school for pastors), asking all the "why" questions, graduating from seminary, being called to serve the church, meeting my wife, adopting our first child and having two more in as many years, going back to school for more brain busting, buying a home and moving a couple times. In the midst of it all, the one thing I have come to learn, not only for myself, but for many of the students and families I have worked with, is that the tension between our desire to be involved with the church/ faith and the demands of our extracurricular activities is all too real. The trend today leans toward our time being spent with extracurricular activities far more than with church/ faith. As a result, our extracurricular activities have more influence over us, simply because of the time we spend, than church/ faith. This might be the way it is, but that doesn't mean it is the way it has to be. This "reality" does not have to define us. We have a choice. Better yet, we have an opportunity to bring it all together.

The foundation of this devotional is built on two very key theological beliefs: 1. God created and made all things, and then, God looked at creation and pronounced it "Good." This means, everything that is good, is rooted in God. 2. God is everywhere (omnipresent). This means that there is no place we can go that God isn't already there. So, no matter what we are doing, where we are doing it, who we are doing it with, or when we are doing it, God is a key part. What this also can mean is that there are no timeouts with God. God doesn't take timeouts from us and we can't take timeouts from God. This is not meant to be a burden, it is meant to be a blessing, and something to be celebrated throughout our lives, in all we say and do.

THE SNEEZE

They walked in tandem, each of the ninety-two students filing into the already crowded auditorium. With their rich maroon gowns flowing and the traditional caps, they looked almost as grown up as they felt. Dads swallowed hard behind broad smiles, and Moms freely brushed away tears

This class would NOT pray during the commencements, not by choice, but because of a recent court ruling prohibiting it. The principal and several students were careful to stay within the guidelines allowed by the ruling. They gave inspirational and challenging speeches, but no one mentioned divine guidance, and no one asked for blessings on the graduates or their families. The speeches were nice, but they were routine until the final speech received a standing ovation.

A solitary student walked proudly to the microphone. He stood still and silent for just a moment, and then, it happened.

All 92 students, every single one of them, suddenly SNEEZED !!!!

The student on stage simply looked at the audience and said, 'GOD BLESS YOU' And he walked off the stage.

The audience exploded into applause. This graduating class had found a unique way to invoke God's blessing on their future with or without the court's approval.

This is a true story; it happened at the University of Maryland.

Consider This:

No matter how hard the world may try to keep God out of things, it is impossible. How? Because God is already there and there is nothing anyone can do about that. Our role is to help illumine the presence of God and allow the power of the Spirit to fill us and use us, giving us the courage, strength, and hope to be the Salt of the earth and Light of the world (Matthew 5: 13-16).

What Now? Yes, And Theology is a powerful way to dig deeper into how we can better understand God's role in all aspects of life. Please look at the following page and work through the worksheet provided.

Yes. And...

Contrary to what several “church folks” believe, I don’t think our many extra-curricular activities (i.e. soccer, dance, family time at the lake, etc.) on Sundays are the “devil”. Actually, I think the activities we choose to participate in are vital to our growth and understanding of who God has made us to be. These activities can teach us many of the same characteristics being in church can. With this being said, I don’t believe our activities are ever an acceptable excuse to not be engaged in the church. If our goal is to be the best version of ourselves, then we not only need to sharpen our athletic abilities, fine tune our agility and balance, and relax with quality family time, we need to be active participants in the church (aka: the body of Christ) worshipping joyfully, growing spiritually, living faithfully, and serving others boldly.

To get started, I would like to ask you to brainstorm a list of characteristics, qualities, beliefs, values, etc. you learn, develop, and obtain from each of the two columns below. (I.E. Teamwork, loyalty, unity, support, accountability, trust)

Extra-Curricular Activities

Sports, School, Clubs, Camps, Hobbies, Family Time

Church- Faith- God

Worship, Youth Group, Conferences, Spiritual Growth Classes, Bible Studies

The goal of this exercise is to validate the value and worth of both extra-curricular activities we participate in and our faith. The reason there is a dotted line in the middle of the two columns is to show that there are similarities of what we can be learning and growing from throughout our life. The Church is a great place to learn and grow and develop as a person. Some would say it is the safest and best place to learn how to be the best person you can possibly be. I will echo that is it certainly a great community intended to strengthen each individual a part of it. I think that is God’s true intention for the church. However, I will say that I don’t think the Church is the only place we can learn value and important lessons. The church is not the only positive influence we have in our lives. The point is, God is working in and through all aspects of our life. The Holy Spirit is not bound to the walls of a church building but is actively at work in and through us in all we do. God is with us at Church for sure, God calls us there. God is also with us at home, school, on the field, court, in the studio, at the park, or anywhere. All throughout this devotional, an intentional “Yes, And” theology will be used to enhance the importance of not only the importance of our faith, but also God’s activity through everything we do.

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WHO AM I?

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Who am I?

I am your constant companion.

I am your greatest helper or heaviest burden.

I will push you onward or drag you down to failure.

I am completely at your command.

Half the things I do, you might as well turn over to me, and I will be able to do them quickly and correctly.

I am easily managed- you must merely be firm with me.

Show me exactly how you want something done and after a few lessons I will do it automatically.

I am the servant of all great individuals and, alas, of all failures, as well.

Those who are great, I have made great.

Those who are failures, I have made failures.

I am not a machine, though I work with all the precision of a machine plus the intelligence of a human.

You may run me for a profit or run me for ruin-
it makes no difference to me.

Take me, train me, be firm with me, and I will place the world at your feet.

Be easy with me and I will destroy you.

Who am I?

If you don't know anything else, know these things...

Love- You are loved. More than you know. You have a circle of people who love you totally and want good things for you. They hurt when you hurt and rejoice when you rejoice.

Gifted- You alone have talents, insights, ideas and inventions unique to you and the world is a better place with you sharing your gifts. Share your gifts and know they are worthy.

Constant- You are both the same and changing- constantly. While your core beliefs and values and personality traits remain the same, your opinions, tastes and interests may be changing. Be who you are because there is no room to be someone else.

Undecided- Contrary to what the world thinks, you don't have to have all the answers. Seek first who God has created you to be and you will become everything you need to be.

Responsibility- You aren't responsible for everyone else's happiness, but you are responsible for your actions. As hard as we might try, we can't control others. We can do our part to the best of our ability and leave the rest up to others.

Worth- You are immeasurably valuable. You are created good. You are created in God's image. Treat yourself with that respect and others too. Doing so changes every interaction, informs every choice and facilitates authentic and abundant life.

Confident- Don't worry about how you might be perceived by others. This doesn't mean you can be oblivious to how you interact with others, but it is an invitation for you to be free of the constant judgment that might come from others.

Purpose- Nothing is wasted in God's economy. Twists and turns, disappointments, accomplishments, and failures are all free game for God's purposes. Our biggest mistakes can often teach us the most. Not everything that happens, happens for a reason, but everything that happens does have meaning.

Gratitude- Cultivate thankfulness, joy, and beauty. The attitude of gratitude is contagious. When you are grateful and express it, when you are joyful and demonstrate it, and when you notice beauty and point it out, you keep finding more and more to celebrate.

Trust- Trust that all will be well. We must have faith and believe that all things work together for good (Romans 8:28). If things are bad, remember that your story is not yet over. God doesn't abandon us, God delivers us (Psalm 107).

What Now?

If you were to tell someone only 7 things about you, what would you say? Make a list using one word or a short phrase like rock, leader, spark, mother, coach, athletic, funny, etc. What do you feel best describes you?

1. I AM...

2. I AM...

3. I AM...

4. I AM...

5. I AM...

6. I AM...

7. I AM...

When Jesus had the opportunity to do this activity, do you know what 7 things he used to describe himself? In Greek, *ego eimi*, means "I AM," and in the Gospel of John, Jesus was quoted making 7 bold declarations to help everyone know who he is.

1. **"I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE"** (John 6:35)
 - a. Daily Sustenance, Nourishment
2. **"I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD"** (John 8:12)
 - a. Revelation, Guide, Hope, Victor over Darkness
3. **"I AM THE GATE"** (John 10:9)
 - a. Threshold, Entrance
4. **"I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD"** (John 10:11)
 - a. Protector, Servant, Guard
5. **"I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE"** (John 11:25)
 - a. Eternal, Victor over Death
6. **"I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE"** (John 14:6)
 - a. Path, Direction, Victor over Falsehood
7. **"I AM THE TRUE VINE"** (John 15:1)
 - a. Source of Life, Fuel, Food, Fruit

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THE AIM

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The Aim

“It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless.
The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”
(John 6:63)

The all-important thing, Jesus says, is the life-giving power of the spirit. The flesh is of no help.

One way to understand this is to accept that the most important thing is the spirit in which any action is done. Someone has put it this way: **“All human things are trivial if they exist for nothing beyond themselves.” The value of anything depends on its aim.**

If we eat food simply for the sake of eating food, we become gluttons, and it is likely to do us far more harm than good; if we eat food to sustain life, to do our work better, and to maintain the fitness of our body at its highest peak, then food has a real meaning and significance.

If we spend a great deal of time on sport simply for the sake of sport, we are at some extent wasting time. But if we spend time on sport to keep our bodies fit and athletic, and thereby to do our work for God and each other better, then sport ceases to be trivial and becomes intensely important.

The things of the flesh all gain their value from the spirit in which they are done.

Jesus says, “My words are spirit and life.” It is Christ alone who can tell us what life is, can put into us the spirit in which life must be lived, and who can give us the strength and the power to live it.

Life is like any other activity. It takes its value from its purpose and goal. **It is Christ alone who can give us the aim in life, the spirit of life, the purpose for life; and it is Christ alone who can give us the life, the strength, the power to work out that spirit and aim and purpose against the constant opposition that comes to us all from without and from within.**

The spirit of life and the strength for life are found in God.

(William Barclay- New Testament Scholar, Professor, and Pastor)

What Now?

When we participate in activities, “why” we do something is just as important as “what” we are doing. As a matter of fact, when we have clear purpose for doing something, we will be more successful at what we are doing. When we know “why” we don’t have to work as hard to convince ourselves to participate or complete a task.

Ask yourself why you do what you do? Is it because you are good at it? Is it because someone is making you? Is it because you believe it will help you get ahead (i.e. resume builder, looks good on a college application)? Is it because you love it?

There is no greater joy in life than to do and be and live for God. God makes everything better, and when we stay true to the aim, we experience true life as God fully intended.

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STEP BY STEP

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“Step by Step”

Initial Thought: The only way to make it through life, is taking one step at a time. Making each second and minute and hour count of every day, builds the foundation for a week, a month, and a year. Making each year of our life count, builds the foundation for a fruitful life.

Read: Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Take notes or underline key words or phrases in your bible as you read

Tucked in between Proverbs and the Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes is a book that often gets lost amidst the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The author of Ecclesiastes, particularly in chapter three, focuses on time and seasons. For every matter under heaven (aka: everything, because God created the heavens and the earth and all that it is in them) there is a time and a season. God ordered creation out of chaos and gave purpose to each time. There is a time to be born and there is a time to die; a time to plant and a time to harvest; a time to cry and a time to laugh; a time to play and a time to rest.

God has ordained every element of time and our role, is to find purpose in that time, whether we agree with it or not. One of the first things we must do is accept time as God's and not ours. Time belongs to God. Our lives are a gift from God; therefore, everything we do, and all the time we have to do it, belongs to God.

The good news for us comes in verse 12, when the author makes a statement of assurance as to God's hope for us: "I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil."

Reflection: How many times have we commented that there is not enough time in the day? Time is something we all wish we had more of. Ask yourself whether that is because you aren't making the most out of the time you do have or whether you have too much going on to really enjoy what time you do have. It is easy to fall into the trap of overloading ourselves. When we do, we want others, God even, to bail us out. It doesn't work that way. We need to focus on the gift of time we do have, because it is the only time we get, and make the most of it.

What Now? To make the most of your day, and stay focused on God and what really matters, consider starting with three simple steps outlined in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians:

Rejoice always

begin each day focused on things that bring you joy

Pray without ceasing

live every moment in prayer, talking to God and keeping an open line

Give thanks in all circumstances

close each day, giving gratitude to God for the opportunities of the day

(1 Thessalonians 5:16)

Consider This:

Found in the billfold of Coach Paul Bear Bryant (Alabama) after he died in 1982.

THE MAGIC BANK ACCOUNT

Imagine that you had won the following *PRIZE* in a contest:

Each morning your bank would deposit \$86,400 in your private account for your use. However, this prize has Rules:

The set of Rules:

1. Everything that you didn't spend during each day would be taken away from you.
2. You may not simply transfer money into some other account.
3. You may only spend It.
4. Each morning upon awakening, the bank opens your account with another \$86,400 for that day.
5. The bank can end the game without warning; at any time, it can say, "Game Over!" It can close the account, and you will not receive a new one.

What would you personally do? You would buy anything and everything you wanted right? Not only for yourself, but for all the people you love and care for. Even for people you don't know, because you couldn't possibly spend it all on yourself, right? You would try to spend every penny, and use it all, because you knew it would be replenished in the morning, right?

ACTUALLY, THIS GAME IS REAL!

Each of us is already a winner of this *PRIZE*. We just can't seem to see it.

The PRIZE is "TIME"

1. Each morning we awaken to receive 86,400 seconds as a gift of life.
2. And when we go to sleep at night, any remaining time is not credited to us.
3. What we haven't used up that day is forever lost.
4. Yesterday is forever gone.
5. Each morning the account is refilled, but the bank can dissolve your account at any time WITHOUT WARNING...

SO, what will YOU do with your 86,400 seconds?

Those seconds are worth so much more than the same amount in dollars. Think about it and remember to enjoy every second of your life, because time races by so much quicker than you think.

So, take care of yourself. Be happy, love deeply and enjoy life! Start spending....

"DON'T COMPLAIN ABOUT GROWING OLD, SOME PEOPLE DON'T GET THE PRIVILEGE!"

“Step by Step”

Initial Thought: “Step by Step, I can’t see any other way of accomplishing anything.”- Michael Jordan

“Make Every Moment of Every Day Count with these 7 Spiritual Steps”

1. **Wake Up**- It is important for us each day to wake up and decide to have a good day. “This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.” (Psalm 118:24) Every day is another opportunity for us to live fully and enjoy the gift of life God has given us.
2. **Dress Up**- I don't mean to put on a costume or even to get fitted in your finest attire. One of the best ways to dress up is to put on a smile. “I will forget my complaining; I will change my expression and smile!” (Job 9:27) It is a joy to be around those who wear a smile and are filled with joy. Everyone looks good with a smile on their face.
3. **Show Up**- It is one thing to show up and be present and another to show up and be pleasant. We should show up every day ready to be nice to others and listen with an open ear. “Listen to advice and accept instruction, so you may grow wise in the future.” (Proverbs 19:20) We can all learn a lot from each other if we allow ourselves to be open to the process of learning.
4. **Stand Up**- Yes, we should all stand and not be lazy, but that is not what I am suggesting. We should all be ready every moment of every day to stand up for what we believe in! “Be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:9) We are presented every day with several opportunities to witness to others through our actions. We all need to own our faith and our beliefs in everything we do.
5. **Look Up**- It is hard to see where you are going if you are always looking down. We all need to look up to the Lord! “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.” (Philippians 4:13) God is always there for us. All we must do is turn to God and trust. It is true that we still must do our part, but God knows exactly what we need when we need it.
6. **Lift Up**- We are all presented with countless opportunities every day to lift up our prayers to God. Do not worry about anything, instead, pray about everything! “Pray at all times.” (Ephesians 6:18) The more we are in communication with God the more we are sync with God and the more we are in sync with God, the more fulfilling our lives will be.
7. **Sum Up**- When we do our best to do the first 6 steps, we won't be able to do anything but sum up our day with thanks and praise. “Enter His gates with thanks, enter His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him, bless His name.” (Psalms 100:4) We all have so much to be thankful for and we all need to take the appropriate amount of time to stop and show our gratitude to God.

Wake – Dress – Show – Stand – look – lift – Sum
UP

Immerse

TO “NOT DO” OR “DO”

On the Go Devotional Guide

By Rev. Peter A. Thompson

Pastor- First Presbyterian Church (Lynchburg, VA)

Fundamental Notes:

Purpose: Explore, discover. Grow. The purpose of this devotional is to provide another way for us to engage God and God's Word, reassuring us that God is with us wherever we are, no matter what we might be doing. This devotional is not a substitute for church. This devotional is not meant to replace the focus or importance of being in community with others in our faith exploration, discovery, and growth.

Goal: The last time I checked, none of us have all the answers. The goal of this devotional is to wrestle with God's word and open the door (window) for God to speak to us. When we wrestle, we provide a platform of opportunity to be shaped and formed (like a potter at the wheel) to God's intended purpose. Asking questions on our own, rather than simply take another person's word for it, helps us develop our independent character and grow stronger in self.

Structure: At the front end of this devotional guide are things meant to center your focus. You may read them one at a time and one each day, or you can dive in head first and double team them. The one activity I would like to encourage everyone to take time on, is "Yes And." This activity gets at the core of validating the importance of all we learn through our faith and involvement in church and all we learn by participating in extracurricular activities.

One a Day. Two a Days. Two sides of the coin: As you reach the core lessons, you will find that they are labeled as A and B. Sometimes, there is even a "Consider This" addendum. There are many consistent themes throughout scripture and as we might already know, there are often two sides to consider within each theme. The layout of this devotional is meant to give the flexibility to explore the devotions one each day, if you are away for a weekend, or if you have a group gathered, you are welcome to take each topic in its entirety. The "Consider This" addendum provides further thought to consider and dig deeper. In essence, the hope is for you to use how it works best for you.

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To “NOT DO” or “DO”

Initial Thought: As I have grown a bit older, learning to think for myself and comprehend situations and information on my own, I have learned that you can know “what to do” in one of two ways: how “not to do” and how “to do”.

“NOT DO”...

Read Exodus 20: 1-20

Take notes or underline key words or phrases in your bible as you read

The first five books of the bible are a section known as the Pentateuch or Torah; “Law”. Exodus is the second book of the Torah, following Genesis and preceding Leviticus, and contains the stories of God’s people being delivered out of slavery to the promised land. The stories span a time frame of 40+ years, in which God’s chosen people traveled through the wilderness learning how to depend on God and what it means to gain true life.

One of the things I have noticed in reviewing the Ten Commandments, is that most of them are structured in the negative. These Ten Commandments are famous for marking a clear line in the sand that you are not to cross: Thou Shalt NOT have other idols; Thou Shalt NOT steal; Thou Shalt NOT lie; Thou Shalt NOT murder; Thou Shalt NOT wish for things your neighbor has and you don’t. “Thou Shalt Not” is meant to scream at us and tell us to stay clear.

Note: If you think about it, the only law we ever really needed was the first. If we were to faithfully follow the first commandment, the other nine would never come into play. I think God must have known what our tendencies would be, don’t you?

Reflection: Most of us know what this is like. Anytime we have been told “NO” by a parent, coach, or teacher, we have learned that we are “not to do” whatever we were thinking of doing. How does this work for you? Does being told “NO” effectively teach you and instruct you on how to be better?

Some of us respond well to this form of instruction. We do well knowing there are hard lines in the sand we are not to cross, and if we do, there will be consequences for our actions. I think these lines are easier to define in the activities we participate in than in the big decisions of life we are faced with, but the concept is the same.

All of our actions and choices, whether they seem big or small, have consequences. There is a right way and a wrong way. In order to get the results we desire, whether we are learning to play an instrument, balance on the tip of our toes, shoot a jump shot, or be successful in life, it is important for us to learn the right way. In order to do that, sometimes we need to know what the wrong way is.

As Thomas Edison worked to invent the lightbulb, it took him hundreds of tries doing things the wrong way in order to finally discover the right way. Ultimately, what Edison did was work to rule out all the ways “not to do” it, to find the way “to do” it.

What Now? Even though we may know what “not to do”, our human tendency and temptation (like Adam and Eve knowing they were not to eat from the Tree of Good and Evil), is to flirt with the edge of what we are “not to do”. To do this is a trap. We might even say to ourselves that rules are meant to be broken. No! The reason we are told “not to do” something is because someone else has figured out that it is not good for us. Living close to the edge, with the temptation of crossing that line, is a dangerous place to be. For some there may be no turning back. Don’t let that be you. Take the “NOT DO” signs seriously and stay clear!!!

Consider this:

Don't Cut Corners... In competition, the temptation to cheat is always there. We try to think of whatever it takes to get the edge over our competitor; to insure a victory rather than defeat. In the heat of the moment, what we often forget, is that by cheating, we are immediately choosing the losing way. Even if cheating warrants an immediate victory, there will always be an Asterix next to our name, even if we are the only one who knows.

I am pretty sure I will always remember running laps in gym class. It was our warm up every day. At the time, it was important for me to be at the front of the line and be first. Our class would take off and begin running. No matter how fast I would run, there was always someone who would try to move to the front. In order to get there though, they were going to have to cut the corner and take me on the inside. Without fail, as soon as that person would try to cut the corner, our gym teacher would yell out to the class "Go back. Don't cut corners. That is cheating. We don't cheat. Go back and do it again. If you cheat in here, you will likely cheat out there, and that is not acceptable." What did I learn? "Don't cut corners. Don't cheat."

In the case of an athlete, no one is crowned without competing according to the rules.

2 Timothy 2:5

What Paul is teaching his protégé Timothy is much more serious than taking a few steps off a lap in the gym. Paul is speaking about "being crowned" in victory. Salvation, eternal life with God, is the ultimate victory and what Paul is saying is that there are rules to live by in order to "be crowned." Following the life of Christ, and "not" any other way, is the goal, and following the life of Christ has rules. Some of those rules are spelled out clearly by what "not to do" but others, are spelled out clearly by what "to do."

To “NOT DO” or “DO”

Initial Thought: Not only can we learn from what “not to do” but many of us do better knowing what “to do”. There is still a line in sand, but instead of being a line not to cross, it becomes a goal line we are striving toward. And we not only want to reach that goal line, we want to exceed it.

“DO”...

Read: Matthew 5: 1-16

Take notes or underline key words or phrases in your bible as you read

The first four books of the New Testament are the Gospels (Good News) and each of them tells of the life of Jesus Christ, God’s only Son. Matthew is first in line, not because it was written first, but because of the historical genealogy of Jesus and the comprehensive birth story of Jesus. Matthew’s narration portrays Jesus as a teacher, focusing on Jesus coming to fulfill the law and prophecies of the Old Testament. Chapters 5- 7 of Matthew are some of Jesus’ most famous teachings and proclamations called “The Sermon on the Mount”.

The beatitudes are exactly what the word “be-attitude” suggests. They are declarations from Jesus on how we are to act and “be”. The sheer beauty of this list is the promise of blessing accompanying it; BLESSED are the meek; BLESSED are the pure in heart. Not only does this section of Jesus’ teachings include the beatitudes, it concludes with the charge and calling for us to be the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world.” For many, the beatitudes are the new Torah (law). In other words, they are the newly rendered ten commandments. Not only do the beatitudes teach us who we are to be, they embody what we are “to do” in order to faithfully be.

Reflection: I have grown into someone who really enjoys watching people do things the right way. I love to eat and because I love food so much, I have also grown to love cooking. There is nothing more satisfying for me than to watch a good chef, particularly on Food Network, create their masterpieces. The skill and knowledge they own, and share, sets a great example. All I want to do is be able to learn and follow the right steps in my own kitchen.

What Now? A few years ago, at the dawning of fatherhood, I was gifted wall art entitled “The Ten Commandments for Kids.” This wall art now hangs in my office and is a daily reminder to me of the Law of God (Torah). The difference in these Ten Commandments and the original Ten Commandments is that these are structured in the positive. These commandments mark a line in the sand representing a goal to strive toward.

**“Love God more than you love anything else”
“Be thoughtful and kind in what you say and do”
“Share your things cheerfully”
“Love and respect your mom and dad”
“Take care of all living things: people, animals, and plants”
“Be true to what is really important”
“Treat other people’s things as if they were your own”
“Always tell the truth and be honest”
“Be happy for your friends when good things happen to them”
“Show God your love by loving others”**

How can you do your part in being who God has called you to be? What things do you need “to do”?

Consider This:

Deuteronomy 6:1-9... “Great Commandment”

Now these are the commandments, the regulations, and the case laws that the Lord your God commanded me to teach you to follow in the land you are entering to possess, ² so that you will fear the Lord your God by keeping all his regulations and his commandments that I am commanding you—both you and your sons and daughters—all the days of your life and so that you will lengthen your life. ³ Listen to them, Israel! Follow them carefully so that things will go well for you and so that you will continue to multiply exactly as the Lord, your ancestors’ God, promised you, in a land full of milk and honey.

⁴ Israel, listen! Our God is the Lord! Only the Lord!

⁵ Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength. ⁶ These words that I am commanding you today must always be on your minds. ⁷ Recite them to your children. Talk about them when you are sitting around your house and when you are out and about, when you are lying down and when you are getting up. ⁸ Tie them on your hand as a sign. They should be on your forehead as a symbol.^[b] ⁹ Write them on your house’s doorframes and on your city’s gates.

Matthew 22:36-40... “Great Commandment”

³⁶ “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ He replied, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself.^[b] ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.”

The Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and its surrounding text) was, and still is today, the fundamental commission for all Jews. It is the very foundation, the heart and soul, of living a life for God. Jesus, a Jew, would have grown up reciting the Shema and would have bound it to his heart, his hand, his forehead, his mind, and his life. And here, in Matthew’s narrative, Jesus fulfills the commission “To recite them to your children. Talk about them when you are sitting around your house.”

Commandments, whether the Ten Commandments or the Great Commandment, are not simply meant to be talked about though.

Meod

A professor of mine in seminary once shared a story to illustrate the embodiment of this text. So often, we focus on the heart, soul, and mind, with a quick glance over strength. Strength seems rather peril in comparison to the other three. Or does it? The term in Hebrew is “*meod*,” which actually translates as “ability.” We are to love God with 100% of our heart, our soul, our mind, and our ability.

He shared the story of his son, who, after a long day, wanted to go to bed. On his way, his son fell to his knees in the hallway, exhausted and tired. From his knees, he reached out with one hand after another lunging for the door. It was all he could do to lift his arm again and pick up his knees to follow. His eyes couldn’t stay open and the few feet left to the door seemed like miles. His son was giving everything he could in that moment: all of his strength, all of his ability.

This is what “meod” is. To give it all is to commit every ounce.

To give it all is to fully immerse: heart. soul. mind. ability.

NOTES:

Immerse

WE NEVER KNOW

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A Dirty Joke

I was 12 years old and one of those, “did your son eat fertilizer the last couple years,” sized kids. If you have ever watched the Little League World Series in August of every year, you know what I am talking about. I was that kid who no one believed was 12 because I was a foot taller than all my teammates and I threw the ball really hard and hit the ball really hard and far. I was a pitcher and because I could throw really hard I became pretty good.

To say the least, I still had my moments. Let’s just say that at 12 years of age, I didn’t always have the best mental approach and didn’t always stay focused like I should. There was one game I will never forget. We were playing the second-best team in the league (we were the best) and I was pitching in the late innings. As I started the next inning, I couldn’t seem to find the strike zone. I am sure my mom yelling, “throw strikes,” didn’t help. I mean, it wasn’t like I was trying to throw balls. I managed to throw 12 straight balls walking 3 straight batters to load the bases with no outs.

My dad called time out and came out to the mound. I knew it was serious because usually our other coach, my best friend’s dad, would come talk to me and my dad would always be the one to talk to him. Somehow, we listened better that way. Anyway, my dad gets to the mound and he is smiling. I didn’t think things were very funny. He asked me if I wanted to hear a dirty joke. My father is a pastor and trust me, the last thing I thought he would ever ask me is if I wanted to hear a dirty joke. I didn’t know he even knew one.

He looked me in the eye and said to me, **“a horse fell in a mud puddle.”** You got it. That was his version of a dirty joke. Believe it or not, it worked. I laughed, and he laughed and then he said, “relax and throw the ball.” Still chuckling as he returned to the dugout, I couldn’t help but wonder what was going through the minds of all the fans, especially my mom. I focused back in on the next batter and in three pitches, struck him out. I managed to throw just 6 more pitches in that inning, striking the next 2 batters out and leaving the bases loaded.

What now? Whether you are a coach, player, referee, parent, or fan, remember that these are just games. The next time the temptation is there to take things too seriously, think of a dirty joke. It might just pull you out and get you back on track. At the very least, it will relax you and help put things in perspective.

“We Never Know”

Initial Thought: Research has shown through the years that a teenager needs at least 5 adult mentors in their life outside their parents: including coaches, teachers, youth leaders, pastors, family friends, extended family, and coworkers. One of the most effective ways we grow is to learn from others. Therefore, as coaches, teachers, pastors, etc, we never know just how much we are passing along and the impact we are having.

Read: Proverbs 22:6 and Ephesians 6:4

Take notes or underline key words or phrases in your bible as you read

Caution: Proverbs 22:6 is not a guarantee or a promise for a life of ease or great success. Life is life and sometimes things happen. Sometimes parents and coaches and teachers do all the right things, and the student doesn't follow the exact path they know they should. Still, our children wouldn't know how to even take the first step in life without the proper guidance and direction. It is hard, but we just never know what could happen. We do know what we can do and we must stick to that.

Reflection: There is a tale of an old German schoolmaster who, when he entered his class of boys in the morning, used to remove his cap and bow ceremoniously to them. One asked him why he did this. His answer was: “You never know what one of these boys may someday become.” He was right- because one of the boys was named Martin Luther.

What now? If a Sunday School teacher slowly brings a child to Christ, no man knows what that child may someday do for Christ and his Church.

Read: John 6:1-14

Take notes or underline key words or phrases in your bible as you read

Andrew brought the boy to Jesus, and by bringing him made the miracle possible. No one ever knows what will happen and what will come out of it when we bring someone to Jesus. If a parent trains up his or her child in the knowledge and the love of God, no one can say what mighty things that child may someday do for God and for others. Andrew didn't know what he was doing when he brought that boy to Jesus that day, but he was providing material for a miracle. **We never know** what possibilities we are presenting when we do all the things necessary to point someone to God.

Reflection: The whole “Doctor” thing didn't hit me until a class I took with a professor who called everyone in the class “Dr.” so and so. After being called Dr. Thompson for a couple weeks, I really began to believe it. Through this practice, our professor willed us and believed us into what he believed we already were, “Doctors in Ministry.” His leadership style in doing this set a powerful example for us who would in turn have the opportunity to do the same for others.

What now? We all need to pay attention and lead others to the right water fountain to drink from, feed them the right foods, and surround them with the right influences. We never know what will become of them. However, the chances of them becoming the products of their teachings and practices is much better than not.

“We Never Know”

Initial Thought: Coaching is leadership in ministry. Not all of us are called to preach in the pulpit or teach in the classroom. Some of us are meant to coach; in the classroom, on the field or court, at home, in the office, in the studio.

to COACH:

*a person who teaches or trains an athlete or performer;
a person who translates specific knowledge of a skill to a protégé
and helps them grow in their ability to use that skill successfully*

Read: Titus 2:7-8

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A Special Coach

**A coach is a molder of lives,
a shaper of dreams,
a teacher, a helping hand,
a loyal friend...**

**A coach brings out our best,
inspires us to achieve,
shows us the need to believe in ourselves,
and in others...**

**A coach is someone
to respect,
to admire, to trust-
someone like you...**

What now? Be a coach, teacher, parent, youth leader, pastor, or mentor that sets the right example. There are enough negative examples to learn from. All kids and students and people need positive guidance to really know the right paths to take in life.

Notes:

Immerse

TIMEOUT

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“Timeout”

Initial Thought: We all need a break. We all need to rest and take the time to take deep breaths. We all need to stop, have a snack, and if we are lucky, take a nap.

Read: 1 Kings 19:1-8

Take notes or underline key words or phrases in your bible as you read

We all need to rest.

Reflection:

- A. There is a reason every sport has an off season. The time away from the intensity of being in season allows us to step back and gain new perspective, work on things to become better, and allow our bodies to recuperate. An example is Winter. The season of winter is dormant for a reason. It is dormant in order to give creation a rest. Even trees shed their leaves and let the weight go. Winter is a season of rest and hibernation.
- B. Our muscles need time to recuperate and develop. When we are working out and training, the physical process of tearing our muscles by lifting and pushing new limits, must be accompanied by rest in order to allow those muscles to grow back stronger.
- C. *Selah* is a musical rest. In scripture it appears in the psalms to signify a break. Most of the psalms have become hymns and the notation of *selah* after a phrase marks a clear break in thought and rhythm. In music, rests are vital. They are strategically placed in a way to allow the energy and breath needed to carry on. No one could sing an entire song the right way with the right passion and tone, with only one breath.
- D. Coaches who know how to use timeouts correctly in games give their teams an advantage over the course of a game. If a coach or player misuses their timeouts, they could find themselves forcing matters without the appropriate attention or personnel to run the right play. A coach who can rest players at the right times, allows for the right players to be in the game at the right times. There have been very few players throughout the history of sports, if any, who have ever been able to play every down, every minute, or every inning.

What Now? “Sabbathly” means to do something in the manner of Sabbath. Keeping the sabbath is hard, so we might need to act our way into it. Sabbathly can happen any time and not just on the Sabbath. Considering the chaos of the world, the mindset we have while doing our work matters; feeling the warm water on our hands as we do the dishes or driving the speed limit rather than breaking land speed records from point a to point b. Even though work is pulling at us, we can work at focusing our attention elsewhere.

Six days shall you be a workaholic; on the seventh day, shall you join the serene company of human beings.

Six days shall you take orders from your boss; on the seventh day, shall you be master/mistress of your own life.

Six days shall you toil in the market; on the seventh day, shall you detach from money matters.

Six days shall you create, drive, create, invent, push; on the seventh day, shall you reflect.

Six days shall you be the perfect success; on the seventh day, shall you remember that not everything is in your power.

Six days shall you be a miserable failure; on the seventh day, shall you be on top of the world.

Six days shall you enjoy the blessings of work; on the seventh day, shall you understand being is as important as doing.

-Blu Greenberg

“Timeout”

Initial Thought: Unfortunately, we often work ourselves into rhythms that don't stop, psychologically convincing ourselves we can't afford any time for a break. Knowing when to stop and take a break is extremely important. As a matter of fact, taking timeouts are absolutely essential.

Read: Genesis 1-2 and Exodus 1

Take notes or underline key words or phrases in your bible as you read

God made the universe and everything in it and then rested for a time: “On the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation (Gen. 2:2-3).”

The text from Exodus reminds us of the time when God's people were slaves in Egypt, captive to Pharaoh. God's people were forced to work every day of the week with no freedom and no relief. At that time, God's people lived every day with the constant lashing of expectations. They needed to do more, produce more, and build more. This reality is not the end of the story. God delivered the people out of slavery. God led the people to a safe passage of freedom and shortly thereafter, presented them with the Ten Commandments. No longer were the people slaves to Pharaoh. Now, they were to follow God's ways.

Reflection: “Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy (Exodus 20)” is often known as the cute commandment. In our fast-pace-try-to-do-it-all-world, keeping the sabbath is easy to dismiss. It is a nice idea, a lofty, pleasant-sounding but unattainable goal. Sabbath feels like one of those cultural trappings from the Bible that doesn't apply any more, like polygamy or washing a guest's feet when they enter a house. But why? Doesn't a day each week without work sound heavenly; a day to unplug, unwind, laugh, play, and love? On one day, we wouldn't have to multitask, plan, or shop. We wouldn't have to map out the optimal way to get everything on our to do lists complete. Instead, we can stop and rest. For one day a week, we can take a day of rest to help put the rest of the week in better perspective.

To stop and rest is the literal meaning of Sabbath, or the Hebrew word “shabbat.” In order to uphold the original law of keeping the sabbath, one could not take on any weight or burden. No cooking, no carrying a mat, no washing clothes, no physical work at all. Taking time to stop and rest for one day each week provides intentionality to our lives in connection with God. Keeping the sabbath puts the focus on God and God's gracious invitation to rest from our work. The sabbath was a day reserved solely for the worship of God.

What Now? God rested and so should we!! It has been said that our checkbooks are spiritual documents. How we budget and spend our money demonstrates what we believe and hold dear. Do we give a portion away? Do we spend it on trendy clothes and trinkets? Our money reveals who we are and what we believe about the world and about God. Our calendars are spiritual documents in a similar way. To a certain degree, to-do lists and Google calendars are statements of faith. What does your calendar say about your faith? Are you busy with good and important things but have no time to stop and enjoy God's creation? Do you believe in your own self-importance? Do you believe in your need to keep up appearances of having it all together? Do you believe you are in control of your own life?

(from *Sabbath in the Suburbs*)

Consider This:

Knowing When to Quit by David McGlynn (June 2, 2017) Credit given to Giselle Potter

My son, Galen, had been shooting hoops since he was 4, barely big enough to hold the ball. Now 11, he was 5-foot-6, a head taller than his mom, and light and agile on his feet. He could sink a basket from anywhere on the driveway, including a shot that passed between the branches of the maple tree on its way to the net. Basketball, I'd long believed, was his destiny.

Galen was a standout his first season at the YMCA, when he was 8. The next year we signed up for the club team, which turned our six-week rec league season into six months of intense tournament play. When it became clear that every kid on his team had been a YMCA standout (or had bypassed the Y league altogether), I arranged for him to take private lessons with the captain of the basketball team at the college where I teach.

He played in a 3-on-3 league over the summer and, at the conclusion of the club season the following spring, he began playing with an Amateur Athletic Union team, a national youth sports organization that, in addition to increasing the level of competition also expanded our travel radius to a tristate region. Three weekends a month, from October to July, we crisscrossed the Upper Midwest traveling to tournaments. All the parents complained about the endless driving, the lost weekends, the hours spent in the bleachers, yet all agreed the sacrifices were worth it. They were the cost of success.

I was no stranger to the world of hyper-intense sports. I'd grown up swimming and had spent my share of weekends camped out in stifling, chlorinated natatoriums. I was good enough to swim, on scholarship, at a large Division I university where I routinely lost to swimmers who'd go on to win Olympic medals. Twenty years later, I still swam every morning and I still believed in the power of sports — to focus both body and mind, release stress-busting endorphins, forge lifelong friendships. Even the defeats were useful. Anyone who's ever loved a sport has learned the hard way that sometimes life isn't fair.

But while I (most of the time) looked forward to swimming practices and meets, the chance to test my mettle against my peers, basketball tournaments made Galen nothing but miserable. He'd punish himself for days over missed shots and flubbed passes, even if his team prevailed in the end. Whenever a shot went in, he looked more relieved than happy, grateful not to have screwed up again. During the lulls between games, he sat by himself, brooding into his iPad. He didn't want to talk to anyone, not even me.

For a while I thought I was the problem. I was failing my son by not loving his sport enough for the both of us — until the Saturday I took a seat on the bleachers beside another dad. He told me his older kids had also played competitive basketball; he'd been coming to tournaments for 15 years and figured he had at least a decade more to go. When I asked if his oldest daughter still played, he laughed and said, "By the end of high school she was so burned out she never wanted to see a basketball again. She won't even watch it on TV with her brothers."

"Was it worth it?" I asked.

"Builds character," he said, half-grinning. I could tell he didn't believe it, not all the way. I'd begun to wonder whether it was even true. Did youth sports *really* impart discipline and determination in ways that other activities — like learning Greek, say, or taking long hikes in the backcountry, or painting a fence — could not? How often does a childhood sacrificed on the altar of sports really confer advantages in adult life?

“Did she have fun at least?” I asked the dad.

“Some of the time,” he said. “But it wasn’t really about fun.”

To me, it should be, and John Engh, executive director of the National Alliance for Youth Sports, agreed. “Kids need diversity both socially and athletically,” he said in an email. “When their main outlet for both becomes the same activity, then a bad (or even a mediocre) experience can leave them disliking not only their sport but also physical activity of any kind.”

Driving home from Galen’s final tournament, after nearly a year of constant practices and games, I made a radical proposal. “Maybe it’s time to quit,” I said. “Basketball isn’t making you happy.”

“If I quit basketball, what sport do I play?” Galen asked.

“How about NO sport,” I said. “At least not for a while. You can play basketball with friends all you want, but you don’t have to play on a team. We can spend our weekends camping and backpacking, skiing in the winter. You know, things we actually enjoy.”

He hesitated. “Every kid at my school plays something.”

If he didn’t have a sport, he continued, “I’ll be a nobody.”

“I’m only trying to consider how our light is spent,” I told Galen.

He looked at me. “What’s that mean? Is that poetry?”

“It’s John Milton,” I said. I’d taught a few of his sonnets the previous spring. “It’s about accepting who we are.”

Galen rolled his eyes. “I just want to go home.”

Over the weeks and months that followed, the idea grew on Galen. Freed from practice, he took to riding his bike and skateboard for hours, turning into the driveway as the last of the dusk light drained from the sky, his cheeks ruddy and his shoulders relaxed. He spent far more time outside without basketball weighing on his mind and schedule. He didn’t become a nobody or stop being an athlete.

Instead, both his definition of sports and his circle of friendships expanded. In the fall, he signed up for a kayaking class and went out for the junior high cross-country team, a far more reasonable eight-week season. When the snow fell, he joined a skiing club. Each new activity introduced him to new friends, and in some cases gave him a chance to hang out with his old basketball teammates without the pressure to win a game. This summer he’s heading to the Boundary Waters in northern Minnesota for a weeklong canoeing trip.

Now that the weather’s warm, Galen’s back to shooting hoops in the driveway. More than once, I’ve looked out the kitchen window and spotted him dribbling the ball between his legs while talking trash to an imaginary adversary. He fakes right, spins to the left, stops on a dime, swishes a jumper from behind the garbage cans. When he exultantly raises his arms above his head, full of joy and confidence, I know the decision to quit was the right one. A slam dunk.

Immerse

BETTER TOGETHER

On the Go Devotional Guide

By Rev. Peter A. Thompson

Pastor- First Presbyterian Church (Lynchburg, VA)

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“Better Together”

Initial Thought: I have heard it said a thousand times, “there is strength in numbers.” I have almost always believed this to be true. That is, until I realized that the only way numbers produced strength was through unity. Without unification, the masses are like a million specks of sand as opposed to a single boulder.

Read: Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Take notes or underline key words or phrases in your bible as you read

A single strand can be broken easily. With more effort and strength, a two-fold strand can be broken as well. A three-fold cord, on the other hand, is not easily broken.

Read: Ephesians 4:2-6

Take notes or underline key words or phrases in your bible as you read

Paul’s letter here to the Ephesians calls for the church, the community of people in Ephesus, to be one body, just as God is one. They were not to split off and separate into this and that, but through unity with the Holy Spirit, they were to work to become one.

Reflection: As husband and wife come together as one with God, each independent strand works to intertwine with one another, creating a bond of support and strength. The husband is still the husband, the wife is still the wife, and God is still God, yet together, each is made stronger by being connected to the other. Other places we might see this relationship dynamic working out are:

Mother, Father, and Children
Management, Coach, and Players
Coach, Players, and Parents
Administration, Teachers, and Students/Families
God, Pastor, and Congregation

Unity vs. Uniformity

There is a major difference between unity and uniformity. To be unified as ONE does not require all parts to be uniform, but it does require all parts to have a willingness to come together despite differences. A mosaic is one beautiful piece of art made of many different pieces coming together as ONE. To be uniform, on the other hand, is to have the same beliefs or mirror the same movements. Uniformity does not allow room for diversity. When we think about it, uniforms are great for teams to all look alike and instill a sense of unity, but the team would not function successfully if all of its members all did the same thing; unless of course it is synchronized swimming.

What Now? The church is created to be ONE body with many parts (see the next devotion). Does that mean the church is created to be unified or uniform? Does a particular church like First Presbyterian have to be made up of people who all believe the same things, or is there room for variance in God’s church?

“Better Together”

Initial Thought: No one is created with the ability to do everything. There are lots of people who can do several things well, and there are some people who don't seem to do anything well. We are all created to do something. We are created to play a part. We are better together.

Read: 1 Corinthians 12:12-16

Take notes or underline key words or phrases in your bible as you read

This passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians includes one of the most well-known and powerful images in scripture. It defines the Church as a body with Christ as the head of the body. The Church, made up of all of us as God's children, make up the various parts of the body. Paul's challenge to his audience, and our challenge even today, is that we are to do our job as a part of the body!!! We can't all be hands and we can't all be toes. Some of us need to be the skin and some of us need to be the nose. Perhaps the most important lesson from Paul is that we are all needed. As the body, it is detrimental to suggest that someone is not needed for something. It would be like saying we don't need our hand or our leg or our heart.

Reflection: Have you ever tried to play in a game with one less person than the other team? There is a clear void when someone is missing; not just physically, but emotionally as well. Think of being on a basketball team with only 4 players, trying to compete against another team with 5 players. On defense, how is it that 4 players will equally guard 5? On offense, who will be the one to take on 2 players while the others face 1? The odds are not good for the depleted team. Can it happen for 4 players to play against 5? Sure. But it is not ideal, and it is certainly not a sustainable game plan.

To have all the right people in all the right places doing all the right things, helps the mechanism work the way it is intended. It prevents one person from having to over extend themselves to cover for someone else. It gives honor and purpose and call to each person, with no one able to say to another they are not important. To say this acknowledges that there is more to this than just presence. Not only do we have to be present, we must also be willing to own our place and part and perform it well. It is then, and only then, that the body can function effectively.

Do you part!!! Do you know your role on your team? Do you know how you fit into the master plan and how you best contribute? If so, then do your part. If not, now is good time to figure it out. Everyone member of the team is important. Not everyone can be the point guard or shooting guard and certainly not everyone can be the center. Someone needs to be the player off the bench that gets a big rebound and someone needs to be the go-to defender or scorer.

What Now? Being present at church whenever it is convenient, or we feel like it, isn't enough. We all have a role to play. When we aren't present, and better yet, when we aren't fulfilling our role, we are forcing someone else to over extend and cover for us. The church is better with you present and engaged. The church functions at a higher level with you present and doing your part. The church is better when we are all working together toward the same mission and goal.

Active Listening Exercise:
Download and Listen to: “We are the Body” by Casting Crowns

Consider This:

It is likely that we have all heard “No man/woman left behind.” Every member of the team looks after one another and every member is looked after. Every member is given a role and a mission only succeeds if everyone does their part.

“Surf passage,” where small teams of SEAL candidates paddle inflatable boats through waves crashing into San Diego's Silver Strand, has become one of the Navy's most iconic training tools. The goal is for a team of 6-7 seals in full uniform to carry a raft into waist deep water, board the boat together, and then paddle through 3-5 foot crashing waves past the surf.

A business manager from Colorado made a comment in response to a recent article reporting on “surf passage.” He said, “What applies to all of us (in & out of uniform) is the fact that successful teams achieve great things when they all clearly understand the plan and all paddle in the same direction. Does your Team know the plan and are they all paddling in the same direction?”

Notes:

Immerse

PERSEVERANCE

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“Perseverance”

Initial Thought: Never, ever give up.

Read James 1:2-4

Take notes or underline key words or phrases in your bible as you read

When (not if) we face trials in life, James writes, we should consider it pure joy. But why in the world would we ever consider difficulties a cause for joy? Because, continues James, these trials are essential to our development as human beings and people of faith. These trials or tests – part of life for us all - in turn produce perseverance, and this perseverance helps us become mature and complete men and women who do not lack anything.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Roman church speaks similarly of the relationship between trials, perseverance and our personal and faith development when he writes:

Read Romans 5:1-4

Take notes or underline key words or phrases in your bible as you read

Like James, Paul understood that perseverance is closely linked with the formation of one's character and also tied to the one virtue that arguably makes all other virtues even possible: hope. As the saying goes, “When the world says ‘Give up,’ hope says, ‘Try it one more time.’”

Reflection: “Never, ever give up.” Have you ever been tempted to walk away from the challenges before you? In sports? In School? In business? In a relationship? In pursuing your dream? Life for us all is full of bad plays, bad breaks and bad calls. With each difficulty that comes our way, we have a choice to make. We can complain, or we can seek to overcome. Those with a grace-filled character find a way to pick themselves up, brush themselves off and continue on in the game.

One of the greatest examples of never giving up is Cal Ripken Jr., Hall of Fame Shortstop for the Baltimore Orioles and now business owner. It is one thing to play through an entire season without missing a game. Every day we play, we are susceptible to things that could keep us from playing the next day. Cal Ripken Jr. defied all of those odds. After playing 2632 games, more than 16 Major League baseball seasons worth, Cal Ripken Jr. set the Consecutive Games Played Record earning him the nickname “Ironman.”

Perseverance

To persevere is to do something in spite of difficulty.

To persevere is to persist despite great odds. To persevere is to refuse to give up.

What Now? Pray! (*Prayer is simply talking to God. Like you would talk to a friend. Through prayer, God connects us all together in the Spirit.*) Hey God, help me to keep plodding along. Help me to take it one day at time. Help me to remember, that through it all, I will be stronger and more complete when I get to the other side. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, empower me to persevere and never, ever give up. Amen.

“Perseverance”

Initial Thought: In order for us to enact perseverance, we presume some type of adversity. Whether we are working hard on a project, enduring a long season, or going through necessary growing pains, perseverance can be the key to helping us keep going when all we really want to do is stop and quit. Perseverance is an act of will and not just of skill.

Read 2 Corinthians 11:23-28

Take notes or underline key words or phrases in your bible as you read

Within

The exact point of contact, physical and psychological, between man and his sport.

That is where the Game is.

In the bleeding, broken hands refusing to let go
because there's still time on the clock, time for one more play.

That is the test.

This measure of commitment and wherewithal of mind and body.

It is not on the scoreboard or in the victory lane.

Those illustrations exist only to make the Game easier to understand from the bleachers,
from living rooms, from the outside looking in.
Only when we get close do we learn where the Game is truly played.

It is this intimacy that takes us past the mano a mano, through the obvious battles with gravity, speed, and the elements, to expose the vulnerabilities alongside the victories. And it is here that we discover one simple truth about competition:

In sport as in life, the real opponent, the only real enemy, is within.

-No Fear: Sport Chronicles

What Now? How does perseverance play out in the Church? How can you dig deeper and find strength within to deepen your faith? In what ways would persevering benefit your participation in the church and with your community of faith?

Just like in our activities, the only real thing holding us back from being more involved, more invested, and more in tune with God, is ourselves. We must persevere, for God's sake and ours.

Consider This:

Carrots, Eggs, and Coffee

A young woman went to her grandmother and told her about her life and how things were so hard for her- her husband had cheated on her and she was devastated. She did not know how she was going to make it and wanted to give up. She was tired of fighting and struggling. It seems as soon as one problem was solved, a new one arose. Her grandmother took her into the kitchen. She filled three pots with water and placed each on a high fire. Soon the pots came to a boil. In the first she placed carrots, in the second she placed eggs, and in the last she placed ground coffee beans. She let them sit and boil; without saying a word.

In about twenty minutes she turned off the burners. She fished the carrots out and placed them in a bowl. She pulled the eggs out and placed them in a bowl. Then she ladled the coffee out and place it in a bowl. Turning to her granddaughter, she asked, 'Tell me what you see.' 'Carrots, eggs, and coffee,' she replied.

Her grandmother brought her closer and asked her to feel the carrots. She did and noted that they were soft. The grandmother then asked the granddaughter to take an egg and break it. After pulling off the shell, she observed the hardboiled egg. Finally, the grandmother asked the granddaughter to sip the coffee. The granddaughter smiled as she tasted its rich aroma. The granddaughter then asked, 'What does it mean, grandmother?'

Her grandmother explained that each of these objects had faced the same adversity: boiling water. Each reacted differently. The carrots went in strong, hard, and unrelenting. However, after being subjected to the boiling water, they softened and became weak. The egg had been fragile. Its thin outer shell had protected its liquid interior, but after sitting through the boiling water, its inside became hardened. The ground coffee beans were unique, however. After they were in the boiling water, they had changed the water.

"Which are you?" she asked her granddaughter. "When adversity knocks on your door, how do you respond? Are a carrot, an egg, or a coffee bean?"

Which are you? How do you handle adversity? Are you a carrot that seems strong, but with pain and adversity, you wilt and become soft and lose strength? Are you an egg that starts with a malleable heart, but changes with the heat? Did you have a fluid spirit, but after a death, a breakup, a financial hardship or some other trial, you became hardened and stiff? Does your shell look the same, but on the inside you are bitter and tough with a stiff spirit and hardened heart? Or are you like the coffee bean, able to influence even the toughest of circumstances pushing against you? When the water gets hot, it releases the fragrance and flavor. If you are like the bean, when things are at their worst, you get better and change the situation around you. When the hour is the darkest and trials are their greatest, do you elevate yourself to another level?

May you have enough happiness to make you sweet, enough trials to make you strong, enough sorrow to keep you human and enough hope to make you happy. The happiest of people don't necessarily have the best of everything; they just make the most of everything that comes along their way. May we all be like the COFFEE.

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THINK SIMPLE

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“Think Simple”

Initial Thought: The little things make the biggest impact. We don't need to tackle the world in order to make a difference or make the world a better place. As a matter of fact, what is needed most is for us to give our focus to making the most of what we can with what we have. A successful career, major revolution, or great life, can very easily be defined in the simplest of moments.

Read: Matthew 13:31-32, Mark 4:30-32, Luke 13:18-19

Take notes or underline key words or phrases in your bible as you read

The parable of the mustard seed told by Jesus uses one of the smallest elements on earth to make a big point. A mustard seed is tiny; almost too small to believe how it could possibly become a tree. Jesus says that if we have the faith the size of a mustard seed, we could move mountains. What this parable is meant to highlight is the magnitude and power of God's ability to strengthen us in our smallness. If we give God a little, God will do great things.

***Active Listening Exercise:
Download and Listen to: “Dream Small” by Josh Wilson***

Reflection: Never underestimate the power of simple things. In doing the little things, we create building blocks that pile high and wide that soon enough become the foundation for really big and important things. When we think simple, we make ourselves available to be made great.

Loving others (Matthew 12).

A few small stones (1 Samuel 17).

A couple fish and few loaves of bread (John 6).

A smile.

Calling someone just to say you are thinking about them.

Taking time to listen.

Add your own...

How is it that these make such a big difference?

What Now? **Take time to reflect and examine yourself.** What are some things you are really good at doing? This is one time you can brag about yourself so go on, be honest and acknowledge what you are good at; small things as well as big things. Now, think about the impact those things have on your surroundings. In what ways do the simple things play a significant role? In what areas of your life could you focus on doing simple things to be a part of a bigger movement?

Consider This:

YOU CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE BY DOING SOME OF THE SIMPLEST THINGS.

One summer day a player sweated all alone in a gymnasium, long snapping footballs from the half court circle on the basketball court to a target hanging on the wall underneath the basket. **No one in that community had ever seen a player do that before.**

A couple weeks later the same player walked up to local business owners at their place of business and handed them a card which stated the local football team was going to win a state championship that upcoming year. This was a feat the school never had accomplished. **No one in that community had ever seen a player do that before.**

During the season fans noticed the same young man playing offensive center. Every play he would sprint from the huddle to the line clapping wildly as if to say, "Here we come!" How long had that young man been breaking the huddle that way? All year - every game. **No one in that community had ever seen a player do that before.**

Later, during a playoff game, the same young man played every single play of the game, never coming off the field during offense, defense and special teams. He was the only player who did. When the game was over he was so exhausted he collapsed on the way to the team bus. **No one in that community had ever seen a player play to exhaustion before.**

Finally, during the state championship game, this young man snapped punt snaps on a field covered with eight inches of snow hitting the punter right in the hands. What made the feat more remarkable was he was wearing a pair of gloves that he could not remove because they had become frozen to his hands. The team went on to win the first state championship in school history thus fulfilling the prediction of the card. **No one in that community had ever seen something like that ever done before.**

Years later a call was made to the former player. "Your teammate has cancer. We need you."

On a Sunday afternoon the player stood in front of a crowded banquet hall. He spoke about courage. He spoke about teammates. He spoke about loyalty. He spoke about love. Over \$80,000 were raised that day for medical expenses. **No one in that community had ever seen that done before.**

In your life, do what no one has ever seen done before.

YOU CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE BY DOING SOME OF THE SIMPLEST THINGS.

“Think Simple”

Initial Thought: K.I.S.S. (Keep It Simple Stupid)- Keeping things simple is a lost art in our overachieving and multi-tasking society. Sometimes it feels as though the only choice we have in our everyday lives is to think of at least 3 things at once and be 2 places at once. That way of living is not simple. We need to simplify and focus.

Read: Matthew 12:28-34

Take notes or underline key words or phrases in your bible as you read

Why do we have two million laws to uphold ten? This has been a question I have asked for quite some time. Actually, in this section of Matthew, we could ask why we need ten laws to uphold two? Having been questioned by the Pharisees and the Scribes on much of what he stands for, Jesus answers perhaps their most difficult question. They asked, of all the commandments, of all the things we are supposed to do in life, “what is the most important?” Jesus’ answer was simple: LOVE God and LOVE others. The only commandment we really need to be God’s faithful children is this one. If we follow it in true obedience, the rest of life will fall into place.

Reflection: Looking back through the years thinking about all the pitchers I caught, the most successful pitchers were the ones with only two pitches. It was clear their control and command of the game was better and on top of that, they were usually the ones who pitched deeper into games. Most of them had a third pitch as well but it was really for show if they needed to waste one.

There is something magical about calling the game for a pitcher who is focused only on throwing two types of pitches. From these two pitches, location and speed are the only other factors to give the pitch depth and variety. Two different pitches thrown in the right location at the right speed is all the variety a pitcher really needs to be successful.

For pitchers who have an arsenal of five or six different pitches, it not only takes a long time to go through all the pitch choices to find the right one, they tend to rely on the guessing game of the hitter verses their ability to throw certain pitches well. It is hard enough to master one pitch in baseball, much less have the time and ability to master five or six.

What now? Is it better to have twenty items on your college application or resume in which you only had time to give a little to, or have only a few in which you were able to really commit and understand at a deeper level? Is it better to give \$50 each to four different organizations or \$200 to one organization?

What now too? In what areas of life can you simplify? Are you trying to do too much? Are you trying to tackle too many things at once and be too many places at once? Consider whether it is better to dig deeper into something or spread your wings out wide? Another way to consider this is to ask whether quality or quantity is preferred?

How can you better focus, grow in depth, and not jeopardize quality, throughout your life?

Notes:

Immerse

THEOLOGY OF PLAY

On the Go Devotional Guide

By Rev. Peter A. Thompson

Pastor- First Presbyterian Church (Lynchburg, VA)

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“Theology of Play”

Initial Thought: When I think of PLAY, I think re-creation, not wreck-creation. Playing is what we were meant to do as children and there is no reason that ever needs to cease throughout our lifetime. Playing is how we learn, discover, and grow and since our faith (spiritual growth) is a journey of exploration, discovery, and growth, PLAY should be an essential part.

Read: Ecclesiastes 3:12-13

Take notes or underline key words or phrases in your bible as you read

Right after the author in Ecclesiastes declares that there is a time and a season for everything, the text above appears as a purpose statement from God of how we are to fulfill our time. It describes what God wants for us: to be happy and to do good; to eat and drink and enjoy what we do. As a matter of fact, it tells us this is God's gift; a gift that endures forever.

Read: Psalm 150

Take notes or underline key words or phrases in your bible as you read

There is nothing more important that for us to praise the Lord. In everything we do, we ought to praise the Lord. How do we do that? We dance and sing and play instruments and cook and volunteer and laugh and play games the right way for God. Our joy brings God joy.

Reflection: When we do things, we aren't meant to do them recklessly, but with joy and purpose. In other words, God wants us to PLAY as a way of constantly re-creating the joys of life. An important reminder to us all is that PLAY is not limited to childhood. We don't outgrow our ability to play. We may outgrow our willingness, but never our ability. Also, we need to open our eyes to the countless opportunities to PLAY surrounding us. We need to be open to these opportunities and allow God to live and shine through us no matter what we are doing. It may be through our PLAY that we discover God the most.

What Now? No matter who we are or how old we are: we should **take our play history**- getting back in touch with the joy we have all experienced at some point in our lives. (When we find that joy from the past, we are halfway to learning how to create it again.); we should **expose our self to play**- “Stop and smell the flowers.” (The world is full of humor, irony, joy, and objects available for aesthetic appreciation. The trick is allowing ourselves to be open to it.); we need to **give our self permission** to be playful, to be a beginner. (Unless you are willing to do that, unless you can let yourself feel okay about going through the awkward stage, you can't grow. You'll always be stuck in the past.); we should realize that **Fun is our North Star**, but we don't always have to head north- some of the really transforming acts of play aren't purely fun. (This means that we shouldn't do only things that produce easy fun. If we do, we will be shortchanging ourselves.); we need to **be active and just move**. (Take a walk, throw a ball, do jumping jacks. Physical play bypasses the cognitive roadblocks and builds new neural pathways to happiness.); we need to **free our self of fear**- Fear and play cannot go together. (We need to find out what it is in our surroundings that prevents a sense of trust and well-being that would allow play to emerge.); we need to **nourish our mode of play**, and be with people who nourish it, too- Practice Play. Play is nourishing, but we have to take time out for play, just as we would take time out to eat.)

(PLAY by Stuart Brown, pg. 206- 215)

Consider This:

The following quotes can be found in the book “PLAY: How it shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul” by Stuart Brown, M.D. This is a great book for anyone who wishes to be inspired to PLAY more with purpose.

“What enables us to innovate, problem-solve, and be happy, smart, resilient human beings? Our ability to PLAY.” Life without play is a life without books, without movies, art, music, jokes, dramatic stories. Imagine a world with no flirting, no daydreaming, no comedy, no irony. Such a world would be a pretty grim place to live. Play is what lifts us out of the mundane. (6)

Play helps us discover and express our own core truths. Play is a force built into us through millions of years of evolution; a force that allows us to both discover our most essential selves and enlarge our world. We are designed to find fulfillment and creative growth through play. (13)

Play sets the stage for cooperative socialization. It nourishes the roots of trust, empathy, caring, and sharing. Games, sports, and free play between kids sets the foundation for our understanding of fairness and justice. When sports and games are played as they should be played, organized for the fun of it, kids learn that cheating is wrong and that playing the game the best you can is the thing that matters (although many coaches would rather operate under the Vince Lombardi dictum: “Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing”). (197) *Author’s note: The only people who make comments like this are those who always seem to win, or at least don’t lose very often.*

When we get play right, all areas of our lives go better. When we start ignoring play, we start having problems. When someone doesn’t keep an element of play in their life, their core being will not be light. Play gives us the irony to deal with paradox, ambiguity, and fatalism. (202)

In the adult world, play continues to be woven into the fabric of our culture. In large part, play is our culture, in the form of music, drama, novels, dances, celebrations, and festivals. Play shows us our common humanity. It shows us how we can be free within the societal structures that allow us to live with others. It is the genesis of innovation and allows us to deal with an ever-changing world. (199)

Making all of life an act of play occurs when we recognize and accept that there may be some discomfort in play, and that every experience has both pleasure and pain. As long as we are acting in concordance with our central truth, then the outcome will be positive. When we fully internalize this ethos, our work is our play and our play is our work. (205)

What Now? Get out and play. Throw a ball or a frisbee. Laugh. Call a friend and go do something fun. Call several friends and play a pickup game. Put down your phone(s), get out the favorite family board game, and just play. Laugh. Watch a comedian. Go to the movies and get some popcorn. Go to the arcade. Blow up a bag of balloons and try to keep them all in the air. Laugh.

Notes:

Immerse

LIVING A LEGACY

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By Rev. Peter A. Thompson

Pastor- First Presbyterian Church (Lynchburg, VA)

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“Living a legacy”

Initial Thought: In my short 36 years, working with many wonderful people, and building relationships with thousands more through church, school, sports, civic organizations, boards, and family ties, it is clear that life is a RACE and a FIGHT. The most important thread holding it all together, providing the necessary strength for it all, is FAITH (trust and belief in the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the empowering strength of the Holy Spirit).

Read 2 Timothy 4:3-8

Take notes or underline key words or phrases in your bible as you read

Paul writes these words to Timothy, his protégé, reflecting on the end of his life. Like much of Paul's writings, his intention is for those who are listening to his words to implement them early and often in life, so that their life can be lived to the fullest now.

Reflection: At the conclusion of middle school, one of my coaches signed my yearbook: Run the Race, Fight the Fight, Keep the Faith- Coach. I never thought a simple signature in a yearbook, in which most of the time we read only once and move on, would play such an important motivational role throughout my life. There was something about those words that resonated with me and I have never forgotten them. As a matter of fact, I have borrowed them often as my own signoff and subtle encouragement to others. Here is more of what I have come to learn from 2 Timothy 4:7.

Life is a race. It is not a 40, 60, or 100-yard dash. It is not even a 5K or 10K. It is more like a marathon. The race has everything from hills to turns to climbs to sprints. If you start off too fast, you may not have enough to finish, but if you don't start off well enough, you could fall so far behind even the best closers can't catch up. You will likely need to refuel along the way and pitstops are necessary as well (even if it is to pee in the bushes). Everyone running the race with you is moving along at different speeds. Some are taking long strides and others are barely moving. Some are breathing heavy and methodically, and others don't seem to be breathing hard at all. Some have perfect form and others flap around like wounded birds. Some will need a wrap at the finish line, others will need an ice bath, and still others act as though they could keep running. Life is a race. The most important thing is that we keep running it.

Life is also a fight. It is not a street fight in the side alley or under the bleachers. It is not a lightweight or welterweight match. It is not a bout in the hexagon. It is more like a heavyweight title fight. Sometimes you need to fight to get off the ropes and sometimes you will be dancing freely in the middle. Most of the time you will need to have your gloves up protecting from jabs but other times you will need to be the aggressor and land a few. Endurance and perseverance will be the key to making it another round and the difference between winning and losing might just be whether you can get up one more time than your opponent. As Rocky Balboa told his son in the last Rocky movie, "It is not how many times you get knocked down that matters, it is that you can get up one more time than you have been knocked down." Life is a fight. The most important thing is that we keep fighting.

The one variable that gives us the strength to run and courage to fight each day is our faith. When we keep our faith, the race we run and the fight we fight become enriched and fulfilling. Believing and following God doesn't guarantee an easy ride with no work or no struggle, but believing and following God will give us the strength and courage and hope we need to run and fight no matter the work and struggles that are sure to arise. We can and should run. We can and should fight. We must, no matter what, KEEP THE FAITH.

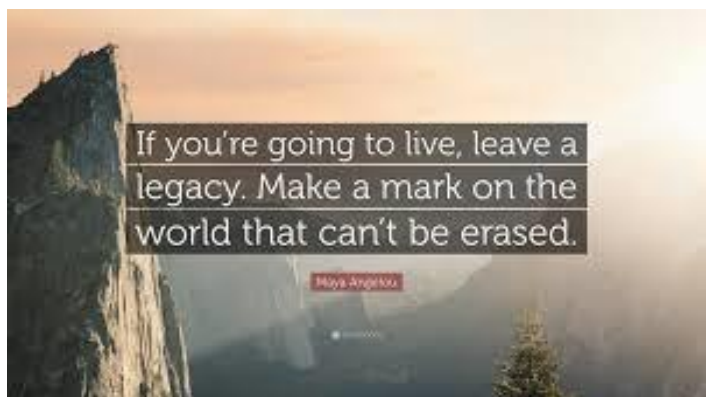
Consider This:

Hebrews 12:1

“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

“Everyone is an athlete, but some of us are training and some of us are not.”

George Sheehan
(Runner, Writer, Philosopher)



Active Listening Exercise:
Download and Listen to: “Only Jesus” by Casting Crowns

“living a legacy”

Initial Thought: We all want to be remembered. Not just when we have passed on to eternal glory, but now. We want to be someone people look up to and respect. We want to do things people admire.

Read Philippians 3:10-16

Take notes or underline key words or phrases in your bible as you read

Reflection: The EC Glass High School Boys Lacrosse Team has developed a healthy reputation of being a force to be reckoned with. Their 2017 season marked a career year for a group of players that had spent much of their lives playing lacrosse together. They had a complete team with quick and agile attackers, fierce face off skills, effective communication, and undeniable team defense. They had good senior leadership, passionate coaching, and as you might expect, a growing fan base made up of much more than parents and siblings. Their playoff run seemed like destiny as they marched into the State Championship with momentum and high hopes. The game was played well but at the end of the game they were just 2 goals short. The lingering thought of defeat and unfinished business would have to wait for another season.

Fortunately for Glass, most of their team was going to return in 2018. With a chip on their shoulders and burning desire in their hearts, their 2018 season lived up to all the hype. They successfully concluded their regular season undefeated, earning them the top seed in the upcoming playoffs. Glass knew the importance of making a statement and they did just that in both the first and second rounds. In the third round, with a bullseye on their chest, Glass took hit after hit from a physical opponent seeking to derail their dreams and goals once again. The toughness, skill, and endurance of Glass prevailed, paving the way to another Regional Final game. Late news of a change of venue, causing the home field advantage to shift against Glass, could have been a good excuse, but Glass was not in the business of making any excuses. They had a goal and they weren't about to let location come in the way. With passion and purpose, Glass took care of business in the Regional Finals, earning them a spot in the State Championship with another shot at glory.

As I arrived at the stadium for the championship game, the banners for Glass Lacrosse read “Unfinished Business.” The players were primed and ready, their hearts beating out of their chests, and one could have said the same for the fans. Glass prided themselves on teamwork, momentum, and sheer confidence in their ability. Their mentality focused on winning and winning big. The game started, and it didn't take long for Glass to strike first with a goal. All sports fans know how important that first and lead goal is, especially in a big game. Their ruthless defense wasn't giving anything up easily and at the end of the first half, Glass had a commanding lead. The beginning of the third quarter brought pressure and a major momentum shift. Glass got caught on their heels and the other team poured it on with impressive shots and physical play. Soon, the score was tied and the tension mounted. On the next face off, Glass took possession and pressed in for a much-needed goal. The ball was knocked loose and was left waiting for the first aggressor. Opportunity was taken by Glass and their risk became great reward as they scored a goal to shift the momentum back in their favor. That goal proved to be the key, as Glass pressed on scoring three more goals and leaving no doubt as the time clocked out. EC Glass Boys Lacrosse won the State Championship and accomplished their ultimate goal.

What now? In order to be remembered, you have to be someone of great character and you have to accomplish some accolades. Perhaps the only thing that may create a legacy beyond character and accolades is how you finish. What are you doing to develop great character? How can God help?

Notes: