Persevere

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. (Colossians 2:6-7)

I have titled this short talk “Persevere.” With a period on the end of it. It’s a one word imperative sentence. A command. In other words, this is not a speech on the topic of perseverance. It’s more of an exhortation from me to you. Persevere! By which I mean some kind of blend between “You got this!” and “Just keep swimming!”

Persevere.

When I was working on my MFA and my PhD—advanced graduate degrees I didn’t know existed or that I would ever want to achieve when I was 18 or 19 and starting college—I looked around at the other graduate students and noticed something important.

Everyone trying to get these degrees was really bright. But there was little correlation between how intelligent a person was and how well they were progressing. There were some “scary smart” people around me who seemed unable to meet their goals. And then there were “regular smart” people, like me, who didn’t blow the roof off of their standardized test scores and didn’t go to an ivy league school for college, but who were doing well in a tough academic programs.

The people who were struggling, I noticed, were easily derailed by difficulty or failure. They were brilliant thinkers but if their research hit a roadblock, they seemed to lose their way for weeks. They were gifted writers but if a professor gave harsh criticism, they became overwhelmed and stopped working.

I learned that when you get a bunch of smart folks together, how much any one person achieves has less to do with how gifted they are and everything to do with how persistent they are. Can they persevere?

“Persevere” has become a favorite word of mine to declare to my Baylor students, especially to the advanced students trying to complete big, final projects. But also to freshman who feel unsure about a challenging assignment, or about college in general. Persevere is my motivational invocation and my blessing. It’s my one word imperative sentence to you today. Because it will take perseverance to meet the tasks you will face between today and your graduation from Baylor, in just a few short years, right here in this same room.

What will it look like for you to handle the challenges about to be put in your path? And how will you grow into a person who thrives and succeeds far beyond Baylor?
Psychologist Angela Duckworth has spent her career studying high-achievers, trying to understand what enables some people to reach significant goals in life more successfully than others. What is it, she wonders, that is different about winners, stars, and leaders? Our culture likes to think it all comes down to raw talent: either you have “it” or you don’t. But Duckworth’s research demonstrates that there is much more to achievement than our talent or natural ability.

Talent, she says, is not destiny. Effort is.

In 1869, Francis Galton, researcher and cousin to naturalist Charles Darwin, published his study of the power behind high achievers, one of the first of its kind. Galton’s findings were that successful people had 1) ability or “talent”, 2) zeal for what they were doing, and 3) the capacity for hard labor. Darwin read his cousin’s book and responded simply that he was surprised talent had even made the list. From his life experience, success had everything to do with zeal and hard work.

Darwin would have preferred Duckworth’s research which shows that effort is the most important factor in success.

Our “talents” become skills through effort: practice, training, homework, coaching. And our skills yield achievements through effort: goals that we set mindfully and work towards using our developed abilities. Effort counts twice in her equation.

Achieving greatness requires what she calls grit: resiliency when things are hard, drive that will kick in when work is discouraging, hope that your efforts will—bit by bit—add up to make your goals a reality. To accomplish big things, she says, you need to be gritty.

Here’s what her research tells us about gritty people:

**They give effort.** They don’t look for ways to put in the least possible work; they don’t skimp. Remember that in the formula for “grit,” effort counts twice!

**They anticipate difficulty.** They recognize that hard things take hard work, and that if we could already do these tasks easily we wouldn’t be on the journey we are on.

**They make plans.** They put practice and skills-building time on the calendar and honor that commitment of time. They break big goals into smaller ones and do what it takes to meet milestones.

**They are resilient.** They don’t quit. What’s the saying? Fall seven times, stand up eight.

As Angela Duckworth writes, “Greatness is doable.” I love that: *do-able*. The word suggests that achievement is about what you do, your actions, your “stick-to-it-iveness.”
My son made a chair last year. His assignment in an advanced carpentry class was to make anything he wanted out of wood. So he picked a complicated arm chair, having never made a chair. He found a picture of the chair he wanted to build. He studied how it seemed to be constructed. He gathered the materials and tools, and he started working.

Quickly he realized how hard it is to make a chair. He lamented. “I think this is beyond my skill set right now,” he told me. But he had set this goal, he’d decided it was the plan, so he made up his mind to push through despite the difficulty. He made peace with the very real possibility of failure.

In the end, he made a chair. He’d be quick to point out its imperfections. But he didn’t quit, and in the process he learned all the ways that he will make a better chair next time. He learned that difficulty isn’t fatal. And the next time he decides to try something beyond his current skill set, he will have the memory of this experience to help him be brave. That’s the power of perseverance.

What will perseverance look like for you at Baylor? As Mark Twain once said “The secret of getting ahead is getting started.” So let’s start together right now.

- **Decide now that you’ll try things that are just beyond your current skill set.** Run the Bearathon, take on a new language, add a challenging minor, learn to play the piano.

- **Decide now to set goals for yourself**—real ones that you commit to and write down where you can see them every day—and work toward them.

- **Go ahead now and anticipate difficulty.** Decide not to be knocked off course when you experience pain and challenge. Decide that you will ask for help from friends, mentors, and counselors when you face periods of discouragement. Anticipate that some of this will be hard.

- **Commit yourself now to going to class every day.** Seriously. Go to class.

- **Plan now to take a variety of classes** to help you find sustained and enduring interests. That’s what zeal is, after all.

What is your zeal? Don’t answer me now – I suspect that whatever answer you have today will change in the coming years, maybe a little but maybe quite a lot. That’s because you will be taking classes at Baylor that will open up new avenues of thought and experience, helping you to discern where your strongest interests are. You’ll go on mission trips and study abroad programs that will reorient your thinking and change you. You’re going to work with professors in their labs, engage with interesting guest speakers, and take leadership roles in organizations, all of which will teach you new things about yourself.

Be alert for topics or ideas that keep appealing to you, energizing you. Again and again, researchers find examples of how passionate interest provide a compass that keeps the successful person pointing in the direction of their goals.
However, believers know something more about zeal and direction. We have encountered an even stronger magnet pulling our compass to True North. We know about a power for perseverance which surpasses mortal understanding.

The story of God’s people is full of examples of perseverance. Think of the ministry of St. Paul. He was driven to succeed in his commitment to spread the good news, and his knowledge of Jesus gave him deep reserves of resilience. That’s why he could exhort the Colossians:  

*Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.*

Paul is not giving abstract advice. He’s talking about a trust in God that is DO-able. Paul knew what it meant to have roots that reached deeply into the real, strong foundation of Christ. Those roots pulled up rich nourishment so that he was fed and grown by God. Full of thanksgiving for what he was given in Christ Jesus, Paul had the endurance to face all that was before him. Talk about zeal! Talk about goals! Paul was all about perseverance.

You and I may not face what Paul did, but we have the ability to endure our own challenges and setbacks because we can trust that we are the beloved creations of a faithful and merciful God who seeks us and draws us in.

With this kind of knowledge about the ultimate reality of the universe, why would we be easily derailed by obstacles in our research or failure in a class project?

With this security about who we really are, why would we fear setting big goals and striving toward them enthusiastically?

With this comfort about the ultimate source of all Truth, why would we not develop zeal for intellectual pursuits, beauty, and new knowledge?

In the words of my favorite hymn, “No storm can shake my inmost calm while to the Rock I’m clinging. Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?” Persevere! Keep Singing! Because your perseverance as a person of faith is about more than your grittiness, your self-discipline, and your good planning. Those things really do help, but not half as much as the sure foundation of God’s love. Your endurance is about more than your efforts—even if effort counts twice in the equation!—because God’s efforts on your behalf have already achieved real victory. Greatness is Do-able, but the really good news is that God does the best DO-ing of all!

So again I give you my blessing and exhortation: Persevere. By which I mean: find your zeal; try new things that are just beyond your current skill set; give effort; anticipate difficulty; go to class.

But most of all, remember the strong ground that you stand on and the beautiful promises of God that envelop you.

How can you keep from singing?  

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