

**Sermon**  
**October 14, 2018**

**Covenant Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Zeta T. Lamberson**

**The Faith Fitness Challenge**  
**2 Thessalonians 1:1-12**

If reality shows are any indication we are fascinated with those who rise to a fitness challenge. WIPEOUT, Extreme Games and American Ninja Warrior are just a few that thrive on challenging individuals to test their endurance and fitness in ways that amaze and thrill the masses. Many other people are challenged by triathalons, marathons or 5K's that require training and honing of one's muscles in powerful ways. When I Googled Fitness Challenge on the internet the first sites to appear related to a 30 Day Fitness Challenge. Listen to the description provided:

You don't need to be super-fit or belong to a gym to commit to this challenge. (Now that sounds encouraging, doesn't it!) The 30-Day Fitness Challenge is designed to work every major muscle group in your body—every day. The structure of this fitness plan gives you the opportunity to improve your fitness and reshape your body while allowing each muscle group adequate recovery time. So how does the 30-Day Fitness Challenge work? Each day you have a different mini-challenge. This beats boredom and works your muscles efficiently because your body won't expect the different exercises. Whether you're new or skilled at working out, each mini-challenge is tiered to challenge any fitness level. The goal is to get you stronger, fitter, and healthier in a month—without getting bored.

It is based on a series of videos that walk you through the steps. Whether getting physically fit is something that appeals to you or not we understand that to be fit there are things that we have to do. And it is important when exercising to realize the need to work different muscles - to do a variety of different exercises to impact the whole. Many here have been through physical therapy after surgery or an illness. We have experienced how the therapists use a variety of exercises to strengthen the

damaged muscles. It is not helpful to just do the same things over and over. There is a need to vary our actions.

The same is true for our life as a Christian. There are a variety of things that we need to do to become a strong person of faith. Example: Just coming to worship or reading our Bibles is not enough. We need to put our faith into action caring for others and serving the world. To be fit also requires a commitment to an exercise regimen that many of us have a hard time sticking with if we are honest. For being a Christian is a life-long process that requires different things of us at different times.

Paul's second letter to the church in Thessalonica was a Faith Fitness Challenge to this community. He began by encouraging them as he showered praise on them for their faithfulness. In the face of persecution Paul had received word that they were keeping fit - they were sticking to the plan - they were working every major muscle group. In Eugene Petersen's the Message Paul says "*All this trouble is a clear sign that God has decided to make you fit for the kingdom.*" So what does it take to be made fit as a Christian.

First and foremost we need faith. Paul said "*your faith is growing abundantly.*" Faith grows as we are challenged, as we grow deeper in our understanding of God's power, love and grace. As we struggle with the stories of faith that reveal how others have experienced God and found strength we grow stronger in our faith. As we struggle in difficult relationsh we grow in our understanding of ourselves and others. Every experience strengthens another muscle - stretches it until we are more pliable and able to bend and move in new ways. For our God gives us everything we need. God makes us everything we are to be. That is what it means to have faith. To trust that in God we have all we need.

The people of Thessalonica were being persecuted. We don't know the specifics but it is clear that the life of faith was not easy for them. Their faith was being challenged daily - just as ours is. And yet their faith was growing abundantly so that they were able to stay faithful in the midst of persecution. We struggle with the words in the middle of this passage which speak of vengeance. And yet it is important for us to hear them as the people of the first century would have heard these words. In the Greek verses 3-10 make up one sentence. It is important to hear it as one thought. Not to just pull out the sentence about vengeance but to look at the whole of what Paul was saying. Listen to how Eugene Petersen translates these verses:

*All this trouble is a clear sign that God has decided to make you fit for the kingdom. You're suffering now, but justice is on the way. When the Master Jesus appears out of heaven in a blaze of fire with his strong angels, he'll even up the score by settling accounts with those who gave you such a bad time. His coming will be the break we've been waiting for. Those who refuse to know God and refuse to obey the Message will pay for what they've done. Eternal exile from the presence of the Master and his splendid power is their sentence. But on that very same day when he comes, he will be exalted by his followers and celebrated by all who believe - and all because you believed what we told you.*

Justice is on the way and God will provide that justice - when Christ returns. Friends, their belief that Christ would return in the near future helped them to focus on the present and to trust God to deal with what was out of their control. Note the symbolism here. Jesus appears out of heaven in a blaze of fire - remember that God appeared in the burning bush to Moses. And the bush was not consumed. Fire is a sign of God's presence not destruction. And he will be surrounded with strong angels who with him will settle the scores. God will settle the accounts with those who gave you such

a bad time. They will get what they deserve - what God believes they deserve. And that will be eternal exile from the presence of God - being separated from God forever. But those who are believers, those who have faith, those who are hearing this message do not need to worry about that. Our faith in God promises that when that day comes believers will be in the presence of God - secure in the loving arms of our Lord and Savior. That is why faith is so important. Why growing in our faith is so important. It will sustain us when suffering comes.

Along with faith is the importance of loving one another. Paul has heard that their love for one another is increasing. For when our faith grows stronger our desire to love as Christ loved us grows. We begin to embody the characteristics of Jesus. We begin to love as Christ loved reaching out in caring and grace-filled ways. This is what Paul prayed for that God will *“fill your good ideas and acts of faith with his own energy so that it all amounts to something.”* A deep faith in God leads to actions that share the love of God.

This week we have again watched the destructive force of the winds of a hurricane. All across the Gulf Coast, south Georgia and along the east coast homes have been demolished, crops have been destroyed and lives have been forever changed. We have seen pictures of the devastation of beach communities and many homes along the path of the hurricane yet we must remember that homes and buildings can be replaced. It is the people whose lives have been forever changed. It is the people who need our love and care as they recover and put their lives back together again.

This weekend I was with some of our brothers and sisters from Flint River Presbytery which is headquartered in Albany Georgia. That community was hit hard by the storms. Power is still out for many. The presbytery offices were damaged as were many churches and communities. And yet they were already talking about the ways that the church through the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance

program was responding with love and care. That is what the church of Jesus Christ does. We reach out in love to those in need. We care for those who have been hurt. We offer hope in the midst of despair. For we are called to love one another.

As Christians one of the things we learn quickly is that being faithful and loving as Christ loved is hard. Paul knew this and we know it only too well. Think how hard it is to stick to a fitness regimen. How many times have we gotten off to a great start only to back slid quickly. Our Faith Fitness Challenge requires a focused dedication. One of the purposes of Paul's letter was to encourage the Thessalonians to stay focused - to keep working out - to keep striving even when they were persecuted. What Paul knew was that it was through the community, through the love for one another as they kept the faith that they would develop the endurance needed to overcome all that they faced. For faith and love leads to an endurance that gives us the strength to do what others cannot. And this focus will lead us into a life in the presence of God.

Back in 1917 there was a little country schoolhouse that was heated by an old-fashioned, potbellied coal stove. A little boy had the job of coming to school early each day and starting the fire to warm up the building. One morning he and his siblings arrived early and as he was starting the fire there was an explosion. The building was engulfed in flames. Fortunately the children were able to get one another out of the building but this little boy who was only seven years old was badly injured. He had major burns on the lower half of his body. He and his brother who was burned more severely were taken to a nearby hospital. His brother died nine days after the fire. This little boy's legs were severely burned. The doctor told his mother that they might have to amputate his legs but he might live unless infection set in. And regardless he would never be able to walk again.

The brave little boy didn't want to die and he had faith in God for he had accepted Jesus Christ

into his heart a year before. He made up his mind he would survive. Others said he was doomed to be a cripple all his life and never walk. The little boy managed to gain strength, although from the waist down he had no motor ability. It seemed hopeless. Ultimately the boy was released from the hospital. Every day his family massaged his legs praying that one day he would walk again, but there was no feeling in his legs for a long time. But neither he nor his mother - a woman of faith - gave up.

One day his mother wheeled him out into the yard. It was a sunny day. Instead of sitting there, the boy threw himself from the chair. He pulled himself across the grass and managed to work his way to the picket fence. With much effort he raised himself up and stake by stake, dragged himself along the fence. He resolved that he would walk. Every day he dragged himself to the fence and worked his way along the fence.

Through the daily massages, his iron persistence and his resolute determination, he developed the ability to stand up. His efforts worked different muscles until eventually he had enough strength to walk. In less than two years he learned to walk again. He began to walk to school, then later he started running to school. Twelve years later as a high school senior he ran on painful and scarred legs to set a world high school record for the mile run. He entered college and made the track team. Still later in Madison Square Garden the boy, now a young man, who was never expected to walk, ran the world's fastest mile. Through endurance, Dr. Glenn Cunningham had overcome what others thought was a permanent disability. ([Http://www.sermons.com](http://www.sermons.com) ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., What To Do When The Walls Fall Down, by Mickey Anders)

He did not give up. He had faith in God and through the love of his family who cared and supported him he gained strength. He kept focused on his goal and eventually he walked again. But not only did he walk and run the mile faster than anyone else he and his wife went on to operate a youth ranch where they took in over 9,000 disadvantaged young people and gave them direction and

hope as he shared his own struggle to endure. His wife would say later in life that they had discovered that Jesus Christ was the only source of every provision in life.

Glenn Cunningham had faith in God, felt the love of others and shared that love with thousands of children and through focused dedication to his faith and to his fitness was able to meet God's faith fitness challenge. He had learned to connect his ideas and acts of faith with his energy and together he did powerful things with his life. It is not a requirement that we be severely injured or face a health crisis to begin the Faith Fitness Challenge. Although sometimes we need motivation.

But my friends, we are all challenged - as followers of Jesus Christ - to take up the Faith Fitness Challenge and to seek to be made fit for what God calls us to do and be. Are we willing to take the Faith Fitness Challenge and to seek to honor God through our lives?