

Title: The Fundamentals

Date: 2/22/26

Subject:

Scripture: Romans 12:11

I ended last week's sermon with a football illustration featuring Vince Lombardi. It's fitting that this morning I'll use one to kick-off the message. It was July 1961. The Green Bay Packer training camp was starting. The previous season they'd come oh so close to being NFL champions. They'd lost by three points.

The players assumed the 61 season would kick off from the lofty heights. They had the offseason to stew about what might have been and were ready to scale the mountain peak. They figured coach Lombardi would come up with some innovative plays to lead them to ultimate victory.

The players took their places in the meeting room. Lombardi walked to the front, carrying a football. He lifted it into the air and spoke to players, "Gentlemen. This is a football!"

Say what? I'm sure there were some surprised looks and chuckles. But Lombardi was serious. He proceeded to have the team comprised of grizzled veterans who'd competed on levels from peewee, high school, college and pros open their playbooks to the first page. They reviewed in detail the fundamentals of blocking, tackling, throwing, catching, running.

How do we feel when we get a reminder? Reactions vary depending upon who does the reminding: the doctor's office about an upcoming check-up, your tax preparer about the need to file taxes, the voice from the kitchen saying it's almost time for supper, the coach about proper form and the goal trying to accomplish.

We all need reminders because sometimes we fall into routine. It can be good and it's accomplishing what we're supposed to be doing. Then the reminder takes the form of encouragement to keep on keeping on. Other times the reminder clues us in that we've gotten a little sloppy, performing less than optimally. We might even get lazy because we think we've got whatever's covered. We need a refresher course.

It shouldn't surprise us that God is in the business of providing reminders for us.

READ Romans 12:11.

It's difficult to separate these phrases because they depend upon each other. The first tells us what to do. The second is a parenthetical statement that elaborates on the first. The third completes the thought.

Never be lacking in zeal

Other translations: "not lagging behind in diligence" (NASV). "Do not be slothful in zeal" (ESV). "Never be lazy" (New Living Translation).

Most translations don't use the word *never*. *Never* doesn't allow for another option. However, we shouldn't think that the words *do not* allow for a lesser response. That certainly wasn't in the Lord's mind when he told Adam that he must *not* eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17). *Do not* and *never* mean the same – no, no, never, never.

What is the prohibition?

The NIV “never be lacking.” Something could be missing so there's not enough. In the case of chocolate chip cookies – might stir some chocolate chips in the batter and feel need more for a better distribution. Who are we kidding? There's never enough. Just dump the whole bag in to begin with.

The second wording “not lagging behind.” It's like a runner who has the capacity to excel but is behind the leaders because is looking at the flowers along the route, the clouds in the sky.

“Not slothful.” Kind of fun to say. How often do we refer to something as slothful? How about its synonyms: indolent or languid? Help? Not so much. Try sluggish. The animal the sloth moves between 13 to 15 feet per minute in trees and even slower on the ground - 5 to 13 feet per minute. A full day on the ground they might cover 40 yards. It wouldn't even win a race against the tortoise.

Another wording is to not let zeal subside (Berean Standard Bible). Synonyms are wane, fade, ebb, decrease. The New Living Translation simply says “Never be lazy.” It's not just a command to not be lazy in general, which is a good idea, but focuses on the spiritual realm.

All phrasings point out there's not enough zeal. It's not the broad-based idea of having a zest for life. There are some who say zeal is enthusiasm and passion. Are we to be like a crazed cheerleader, broad smile, yelling and screaming “Go team. Go team. Go team” oblivious to the fact the game has been over for an hour?

It's possible to have misguided zeal. Earlier in the book of Romans Paul wrote about people who had zeal that wasn't based on knowledge (Romans 10:2). They were very religious, meticulous in keeping rules, laws and commandments but the keeping of rules, laws and commandments became an end in and of themselves. They weren't focused on the one who was behind the rules, laws and commandments. They weren't seeking a relationship with God. They were just doing a checkoff list and as long as they performed their checkoff list, they felt they were good to go. They had lots of zeal.

Paul had been part of this group. He had lots of zeal without knowledge and he utilized that zeal to persecute followers of Jesus Christ. He used the persecution of the church as an example of his zeal that he had before he put his trust in Jesus Christ. He thought he was doing the right thing, but he was misguided.

There are lots of people in our world who are very religious, who have zeal and passion. This includes some who call themselves Christians. They go through a bunch of checkoff lists, rituals and things they feel they need to do in order for God to show them his mercy. They invest a lot of time and energy, but it's zeal without knowledge. They haven't personally placed their trust in Christ, of him being the only way to have a relationship with God and not because of anything a person can do.

Followers of Jesus Christ are called upon to have diligence and earnestness. These can be demonstrated even if there aren't feelings. What are we to do when there's the temptation to quit, throw in the towel and say “enough”?

Jim Caviezel starred in the movie “When the Game Stands Tall.” It's the true story of the De La Salle high school football team that had a winning streak of 151 games. The players helped fuel and push one another

to do more. There's a scene where one of the guys is lifting weights. He hit the target number of reps. His teammates who were watching called out, "One more. One more" like they usually did. The guy stopped. It wasn't that he couldn't physically do one more. He just decided to shut it down and not go beyond to give more effort. He said he'd done enough.

Keep your spiritual fervor

The word picture created by the original language is a boiling pot. The water is hot and bubbling. It's like a steam powered locomotive. The wood or coal is thrown in the burner to cause water to boil. The steam provides the power to make the wheels turn to move the massive locomotive.

The idea is to have a burning intensity in our relationship with the Lord. Be spiritually hot.

This past Wednesday night at youth group we were studying the core practices of the church established shortly after Jesus returned to heaven. The description of what they did begins by saying "they devoted themselves."

I asked, "What would a coach have in mind if he asked the team, "Are you devoted to the team?" Some of the answers from the youth included effort, focus, time, show up, not be lazy, obey, commitment.

That's what these phrases in Romans 12:11 are talking about - commitment. It's commitment that's beyond good intentions. It's becomes a priority. It's not something that's haphazard.

The opposite of what God expects would be complacency, cooling off, uncommitted, and undevoted. Sometimes people feel like they've arrived and don't need to give any more or work hard at being a follower of Jesus Christ. They can become indifferent.

It's like the classic anecdote in which two people were discussing the state of the world. One man says to his neighbor, "What do you think is the biggest problem we're facing today in the world? Is it ignorance or apathy?" The neighbor shrugs and replies, "I don't know and I don't care."

The Indiana University football team went undefeated and won the National College Football Playoff championship this year. The quarterback had earlier won the Heisman Trophy as the college football player of the year. He claims to be a Christian. He prays in end zone before games. He celebrated the victory over the University of Miami to win the championship by going with some friends/teammates to a strip club. WHAT?

Contrast that with C J Stroud, quarterback for the pro Houston Texans who, after a playoff loss, was asked why he doesn't use four letter words, cuss. "His recent decision to stop swearing is a testament to his dedication to personal growth and positive influence. This commitment, driven by his Christian faith and desire to set a good example, highlights the profound impact that words can have on individuals and those around them. Raised in a family that emphasized the importance of respectful and positive language, Stroud's recent promise is a return to these foundational principles. In an interview with Sports Spectrum, Stroud mentioned that he wants to honor God with his words and actions. He was convicted of the habit when he read James 3, explaining, "I can't proclaim that I love God and have like a wild mouth. Like that just doesn't make sense to me. It's hypocritical." The quarterback recognizes that if he wants to set an example for Christ, he needs to

watch his language ([beliefnet.com/columnists/inspirationreport/2024/08/texans-cj-strouds-commitment-to-stop-cussing](http://beliefnet.com/columnists/inspirationreport/2024/08/texans-cj-strouds-commitment-to-stop-cussing)).

We are to never be lacking in zeal, but keep our spiritual fervor, as we serve the Lord.

Serving the Lord

My brothers and I used to play king on the hill. It could be on top of the snow banks dad had plowed or in the hay mow on a stack of bales. The idea was for the person at the top to try to stay there as the others tried to knock, pull, drag or push him down, taking the position of king of the hill. There was only room for one king. The person on top wouldn't tolerate somebody else being up there.

There can be only one spiritual king in our lives. This is the position the Lord deserves because he has saved us from eternal punishment in hell and given us eternal life in heaven. He's made us his children because we've placed our trust in Jesus Christ as our Savior.

Not only are we his children, but we are his subjects. The title *Lord* means he is the ruler and master. He is the one who deserves to be served. We are in the role of servants, not just any kind of servant but a bond servant. This was a servant who sold himself for life and nothing could be done that would grant him his freedom. The servant had made his decision that he wanted to be attached to the master for life.

The Lord has the right to give the orders and we're the ones who are to obey. It can be difficult to give control to somebody else but that's what God asks from us, expects from us, demands from us. At the same time, it can be easy when we think about what God has done for us.

Our lives can be represented by a circle with a throne in the middle. Inside the circle around the throne are goals, aspirations and people including ourselves. God's desire is for us to put Christ on the throne, but sometimes we place ourselves on the throne. Christ is put to the side as merely one of all the other stuff.

The Lord doesn't tolerate anybody else sitting on the throne with him. All other potential suitors for the throne must be expelled if we're going to please the Lord.

The difficult part is we're the ones who decide who sits on the throne in our lives at any particular moment. Sometimes there can be pushing and shoving as we try to assume the role of king on the throne and push the Lord off. We want to be in control and make decisions about how we live our lives, what kind of things do, according to our expectations. Sometimes people order their lives to seek the approval of other people. They place others on the throne and are willing to do or say what pleases them.

It's tempting to compartmentalize our lives into the spiritual component – church, Bible reading, being with other believers, and all the rest – job, school, internet visits – is physical and non-spiritual where we don't have to pay attention to the spiritual. The truth is our entire being is spiritual.

It's been a few years since I've read the book "The Practice of the Presence of God." I didn't read it when it first came out because it came out in 1692. It continues to be an inspiration for Christ followers. The author wrote about inviting God into his daily activities including mundane ones like washing dishes and cleaning floors. My mom had a plaque near the kitchen sink that read "Divine service is performed here daily."

We need to be aware that God is always with us, in every part of our lives, including our mundane activities. They all provide opportunities to honor him.

In December 2018 an expectant mother in San Diego was experiencing severe complications. Her blood pressure was over 200. Doctors determined she needed an emergency C-section if she and her baby had any hope of surviving. The operation was performed at 23 weeks. Baby Saybie was born, a micro preemie, weighing 8.6 ounces, about the weight of an apple. She was so small she could be held in the doctor's palm.

The doctors had warned the parents they might only have an hour with their baby. But one hour became two. Two hours became a day. Days became weeks and weeks became months. After five months in the neonatal ICU, Saybie was able to go home, weighing five pounds. She is the world's tiniest surviving baby.

Explanations for the how and why are varied. An RN, "We do everything we can for each preemie, as well as we can, and after that, it's really up to our babies. Some really have the strength to go through it all and survive outside the womb." Some might attribute Saybie overcoming the obstacles and odds as a combo of the right genetics, good luck, great hospital staff. Others are quick to point to it being a miracle.

Nurses had posted many signs by her crib. One that stands out is "Tiny but Mighty." She kept fighting and enduring. We are to keep fighting and enduring in our commitment as we follow Jesus.

The fundamentals of how we fulfill the command to "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord" are familiar. We just have to employ them and employ them and employ them. They are involvement in the word, prayer, fellowship with others (the log separated from the rest of the campfire will burn out), worship the Lord, serve, tell others about what Jesus has done, remember what God has done for us (he's taken us from a life doomed to hell because of sin and where he's leading us – heaven), watch our input (garbage in becomes garbage out but the reverse is also true - focus on God leads to spiritual health).

Some other reminders. *Romans 13:11 – 14. The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.*

*1 Corinthians 15:58. My dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*

*Colossians 3:23. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord,*

*2 Timothy 2:15. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.*

*Hebrews 6:10–12. God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.*