

“Man Up: True Grit”

2 Corinthians 4:6-9, 16-18 ¹

Where I come from, a food called “grits” is a staple of diets both rich and poor. Made from corn that has first been transformed into hominy, grits go back to our Native American forebears, and I suggest to you that no hearty breakfast is complete without them.

Once, years ago, Jill and I had a couple over for breakfast who were not from the South. When we offered them some grits, the other fellow bravely said, “Well, I’ll try a grit.” While that friend misunderstood grits, the word “grit” is probably better known among us than that food to which “grits” refers.

When used more or less as a synonym for “strength of character,” “grit” is a word that is being heard more and more these days, especially in educational circles. Here’s some of what’s going on

When parents and educators launched the “self-esteem movement” in the 1980s, lavishly praising kids and handing out trophies to all, they expected that everyone would try harder as a result. But what actually happened probably comes under the heading of “the revenge of unintended consequences.”

Instead of becoming high achievers, our coddled kids became softer, slower, and less likely to persevere. As they grew older, these “self-esteem kids” became frequently and easily overwhelmed because they’d been diligently protected from anything that even faintly resembled failure. And so, instead of producing robust and resilient character, the self-esteem movement tended to produce young people and young adults who just weren’t up to the rigors of real life.²

To put this in current lingo, “self-esteem kids” were not “gritty” kids. Their “get up and go” got up and went. They didn’t persevere. They didn’t achieve. They continued to think they were special, even though they really weren’t. They expected to be protected, coddled, and taken care of forever. And that disappointing outcome helped to produce the current educational retrenchment away from standardized tests and toward “strength of character” instead.

Dr. King once observed that “the goal of true education is intelligence plus character,” and a great deal of evidence has now accumulated in support of that proposition.³ As we make this transition toward character development, the current “Guru of Grit” is Dr. Angela Duckworth. A psychologist with degrees from Harvard and Oxford, she is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and she is the author of numerous works on the subject of “grit.”

Dr. Duckworth defines “grit” as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals,”⁴ and she has developed a “grit scale,” the short version of which you have as an insert in your worship order. This scale is used by some of our military academies to predict which cadets will make it through the initial rigors of their training and which cadets will bail out.⁵

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on June 19, 2016, Father’s Day. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the *New Living Translation* (Tyndale, 1996).

² www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2015/03/09/grit-the-key-ingredient-to-your-kids-success/

³ www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/opinion/sunday/dont-grade-schools-on-grit.html?_r=0

⁴ www.forbes.com/sites/margaretperlis/2013/10/29/5-characteristics-of-grit-what-it-is-why-you-need-it-and-do-you-have-it/#2307c9621f76

⁵ www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/05/is-grit-overrated/476397/

Dr. Duckworth's research discovered that what distinguished high performers from "also rans" was largely how they processed feelings of frustration, disappointment, and even boredom. Whereas "also rans" saw difficulties as signals to cut their losses and turn to some easier task, high achievers did not.⁶

As you can see, half of the "Grit Scale" questions are designed to measure *perseverance*, or the determination to meet a particular challenge. The other questions measure what Duckworth calls *passion*, or the ability to stick unswervingly to the accomplishment of a single, overarching goal over a period of years.⁷

Some of you will recognize similarity here between Duckworth's "gritty people" and Malcolm Gladwell's "spectacular achievers." After a great deal of study, Gladwell concluded that what the persons we regard as spectacular achievers have in common is that they have each invested at least 10,000 hours in the pursuit of excellence in their chosen goal.

Though not without its critics, Gladwell's core contention has been generally well-received: that to reach the pinnacle of success in any area, it is necessary for even the most talented persons to invest a minimum of 10,000 hours in the pursuit of that goal—that is, at least twenty hours a week over a period of ten years.⁸ And I submit to you that to pursue any goal for 10,000 hours ought to count as "grit."

In general, gritty people don't seem to seek "perfection" but strive for "excellence" instead. "Perfection" is usually unrealistic and seldom attainable, but "excellence" can often be achieved. Excellence is an attitude, not an end game.⁹ And the reasons that educators are excited about "grit" these days are that: (1) grit appears to be either unrelated to or inversely related to talent; (2) grit can be taught; and (3) grit is contagious.¹⁰

*One of the things that seems to keep gritty people going is the conviction that everything is going to turn out all right in the end, and if things are not all right now, then this is not the end.*¹¹ We could debate whether or not that statement is true across all of life, but it seems to me that it is true when we consider a theological understanding of life.

When we combine Dr. Duckworth's ideas about "grit" with Mr. Gladwell's 10,000 hours, we might reasonably conclude that whether our passion is money or property or power or influence or even a good golf game, our lives tend to quite dependably produce what our hearts yearn for more than anything else.

And when we turn the idea of "grit" toward theological things, I'm reminded of what the great New York preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, called "the Prayer of Dominant Desire."¹² Fosdick contended that most of the time, no matter what we say our life goals are, **our lives tend to produce what we desire with all our hearts.**

⁶ www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/05/is-grit-overrated/476397/

⁷ www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/05/is-grit-overrated/476397/

⁸ Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (Little, Brown, and Company, 2008).

⁹ www.forbes.com/sites/margaretperlis/2013/10/29/5-characteristics-of-grit-what-it-is-why-you-need-it-and-do-you-have-it/#2307c9621f76

¹⁰ www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2015/03/09/grit-the-key-ingredient-to-your-kids-success/

¹¹ www.forbes.com/sites/margaretperlis/2013/10/29/5-characteristics-of-grit-what-it-is-why-you-need-it-and-do-you-have-it/#2307c9621f76

¹² Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer* (New York: Association Press, 1915).

And since this is Fathers' Day, let me ask you Dads, as I ask myself, **what it is that you truly desire with all your heart?** How do you think your family would answer that question? Would the goal of being a godly husband and father be near the top of the list? Would it be on the list at all?

In my Bible reading this week I came across this injunction from David to his son Solomon as Solomon ascended to the throne: "*Solomon, my son, learn to know the God of your ancestors intimately. Worship and serve him with your whole heart and with a willing mind. For the LORD sees every heart and knows every plan and thought. If you seek him, you will find him*" (1 Chronicles 28:9-10a). Would your children be surprised to hear such words from you, or would those words seem entirely in character for you?

Dr. Duckworth and Mr. Gladwell notwithstanding, I suggest to you that **our greatest fear as Dads should not be of failure, but of succeeding at something that doesn't really matter.**¹³ And that reminds me of a poem I encountered many years ago that I have in my office to this day. I thought I had gotten it from Bill Gaither, but the Internet doesn't seem to know where it came from. It's called "That's Worth Everything":

I may never be as clever as my neighbor down the street,
I may never be as wealthy as some others that I meet,
I may never have the glory that some other men have had,
But I've got to be successful as that little boy's Dad.

There are dreams that I cherish that I'd like to see come true,
There are things that I'd accomplish e'er my working time is through;
But the task my heart is set on is to guide a little lad,
And to make myself successful as that little boy's Dad.

I may never come to glory; I may never gather gold;
Folks may count me as a failure when my business life is told;
But if he who follows after shall be manly, I'll be glad,
For I'll know I've been successful as that little boy's Dad.

It's the one job that I dream of, it's the task I think of most—
If I fail that little fellow, I have nothing else to boast;
For the wealth and fame I'd gather . . . all my fortune would be sad
If I fail to be successful as that little boy's Dad.

Of course, that could just as well have been written about a daughter as about a son. The point is that we Dads need to be men who are seeking after God with our whole hearts and are teaching that pursuit to our children as the central purpose of our lives . . . and theirs. Nobody ever said this was easy, and being a godly Dad these days may actually be harder than it has ever been before . . . but that doesn't let us off the hook.

It was January, 1956. Martin Luther King, Jr. got home around midnight after a long day of helping people get organized to effectively oppose segregation. Dr. King's wife and young daughter were already in bed, and he was eager to join them. But a threatening call—the kind of call he was now getting thirty to forty times a day—interrupted his efforts to rest. When he tried to go back to bed, he couldn't shake the menacing voice that kept repeating hateful words in his head.

¹³ Unknown New Tribes Missionary, *Eternal Perspectives* (Fall 2003), 15.

Dr. King got up, made a pot of coffee, and sat down at his kitchen table. With his head in his hands, he cried out to God. And there at his kitchen table in the middle of the night, when he had come to the end of his own strength, Dr. King met the living Christ in an experience that would carry him through the remainder of his days. “I heard the voice of Jesus telling me still to fight on,” King later recalled. “He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No, never alone! He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.”

In the stillness of that Alabama night, the voice of Jesus overpowered the threatening voice on the phone. The voice of Jesus gave Dr. King the courage to press through that tumultuous year to the victorious conclusion of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. More than that, it gave him a vision and a power for ministry that would sustain him for the rest of his life.¹⁴

Some things really are worth giving your life to . . . and giving your life for. Like Dr. King, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had a choice to make. King Nebuchadnezzar told them that if they didn’t worship his huge idol, they would be thrown to their deaths in a great furnace. As I’m sure you know, their answer went like this: “*O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. But even if he doesn’t* [the King James says, “but if not”], *we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up*” (Daniel 3:16-18). They were indeed thrown into the furnace, and God did rescue them.

Seventy-six years ago this month, the German army was plowing through France and had trapped several hundred thousand British troops near the French coastal city of Dunkirk. Although a massive evacuation across the English Channel was eventually successful, there was a period in which it really looked as though the British troops were facing either annihilation or surrender.

The story goes that a British commander sent the following cryptic message to those troops: “**But if not.**” That commander was calling upon this ancient story of biblical courage and faithfulness to encourage the British troops to stand firm through that harrowing experience, whatever happened—and they did stand firm.¹⁵

In his novel *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful*, Alan Paton tells the story of Robert Mansfield, the headmaster of a school in South Africa during the days of apartheid. When Mansfield’s school was barred from competing against a black school, he finally took a stand against apartheid and resigned his post. A friend said to him, “You know you will be wounded. Do you know that?”

Mansfield pointed up to heaven and replied, “When I go up there . . . the Big Judge will say to me, ‘**Where are your wounds?**’ If I say I haven’t any, He will say, ‘**Was there nothing to fight for?**’ I couldn’t face that question.”¹⁶

My brothers, the world, the flesh, and the Devil are grasping at our children’s lives. Will we fight for them? Our lives will be impoverished if we choose the easy road. Worse, our children’s lives will be impoverished. We have something to fight for!!

It’s the one job that I dream of, it’s the task I think of most—
If I fail that little fellow, I have nothing else to boast;
For the wealth and fame I’d gather . . . all my fortune would be sad

¹⁴ Charles Marsh, *Welcoming Justice* (IVP Books, 2009), pp. 16-17.

¹⁵ Gettner Simmons, “The Words Still Resound,” *Omaha World-Herald* (4.24.2011).

¹⁶ Alan Paton, *Ah, But Your Land is Beautiful* (Scribner’s, 1996), pp. 66-67.

If I fail to be successful as that little boy's Dad.

Guys, there is nothing to which we can give our lives that will make a bigger difference to the future of this world than to build Christian grit and faithfulness into our own lives and into the lives of our children. And whether we have biological children or not, we can build grit and faithfulness into the lives of the myriads of kids who have no Dads in their lives.

Our Savior's promise is the same today as it was long ago: "He promised never to leave me; never to leave me alone!" Let's get after it!

Short Grit Scale

Directions for taking the Grit Scale: Please respond to the following 8 items. Be honest – there are no right or wrong answers!

1. New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.*
 - Very much like me
 - Mostly like me
 - Somewhat like me
 - Not much like me
 - Not like me at all

2. Setbacks don't discourage me.
 - Very much like me
 - Mostly like me
 - Somewhat like me
 - Not much like me
 - Not like me at all

3. I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.*
 - Very much like me
 - Mostly like me
 - Somewhat like me
 - Not much like me
 - Not like me at all

4. I am a hard worker.
 - Very much like me
 - Mostly like me
 - Somewhat like me
 - Not much like me
 - Not like me at all

5. I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.*
 - Very much like me
 - Mostly like me
 - Somewhat like me
 - Not much like me
 - Not like me at all

6. I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.*
 - Very much like me
 - Mostly like me
 - Somewhat like me
 - Not much like me
 - Not like me at all

7. I finish whatever I begin.
- Very much like me
 - Mostly like me
 - Somewhat like me
 - Not much like me
 - Not like me at all

8. I am diligent.
- Very much like me
 - Mostly like me
 - Somewhat like me
 - Not much like me
 - Not like me at all

Scoring:

1. For questions 2, 4, 7 and 8 assign the following points:
 - 5 = Very much like me
 - 4 = Mostly like me
 - 3 = Somewhat like me
 - 2 = Not much like me
 - 1 = Not like me at all

2. For questions 1, 3, 5 and 6 assign the following points:
 - 1 = Very much like me
 - 2 = Mostly like me
 - 3 = Somewhat like me
 - 4 = Not much like me
 - 5 = Not like me at all

Add up all the points and divide by 8. The maximum score on this scale is 5 (extremely gritty), and the lowest score on this scale is 1 (not at all gritty).

Grit Scale citation

Duckworth, A.L., & Quinn, P.D. (2009). Development and validation of the Short Grit Scale (Grit-S). *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 91, 166-174.

<http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~duckwort/images/Duckworth%20and%20Quinn.pdf>

Duckworth, A.L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M.D., & Kelly, D.R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 9, 1087-1101.

<http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~duckwort/images/Grit%20JPSP.pdf>