

Full Court Press

1 Timothy 6:11

Occasionally, in the heat of a basketball game, the coach will find it necessary to use a type of defense known as a “full court press.” For those of you who are not basketball fans or players, a “full court press” is used when the score in a game is extremely close, or when there is some other special circumstance which requires an intense, very careful defense against the opposing team.

Usually what a full court press means is that each of the five players on the team will be assigned to one of the players on the other team, and will follow that player wherever he goes. Up and down the playing court, the team members in a full court press will dog the steps of the opposing team.

For the last two weeks we’ve been looking at something we called a “Permanent Press.” When the Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the church at Philippi, he told them that he was “pressing on” toward the goal of being mature in Christ. Of all the people in his day, Paul was probably the one most qualified to claim that he had already reached that goal, but he would not claim it for himself.

Instead, he insisted on quite the opposite. “I have not yet grown up fully in Christ,” he told them, “so I press on with all the eagerness and persistence of a man who is hunting an animal, or a runner reaching for the finish line.”

But it is interesting to note that Paul uses this same terminology in many of his letters. For example, Paul had a lot of things to share with a young pastor by the name of Timothy, among them being the kinds of qualities he would need in his work for the Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps Timothy, like many of us, was beginning to feel the effects of exhaustion upon his ministry there in Ephesus.

The responsibilities may have begun to wear on him. Being the leader of a group of Christians in first-century Ephesus could not have been very easy, and Timothy may have been exposed to many things which might have damaged his ministry if he didn’t press on to the goal of Christian maturity. So Paul warned Timothy of a few things he would need to avoid: things like controversies and arguments, envy, quarrelling, malicious talk, evil suspicions (v. 4), constant friction between men (v. 5), and the love of money, which, Paul says, is the root of all kinds of evil (v. 10).

Then Paul tells Timothy to flee those kinds of things, to run away as if he were running for his very life. There are times in our Christian experience when it would be cowardly to run away from a challenge or a crisis, but there are other times when the most Christ-like thing we could possibly do would be to flee, to escape the influence of something deadly to our walk with Christ. Knowing when you should flee and when you should stand and fight is a mark of spiritual wisdom and maturity.

Of course, Paul wrote this centuries and centuries before the game of basketball was even invented, but in modern vernacular Paul might tell Timothy that the best defense against those kinds of things would be a full court press:

But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. (1Timothy 6:11)

The word “*pursue*” (KJV: follow after) is the same Greek word that is used in Philippians 3:12, 14 where Paul says “*I press on.*” So what Paul was actually saying to Timothy was that in order to reach the goal of righteousness, which can be compared to the goal of maturity in Christ Paul had in mind for himself, Timothy was going to have to give it all he had.

Then Paul named five qualities which Timothy would have to incorporate into his life in his quest for righteousness and maturity in Christ. Some of us would like very much to be able to press on toward the goal of being more and more like Christ, but we don’t know how.

And even when we make an honest attempt at growing up spiritually, we find that there are too many obstacles, that there’s too much pulling us away from the goal. To help us understand a little better, let’s compare these five qualities Paul was recommending to Timothy to the five men on a basketball team, and say that in order to adequately defend ourselves against the things which would keep us from permanently pressing on, we must make use of a “full court press.”

We are saying that pressing on to win the prize is something which should, and must, involve every bit of our lives, every area and corner and nook and cranny of our hearts. We are to defend against spiritual immaturity on the entire court of our lives. Who are these five men we need to involve in this full court press? Let’s introduce them one by one, as they run out onto the court:

1 The first player is named “Godliness”

This is one of the most neglected men on our team. We don’t fully appreciate his value or worth to the team. We may not completely understand how absolutely necessary godliness is in our quest to win the prize of maturity in Christ. Some of us want to be grown up in Christ, but we are not willing to admit that we cannot accomplish that end without godliness.

Well, how would you define “godliness”? What characteristics would you give a person who is godly? Some would say that a godly person is holier-than-thou, self-righteous, starry-eyed even to the point of being totally impractical about life. Others would claim that a godly person is naïve and out of touch with the real world. But let’s make sure we understand what the word actually means. This word describes a manner of life that affects your dealings with God, with yourself, and with other people. Godliness places a person in a proper relationship to Him, and to seek to improve that relationship, to make it more vital and meaningful. Very simply, godliness involves being like God, a quality we leave out of our lives far too often.

Too many of us how gone out onto the playing court too many times without the key player. Too many of us have left godliness out of our lives. Sure, we may be good people, well-liked and respected by many, but the missing element is our own personal relationship with God. We have not cultivated godliness. But it is definitely something we cannot do without.

We’ve tried to do that, haven’t we, only to discover that something was wrong. Our faith, love, endurance and gentleness (the other players in this full court press) run out of steam too soon. What we discover, if we will allow ourselves to admit it, is that we’ve been trying to utilize a full court press in our Christian experience, giving it all we’ve got, when actually we’ve kept the main player on the bench! And without him, the game is lost.

If you would press on, permanently, and if you would follow the commands of Scripture to extend this pressing on to every area of your heart and life, then the first player on the court of your life will have to be the one named “Godliness.”

2 The second player is named “Faith”

His name is “Faith,” though that is only a nickname his teammates have given him. Actually, his full name is “Faithfulness.” You see, the Greek language is so rich and expressive that there is one word which means faith

in the sense of what you believe, but quite another word which means how what you believe affects the way you live. It is the second of these two which is used in 1 Timothy 6:11.

The idea here is “one who can be trusted, one who can be believed in.” Paul’s advice to Timothy was that in order to reach the goal, he should live his life in such a way that all would consider him to be trustworthy, that he should have the reputation as being one you can depend on.

You know the kind of person Paul was talking about: that man or woman who is so dependable you never feel you have wonder about their commitment or loyalty. A faithful person is one you can believe in, someone who is there when you need them, someone whose life is characterized by stability.

Someone has written that the greatest ability is dependability. Of all the people you know, who else but a Christian should be the *most* dependable? And why is that? It is because the Christian, in his quest to grow up in Christ, should strive to become more and more like Christ! And who is more dependable than *He*?

When we call faithfulness a quality to be pursued by the growing Christian, we mean just that. It is an aspect of the Christ-life we cannot neglect. No one will grow in Christ if faithfulness, loyalty and commitment to God first and then to others is left out.

3 The third player is named “Love”

It sounds almost so simple that we shouldn’t even have to mention it. And yet love—the kind of love God demonstrates toward us—does not come naturally in our lives. Maybe we lapse into an attitude that causes us to think that loving God and loving others happens automatically.

But it doesn’t. It is something which must be pursued—chased—with non-stop determination. This is why we call this a “full court press.” If we ever let down one little bit from our quest to love people the way God loves us, we lose sight of the goal of growing up spiritually. If our goal is to become more and more like Christ, then the player named “Love” has to be on the team.

We could spend a lot of time talking about this love, and we still would not completely define all that is involved here. Paul tried to describe it one time and found out that he couldn’t. He finally just told his readers that he prayed that they

might grasp how “*wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ*” and that they might know “*this love that surpasses knowledge*” (Ephesians 3:18b-19a).

When John thought about the love of God He has shown toward us, he said, “*How great is the love that the Father has lavished on us...*” (1 John 3:1). So the love of God is probably something we will never completely understand this side of heaven. Perhaps that is why we find it so difficult to explain a person who acts unselfishly in the best interests of others rather than himself.

No full court press in your life or mine is complete without the quality of love, because no other characteristic so completely describes God to us. No other characteristic is so like God Himself.

4 The fourth player is named “Endurance”

The KJV uses the word “patience” here, but as the word “patience” has evolved through the years since the King James was translated, it has taken quite a different meaning. In our day, we picture patience as a person sitting with his hands folded, quietly waiting for things to get better.

But the idea behind this word in the original language is that here is a person who sticks to his job even when the going gets extremely tough. This is an unswerving loyalty to the things of God in spite of disagreement, adversity and suffering. One writer says that endurance is the quality which does not so much accept the experiences of life as conquers them.

Patient endurance is what will keep us going when we feel like we want to quit. Patient endurance is what empowers us to permanently press on, to keep reaching out for the goal. For example, when we are tired of resisting the influences of the world around us, our resolve to live a godly, faithful, loving life begins to fade. When we are trying our best to live a Christ-honoring life, and everything seems to go wrong, patient endurance enables us somehow to keep going.

Now, we are not talking about that characteristic many of us have which is known as stubbornness; that’s something else entirely. That’s a purely human characteristic which sometimes is more trouble than it’s worth. We’re talking about a quality that makes you stay in there when your natural reaction would be to run and hide somewhere.

5 The fifth player is named “Gentleness”

Again, the KJV uses a word which has changed somewhat in the last four hundred years. To us, “meekness” is a close cousin to “weakness,” but of course that is not what enables us to press on permanently. This word cannot be translated using a single English word, but the idea behind this word “gentleness” or “meekness” is that of a powerful horse under control. The power is there, but it is being guided in the proper direction.

The Christian who is gentle is the Christian who knows how to wage fierce spiritual battles, but who also knows how to forgive. This is the Christian who knows how to hate sin passionately, yet love the sinner with the passion of Christ.

Again, it should be readily apparent why we are to “pursue” the quality of gentleness in our quest for Christian maturity. It is because none of us has this quality by nature. There are some who allow anybody and everybody to just walk over them and take advantage of them. But that’s not gentleness. That is weakness. We also know of others who stand like a rock and never give in an inch on anything. Well, guess what? That, too, is weakness. The growing Christian is the one who has the power to stand up to people if need be, but sometimes chooses *not* to because that is the most Christ-like thing to do. Others may not understand. But they will not be able to deny the strength apparent in the life of a person like that.

So how do we permanently press on? It can’t be done halfheartedly, because so much more is at stake than that. It is accomplished with a straining forward to reach out for what God has in store for us—a total effort, involving everything we’ve got—a full court press.

There is no room for the apathetic heart here. Some would say that there is no need for urgency on the matter—at least we are Christians, right? Listen to me! Even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there. It is just about time for the opening tip-off in this game, against a formidable opponent. A full-court press is absolutely necessary to win this game.

Take a look around at the players on your team. Are they the kind of players who can defend you in this spiritual battle, in your quest for righteousness in the eyes of God?

Some of us have guys like anger, lust, pride, bitterness and an unforgiving spirit as the players on our team. But look at it this way: Has using that lineup in your life got you anywhere? Have those players helped you to win anything at all?

If not, then perhaps you need to add some key players to your roster, players like

Godliness

Faithfulness

Love

Endurance

Gentleness

Where do you need to start first?