

Theme: Faithful to the Finish in Christ

Picture a runner in the final quarter mile of a marathon. Her legs are burning. Her lungs are screaming. Every step hurts. Everything inside her says, “Stop.” But she keeps running.

Why? Because she can see the finish line. More than that, she knows someone is waiting for her there.

That image is exactly where we find the apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 4. He is not sitting comfortably at a desk. He is sitting in a Roman prison cell. The trial is over. The verdict is coming. The executioner is not far away. Paul can see the finish line. Remarkably, he is not afraid.

Why? Because he knows who is waiting for him there.

Before Paul crosses that finish line, he has something urgent to say. Not just to Timothy. To us. Say it out loud. Keep the faith. Speak the Word of God out loud to others. Stay in the race, even when everything in you wants to stop.

That sounds simple enough. Until speaking God’s truth costs you something. Until faithfulness means standing alone. Until suffering lingers longer than you expected. Until death itself comes into view.

Then the question becomes very personal: Will you remain faithful to Christ and his Word until the end?

Paul begins with a charge. **“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead ... I give you this charge: Preach the Word.”**

Notice the setting. God is listening. Christ the Judge is listening. The King is listening. This is not a suggestion. This is not advice. This is a command. Preach the Word. Be ready whether people want to hear it or not. Correct. Rebuke. Encourage. Speak God’s truth faithfully.

Paul uses the image of a herald — a messenger sent by the king. A herald does not rewrite the king’s message. He does not soften it for the crowd. He does not take a poll to see which parts people prefer. He delivers it. Exactly as given. Regardless of the response.

Neither Timothy nor the Church gets to edit God’s Word. We are called to faithfulness. We are divinely charged to: Say it out loud.

But that is where the problem begins. Because Paul immediately names the pressure we will face. A time is coming, and Paul clearly believes it has already arrived, when people will not put up with sound doctrine. They will surround themselves with teachers who say what they want to hear. They will turn their ears away from truth and turn to myths.

We recognize that world. The voices that tell us God’s Word is negotiable. That truth can be adjusted. That the gospel needs an upgrade. That what the Bible calls sin is in our modern world really just personal preference. That Jesus is one option among many.

Against all of that, Paul says: Say it out loud. Keep speaking. Keep preaching. Don’t flinch. Don’t drift. Don’t go quiet.

But if we are honest, we recognize something else. We recognize ourselves.

We like approval. We dislike conflict. We prefer comfort.

I know I do. By nature, I am a people-pleaser. That can be a blessing when someone needs comfort. But it becomes a temptation when someone needs correction.

I wrestle with this regularly. The conversations I know I need to have but I'm not sure how the message will be received. So I delay. It wouldn't be so hard if the people didn't matter to me. But when someone I care about deeply is making choices that are pulling them away from Christ, it tears me up. I know what needs to be said. I know the Word of God is clear. Often I don't even need to construct opportunities to bring it up. Yet when God gives me natural chances to address the matter, I find, even invent, reasons to wait. I'll tell myself, that patience is a virtue, the pastoral thing to do. But the deeper truth? It's often just fear. Fear of losing the relationship. Fear of the awkwardness. Fear of the look on their face.

There are times those fears were justified. But more importantly, there are times when I finally found the courage to say what God would have me say and the person responds gratefully, "I am so glad you said something because I've wanted to talk to you about this but I wasn't sure how to bring it up." I had been so busy protecting the relationship that I had failed the person.

There have been other times when I went the opposite direction. I spoke the truth without love. The right words. The wrong heart. I corrected when I should have first listened. I rebuked when I should have first wept. Neither extreme is faithfulness.

Perhaps you know that struggle too. Maybe your silence comes when you should speak. The friend walking away from the faith. The family member you haven't had the conversation with yet. The moment at work when something was said and you let it pass. Maybe your failure comes in endurance. You started strong. You've grown tired. You've drifted. You've stopped running.

Measured against God's standard, speak faithfully, endure fully, finish well, none of us has made it.

If the finish line depended on our faithfulness, none of us would reach it.

That is why the Gospel is so necessary. And so refreshing.

Because Christianity is not ultimately the story of faithful people reaching God. It is the story of a faithful Savior reaching sinners.

Go back to the runner. Imagine her collapsing. Imagine knowing she cannot finish. The legs are gone. The strength is spent. She is on the ground.

Now picture someone else who has been in the race all along. Running every mile for her. Bearing every remaining pain in place for her. Crossing the finish line on her behalf. And then returning to her, still on the ground, and placing the gold medal around her neck. His prize, her reward.

That is what Jesus has done for you.

Where we failed, he remained faithful. Where we compromised, he stood firm. Where we went silent, he spoke. Where we quit, he endured. He preached the truth when crowds loved him. He preached the truth when crowds abandoned him. He preached the truth when it led him all the way to a cross.

There, on that cross, he carried every failure of faithfulness. Every silence. Every compromise. Every fear. Every act of cowardice. Every sinful motive, including the ones you are most ashamed of. Including mine.

Once the work was complete, he said it out loud: **“It is finished.”** Not, “I tried.” Not, “I almost made it.” Not, “Now you finish the rest.” **“It is finished.”** The fight was fought. The race was finished. The faith was kept. By him. For you.

That is why Paul can look death in the face and say this out loud, **“There is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day.”**

A righteous judge gives what people deserve. What do we deserve? Condemnation. The kind that never ends.

But Paul expects a crown. Why? Because the Judge is also the Savior. The One seated on the throne is the same One who was crucified in our place. The same One who carried our guilt. The same One who gave us his righteousness.

The crown is not a reward for Paul’s performance. It is a gift purchased by Christ. Notice, Paul says it is not only for him. It is for **“all who have longed for his appearing.”** That includes you.

Your standing before God does not rest on the strength of your faithfulness. It rests on Christ’s. Even your perseverance is his gift. You do not maintain your grip on God. He maintains his grip on you. Through his Word. Through your Baptism. Through his Supper. Through the promises he keeps on speaking into your weary heart.

That is how Christ keeps his people running. Not by demanding more strength from them. But by continually pouring his strength into them.

Say that out loud. He is how you keep the faith. Tell people God’s truth about the Savior who has won the race for them too.

Not because your standing before God depends on it. But because theirs might. What I mean is: God may use your witness as the means by which he reaches them.

The friend who has been drifting. Say something. The family member whose choices are pulling them away from Christ. Have the conversation. The coworker who asked you once what you believe and you changed the subject. Go back. The moment at the dinner table, or in the break room, or at the baseball diamond, when someone says something about faith and you feel the familiar pull toward silence. Speak.

You are not the herald of your own message. You are the herald of the King’s message. You do not need to be eloquent. You do not need to have all the answers. You are called to say what God commissions you to speak. Point to what Christ has done. Trust the Word to do what the Word does.

When you stumble, when you go silent again, when you get it wrong, when the fear wins, return. Repent. Receive forgiveness. And go again, saying out loud God’s truth.

Endure hardship. Return daily in repentance. Encourage one another. Run the race set before you.

And never, ever forget why you can.

One day your race will end. One day your final mile will come. One day your last breath will arrive.

On that day, you will not find a Judge waiting to tally your failures. You will not find a record of every silence. You will not find a list of every stumble, every fear, every time you should have spoken and didn't.

You will find Jesus. The One who carried your sin. The One who ran for you. The One who finished for you. The One who kept the faith for you.

There he will stand at the finish line. Not to condemn. But to crown.

The fight was fought. The race was finished. The faith was kept. By him. For you. Say it out loud: Thanks be to God! Amen.