

FINISHING WELL

2Tim. 2:1-7 • FCBC • 10/15/23

Intro: [Alice in Wonderland.] Where do you want to get to? Good Q. How do you want to finish? Knowing the end helps but doesn't guarantee you'll get there.

- Most every couple I've married wants to live happily ever after. Nearly none have ever contemplated on their wedding day the escape clause of divorce. They all want to grow old together, and eventually when one dies, bury the other and grieve greatly because they lost their best friend. But statistics tell us that half of marriages end in divorce; and 4 out of 5 of the remaining confess to not being particularly happy. They had some idea where they'd like to end up, but most do nothing along the way to get there. There is a difference between wanting to finish well, and finishing well. What is true in marriage, is just as true in your Christian life: Having the goal of finishing well in life does not guarantee you will. The Christian life is not a decision, but a direction; not a fast dash but a long marathon; not a one-night stand, but a life-long marriage. Wanting to finish well is a good start—but it doesn't mean you will.

- Finishing well means walking hand in hand with Christ every day on the path of life. It means loving God wholeheartedly and loving others sacrificially. It means being faithful to what He has given you to do and making a difference with the gift of your days. It means not giving in to the pull of the world when it gets hard or giving up on serving Him when no one claps and cheers or even notices.

- I don't mean that you won't go to heaven, or that you'll no longer be a part of His Kingdom, or that God will revoke your citizenship or kick you out of His family. Far from it. If you have admitted that you have done wrong and gone wrong, and put your trust in Christ alone, then He has saved you by His grace—not because of your good works, or your promises to do better, or any other thing. Christ died for you as your Savior and has been raised from the dead as the Lord—and He has given you complete forgiveness and has changed your heart—He has given you the Spirit to work from the inside out. But could such a person, *could you* still squander your life, or mess-up morally, or finish badly? You bet.

- Some of you sitting here will not be committed to Christ in ten years. I wish it weren't so, but it's true. You'll be seduced by a job, or compromised by a marriage, you'll be distracted by hobbies or discouraged by failures. You may still believe, but you the way you live will not reflect it. And unless you turn around then (or something changes now), you won't finish well. So what will it take to finish well?

- The Apostle Paul is on death row with little hope for appeal. His judge would be Caesar Nero, a half-crazed, vindictive megalomaniac who tagged Christians as scapegoats. Paul was fairly certain that he would not walk out of this prison alive. Shortly before his death, he scribbled these last words: [4:7-8]. He would finish well. Knowing what it takes to finish well, he writes to his long-time disciple,

Timothy, Pastor of the church at Ephesus, about 850 miles away as the crow flies. Much of the empire at this time was souring toward the new sect of Christianity. It was neither popular nor legal to be a Christian nor promote Christ. Now it was becoming deadly to do so. Because Christians believed in one sovereign Lord—Jesus, they were seen as politically subversive. Because they didn't take part in the common social parties (often drunken orgies dedicated to one of the many gods of the time), they were seen as reclusive and bigoted. In the backwash of this time, Timothy watched his mentor be arrested, falsely accused, and condemned; and as a Christian leader, he sensed a growing antagonism toward himself. And naturally, perhaps slowly, almost imperceptibly, he began to be a little more cautious, more timid, a little more quiet about his faith.

•One of the reasons why we need to grow in our faith and our character is because our times are changing; and the faith and character we possessed yesterday, adequate for the challenges of yesterday may not be strong enough, sturdy enough, or deep enough to handle the blasts of today nor the dark rumblings of tomorrow. We need to listen very carefully to Paul who finished well, and who is writing to Timothy (and through him to us) to help us understand what it will take to finish well. (2:1-7) *He begins by telling us that:*

I. FINISHING WELL REQUIRES US TO FOCUS ON CHRIST

A. WE MUST RELY ON GOD'S GRACE TO US IN CHRIST (2:1)

¹You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus...

NB Paul is not telling Timothy to buck up. He's not just saying, "Be strong", which assumes the person isn't. Telling a wavering person to be strong is a lot like telling a depressed person to "Cheer up" or an indebted person to "Get a grip on your finances", or a person who has just fallen flat on his face to "Watch it!" No! Paul is saying, "Be strong *in the grace* that is in Christ Jesus" which is very different. NB: The tendency for us when we fail, is to focus on the immediate failure, even to the point that we compound our failure with a failure to keep going. We sin. Perhaps we back down and fail to speak up. We get intimidated and shut up. Or we compromise our moral convictions and dirty up our lives to the point that we feel we have nothing to say to others who don't know Christ. In all this, we look only at the moment, or the week, or the season we're in. God wants us to look back to the death of Christ that forgave us of all sin, look now at why we need a Savior, and look forward to the end when we'll see him who has been raised from the dead face to face. Rest in His grace, and keep going. Grace gives us a longer range perspective. "Be strong" does not describe *how* something is done, but *that* it is done at all; and to be strong *in the grace in X* means that what motivates you and keeps you going is the conviction that you've been totally forgiven & completely accepted by God graciously; now whenever you stumble and fall in failure/sin, you can get up & keep going. If we are to finish well in the end, we must rely on

God's grace in the present. You apply the Gospel to yourself every moment of every day. Then:

B. WE MUST PREPARE OTHERS TO PASS ON THE TRUTH (2:2)

²and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

As a pastor, Timothy was told by Paul to look beyond the immediate group he'd affect by teaching the truth and focus on future generations. He must teach others in such a way that they'd be able to teach others. He must pass on the central truths about God and the Gospel in such a way that his hearers would be able to do the same. One of the reasons we at Faith Community focus on teaching you the Bible is for this very reason. We don't want you just to hear a motivational speech, or to get great ideas about life; we want you to understand the Bible for yourself and be able to affect others as you've been affected. We want you to think biblically, and help others do the same. This applies to you passing on the truth to your children, your grandchildren, as well as to your friends, co-workers, acquaintances. How long range is Paul looking? NB: [Paul-Tim-Reliable people-Others]. Certainly this speaks to us as teachers and leaders, but don't miss that the goal is for all of us to understand and embrace the truth to the point that we pass it on to others. He's telling us that we must develop deep convictions about the truth, or we won't finish well. *Some of these very convictions deal with what it takes to finish well:*

C. WE MUST COME TO TERMS WITH WHAT IT WILL TAKE (*Like what?*)

1. Determination (vs. 3)

³Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

Being faithful to proclaiming the Gospel to others also exposes us to criticism, censure, even persecution and suffering. It isn't just metaphorical—as a soldier is exposed to difficult circumstances, or being wounded in battle or even losing his life, so one faithful to Christ in a rebellious and broken world is never immune to the same treatment. And if pushback—even suffering—surprises you, or shocks you, you could back down or even leave the fight. Knowing that things could get really bumpy protects you when it does. We need determination to keep going to finish well. And we need:

2. Inspiration (vs. 7)

⁷Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

We are to ponder and reflect on what Paul has told us; this takes time and focus. But why didn't Paul just explain the whole enchilada—why not make it plain? Why make us work for it? Because we all tend to hear things and forget things. But the things we discover for ourselves tend to stick with us. And Paul believes that in mulling over what he is about to tell us, the HS will enlighten us as to the meaning and implications, as well as speak to us personally in unforgettable ways. But if we don't take time to ponder and let God solidify our convictions, we risk

seeing life not as God sees it, and living it shortsightedly. If we're to finish well, we need a long-range perspective, and come to terms with what it will take. EG?

II. FINISHING WELL REQUIRES CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT NOW

(3 crucial traits found from 3 clear examples:)

A. THE SOLDIER (vs. 4)

No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.

1. The Stakes: *Christ's Approval*. In that day, there was no draft, no conscription service. Instead, the commander of the army would personally enlist men who would fight for him. Those under his authority would love and obey him; plenty of examples of men who would do nearly anything to please their commanding officer. That isn't bad or base—even in your relationship with God.

• There's a difference between love and approval. Love doesn't change but approval is something we earn or lose with our choices and actions. I love my children—regardless of what they do; but I may not approve of their actions. You and I can't earn God's love—freely given in Christ. But we can earn his approval—his “well done.” What a wonderful thing to see Christ, and hear him say, “You followed my orders. You did it right. Steven, well done. Well done.” Don't you want to hear that? Certainly I'd take some hardship for that! But requires something else:

2. The Need: *Single-minded Obedience*: No soldier called to active service still runs his business, makes his own schedule, pays his own bills, runs his own life. When soldiers leave for battle, they leave behind daily life. Does this mean that you can't have a “daily life?” Not at all. “gets involved” lit. is “become entangled”; i.e. a Q of priorities at hand; not that one can't make a living, nor possess nice things; rather, they mustn't “entangle” the soldier so as to impede his task, or restrict his service. Otherwise, he is at best a useless soldier—unavailable to come when he is called, unwilling to do what he is told, unable to muster the mental discipline to leave other things behind & concentrate on the fight ahead.

• As a Xian, you can't be divided in your loyalties or your affections. You have one job: to obey X, commanding officer. To receive His commendation, you have to set right your priorities. If you become entangled in civilian affairs, and your loyalties are splintered, and He won't be pleased. Your heart won't be w/him; you won't be available for him to command. [Matt. 6:24]

“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

He's applying the principle of divided loyalties to money—but it applies to anything rivaling Him. And NB He does not say, “should not serve...” or “may

not serve..." but "cannot serve." It's not an issue of permission, but possibility. You can't serve both. He must come 1st. "Jesus—whatever you say." He is asking for your single-minded commitment to obey and serve Him first and foremost, to be responsive to Him. Without that, you will not earn his approval.

3. The Question: *What is entangling me?*

What is distracting me from being available for Christ to command? It might not be anything big. It could be parceling your interest and passion out to a hundred small things. You could fill your life with many things that don't matter instead of a few things that do. You'll know it when you think God is nudging you to get involved but you have little energy to do so, or passion for anything spiritual or eternal. What if anything is entangling you? Put them aside. Say no to distractions and trinkets and yes to whatever Jesus says. We need to develop single-mindedness in obedience now. Second picture:

B. THE ATHLETE (**vs 5**)

⁵An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.

1. The Stakes: *Heavenly Honor*: For the athlete who competes in the games and wins, there was a twisted sprig of olive leaves, a crown—not worth much in itself, but highly sought after for the honor it represented. In the Olympics, it is a medal of gold, silver, or bronze; in the Tour de France, it is a yellow jersey; in boxing it is a large belt. In the believer's life, it is the honor from heaven of a job well-done. When we go home to be with the Lord, will we sneak in the back door, a bit embarrassed by not having brought anything to the potluck party? Or will we experience a warm welcome, a triumphant and honorable and happy finish to a hard run race; it's all of our friends cheering us on at the finish line and welcoming us home forever. Amazing to think that as we grow to know the Lord better, and make an impact here through our lives, it will affect how we are received when we die. And we're not competing against each other; we're competing against ourselves. The goal is to serve Him all our days and finish with honor. Then we'll know it was all worth it! But won't happen automatically.

2. The Need: *Self-Disciplined in the rules*. There were rules of training and of competition. We know that part of the rules in that day required athletes to state on oath that they had completed ten month's training before they were eligible to enter the contest. Failing to do so meant they weren't allowed to compete, and if they did and it was found out they had cut corners, they'd be instantly disqualified. Further, as now, every athletic event had its boundaries, rules. (In tennis, and volleyball the line is in; in basketball and football the lines are out.) Those who fail to observe the rules are disqualified: can't start too soon, hit below the belt, grab a facemask, lob a ball outside the line, catch a pass out of bounds; now the focus here isn't a specific set of rules to keep, but the self-discipline to submit to the rules so as to not be disqualified.

•As Christians, Christ has set the rules for serving him. And we simply can't cut corners. Can't play w/sin on the side and still serve Christ. Can't expect to take the easy way and never pray/study the Scriptures but still have strength and faith in the fight. Have to play within the bounds of Scriptures, which forbid bitterness, lack of forgiveness, worry, self-centered living, discontentment. Admit it would seem a lot easier sometimes to do it our own way, but cutting corners ends in disaster. Some tell me they don't need discipline of worship, sloppy about studying Scriptures, don't pray, but think that in heat of game can pull it off. But I've never found one who could or did. Who you are in training is how you'll act in the game.

3. The Question: *Am I respecting the rules and training?*

To finish with honor, you'll have to develop discipline to follow the rules and avoid shortcuts. If you break the rules of training or of competition, God will set you aside, and you'll forfeit the prize. It is not enough to be talented, gifted, to have energy and ability; we must have the discipline to stay within the bounds, within the rules. Am I learning to live within God's rules for my life? Am I training by learning the Scriptures, practicing praying, asking Him to deal with my character and habits, my failures and sins? Simply stated, you must allow God to set the rules, and obey them, whether you like them or not. He's the judge, the official. We need to cultivate self-discipline in keeping the rules.

C. THE FARMER (vs. 6)

It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops.

1. The Stakes: *Lasting joy*: Final picture is of a farmer, who after toiling and working with his crops all year, finally with joy sees the harvest come in—which harvest he has the first share of. It's a picture of joy and the satisfaction of the worker who has worked and waited for his reward, and now has received it! (Ever notice that when you get something as soon as you want it, it never is nearly as sweet as when you've had to work for it, and wait for it, and finally you get what you've wanted?) Some people never have known such fulfillment because never developed the ability to persevere over the long haul.

2. The Need: *Faithfulness in Serving Christ*: Farmer doesn't sow seed, then every little while go out and dig up the plants to see if anything is happening under the soil. Instead, he tends his crops, waits patiently, and perseveres even though the progress seems slow (if even at all). So with us: we need to develop the ability to "work hard" even when nothing seems to be happening. (This trait pictures continuing to work to the point of weariness and exhaustion—a trait required of elders in 1Tim. 5:17). At times, it will seem that you see nothing happening—your effort seemingly has made no difference. But if you keep tending your life/work, and don't give up, the reward will come. As believers, God says what we do will never be for nothing: [1 Cor. 15:58] i.e. more is happening

than we can see, and in time we will enjoy the fruit of our work not only in this life, but also in the life to come.

3. The Question: *How can I be faithful today?*

To see results in your own life and in the investment of your life in others, you'll have to persevere, and tend, and be patient until the harvest. So difficult for us who have cut our teeth on immediate gratification. We want everything right now! Just can't wait. But if we are to experience lasting joy, it will mean we'll need to learn patience & perseverance and keep serving Him even when we're tired. There may be sacrificial investments and exhausting work of cultivation with little seen results at first, before you see anything happen. If you don't work hard, or if you give up when you don't see much happening, the results will be thin, your share will be meager, if anything, and your joy will be hollow. Let's not settle for that.

Summarize: 1) [Be single-minded in obedience. Don't get distracted.] There are a lot of things that aren't really wrong but could monopolize your time and energy, and hinder your response to Christ.

2) [Be self-disciplined in the rules. Refuse to take shortcuts.] There are rules in training and rules in life. Most of the time, no one but Christ is watching. He sets the rules. You can't cut corners morally or spiritually and expect Him to use you significantly.

3) [Be faithful in serving Christ. Never give up.] Don't get caught demanding instant results, or immediate gratification. If you do the right things consistently, the reward will be great eventually.

- This is exactly what Paul was getting at—how he finished well: [2Tim. 4:7/x]
- Our response to Christ will determine the outcome of our life. Finishing well in the End demands living well in the present. Are you single minded in obedience to Him, self-disciplined in His rules, and faithful in serving Him? Be strong in God's grace. Grow in these areas. Keep a long range perspective and a long term development in character and you will finish well.