

Learning to Finish Well

2 Timothy 2:1-7, Philippians 3:3-4, Philippians 3:5-10

Slide 1

"It's not how you start... it's how you finish." To me, that brings to mind the fable about the tortoise and the hare.

But it can also describe the hard fate of some sports teams where during the season they become the favorites to win and then they're out.

Yet, this saying speaks more deeply about life. We've all heard of those who seem to have headed off so well then crashed along the way.

In our teens and twenties, we think there is so much ahead and by our 40s and 50s we find we're navigating more challenges and in later years we begin to consider what it means to even finish.

Now, I want to finish well, not just in a role but in life. That's what Paul is speaking about in 2 Timothy.

He was born within the Roman empire and, as a Roman citizen, was able to travel across the known world and spread the Good News.

When Asia Minor was incorporated into the Roman Empire in 133 BC, Ephesus was designated as the capital of the new province of Asia.

As a Roman citizen he wisely chose the city of Ephesus to start a church. It was a major seaport and on a major trade route.

He stayed there for at least two years and then, in his extended years, began moving from city to city.

When he left Ephesus, he entrusted those who had received Christ to a young man named Timothy.

Timothy would prove not only faithful serving in Ephesus but also in helping Paul throughout the years wherever he went.

Paul called Timothy his spiritual son and his fellow worker. In fact, Timothy is listed as coauthor on six of Paul's letters (2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon.)

It's here in 2 Timothy that Paul tells him that he has been arrested while in Rome. Paul knew that an arrest was imminent, but this time it was different.

The emperor is Nero, infamous for his brutal rule and there was a prison, a converted cistern, for those that would be executed. Paul knew these were likely his last days.

It's been about 11 years since they last saw each other and the knowledge gleaned over the years needed to be given to his friend.

These words in 2 Timothy are the last of the man who helped change the world and the most important words to his spiritual son were: *"finish well."*

Yet, really what we're reading are words meant to be heard by us today. While this letter addresses Timothy, like Paul's other letters, Paul clearly intended it to be shared with the whole community.

It even ends with the second-person plural, *"Grace be with you all."*

Slide 2

2 Timothy 2:1, *"You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus."*

In this first sentence, Paul is encouraging Timothy. He tells him that to endure he must *“be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.”*

In other words, not only do we need to find our strength in the grace of Christ, but we must be rooted in that grace.

He knows Timothy’s facing plenty of challenging circumstances and people. So, Paul’s telling him, *“You don’t have to find your security and strength in proving anything. You’ve already been accepted by God through the grace of Christ.”*

Paul understood what he was saying since he had spent his entire life striving to prove his merits.

Then, on a short journey to Damascus, divine grace found him and now that grace has become not only a strength but a message.

This is what Paul expounds upon in Philippians.

Philippians 5-10a, *“Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.”*

Paul knows that when we wake up each day and try to prove our own merit, we'll be depending on something that we can never fulfill, but has already been fulfilled by God in Christ.

We're to find our strength in what God has done not in what we've done. God has already provided but it's our choice as to what to rely on.

But if you choose to find your confidence in the grace of Christ then you'll have a source of strength that no person and no circumstance can take away.

For Paul, the grace of God wasn't a bumper sticker or a proposition; it was an actual relationship with the One who loved him!

He said, *"I want to know Christ."* In other words, Paul wants to become one with Him, to become like Him!

Paul realizes that Christ had a strength that transcended this world. It was a strength that could endure hard circumstances around us.

It's the strength that comes from living life out to an audience of One. It's what allowed Christ to express, in the end of his life, *"Father I have completed everything you gave me to do."*

Slide 3

2 Timothy 2:2, *"And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others."*

The second point Paul wants us to understand in finishing life well is to invest in others. This is something that's so true and yet so easily missed.

At the end of our earthly lives, it won't be our possessions that matter it will be the difference we made in other people's lives.

Paul realized that there's no investment like the investment we make into other people's lives particularly when we're investing the truth about eternal life.

He wasn't interested in holding big rallies, he met people where they were. Paul understood that lives are natural networks made up of families and friends.

That's exactly how Jesus had begun. Yes, He spoke to crowds, but his focus was on just 12 lives for his entire three years of ministry. Twelve rather ordinary lives.

Paul told Timothy, *"Since you've received the investment I've made in you, now do the same."* He wanted Timothy to recognize the potential of the family.

Notice he says, *"entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others."* Paul understood the exponential power of one because they will influence others who will influence others.

This is the principle God has built into His physical universe. It can be seen everywhere. For example, God created trees with fruit and seeds according to their kind.

We can sit in a forest of massive oak trees and not only ponder how many acorns are in that forest but how many acorns are within a single acorn after it breaks open, takes root, and shares its contents.

It's the unseen power of exponential multiplication, when everyone invests in someone who then invests in someone else.

If one person helped just one other person begin a relationship with Jesus and then spent a year helping them develop so that they could help someone they knew begin a relationship with Jesus do you know what would happen.

After one year, 2 disciples. At the end of the second year, 4. However, after just 33 years, more than 8.5 billion people could have a relationship with Jesus.

We each have the power of exponential influence just by helping one person begin a relationship with Jesus.

Maybe we hear the word “teach” and don’t identify with being teachers. Paul isn’t talking about some type of formal academic teaching.

He is talking about passing on what we’ve learned in any way we might share it. If you just know John 3:16, you know enough to change the world.

Some may think, “*Well, I don’t feel I have a right to impose what I believe on others.*” Paul isn’t talking about imposing anything, but rather sharing what we’ve learned.

Maybe we think, “*No one wants to hear the truth.*” The truth is that people don’t want to be spoken down to, but they’re open to hearing what you’ve personally learned.

Many may initially show resistance, but they know that there’s something more and will be more open than they may show.

You may think, “*I don’t have a lot of potential relationships.*” Did you know that the average person influences 10,000 people throughout their lifetime.

So, embrace your influence, invite people to church, Wednesday Bible study or Sunday evangelism classes, you could invest weekly into an emerging life. Finishing well involves investing ourselves in others.

Slide 4

2 Timothy 2:3-7, “Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer. Similarly, anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor’s crown except by competing according to the rules. The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.”

“Join with me in suffering” how’s that for an invitation. If I got a letter from someone in one of the worst of prisons in the world, I’d expect it to read, *“Get me outta here,”* not *“join me in suffering.”*

It’s important to be clear that Paul didn’t like suffering in itself. When he faced various authorities along the way, he drew upon his legal rights, his influence, and the prayers of friends to be released.

What he’s calling Timothy to join him in is not wanting to suffer but be accepting of what’s required to fulfill what matters most.

This becomes clear as Paul brings in three illustrations: The good soldier, the dedicated athlete, and a hardworking farmer.

Each of these reflect that we must embrace what is required in order to fulfill what matters most, but how do you embrace what is required to fulfill what matters most?

You can spend your life trying to be free of any demands, free of difficulties, but those who want to fulfill what matters most will embrace what is involved. They have a MINDSET towards life.

That's why Paul gives us these three examples. First, he uses the example of a soldier. *"No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer."*

A soldier embraces the fact that they are serving a cause that requires dedication and in doing so they surrender some of the freedom and comforts of civilian life.

That's what allows them to fulfill what matters most. In the same way, we should embrace that which we're now part of, an eternal kingdom.

Then he uses the example of an athlete who's motivated to stay qualified. Verse 5, *"Similarly, anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor's crown except by competing according to the rules."*

An athlete wants to finish honestly and not be disqualified for not following the proper rules. The rules define what winning requires.

There are a variety of athletes who have achieved success, but then it was found that they had not followed the rules so, they were disqualified.

A true athlete will know that it's worth embracing the rules so that what they achieve is legitimate. Rules equal integrity. Are you actually achieving what you appear to achieve?

His last example is of the farmer who should be motivated by the potential of the crop and harvest. Verse 6, *"The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops."*

The point that Paul is making is that the farmer embraces months of work because they value the crop.

God's calling us to work the field of our own lives. Paul's telling Timothy and us to embrace what's required to fulfill what matters most.

Paul has reached the end, and he's not bound by regret. Why? Because he knows that he has pleased his Commander.

He knows that he is not going to be disqualified for lacking integrity, but will share in the rewards of the harvest!

This is that point which Paul wishes for Timothy, and for each of us.

Slide 5

Conclusion

Paul brings this home with the following in the following verses.

Timothy 2:8-9, *"Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained."*

I am now chained like a criminal but God's Word is not chained. With these words Paul brings home the unstoppable power of what God has done.

They may chain the messenger, they may even kill the messenger, but the Gospel message can't be stopped.

Paul was killed within weeks, silenced, by the empire to end all empires, and here we are 2,000 years later gathering around the Gospel he shared. If you want to finish well, hold on to what will last.

I want to close with a story that may be familiar to some, it's actually a true story drawn from a naval magazine.

While on maneuvers, a battleship lookout noted a light in the dark, foggy night. After noting the light's coordinates, the captain recognized his ship was on a collision course with that other vessel.

"Signal the ship: We are on a collision course, advise you change course 20 degrees." The return signal came, *"Advisable for you to change course 20 degrees."*

The captain said, *"Send, I'm a captain, change course 20 degrees."* *"I'm a seaman second class,"* came the reply. *"You had better change course 20 degrees."*

By this time the captain was furious. He yelled, *"Send, I'm a battleship. Change course 20 degrees."* The reply, *"I'm a lighthouse."*

God's authority is never changing, it's always constant. Whenever a change of course is required, we better be prepared to make the correction from our end.

To oppose God would be like me saying, *"Please go outside and stop the rain."* God is unstoppable!