

## **Finishing Strong - Run With the End In Mind**

October 17, 2021

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2 Timothy 4:1-8

*In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.*

*As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing. 2 Timothy 4:1-8 (NRSV)*

Let's pray together. *O God, open us up, open our eyes that we might see, our ears that we might hear, our hearts that we might feel, and then O' Lord open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

There's a lady here in our church – a wonderful lady. She's very classy so when you'd see her, you'd say "That's a classy lady!" Very dignified, always knows the right thing to say. I saw her one Friday afternoon and I said, "So what are your plans for the weekend?" I was just making small talk. She said, "We're going to WrestleMania down at the Toyota Center." Professional wrestling – WrestleMania. I was surprised and said, "You're what?" She replied. "We're going to WrestleMania." I said, "Are you going to paint your face and get a hat kind of thing? What are you going to do?" She said, "Oh, no, we're just going to be supportive." I thought, "How interesting. Wrestling.

Paul is using athletic images in this passage. “Fight the good fight...” “We’re going to finish the race...” It’s specific imagery. He’s dealing with the ancient Greek Olympics which were held from 776 B.C. to 393 A.D. – 1100 years. The ancient Olympics were held in Athens. One of the funny things is that they were discontinued in 394 A.D. by the Emperor Theodosius I. He said they weren’t Christian. Even though Paul’s quoting them – he said they weren’t Christian because originally when they were Greek, they were dedicated to the god Zeus, and he thought it was a pagan practice after Constantine brought the Christian faith into the Roman Empire.

So Paul is speaking about those and two of the greatest events in the ancient Olympics were boxing and wrestling. So he said, “I have fought the good fight...” Do you ever feel like everything is a battle? It feels sometimes everything is a wrestling match – a battle of some sort. I think it’s the “P’s that have got us – the pandemic, polarization, and personnel challenges – labor shortages. Also, purchasing – our supply chain challenges. And in the midst of all that as a pastor I hear more about personal problems. They still go on. People have challenges in their families, with their health, challenges at work that they wrestle with. I’ll have to personally say the battles I find myself fighting are usually right here - inside me - inside my heart. Battles against cynicism, against fear, or against this judgmental, condescending spirit where you find yourself looking down your nose at people who disagree with you.

All these battles against anger, and rage. So much that we are wrestling with.

Paul is clear in Ephesians that we’re not battling against other people. That’s our tendency. We could demonize saying, “It’s you – or it’s you – you’re the problem.” Paul says that no, we’re battling against spiritual forces of darkness. The battles that we fight are to be pushing back the darkness that wants to seep into the world around us. And we’re children of light, and so we want to be pushing for the light, fighting for the light instead of the darkness. That’s the business we’re in.

Paul writes this letter of 2 Timothy from the Mamertine Prison and that’s in Rome. It is a terrible place. When we hear that Paul was writing in prison, we like to think about it being a place with doors that clang shut. But at that time the prisons were cellars down below ground level, so when you were put in jail, they would lower you through a hole into the cellar. Then if you got released, they’d put a ladder down and you could climb

out. But other than that there was no way out. They'd throw things down for you to eat. If you had someone to support you, to pay the money, they would bring you food to put down in the hole. The Roman historian Sallust said that the Mamertine Prison was "Full of neglect, darkness and stench. And it gave it a hideous and terrifying appearance."

Yet Paul writes from there still full of encouragement and exhortation. You can hear when you read the letter that there's this struggle inside. The despair is kind of creeping in as he reaches his last days. But he's still encouraging and exhorting Timothy, "You can do this! Lead well! Keep the faith, don't stop. You can do this!" It's a powerful picture.

The New Testament reminds us over and over again that being a follower of Jesus, being a Christian is not -- God's agenda is not to make our lives more comfortable, to make our lives easier. But in fact it tells us that when we decide to be followers of Jesus it's going to get harder. We're going to talk more about that next week.

So how do we fight the good fight? What does it take? It takes perseverance. So Paul says, "I have finished the race." We too are to finish the race. Perseverance.

You know the legend about how the Marathon race was begun? Somewhere around 500 B.C. the Greeks defeated the Persians at a place called Marathon -- the Battle of Marathon. The general there sent a Greek man named Philippides to run to Athens and tell them that the Greeks had defeated the Persians. It was a turning place in the war. So what does he do? He runs all the way to Athens, and he says, "Rejoice! We conquer!" Then he falls down and dies. That's the legend. He ran all the way, as fast as he could and when he got there, he made his announcement and he died.

Now I don't know why hundreds of thousands of people a year sign up to run a race where you die at the end. But they do. You have to get in a lottery nowadays to get into the race, to run 26.2 miles along the way. Why do we do that? I can tell you why. I talked to some people right after the earlier service who'd said they'd just finished their first Marathon. They were excited. It's because you learn so much.

I ran one Marathon many years ago and I'll tell you I didn't die but I thought I was going to. But what you learn is that you can do it if you'll train and persevere. It's not like it's easy. The fact that it takes this discipline over time and training to persevere and push forward is why we choose to do it. Because we learn in the midst of it the power of

persevering in the face of challenges. Frank Shorter the great runner was having a really bad day in 1971. He got to mile 21- what they call *the wall* – and he was being passed by everybody. He just couldn't do it anymore. He had to just quit. He said something that became a famous quote: “Why couldn't Philippides have died here – at mile 21? This would have been a good spot for that to have happened.” It takes this kind of perseverance and challenge.

There's a difference between passion and conviction. Passion is hot and it's volatile and conviction is this sort of slow burn. Passion is what makes you fall in love. Conviction is what lets you stay married for decades and do life together. Passion is that feeling that you feel when you first come to Jesus and you think, “Oh, my goodness, I understand how much I'm loved.” And you just feel that all over your body and you feel like you're walking on air. Conviction is what allows you to put one step in front of the other and then take the next step no matter what the circumstances, no matter whether you feel it. To just keep on running.

In the Capital Campaign we're at this position of \$19 million now and we're at the wall. Like mile 21. But we're going to persist. By the way, I love this line. I printed it out on a piece of paper and put it on the wall in my study upstairs. Paul writes it in verse 2: “Be persistent whether times are favorable or unfavorable.” (2 Timothy 4:2). What if we could live that? What if I could live being persistent whether times are favorable or are unfavorable?

There's this tradition that's arisen now in college football. When they get to the fourth quarter all of the students on the home team and all the players on the bench will hold up four fingers. Have you seen that? It's to say, “We're in the fourth quarter and we're not going to quit now! Let's not give up! We have to finish strong!” I've been talking to some of the other staff about whether it's appropriate to mention the University of Texas and the last two Saturdays blowing the lead in the fourth quarter. We decided it was too soon, so I wasn't going to mention it. Finish strong, finishing the race.

So what does he mean by that – to finish the race? Well, he describes it. He says, “I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.” Keeping the faith. The word faith here is an interesting one. In Greek it's *pistis* and it's a challenging word for English translators because it means both *faith* and *faithfulness*. For example,

*pistis* is a word that's used to describe the character of God. God is a faithful God. God won't let us down. God will keep God's promises. It isn't about believing only. We talk about faith like it means to simply believe in Jesus. To have *faith* means to be *faithful*. To have faith means to live that belief with your feet and your hands and your voice. To be faithful – to have *pistis* means to keep the faith. To not quit, to continue to try and live that faithful life no matter what.

Here at St Luke's we talk about five Inside-Out Habits that encourage people to follow as a discipline. We pray and worship, we pray when it feels good, and we pray when it doesn't feel so good. We study the Bible. We don't just read the Bible, we study it. We make friends, we build relationships. We tell our stories, we witness to our faith to others and finally, we give ourselves away in service and generosity. Paul says, "I have been poured out like a drink offering." We give ourselves away.

And here's the thing- that makes us feel so fruitful and it feels like you're being transformed and you're walking on air. And sometimes it's like, "Come on, I'm just plodding along here, God." But we're going to keep the faith. We're going to stay at it.

Now listen again what Paul says. "I have kept the faith and henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness and not only for me but for all who long for his appearing."

He's talking about the victory crown. If you've ever run a Marathon, there's always this little snide thing that someone says to you. They say, "Well, did you win?" And unless you're from Kenya, you didn't win. No one runs a Marathon to win it. Most of us anyway don't go to win the Marathon. We're not going to win. We are going to finish – that's what matters. As followers of Jesus we don't win. God provides a victory on that day – on the day of resurrection. God provides us the victory, but we don't make that happen. What we do is that we continue to be faithful.

Do we believe that because of our hard work in the Gethsemane parish that every single child there will have a quality education? That would be a dream, but do I believe that? If I believed that I would ultimately be so cynical. Do I believe that because of the hard work we do that no student, no teenager, will find themselves falling into gangs? No, I don't believe that. I would have given up a long time ago. Do I believe because of our great evangelism that every single person in that community or around this church or

every student who comes to our Westheimer student ministry, or every child who is in this neighborhood is going to know the amazing love of Jesus? That Christ died for them, and they receive that. Do I believe that? Not because of our great work. No, the victory is God's. Our job is to be faithful. And we do believe that one day every knee will bow, and every tongue confess. We do believe that the darkness will be pushed back, and God will re-create the world and put it right again. That's why Paul can say in 1 Corinthians 15, "Just keep at it, keep at it, because your labor is not in vain." God will ultimately make things right. That's what we believe.

So what is our job? We are just to be faithful and let God worry about that victory.

Let me close with this. In 1964 a runner from Sri Lanka whose name I cannot pronounce was running the 10K run – 25 laps around the track. And while he's running, he's the slowest of all the runners. In fact, the winner laps him many times. Then once the winner wins, the winner wants to take that victory lap. That's where they hold the flag and run around and everyone's cheering for the victor. And all the crowd is ready for that, so they see this guy continuing to run on the track. So the winner can't go out and do the victory lap. So the crowd begins to boo him as he's trudging around the track. Over and over until finally they realize what's happening. So they stop and begin to cheer him on. Because he'd come 4000 miles, sent by his country, not to start a race but to finish it.

That's what we're called to do. I don't know where you are in your spiritual journey. I don't know what headwinds you might be facing, or the battles you're fighting. Sometimes you might be on fire for Jesus or maybe you're just putting one foot in front of the other. But fight the good fight. Finish the race. Keep the faith.

*Gracious God, all this world around us so many challenges, headwinds, and in the midst of it you have placed us here and called us to faithfulness. So we will be faithful, God, by the power of your Holy Spirit send that within us that we can keep running and not stop. Until that time when we finish the race, knowing for sure that on that day you will give us the victory. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.*