

Finishing Well

2 Timothy 4:6-8

Most of you received a letter from me last week describing the sabbatical that Brenda and I will be taking May, June, and July. If you didn't receive a letter and want one, email Deb and she'll send you one (deb@faithmanhattan.org). Our church has a generous sabbatical policy for its full-time pastors. Every seven years we can request a sabbatical; unless there are extenuating circumstances our elders gladly grant such sabbaticals.

This morning I wanted to invite you into the topic I'll be studying on sabbatical (whether you're young or old or somewhere in between): finishing well. I've been at Faith for 26 years; I'll be 55 years old this summer. And so I'm thinking about finishing well as a pastor over the next ten to fifteen years.

Most of my Christian life I've identified with Timothy more than anybody else in the Bible. The first Bible study I did as a believer in college was on 1 and 2 Timothy. I identified with Timothy in all sorts of ways. For starters, Timothy's mother was Jewish and his father was Gentile (Acts 16:1); my mother is Jewish and my dad was from Texas (which is about as Gentile as you can get). Like me, Timothy was somewhat sensitive as a young man (1 Corinthians 16:10-11). I felt a natural affinity toward Timothy.

When I became a pastor, everything Paul wrote to Timothy became immediately relevant. Paul's letters to Timothy address situations and responsibilities that pastors face all the time. Almost every single week for the last 25 years I've spent at least a few minutes reading from 1 or 2 Timothy. For years 1 Timothy 4:12 was one of the main challenges I accepted from these letters:

12 Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe.

In that day as well as ours it is easy to dismiss or not take seriously people because they're young. But Timothy was supposed to preempt such a response by living the type of life that others just can't dismiss. Through the years I have tried to take that challenge to heart.

But a few years ago it occurred to me that the term "youthfulness" might no longer apply to me. Subtly I've begun to identify with Paul in certain ways. Specifically I've become fascinated with the statement Paul made in 2 Timothy 4 as he looked back over his life. Paul was able to say, "I've fought the good fight, finished the course, and kept the faith." He actually had a sense of satisfaction about the way he'd lived and the way he'd served God. I've recognized a growing desire to be able to say the same thing at the end of my life. This is the main topic that I will be exploring on sabbatical: what it might look like to finish well in the pastorate and in my marriage.

And so today we are going to consider **the vision** Paul gives for finishing well and then **the habits of life** that promote finishing well. What Paul wrote to Timothy as a pastor is relevant to every believer.

The Vision for Finishing Well (2 Timothy 4:6-8) In 2 Timothy 4:6–8 Paul first looks back at his life on earth and then looks forward to his reward from God. Since verse 6 flows from verse 5, let's read it first:

5 But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

It's in the context of challenging Timothy to fulfill **his** ministry that Paul makes his comments about his own life. He tells Timothy, "Fulfill your ministry. . ."

6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.

A drink offering was one of the offerings stipulated in the old covenant. Leviticus 23:13, for example, says that when you bring the "first fruits" (i.e., the first harvest) to the Lord, you are to pour "a fourth of a hin of wine" (about 2 pints) on top of the grain as a drink offering. A drink offering was a sacrifice of praise to God, and when it was poured out, it was gone. Paul had the sense that he was being poured out as a drink offering to God. His life was drawing to a close; the time of his departure/death was near.

7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith;

In the Greek text Paul puts the nouns first to emphasize the things he had pursued: the good fight I have fought, the course I have finished, the faith I have kept. First, his ministry had been a fight or a struggle. If you've ever been personally involved in the spiritual development of others, you know that it's not a nice, tidy endeavor; it's a fight for people's souls. But Paul calls it a good fight because the souls of people matter and the reputation of Jesus matters. Paul looked back at his ministry and he was able to say he had fought the good fight. [In 1 Timothy 6:12 Paul had told Timothy to "fight the good fight of faith."]

Second, the race Paul had run. Paul's race involved being an apostle to the Gentiles and taking the gospel to people who'd never heard the name of Jesus. His race also involved being beaten, stoned, imprisoned, and going hungry and thirsty. It was a difficult race, but like Jesus Paul had run it with endurance (Hebrews 12:1). He hadn't dropped out or given up.

Third, "the faith" Paul had kept. That is a reference to the Christian faith: the gospel and the doctrines about Jesus. Paul had persevered in believing and proclaiming "the faith," the truth about Jesus. In the things that really mattered, Paul finished well.

In verse 8 Paul turns his attention to the reward that awaited him at the return of Christ.

8 in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.

Paul uses the imagery of a race in which the “judge/official” awards the crown to the victor. I think Paul is saying that the crown he would receive from Jesus was righteousness itself. Paul readily acknowledged that he wasn’t unique; Jesus would award righteousness to “all who have loved His appearing” (i.e., to all who love Him).

Paul ended his life with the satisfaction that he’d finished well. And he actually looked forward to seeing Jesus. I think it’s important to point out that Paul wasn’t bragging when he wrote to Timothy, “I have fought the good fight, finished the course and kept the faith.” And he wasn’t concerned about his reputation - at least not in some self-centered way. He was really concerned about passing the baton to Timothy so that **he** would finish well. They say that when you’re running a relay race nothing else matters much if you drop the baton at the handoff. This is one of many reasons why it matters so much that each generation of believers is able to say, “I’ve fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith.” Upcoming generations need to know 1) that it’s possible to finish well, serving God for a lifetime, and 2) that there are time-tested ways to finish well.

Our capacity to serve in certain ways may change due to health and other circumstances. But I agree with those who say that older adults have a unique contribution to make to the cause of Christ. Those who’ve walked with God for years and years are often the most skillful when it comes to “being zealous for good deeds.” And those who are older often have wisdom and experience that upcoming generations desperately need. When I was in my early 30s everybody in the church was young, so I looked around town a bit for someone older to mentor me. For whatever reason I never found that person. Here at Faith wouldn’t it be great if those who were younger were routinely mentored/discipled by those who are older? Some of that is already happening; it’s pretty exciting. That’s what we want to grow.

If you read my letter this past week, you already know this. . . This fall (October 11th) we are hosting a seminar for everybody 50 and older; if you’re younger you’re welcome to attend and listen in on the conversation. But the seminar is designed for those 50 and older to help us think through the last chapters of our lives. One of the speakers is Chris Holck, an E-Free pastor in Florida. He pastors a church comprised entirely of retirees. Their church’s mission is “to equip and encourage people to finish well for the glory of God.” It will be good to learn from someone who is intentionally leading a church into the very things we’re talking about this morning.

The other speaker will be Amy Hanson. Amy is a respected author and speaker on baby boomers and aging. Her book *Baby Boomers and Beyond* is helping churches across the nation reinvent ministry to aging adults. Amy received her undergraduate degree from Manhattan Christian College and now lives in Omaha. She’s excited to come back to Manhattan and be with us.

This seminar will help those of us who are older think through and dream about some of the issues surrounding “finishing well”: how we might use our time and resources for the glory of God.

Paul wasn’t merely concerned that he finish well; he wanted Timothy to do the same. We saw in 2 Timothy 4:5 that Paul told Timothy, “Fulfill your ministry” - bring it to fullest expression, faithfully carry out your responsibilities. The things Paul urged upon Timothy throughout 1 and 2 Timothy were the things that would help him fulfill his ministry and finish well.

The Habits of Life that promote Finishing Well (1 Timothy 4, 2 Timothy 1:13-14, 2:15, etc.) I’ll have to be selective, but I want to review some of things Paul mentions that promote finishing well. On sabbatical these are the types of things I plan to re-engage; I want to make sure I’m actually **practicing** these habits of life. These are the types of things to which all of us should pay attention. One of the core challenges to Timothy is found in 1 Timothy 4:16.

16 Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.

Timothy needed to “pay close attention” to two broad areas: himself and his teaching. We’ll come back to these two areas in a couple minutes. But notice that Paul said, “persevere in these things.” To persevere means to stick with something as opposed to giving up or being half-hearted. Timothy needed to pay close attention to himself and his teaching for the long haul.

If Timothy persevered in this way, Paul said that Timothy would “ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.” Paul literally says, “. . . **you will save** both yourself and those who hear you.” In an ultimate sense, the only thing that can save people from their sin is the death and resurrection of Jesus. But this verse reminds us in a rather stark way that God uses other people in that process. By being faithful to his calling Timothy would himself experience more and more of his salvation. And God would use Timothy in a similar way in the lives of those who heard his teaching.

There was a tremendous amount at stake in whether or not Timothy “persevered” by paying close attention to himself and to his teaching. These two areas represent two broad categories to which all of us need to pay attention: yourself (your spiritual maturity and walk with God) and your ministry (which is normally aligned with your spiritual gifting). The Scriptures teach that every believer is responsible to pursue maturity and to pursue ministry/service. If you want to persevere through this life and finish well, you have to pay attention to yourself and to your ministry.

“Pay close attention to yourself.” When it came to “himself” Paul stressed a number of things. Earlier in chapter 4 Paul wrote this:

6 In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following.

Timothy needed to be “constantly nourished” by the truth that he was communicating to others. It’s not enough for a spiritual leader to know and communicate the truth; s/he also needs to be nourished by God’s word so that it’s not hollow information. Teaching should flow from a deep place in the life of the teacher. In verses 7 and 8 Paul makes a contrast and then gives a challenge.

7 But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; 8 for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

There is a sense in which God disciplines us as a good Father (Hebrews 12:4-11). But there’s another sense in which we discipline ourselves. Paul told Timothy, “. . .discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.” Just as an athlete trains ahead of time so that s/he can perform instinctively in competition, as believers we are supposed to train ourselves in the ways of godliness.

We discipline ourselves through various spiritual disciplines. We meditate on Scripture to train our minds and emotions so that we think and feel like Jesus did. We practice solitude, withdrawing from people and conversation, in order to learn how to hear the voice of God. We practice secrecy, keeping some things between us and God alone, to break the craving to impress others with our righteousness. Just like an athlete can’t perform unless s/he has trained, neither can a believer act like Christ in everyday situations unless s/he has trained in godliness. Trying hard isn’t enough; we also have to train.

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 Paul wrote about how he disciplined himself in this way. That’s where he made the memorable comment, “I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.” This is one of the core ways we “pay attention to ourselves” so that we might finish well.

“Pay close attention to your teaching.” When it came to “paying attention to his teaching,” Paul also stressed a number of things. In several places Paul urged Timothy to maintain sound doctrine. In 2 Timothy 1:13–14, for example, Paul wrote:

13 Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. 14 Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you.

Paul had passed along the faith (i.e., the gospel) to Timothy; Timothy couldn’t pass it along to others unless he held fast to it himself. The gospel was a treasure which had been entrusted to Timothy. Therefore he shouldn’t water it down or change it for any

reason. Rather, he should guard it and proclaim it through the power of the Holy Spirit. In this way Timothy would “fulfill his ministry” and persevere.

In addition to maintaining sound doctrine, Paul repeatedly told Timothy to pay attention to his spiritual gift. A spiritual gift is a God-given aptitude that allows you to serve God in some specific way (whether mercy, administration, leadership, or giving). Our best understanding is that Timothy’s primary spiritual gift was teaching. In 1 Timothy 4:14-15 Paul writes:

14 Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery. 15 Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all.

Paul warns Timothy, “Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you.” Instead of neglecting his gifting, Timothy was supposed to “take pains” so that he would excel in his spiritual gifting. We offer the **Network** class periodically to help you discern and then mature in the use of your spiritual gift(s). As Paul told Timothy in verse 15, people should be able to notice that you’re making progress - that you’re actually growing and maturing - in your spiritual gifting.

Having the spiritual gift of teaching didn’t mean that it would be easy. To the contrary, in 2 Timothy 2:15 Paul told Timothy to work hard as a teacher.

15 Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.

Even though Timothy was gifted, he still needed to work hard in studying and teaching. He was responsible to handle the word of truth accurately. If he were sloppy or lazy or unwilling to address hard topics, he would be “ashamed” before God instead of “approved” before God. It mattered how he used his spiritual gift.

There are many other passages we could review. But I think you can see some of the ways that Timothy needed to pay close attention to himself and to his teaching in order to persevere, fulfill his ministry, and finish well. These are the types of things I’m going to study and ponder and pray about on sabbatical. These are the types of things we’ll be exploring together in the seminar in October and through an ongoing conversation within the church.

Today I’m primarily inviting you - whatever your stage of life - to enter into this topic of finishing well. I’d invite you to make finishing well your personal aspiration. And I’d invite you to discern the habits of life you need to practice that will promote finishing well.

I thought it would be fitting to read an account from *Fox’s Book of Martyrs* about Timothy’s death. Remember that Timothy was naturally a bit timid; Paul had written to Timothy that “God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power, love, and discipline.” Paul had challenged Timothy to “not be ashamed of the gospel,” but to “join with me in suffering.”

Timothy was the celebrated disciple of St. Paul, and bishop of Ephesus, where he zealously governed the Church until A.D. 97. At this period, as the pagans were about to celebrate a feast called Catagogion, Timothy, meeting the procession, severely reproved them for their ridiculous idolatry, which so exasperated the people that they fell upon him with their clubs, and beat him in so dreadful a manner that he expired of the bruises two days after. (p. 7)

Did Timothy “finish well”? Would Paul say that Timothy finished well? Absolutely. Finishing well isn’t a function of “success” the way we often think about it. Ultimately finishing well means doing God’s will until the end of your life no matter the cost.