

## ***Finishing Well: Work***

I'm taking three weeks to share about three of the core things that God impressed upon me while on sabbatical this summer: Sabbath (last week), work (this week), and seeking God's face (next week). Our sabbatical focused on the issue of "finishing well."

Specifically, I wanted to gain some convictions about finishing well as a pastor. I didn't really have a preconceived notion of the types of convictions I would gain; I mainly wanted to put myself in a position to hear God's voice by spending time in Scripture, reading spiritual books, talking with other pastors, prayer, etc.

If you heard my pre-sabbatical message at the end of April (and if you remember it) you probably aren't surprised that I spent a good deal of time this summer reading 1 and 2 Timothy. I've been drawn to 1 and 2 Timothy my entire Christian life.

A theme that stood out to me more prominently than ever before is the theme of working hard and suffering hardship. Paul repeatedly urged Timothy to work hard as a pastor and suffer hardship for the cause of Christ ***just as he had done***. Paul was able to say at the end of his life that he had fought the good fight, finished the course, and kept the faith. He urged Timothy to adopt the same style of living that he had adopted. In a very direct way, I sense God telling me that my finishing well as a pastor involves this same commitment to working hard and being willing to suffer hardship.

This emphasis is instructive for me because if I'm not careful I can have all sorts of misguided expectations about the next 10 to 15 years. I can find myself expecting that the longer I'm a pastor, the easier my life should be. I can even find myself thinking that I deserve for my life as a pastor to be easier. At times I've thought that eventually I/we would no longer need to deal with conflict in the church - because we're all so mature and so like-minded and so content. At times I've thought that eventually studying and teaching the Scriptures would no longer be a strenuous endeavor; maybe someday I could put my gifting on auto-pilot and effortlessly study and teach the Scriptures.

Paul's letters to Timothy are helping me let go of these misguided expectations. I'm convinced that finishing well as a pastor means working hard and being willing to suffer hardship. In the first half of this message we'll consider a few Scriptures in 2 Timothy that articulate this mindset. As I'll point out, this way of thinking is important for everyone in spiritual leadership in the body of Christ. In the second half of this message we'll see that this same mindset is urged upon every line of work, not merely those who serve as pastors and missionaries.

***Working hard and suffering hardship (as a pastor and as a follower of Christ).*** (2 Timothy 1:8, 2:3-6, 2:14-15, 3:1-5, 4:1-5, etc.) In 2 Timothy 1:8 Paul gives Timothy a very direct, bold challenge to suffer "for the gospel."

8 Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God,

In Paul's day and ours, there is the temptation to be ashamed of the simple message that Jesus died on the cross to pay for our sins, that Jesus was raised on the third day, and that all who believe in Him are born from above with a new identity and new purpose in life. It's tempting to mute and soften this message so it's not quite so dogmatic about the diagnosis of sin and not quite so exclusive about the remedy being found only in Jesus' death and resurrection. Paul tells Timothy not to feel shame when people reacted negatively or even violently; he shouldn't distance himself from the message or from Paul as the messenger.

Instead, Timothy was to join Paul "in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God." Timothy didn't need to go looking for suffering, but when he was required to suffer because of the gospel, he was to enter into that suffering, knowing that God's power was sufficient. God wouldn't abandon him to his own strength; God would provide power to suffer well.

This instructs me not to dread the possibility that I will suffer because I am a pastor who shares the gospel and teaches the Scriptures. Next month we're going to launch into a study of the book of Romans. In Romans Paul deals with some issues that are very controversial and emotionally charged in our day. This verse reminds me that my calling involves faithfully teaching the Scriptures and trusting God with the results. To do anything less is to stumble before reaching the finish line.

Paul makes a similar appeal in chapter 2. He uses the imagery of a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer - three callings that require lots of work and lots of hardship. If you're a soldier, an athlete, or a farmer, you'll know exactly what Paul is saying in this passage.

3 Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. 4 No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier. 5 Also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules. 6 The hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive his share of the crops. 7 Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

It's just wrong for someone in spiritual leadership in the body of Christ to think, "I shouldn't have to work hard and suffer hardship." No good soldier, athlete, or farmer would think that. Those whose vocation involves spiritual leadership should expect to work as hard as those in every other vocation/calling.

In 2 Timothy 2:15 we find Paul's classic challenge to Timothy to work hard in studying and teaching the Scriptures.

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.

A workman would experience healthy/appropriate shame for not doing the work that s/he had been hired to do. Paul repeatedly reminded Timothy that God had called and gifted him to study and teach the "word of truth." Every spiritual gifting requires

diligence; just as an athlete may have natural abilities but needs to be disciplined and focused, Timothy needed to be diligent in handling accurately the Scriptures. Ultimately Timothy should seek God's approval for the way he conducted himself as a pastor.

Let's look at 2 Timothy 4 as one more example of this challenge to work hard and endure hardship.

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

This is a reminder for everyone in positions of spiritual leadership (pastors, elders, life group leaders, campus ministers, etc.) to be soberminded, to endure hardship, to do the work of an evangelist, and to fulfill their ministry. Paul tells Timothy to fulfill his ministry because he [Paul] had fulfilled his (2 Timothy 4:6-8):

6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; 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.

For Paul, the finish line was the return of Christ ("that day") or death, whichever came first. My finish line isn't when I retire from being senior pastor at Faith. Paul was committed to seeking God until His last breath and he urged Timothy to live with that same intensity.

This summer I soaked in these Scriptures and thought about what the next ten to fifteen years of ministry might be like for me. I realize that capacity and energy will change as I get older, but I'm fully convinced that God wants me to continue working hard as a pastor instead of coasting or taking the path of least resistance. The mission of the church (making disciples of all nations) is inherently strenuous and difficult. Therefore, being a pastor will always be strenuous.

This doesn't mean that it won't be joyful/satisfying. Actually we want the spiritual leadership at Faith to experience as much joy as possible. Hebrews 13:17 says that this is in the best interests of the entire church. That's why we work hard at relationships and words and forgiveness and reconciliation. Even though serving in the body of Christ is hard, it should be joyful.

***Working hard and suffering hardship in your work.*** (Genesis 2:15, Exodus 20:8-11, Jeremiah 29:7, Colossians 3:23)

So far I've been talking about my work as a pastor. But I want us to spend the rest of our time thinking about **your** work. Your work is the main thing you do whether you get paid for it or not. If you're a student, your work is to study and learn; if you're staying home raising children, that's your work; if you've retired from your career your work might involve running a household, serving in the church or various organizations

around town. I've known people whose main work in later years was to pray. Your work is the main thing you do.

Think with me about this. . . I doubt that any of you would disagree with what I've expressed about my role as a pastor. I doubt that any of you would say, "It's fine if you don't really put your heart into being a pastor. Avoiding hard issues and taking short-cuts is no big deal. After all it's just a job; you're just earning a paycheck to support your family." No, I know you want me to do my work from the heart: fixing my eyes on Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, with God as my audience. You would probably say the same thing about the missionaries and campus ministers that you support, right?

Here's my follow-up question: Do you believe the same thing about your work? Do you believe that you should do your work from the heart, unto the Lord as an expression of your devotion to Him? Or do you think it's okay to go through the motions in your work, doing only as much as necessary so that you don't look bad, because you're only earning a paycheck to support yourself (and your family)?

We don't have time to develop a full-blown theology of work this morning. Sometime in 2015 we'll do a series of messages on the topic of work. But today I want to state as clearly as possible that all believers are to do their work heartily (from the heart) with God as their audience. There isn't this two-tiered system where pastors and missionaries are on the front lines and everybody else is back home making bullets. That is not the picture painted in the Scriptures.

In the Bible, Adam and Eve were given work to do before the Fall. The creation account in Genesis 2 even makes the statement that before Adam and Eve were created that, "there was no man to cultivate the land." This implies that cultivating/working/serving was part of God's plan all along. This is confirmed in 2:15 which reads:

15 Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.

The term cultivate is elsewhere translated work, serve, or labor. The land was never meant to be left in its pristine condition. It was to be cultivated skillfully and responsibly. This "work" was one aspect of bearing God's image in the world. This command to cultivate the land was repeated when Adam and Eve were sent out from the Garden (Gen. 3:23). In a very real sense we were created to work.

Last week we talked about Sabbath. We read in Exodus 20 that the children of Israel were to imitate God by resting on the seventh day as He had done. Today I'd like add the somewhat obvious point that they were also imitating God by their work on the other six days. Listen again to Exodus 20:

8 "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work. . . 11 For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the

sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.”

They imitated God by working six days just as much as when they rested on the seventh. Unless they worked six days, Sabbath would have been meaningless. This all points to the perspective that work isn't some add-on or distraction from what God **really** wants us to do. I like the way Steve Garber of the Washington Institute for Faith puts it: “Vocation is integral, not incidental to who we are.”

That may sound strange to your ears because after the Fall work has become toilsome and frustrating. Most of you would say that your work is every bit as hard as my work for many different reasons: your own sinfulness and that of those you work alongside, structures that dehumanize people in the name of efficiency, overwork and exhaustion, unemployment or underemployment. Sometime work seems meaningless. Nevertheless, “vocation is integral, not incidental to who we are.”

You may remember what Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon in Jeremiah 29:7.

7 ‘Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.’

The well-being of the Israelites would rise or fall with the well-being of Babylon. You could say that if Babylon flourished, they would flourish. This, by the way is at the heart of our Love Manhattan effort. We don't just care about us; we want to see the entire city flourish. And so we're partnering with all sorts of organizations that help people across this city in practical, tangible ways. Another way that we seek the welfare of this city is by doing our work well from the heart for the good of our city.

I would encourage you to think about how **your** work promotes human flourishing in and around Manhattan. In what ways does your work benefit your coworkers, your customers/clients or those whom you serve? What's at stake in whether or not you do your work with excellence, from the heart?

As an exercise in how good work promotes human flourishing try this: The next time you drive across the bridge down by the Town Center Mall, appreciate how wonderful it is that that bridge exists; it's a good thing that we don't have to paddle canoes across the Kansas River to get to I-70, right? Think about the many people whose work allows that bridge to be strong enough for cars and trucks to drive across it without collapsing.

Thank God that the engineers who designed that bridge did their work well. Think of all the people who did their work well to built into the lives of those engineers over the years: parents, 2nd grade teachers, high school math teachers, college professors, etc. Think of all the other people who did their work so that the bridge could be built: those who manufactured the materials, those who transported the materials, those who operated equipment and actually built the bridge. Contractors, supervisors, and inspectors had to do their work well so that the bridge would be built to standards. You get the point, right? All of this work results in a bridge that promotes human flourishing

in our city. In the same way, it's important for you to understand how your work promotes the common good; that understanding should motivate you to do your work well.

Colossians 3 is a fascinating text. It was written by Paul to slaves who had come to faith in Jesus in Colossae. Slavery in the first century in the Roman Empire was different than slavery as it existed in America; it was primarily economic, not racial. Nevertheless slaves were enslaved; they had the indignity of having an earthly master. Paul wasn't writing to people who had their "dream job" when he wrote in verses 23-24:

23 Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.

He went on to remind the masters that they too had a Master in heaven, therefore they should be fair and compassionate. The point is that whatever work we do, God is our audience. We aren't merely trying to please our immediate supervisors; we're seeking to please God Himself. In a sense, Paul is telling them what he told Timothy: Don't be afraid to work hard and to suffer hardship. Our work is one of the primary ways that we express our faith.

Just to be clear: I'm not merely talking about the workplace as a platform for sharing Christ with people - although it can certainly include that. I'm talking about the fruit of your work; I'm talking about your work itself causing "human flourishing" - bettering life in our community and in our world.

Having said that, I have noticed that those who do their work heartily, unto the Lord, tend to be the very people who most naturally share their faith with others. They have the respect and even the curiosity of their coworkers; they have the chance to answer about the hope within them (1 Peter 3:15). It's highly unlikely that anybody is going to say, "Even though I don't respect your work (which I *can* see), I really want to hear about your God (whom I *can't* see)." That just doesn't happen. On the other hand, there *is* something compelling about a Christian who does his/her work humbly as an expression of devotion to God, putting the fruit of the Spirit on full display. It's not that Christians are the only people who do excellent work or that only Christians have virtues; that's not the case. But it is the case that a Christian doing his/her work Christianly is a striking, interesting phenomenon.

Just as my finishing well will involve me working hard and suffering hardship if needed, doing my work from the heart unto the Lord, your finishing well will involve the same thing.

Book Recommendation:  
*Work Matters* by Tom Nelson