

A Faithful Finisher

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- [0 : 0 0] So let's pray and then let's listen to what God has to say. Heavenly Father, we thank you again for your word that equips us for every good work.
- ! So I pray now, Lord, that you help me to be your faithful servant. Help me to preach your word with clarity and with faithfulness so that your message might come across.
- And may your Holy Spirit take those words and use it for your purposes today. We pray all this in the name of Christ. Amen. When all is said and done, and it's time to look back over your life, what would your final words be?
- I'm sure we all hope to have something meaningful to say, but it doesn't always turn out that way. This week I came across the final words of Frank Sinatra, you know, the man who sang, I did it my way.
- And on his deathbed, away from the spotlight and the applause, his last recorded words were surprisingly plain and bitter. I'm losing, he said.
- [1 : 1 5] I'm losing. Now contrast that with the Apostle Paul. He too knows he's on his final stretch, locked in a Roman jail with little chance of release.
- That's why he's been pouring his heart out to his spiritual son, Timothy, urging him to grow up in Christ. As we've seen in our series this month, he's been calling Timothy to be an unashamed guardian of the gospel, to guard that good deposit that has been entrusted to him with the Holy Spirit's help.
- And he's been calling Timothy to guard that gospel by being a resilient sufferer who can endure like a soldier, a truth lover who handles God's word rightly, and a godly disciple who sticks with scripture and faithful examples.
- In other words, he's been showing us what mature Christian faith looks like. But now in chapter 4, everything becomes more personal.
- Paul is essentially reviewing his life, so he begins to get more reflective. And what stands out is what we don't hear. There's no panic, no bitterness, no despair.
- [2 : 3 4] There's no echo of Sinatra's, I'm losing. Instead, in verse 7, we hear words of humble confidence instead.
- I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now that is especially striking, because Paul doesn't look like he has fought the good fight or finished the race.
- After all, his ministry has been cut short. But Paul isn't discouraged at all. Quite the opposite, in fact. Why?
- Because from a worldly perspective, he may not have had a successful or comfortable life. He doesn't think he has failed.
- He has lived wholeheartedly and unreservedly for Christ, staying true to the faith without deviation. And as Christians, isn't that what we long for too?
- [3 : 4 0] That when our race is done, we'll be able to say those same words with integrity and joy? I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.

But the question is, how? How can we finish faithfully? And what does it look like? Well, that is exactly what we want to consider today.

In this chapter, God says, if we want to finish like Paul, then here is the path. Firstly, tune your ears to servants of the word.

Then secondly, join your hands with gospel-minded friends. And thirdly, fix your eyes on Christ's kingdom.

That's where we're going today. So I hope your Bibles are still open, but if you have closed them, then open them again to hear God's word teach and train us in righteousness this morning.

[4 : 42] So firstly, tune your ears to servants of the word. Do you remember last week why Paul said terrible times were coming? Because there are these counterfeit teachers leading people astray.

They have a form of godliness, but deny its power. Because the gospel neither shapes their message nor their lives. But they are not the only reason why things can get really bad.

Because look at 4 verse 3. The time will come, Paul says, when people will not put up with sound doctrine. So Paul is saying, not only will there be false teachers, but also false listeners.

These people have heard healthy teaching, that's what sound doctrine literally means, but they split it out. Like kids pushing away good food.

They say, I don't like this. Instead, verse 3 again, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.

[6 : 01] So here is the shock of this verse. Not only do these false listeners reject healthy teaching, they seek out false teachers.

They stack them up the way hobbyists collect model cards or Pokemon cards just to hear what they want. They don't even have to leave the church for this to happen.

No, so long as the preaching never scratches or challenges them, but simply scratches where they itch, they're happy. For some people, as long as they hear about how God will prosper them materially and bodily, they give a thumbs up.

They love a good prosperity gospel preacher. For others, they love some handy tips on how to be a good worker, a respectable parent, an upright citizen.

So they will go for someone who can give them a good dose of good moralism. Indeed, one reason why there never seems to be an end to prosperity gospel preachers and strong moralists is quite simple.

[7 : 17] The demand creates the supply. And in today's world, sadly, it's probably not too hard for someone to find a teacher who will say what they want.

You want someone who says it is okay to serve the Lord Jesus but also make offerings to other spirits at the same time? Sarawakian church history says you can find one.

Or do you want someone who says it is okay to have romantic relationships outside of marriage? I can think of one supposed evangelical theologian who recently taught that.

And tragically, if we crave for something other than the truth, that means we end up receiving lies. As verse 4 puts it, we turn aside to myths.

And as chapter 2 has already told us, that can result in us never making it to the finishing line. Now at this point, you might say to yourself, ah, okay, no worries then, that is not me.

[8 : 30] I'm not one of those people. I don't buy into prosperity preaching. I know Christianity isn't just about moralism. But perhaps there are more subtle ways in which we can still look for messages that only suit our desires.

Perhaps we love hearing sermons that call out the sin and the failings of others. But we don't like it so much when they start addressing our sin and our hearts.

Perhaps we love teaching that speaks to our immediate needs. but we shy away from the heavier stuff, the core doctrines of our faith, like the triune nature of our God or the theological truths of justification and sanctification.

If that is us, then God says our ears need retuning too. But here's the good news.

God delights to retune them let me share with you what someone shared with me. When this person first came to our church, he really struggled with the sermons.

[9 : 47] It wasn't what he was used to. He found them heavy. He couldn't always follow. He didn't get it. Now, I should say that isn't necessarily his fault.

As the main preacher here, I'm sure I don't always communicate well. But this guy was a humble guy who was always seeking to serve the Lord and who had a teachable heart.

And over a fairly long period of time, as he had conversations with me and some other people in the church, and as he persevered in sitting under the teaching of the word, slowly but surely, he said it was as if his ears were becoming unblocked.

unblocked. And the Bible began to become more and more alive to him. And his spiritual taste buds began to change as he found himself craving for more in-depth teaching.

Because of his humility and teachability, I believe the Holy Spirit was more than pleased to retune his ears to God's wavelength.

[10 : 57] So, what kind of people should we be tuning into? Well, Paul gives us some criteria. You can see that especially in verses 1 and 2 in the charge he gives Timothy.

So, here's the first criteria. They should be people who preach the word. Notice, they can't just say anything they like.

No. As one commentator puts it, the king of heaven has committed his message to his messengers and it is their duty faithfully and with proper dignity to proclaim that message to man without alteration or forcification.

Such men come not as an envoy whom you can negotiate with, but as a messenger who must be heard and heeded. They are people who understand the urgency of what they are saying because they understand they are not just giving man-made statements.

They understand that they have to stand in the presence of God and Christ Jesus, verse 1. And so, they are accountable to him for what they say.

[12 : 19] Oh, and by the way, when it says here, preach the word, it doesn't necessarily have to be just someone like me from the pulpit proclaiming the word on a Sunday. It could refer to a variety of people, such as those who speak in youth groups or even in one-to-one discipleship ministry.

Now, what are some ways to tell if a person is truly preaching the word? Well, you can always ask, is he handling the passage in its context?

does he honor the flow of the argument or the story before him? Is he more text driven rather than personality driven?

And you can always ask, is he regularly pointing you to Christ from the word? Does Jesus get the honor? Those are some possible questions to ask.

And actually, 2 Timothy 4 itself gives us more criteria to help us know what it means for someone to be truly preaching the word. Look at verse 2, for instance.

[13 : 32] Such a person must be prepared in season and out of season. Now, that could mean the season Timothy finds himself, he is to preach when he is full of fire for the Lord, and he is to preach even when he is discouraged and wary.

But given verse 3, the more likely meaning is that Timothy is to preach God's word regardless of whether people are receptive to such teaching or not.

He is the servant of the word, not a mere entertainer. And God says, if you tune in to someone who has such a conviction, you are more likely to finish the race because he is ready to say what God wants you to hear rather than what you want to hear.

But here is another criteria. Is the person ready to correct, rebuke, and encourage you? That's also in verse 2.

For the word of God does both. On the one hand, it has to correct and rebuke us whenever there are wrong ideas that need straightening out and actions that need to be challenged.

[14 : 58] On the other hand, it also encourages us whenever we are feeling weak and worn down and in danger of giving up. Probably no one outside of Jesus gets this balance perfectly, right?

But God says the true servant of the word will be someone who strives to reflect these different purposes of scripture. And he strives to do so, end of verse 2, with great patience and careful instruction.

You know, as we listen to God's word, sometimes we can be resistant because what God is asking us to do can be hard. Other times, it's not so much that we are resistant, but we are just slow.

It takes us time to process what we are hearing. But, if the servant of the word we're listening to is very patient, willing to repeat himself, and to teach the same truth in as many fresh ways as possible, we can be grateful.

If he is willing to take time to find the right words so as to make God's word understandable to us, we are blessed.

[16 : 27] Because, if it is true we can be slow and resistant, that's exactly what we need to finish faithfully.

Wouldn't it be horrible if a teacher gave up on us just because God's word didn't impact us the way it should the first time? And, for those of us who might be in any teaching ministry of any sort, isn't this a reminder and encouragement to us to pay attention not just to the content, but also to the manner of our teaching?

Because our great patience and careful instruction could be what God uses to help someone else run their race faithfully.

And, verse 5 rounds out the criteria for these servants. The basic idea is, if you want to finish the race faithfully, you need to be shaped by teachers who themselves are finishing faithfully, especially when they are being tempted to go off course.

So we should ask, does the teacher demonstrate steadiness rather than drama? Can he keep his head, especially when there is so much false teaching going on elsewhere?

[17 : 55] is he willing to pay the cost to persevere rather than compromise? Does he endure hardship?

Given that there might be people with itching ears who have left the gospel, is he ready to tell them and others the gospel all over again?

can he do the work of an evangelist? Above all, is he willing to fulfill his ministry?

That is how the ESV translates the final part of verse 5, which is a slightly better translation than the NIV. For the basic idea Paul is communicating is this, Timothy, are you willing to persevere until your task is completed?

That is what I am encouraging you to do. So imagine if we tune our ears to servants of the word who speak like verse 2 and live like verse 5.

[19 : 11] If you do, you have found the kind of coaches who can help you run and finish this marathon. But finding good coaches is only half the battle.

It helps also if we have peers to run with us. And that is the next thing Paul shows we need to finish the race. So secondly, join your hands with gospel-minded friends.

Now, I wonder what your image of Paul is. Do you think of him as an independent minded, I can do everything myself kind of tough guy?

And yet have a scan through verses 9 to 22. Did you notice how many names there are? I counted 16, all in all, excluding Timothy.

You see, Paul isn't just some teacher of doctrine, rather he is someone who invests in others. He has spent a lifetime cultivating friendships with all kinds of people in all kinds of places.

[20 : 26] And that means he now has a wonderful support structure in place. Have a glance at verse 11, for instance. Paul is in jail, yes, but is he alone?

No. Luke is with him. How wonderful that is, isn't it, to have a companion sticking with you through thick and thin? One commentator even suggests that there might have been a Roman custom allowing a citizen brought to Rome for trial to take a slave or two along.

If so, perhaps Luke volunteered to be Paul's slave, just to stay close to him. But whether that custom actually existed or not, we're not sure.

The point is clear. Luke hasn't let go of Paul. He's joined hands with him. And if we glance down to verses 19 to 21, we discover that Paul has many other friends joining hands with him too.

Names like Priscilla and Aquila and the household of Onesiphorus and many more. So here is a question for us.

[21 : 46] If we know such friends can help us faithfully finish the race, what are we doing to invest and cultivate such friendships? Perhaps we aren't doing anything.

I can sympathize. Sometimes there are just so many demands on our time, right? Sometimes, especially as we get into adulthood, investing in friendships can fall off the radar.

And yet, if we want to finish well, we need to prioritize being not just with those whom we share hobbies and interests with, but more importantly, prioritize being with friends who will help us keep walking and growing with Christ.

After all, as Proverbs 17, verse 17 says, a friend loves at all times and a brother is born for a time of adversity. So maybe now is the time to audit your schedule.

How much time do you make for friendships where there is a clear commitment amongst all involved to each other's spiritual growth and formation?

[23 : 03] How much are you doing to create space for truthful and transparent conversations about what Jesus is doing in your lives? How much are you looking to serve a friend simply because you know God wants you to do good to someone else?

When we don't intentionally seek to join hands with gospel minded friends, we are robbing ourselves of one channel God uses to help us finish faithfully.

Now to be sure, not all those investments pay off. In verse 10 for example, we encounter the sad story of Demas. Does his name sound familiar to you?

We actually met him a few months ago in the book of Colossians. In Colossians 4 verse 14, we discover he was one of Paul's friends. And more than that, if we were to go to Philemon 24, we discover he is actually a fellow worker.

But what has happened? Well, come back with me to 2 Timothy 4 verse 10. For Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica.

[24 : 24] So here is the tragedy. Paul loves God. he loves Demas too, I believe. And Demas probably did have some love for God and Paul.

But the sad thing is, in the end, he loved something more than them. Now, do you remember back in the beginning of chapter 3, how all those false teachers are marked by the wrong loves?

they loved themselves, they loved money, they loved pleasure, and because of that, they didn't truly love God. Same with Demas.

Paul says he loved this present world. Now, that doesn't mean that he enjoyed sunsets or beaches or good food. It means his heart was pointed in the wrong direction.

He wanted comfort too much and Jesus too little. And so he has not kept the faith. He has abandoned Paul and the gospel.

[25 : 33] So here is the thing. To love people is to risk being hurt by people. Paul's experience with Demas teaches us a hard reality.

Investing in gospel friendships will always carry a cost. When you open your heart to someone, when you rely on them as a fellow worker, you are making yourself vulnerable.

You are giving them the power to wound you. In verse 16, Paul has clearly felt that pain and not just with Demas.

Notice at his initial trial, no one came to my support, he says, but everyone deserted me. And of course, you can't be friends with everyone.

Look further down the page in 2 Timothy 4, and we see that Demas wasn't the only one who left a scar on Paul's heart. It seems, verse 14, as if Alexander, the metal worker, left literal scars on Paul.

[26 : 41] The gospel, verse 15, had drawn a dividing line between him and Paul, since he strongly opposed Paul's message, and meant that he became Paul's enemy, not his friend.

He brought harm to Paul. That's the reality. But there is reward as well. For look again at verse 11.

did you notice that Paul wants to see Mark? What's so remarkable about that? Well, there is actually history between these two.

On Paul's first missionary journey, Mark actually abandoned him. He deserted Paul. You can read all about it in Acts 12 and 13. But now, here is Paul longing to see Mark again.

And not just that, he even hopes Mark can join him on future journeys if he ever gets out of prison. He says Mark is actually a real help to him. So it appears at some point after Acts 13, they got back together.

[27 : 55] They became true friends once again. You see, my brothers and sisters, when friendships are held together by Jesus, and shaped by the gospel, there can be real forgiveness and real restoration.

It may take time, but the fruit of reconciliation can be real. People may have fallen, but because of the power of the gospel, they can get up, keep running the race, and finish faithfully.

because they have friends who forgive like Jesus does, and restores like Jesus does. So join your hands with gospel minded friends.

And as you join your hands together, thirdly, have your eyes fixed on Christ's kingdom. Now, right at the beginning of this sermon, we heard Paul's words, I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

And don't you think that would have made for a great end to this letter? You know, those are some brilliant final words. He probably could have signed off there and then. But Paul doesn't stop there.

[29 : 21] In fact, in verse 9 and 22, he tells Timothy, come as soon as you can. And in verse 13, he says, Timothy, when you come, bring my scrolls, bring the parchments, bring my theological library, in other words.

Now, wait a minute. I thought Paul was done and dusted. I thought he's just waiting in prison, waiting to die. But actually, Paul is still thinking about how to advance the gospel.

All his life, this is what he has lived for, to train and support leaders like Timothy, to push the gospel forward, to strengthen the churches. And now, even on the edge of death, that same fire still burns in him.

That's why Paul is getting his people together. That is why he's getting his tools together. His race is nearly done, but it is not done just yet.

And that's why verse 11, he wants to see Mark too, because he is hoping there is still ministry left for him to do with his friends. That's how he wants to faithfully finish the ministry.

[30 : 43] wants to help. He tells a story about a couple he knows.

He doesn't name the couple, but I think I know who he's talking about. Now, these couple are in their 60s. They are not what you call the impulsive types.

But they decided to move from their comfortable home in the UK to sub-Saharan Africa to work in cross-cultural mission. I think I have one more spell of active service in me, the husband said, and my wife and I want to use it for Jesus.

And so they did. they packed up and moved to Africa to serve churches there, using their gifts and experience in the afternoon of their lives.

And actually, closer to home, I can think of another couple who did something very similar. Those of you who are long-termers here, you will know Dr. Pan and his wife, Gyo Ming.

[32 : 02] And that's what they did too, by choosing first to move from KEC to Cambodia, and then back again to another part of Malaysia where there are much fewer gospel resources so that there might be good witnesses there.

Now, that is such a great way to run the last lap of your race. So, whatever lap you are on, whether you are in the beginning, the middle, or the final portion, we should all be asking ourselves, are the decisions I am making with my life showing that my eyes are fixed on the kingdom?

Am I, to use Paul's language in verse 6, willing to pour out my life like a drink offering, especially as the time for my departure draws near?

Paul here is drawing his language from the book of Numbers in the Old Testament. There, the Israelites were commanded to bring their burnt offerings to God for the forgiveness of sin, but as they brought their animals, they would then pour wine onto the altar as a final symbolic act of sacrifice.

That was the drink offering. So when Paul talks about being poured out, he's thinking of that. He's saying his life is like a final drink offering, poured out for Jesus, even to death.

[33 : 41] In other words, he is a living sacrifice to his Lord. That's how he wants to finish the final lap of his life. What about you?

Now, you might ask, what enabled Paul to go all out like that, right to the very end?

The answer is in verse 8. Let me read it. Now, there is in store 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 longed for his appearing.

You see, as Paul fixes his eyes on the kingdom, what does he see? A crown of righteousness.

Now, we might think of crowns in terms of kings, but that word also means a reef. And when we think reefs, we might think Christmas decorations, but actually a reef is what an athlete would wear around their head.

[34 : 52] You still see it at the Olympics. and that would be the price you would receive. And Paul is looking forward here to receiving that crown of righteousness as a prize from Jesus.

You see, to fix our eyes on the kingdom is really to fix our eyes on the king, Jesus. And if we have put our trust in him, if we have accepted the hand he has stretched out to us, if we have said to him, yes Lord, I believe you died in my place, and you are now the one I live for, we can't wait to see him.

We will long for his appearing. We will long for his kingdom. We will long for the crown he is going to give us. Because that is when everything good will come.

That is when death will die forever, love will win forever, pain and suffering are a thing of the past. And if we know this is our future, we will run as hard as we can to finish as faithfully as we can.

We will pour ourselves out in whatever we can so that as many people can see Jesus the way we will see him. Even when, verse 16, we are abandoned by everyone, we know we can still live for the gospel as Paul does, verse 17, because, verse 18, God will bring us safely into his kingdom.

[36 : 29] That's his guarantee. So how are you running? Now maybe, as you heard the word this morning, you realize you are pretty far from where Paul is at.

you are in danger of not running the race well, or even dropping out. Well, here is your opportunity to get back on track.

You can still turn back to Jesus, but you have to do it now, before the race is over and it's too late.

Martin Luther apparently once said there are really only two days that matter in the grand scheme of eternity. This day and that day.

That day is when we will all give an account to God. but this day, this is the day we decide how we are going to live so that we are ready for that day.

[37 : 50] This day, today, is the day to make the choices that count for eternity. maybe this morning there are a couple of people here who don't consider themselves a Christian.

Maybe you've even been going to the Christianity Explored course that have been running for the last seven weeks or so. You've heard plenty about Jesus. But are you ready to make this day the day that you let Jesus be the Savior and the Lord of your life so that on that day you will be so happy, so joyful because you can see Jesus as he really is.

And for the rest of us, my friends, do you want to grow up to be a faithful finisher? Then tune your ears to faithful servants of the word, join your hands with gospel-minded friends, and above all, fix your eyes on the kingdom and its king, Jesus.

If you do that, a brilliant prize is waiting for you. Let's pray. pray. heavenly father, heavenly father, I believe you have spoken, you have addressed us with your living word.

So I pray, Lord, that you'll help us to be humble and teachable, that our ears might be unblocked, that our taste buds might be changed, and that our heart might be tuned and inclined to a different direction than that is to you.

[39 : 58] for those of us who are struggling in the race at the moment, please lift our eyes to see the Lord Jesus, help us to see his grace, to draw on his strength, help us to find support in the friends we have around us, surround us with friends who not only share our hobbies, but care about our spiritual state, so that we might all together finish the race well, and say to each other, I'm so glad you're here, I'm so glad that together, the Lord Jesus can say, well done, good and faithful servant.

So be with us this morning, I pray. Pray all this in the name of Christ and for his sake.
Amen.