

HOW TO FINISH WELL

2 Timothy 4:6-8; 2 Corinthians 4:2-18

Good morning! We finally reached the finish line. This is the eighth and final message on our series on “Becoming a Champion”. Say to the person next to you, “Congratulations! You’re finishing well.”

Today, we’ll look at one of the important things we must learn in life. Which is how to finish well. This is important because it doesn’t matter whether you started early or late in life. What matters is whether you finished at all and, get this, whether you finished well.

Let’s watch this video. (Oregon Runner Prematurely Celebrates Win)

Well, that runner, obviously, didn’t finish well. He’s got victory within his grasp but he let it slip away. That’s what happens when we celebrate early. When we become overconfident. And when we’re not careful about the traps and pitfalls of life.

The Bible often compares the Christian life to a race. This race is not a hundred-yard dash. It’s a marathon. It begins the moment you accept Jesus Christ into your life and it ends here on earth the moment you die. This race that God plans for you, His plan and purpose for your life, is not a flat terrain. It has hills and it has valleys and it has bumps and it has curves. And it has lonely stretches through the desert. It’s a tough race. To finish the race of life you don’t have to have speed. It’s not who can get there first. But you do have to have endurance. Endurance is a key quality of the Christian life. The Bible says this in **Hebrews 12:1**. It says, *“Let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us.”*

Again, this word is very important in your spiritual life – endurance. In fact, God uses the word in two different Greek forms over seventy times in the New Testament.

Any time God says something seventy times He's saying this is important. The reason why endurance is important is because very few people run consistently and finish well in the race of life.

Probably the best example of finishing well is the Apostle Paul. In **2 Timothy 4:7** he says, *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."* How did he do it? How did he keep from getting tripped up and sidelined in life and distracted by things that weren't important? Fortunately, Paul tells us. In the book of 2 Corinthians, chapter 4, he gives us four secrets of finishing well. We're not going to read the whole passage but I'm going to highlight a few of them. When you get home, I hope you read the whole passage anyway. As we go through this list, the four ways, I want you at each point write either an "OK" or "NW." OK means "I'm doing all right in this." NW means, "Needs work."

The first secret to finishing well is...

1. Refuse to compromise your integrity.

We all know what integrity is. It's when your private life is consistent with your public image. Integrity was very important to the Apostle Paul. **2 Corinthians 4:2** says, *"Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God."* Paul says I set forth the truth plainly. I chose integrity.

This quality – integrity – is one of the most admired qualities in any person's life. For the last 61 years, when any survey's been done on the Most Admired Men in America there is one name that's almost always appeared at the top of that survey. That's the name Billy Graham. Why? Because people appreciate his integrity. Billy Graham is an example of the three qualities of integrity that's built in anybody's life. What does it mean to have integrity?

It means telling the truth. It means keeping your word. It means practicing your beliefs. You do what you say. That's what integrity is all about.

I think we all want to have integrity. I don't think anyone wakes up in the morning and says, "I'm going to live a life without any integrity." We all want it in our lives. So how do we get in trouble? You dig a hole for yourself not only with a backhoe but with a teaspoon – one little decision at a time. In fact, I would guess that some of you this week are facing a decision where you're tempted to do something that's wrong. You know it's a lack of integrity but the payoff seems so great. So you think, "Just this one little time."

What is it that keeps you on track with integrity? Let me give you two reasons to have integrity, especially if you're facing a decision this next week. I hope it will help you.

a. Realize you're being watched.

Whenever we're tempted to not have integrity there is this phrase that Satan uses with us to get us to take that step into a lack of integrity in our life. You know the phrase! He comes to us and he says, "No one will ever know."

The truth is there's always someone watching us. That's God. God does know. He does see. We've all heard that saying, Integrity is what you are when no one's watching. I guess that's true but a deeper truth is integrity is what you are when you realize God is watching. When you're aware of that, it helps you maintain your integrity.

b. Remember that dishonesty damages your character.

It hurts you at the very core. You see, life is a test. We've been talking about this the last several weeks that God is preparing us for eternity. Your rewards in heaven are based much on your character here on this earth. Integrity has eternal implications. The decisions you're making now aren't just going to last for a few years. They're going to last for an eternity. That's why this is so important.

I read about the story of Coach Cleveland Stroud. He coached a boys' basketball team in Georgia that won the state championship one year. Then he found out that there was a player on his team that played for 45 seconds in one game during the year although he was ineligible. He let the state know and they took away the trophy. People said, "Why did you do that? You should have just kept quiet. He didn't make any impact. He just played for 45 seconds." But here's what the coach said he said to his boys. "I told my team that people forget the scores of basketball games but they never forget what you're made of." He was someone who understood the importance of integrity, what's going to last in life. If you want to finish well you have to refuse to compromise your integrity.

The Bible talks about the value of that in **Proverbs 11:3 (MSG)** "*The integrity of the honest keeps them on track.*" You want to stay on track in life? It takes integrity.

So how would you rate yourself on this one? On telling the truth? On keeping your word? On practicing your beliefs? On integrity in life? Is it an OK or is it an NW – Needs work?

Don't lie on this one, even to yourself. It's about integrity.

The second secret of finishing well is...

2. Resolve to live with humility

First you refuse to compromise your integrity, second you resolve to live with humility. The Bible says in **Proverbs 18:12 (EXB)** "*Proud people will be ruined but the humble will be honored.*" If you get on an ego trip you're going to get off track in the race of life. The Bible says proud people will be ruined. That means stay humble or you'll stumble. Remember the lesson of the whale: When you get to the top and you're ready to blow that's when you get harpooned.

Video – Celebrating Too Early

Stay humble or you'll stumble. The proud person will be ruined. You're not going to make it to the end. You're not going to finish well. But the humble will be honored.

I intentionally chose this word "resolve." Circle that word "resolve." That means humility is a choice. It's something you choose to do. A lot of people think humility is something that God does to you. He doesn't do it to you. You don't ever need to pray, "God, please humble me." Don't ever pray that! Humility is not something God does to you. It's not something your husband or your wife does to you. It's something you do to yourself. Humility is a choice. Humility is an attitude. Jesus said this in **Matthew 22:13** "*Whoever exalts himself will be humbled. And whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*" So, you humble yourself.

How do you do that? How do you humble yourself so you can finish well in life? There's a couple ways.

a. Be honest about your humanity.

Be honest about your weaknesses, your limitations, your imperfections. I hate to let you in on a secret but everybody already knows you're not perfect. Big surprise! So you can quit pretending like you've got it all together because you don't. In fact, nobody has it all together.

Humility is not low self-esteem. It's not running around putting yourself down. "I'm no good. I'm worthless. I'm junk. I'm just a worm." Jesus did not die for worms. He died for people. That shows your great value. If you weren't valuable Jesus wouldn't have died for you. Humility is not putting yourself down. Humility is not denying your strengths. It's being honest about your weaknesses.

Part of it means being able to laugh at yourself. Did you know that "humor" and "humility" come from the same word? If you can laugh at yourself it's a good sign you're not on an ego trip.

In 2 Corinthians 4:7 Paul says, “*But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*” Those of you who have heard of the rock group *Jars of Clay* – they got their name from this verse. The Bible says that God puts His glory, His power, His life in us and we’re just jars of clay. We’re common clay pots. Clay pots break easily and the fact is we’re all a little cracked. All of us are. We don’t need to hide the cracks. We’re all a little cracked. You need to learn to laugh at your limitations. If you can do that you’re going to have plenty of comic material the rest of your life. There’s plenty to laugh at.

b. The other way to be humble is to focus on God and on serving others. In verse 5, Paul says, “*For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.*” If you focus on loving God and you focus on loving others you don’t have time to get on an ego trip. You don’t have time to get prideful. Humble people don’t think less of themselves. They think of themselves *less*. They’re just too busy thinking about God and other people. They’re not self-conscious. They don’t think bad of themselves. They just don’t think of themselves at all. Because they’re always either thinking about God or they’re thinking about, How can I help you? How can I serve you?

You know what the big enemy of humility is? It’s image. Don’t worry about your image! Worry about your character. Your image is not going to last. Your character you’re taking into eternity with you. That’s what’s going to last. Image is what other people think you are. Character is what you really are.

Rate yourself on this: OK or NW. Give yourself a rating.

There’s a third secret to lasting in life.

3. Renew your spirit daily.

You’ve got to renew your spirit daily. Running the race that God planned for you is a daily effort.

Because of that you get tired and you're going to give up unless you can find a way to draw new strength every day. The Apostle Paul who's our example in finishing well was amazing in his resilience, his ability to just keep on keeping on no matter what. Look at what he has to say in **2 Corinthians 4:8-9**. "*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.*"

He wouldn't let anything keep him down. What is the secret of that kind of life? The ability to bounce back no matter what?

He tells us a little later in that same chapter – **2 Corinthians 4:16** "*Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.*" The secret is daily spiritual renewal. As he says in that verse outwardly we are wearing out. We can't deny this. But some great news: even though you're wearing out on the outside it doesn't make a bit of difference on the inside. Inwardly you can still be renewed day by day and find the strength and energy to live and finish well in life because it doesn't come from the outside. It comes from the inside. That's where the energy to finish well comes from. So Paul writes, "I'm being renewed day by day." How do you do that? How do you stay fresh on the inside?

There are two major ways that you renew yourself spiritually.

a. The first one is through God's Word.

God has given us this book so we can be renewed. There are over 7000 promises from God in this book to renew us on a daily basis. That's enough for the rest of your life. But you have to find a way to get it into your life. The Bible says in **Psalm 119:114** "*You are my refuge and my shield; I have put my hope in your word.*" How do you wait for God's Word? How do you let it get into your life? By using the five fingers on your hand. If you've taken Class 201, you know this.

You do it by hearing it. What we're doing right now. We're talking about God's word. You hear it through your ears.

You do it by reading it. That's where during the week you pick it up and read some Bible verses.

The third way you get it into your life is by studying it, asking some questions.

A fourth way is by memorizing it. Take a few minutes and memorize a verse so it's with you wherever you are. Put it into your mind.

A fifth way is by meditation, reflecting on the Bible. Asking yourself, "How do I do this?" You think of ways to do what you just read. And that is the application part. Because, after getting it into your life, you've got to get it out. Meaning, you apply what you learn on a daily basis. For example, you come across a verse that says, "*I will set before my eyes no vile thing.*" (Psalm 101:3) Because of that, you decide to stay away from movies, TV programs, web sites that promote sex and violence. In so doing, you renew yourself spiritually.

There's a second way to find energy to last.

2. Through fellowship with other believers.

Hebrews 10:25 says "*Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing. But let us encourage one another.*" That's the key to daily renewal. I would love to say that my keeping on keeping on in the Christian life, my growth in the Christian life is because of my intelligence or my spirituality or my own personal dedication. But the truth of the matter is, any growth that's happened in my life, I know beyond a shadow of doubt, is because I've been privileged to hang around other people that have been growing in the Christian life.

That's not just true for me. It's true for all of us. God's designed us that way. We need other people to grow in the Christian life.

So how are you doing on this one? Is it an OK or is it an NW? How are you doing on being consistent in the habits of renewal on a daily basis?

The fourth secret is to...

4. Remain focused on eternity.

If you're going to finish well you refuse to compromise your integrity, you resolve to live with humility, you renew your spirit daily and you remain focused on eternity.

Anybody who has ever run a marathon or any long distance run knows the importance of mental focus. You ask Swen. On a long run if you let your mind start to wander and you don't keep it focused all kinds of bad things are going to happen. You're going to start thinking about how tired you are. You're going to start thinking about how much your muscles ache. You're going to start thinking about how much further you still have to go. You're going to start thinking about where are the other runners in this race and you start comparing yourself. All of those are fatal flaws that will sidetrack you or trip you up and cause you to fall out of the race or get behind. You need to stay focused. Focused on eternity.

A couple of weeks ago, I talked about two things you need to forget if you're going to make it in the race of life. But this week there are some things you need to focus on, you need to not forget, you need to remember.

The Bible says this in **2 Corinthians 4:17-18** "*For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*" It's saying that no matter what you go through even if it lasted your entire life it's only going to last your life. It's nothing compared to eternity. It's also saying that every problem in your life has a purpose. The purpose and the result and the reward of it is going to last forever while the pain is simply here and now and isn't going to last forever.

“So we fix our eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” He says, you look around and everything you see, none of it is going to last.

So the fourth secret of finishing well in life is focus. The more you focus your life the more effective you’re going to be. Light diffused has no power at all. But light focused through a magnifying glass can burn a piece of grass or paper. Then you focus light even more and it turns into a laser and it can cut through steel. The more focused your life is, the more effective you’re going to be.

So, you focus on the future. Not on the here and now. Not on the temporal. You live in light of eternity to receive the reward one day when you finish well and hear God say, “Well done.” What are we to focus on instead of our success and all these other things? Two things: you focus on Jesus Christ and how He lived. He’s our example. How did Jesus run the race? You read the Bible and you focus on that. How did He live a life that was pleasing to God? Second, you focus on the inevitable rewards that are going to come when you cross the finish line and go into heaven and God is there.

The reason why so many Christians start great and then just kind of flame out and don’t end the race well is they forget why they’re doing it. Why am I reading the Bible? Why am I going to church? Why am I getting involved in a small group? Why do I serve in ministry? Because we’re being set up for eternity. These are habits that help me grow spiritually. When I forget that I’m living for eternity, I start to live for now – the budgets and the bills and baseball and all the other stuff in life that comes in and clutters and gets me distracted and I get off track. I have to stay focused. The most powerful motivation in life is not internal and it’s not external. It’s eternal motivation.

For the last 8 years, do you know how many times I’ve wanted to quit as the pastor of this church? Just every Monday morning!

I go, “Surely, there’s got to be somebody who can do a better job than I’m doing!” I feel discouraged and think, “I’m not smart enough to lead this church.” But you know why I keep on keeping going? Not because of me. And not even really because of Kuya Elvin or Kuya Rey. I do it because of Him – for Jesus’ sake. Because one day I want to finish well. So I’m living in light of eternity.

Hebrews 12:1-2 says, “...*let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith.*” He says the secret of finishing well is focus. If you want to finish well, keep your eyes on Jesus who finished well. If you want to become a champion, imitate Jesus, the original champion.