

Finishing the Race

II Timothy 4:5-8

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to II Timothy, chapter four. We're coming today towards the end of our study of the pastoral letters and of II Timothy.

Next Lord's Day, God willing, Derek Thomas will be taking us through II Timothy 4:9-22, a passage in which Paul is relating personal greetings and expressing personal concerns. At first glance it can look like a group of fairly randomly organized verses, but there are some precious gems in this passage. For instance, in that passage in verse 13 is a famous word in which Paul asks Timothy to bring him his cloak and the parchments. You may or may not know it, but C. H. Spurgeon preached a sermon, just one phrase from that verse: "Bring the books"; and it's one of the most beautiful sermons you've ever heard. Well, Derek will be expounding that as we bring this series to a close.

And then, we'll begin launching into the Book of Ephesians next, together on Lord's Day mornings.

Now, it's appropriate that we're in this passage today—in II Timothy 4:5-8 and the phrase "fight the good fight"—in light of the theme of our Vacation Bible School. In fact, you'll notice that we're singing the Vacation Bible School hymn as a response to the morning's passage— *Soldiers of Christ, Arise*—and this is a theme that we've seen Paul take up on a number of occasions as he exhorts Timothy.

Now you'll also notice as we begin to read this morning that this is a passage in which Paul, the apostle, is exhorting Timothy, the pastor/evangelist. And you may well be tempted to think, 'Well, that's great, Pastor. This is a good passage for preachers to think about, and think about how God's word applies to them, but it really doesn't apply to me.' Wrong! We've already said as we've studied passages like this that there are at least three things that we get out of passages in the word in which God is directly giving exhortations to ministers.

The first thing, of course, is wherever we see God exhorting a minister to do something for us in his ministry to us, we are also (the flip side of that) seeing what God wants to see happen out of the ministry of the word in our hearts. And so those passages are applicable to us, just like they're applicable to the ministers.

Secondly, very often the exhortations that are given to a minister are directly applicable to every Christian, because what God wants to see wrought in the heart and life and ministry of the minister, He wants to see wrought in the heart and life and ministry of the Christian...of the disciple, of every disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But thirdly, everywhere we see a passage in which God gives an exhortation to a minister we are certainly seeing an outline for how we ought to pray for our ministers. Many of you here today are not members of this local congregation, but you ought to be praying these prayers for the pastors of your local congregation, even as this congregation should be faithful to turn this passage into a matter of prayer for all the pastors of this congregation.

So, let's turn to God's word in II Timothy, chapter four, beginning in verse 5. And before we read, let's ask His help and blessing in prayer.

Our Lord and our God, we thank You for Your word. It is truth. You mean to sanctify, or make us holy, by it. It is a lamp to our feet, and a light to our way. You mean to guide us by it. Your word is inspired. It is Your very word speaking to us, and it is profitable. It is for our good, so we pray that You would make us to profit by Your word. Help us to understand it by Your Holy Spirit, and by Your Holy Spirit apply it to our hearts so that we respond in wonder, love, and praise, and faith and obedience, and can say with the psalmist, "How I love Your word, O Lord." We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear the word of God.

But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; 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.

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

In this great passage, Paul is giving his final words of exhortation to his son in the Lord, this faithful servant of the Lord, Timothy. And I want you to see four things in particular that Paul does here: He gives an exhortation in verse 5; he explains his situation and Timothy's situation in verse 6; he gives an assessment of his life and ministry in verse 7; and he sets forth what has been his confident expectation in all of his Christian life and ministry in verse 8.

The reason that he gives this exhortation in verse 5 is because he wants to shape, to form Timothy's aim in ministry, and he wants to form and share your and my aim in life and ministry. The reason that he explains his situation and Timothy's situation in verse 6 is because he wants Timothy to follow his example, and he wants to motivate Timothy, by Timothy realizing the situation that he's in.

The reason that he gives this assessment of his ministry in verse 7 is because the world probably would have had a very different assessment of Paul's ministry, and Paul wants Timothy to aspire to the same kind of ministry that he has had. And the reason that he tells Timothy what his confident expectation is in verse 8 is because he wants Timothy to draw strength and encouragement from that same hope.

So let's look at these four things together. First of all, let's look at the exhortation in verse 5—and you'll notice it's a four-part exhortation. It's a four-fold exhortation in verse 5. Paul is saying these things again in order to form Timothy's aims in Christian ministry: "...you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry." Paul is giving this exhortation in order to shape, to form, the aim of Timothy's life and ministry—and, of course, to shape and form the life and ministry of every gospel minister, and of every Christian. So let's look at the specific exhortations. You saw those four imperatives, those four directives.

I. Forming our aims in Christian ministry

The first one is "...Be sober." Now, what he's saying to Timothy is this: 'Timothy, be calm. Be steady. Be sane. Be serious. Don't be intoxicated by the sensational claims of false teachers. Don't be drawn away from the serious nature of the work by the sentimental. You be calm and steady, and sane and sober in your work of ministry.' And that's an important exhortation for the gospel minister, because the gospel minister longs to see gospel success in the work, and so consequently could be vulnerable to wanting to run after things that are a little more sensational.

I was watching a television evangelist of a particular persuasion about four months ago, and he was reporting to his constituents back here in the United States that while he was in India, just a few days before, that two million people had come to Christ over a couple of nights in his evangelistic campaign. Now, I've got to tell you—just knowing him and knowing what he preaches, I doubt that. But, no doubt, it created a great sensation amongst his followers here. The Apostle Paul is saying, 'Timothy, don't run after the sensational. You just be sober. You be sane. You be steady. You be faithfully doing your ministry.'

Do you know what one of the big problems with sensational claims like that is? It distracts the Christian from the thing that God has called us to do in our day to

day life, and it makes us feel like those things are unimportant. You know...the woman who has been faithfully trying to bear witness with her life and with her words to her next door neighbor for five years...she's cultivated a friendship; she's got to know her neighbor's children, she prays for them; she has conversations about ordinary things from gardening to paint colors, to school dresses, to school, to everything under the sun with that neighbor. And in the course of those ordinary conversations, she seasons those conversations with the gospel. She takes opportunity to bear witness to Christ, to point her neighbor to the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the hope that we have in the word of God. And she hears about somebody going out and in two days having two million converts, and she thinks, 'Oh, what I'm doing is so unimportant...' Wrong! That's the kind of steady, un-sensational, sober commitment that we want from every Christian. And Paul's saying to Timothy, 'Timothy, don't be distracted by these crazy, sensational claims of the false teachers. You just be faithful and sober, and steady and calm in your ministry.' That's a good word for every Christian to hear and to remember.

But he goes on, "Endure hardship." He doesn't want Timothy to be surprised by hardship in ministry. How many times have we heard Paul say this in the pastoral letters: "Be ready for hardship...be ready for trial...be ready for tribulation." He's saying, 'Timothy, I'm not wanting you to go out and court suffering; I'm not wanting you to go out and court martyrdom...but I don't want you to run from it, and I don't want you to be discouraged by it, and I want you to expect it. And I not only want you to expect it, I want you to persevere through it. I want you to endure through that hardship.'

My friends, in comparison to Paul and Timothy, we have very little experience in this congregation, in this city, in this state, in this culture, of open, violent opposition and persecution, although millions of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world know violent opposition and persecution. And so when hardship comes into our lives, instead of questioning whether God exists, or questioning whether God loves us, or questioning whether He really has good purposes for us in our life, or wondering about whether we can go on, we ought to be ready to embrace that hardship, to endure it for Christ's sake. And that's what Paul's saying to Timothy: 'Timothy, you be ready to embrace and endure that hardship.'

And then he says, 'Timothy, do the work of an evangelist.' Now, there's a whole debate: Is *evangelist* a special office that was somewhere between an apostle and a regular pastor, that had powers and responsibilities like an apostle, but wasn't equal to an apostle? There's an interesting discussion about that, but it doesn't matter whether that is so or not. What Paul is saying to Timothy is this: 'Timothy, you need to engage in the labor of gospel preaching.' Every Christian, every minister of the word, has the responsibility of being a herald of the truth of the living God, of the hope of the gospel, of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And he's saying, 'Timothy, in the midst of all your responsibility, be a herald for

the gospel.'

Can I just pause and say right here that it ought to be one of the things that our heart beats for and that we are regularly praying for in our personal lives and in our corporate prayer meetings: that the gospel would go forth in our ministries, and that people would come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, and rest and trust in Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the gospel.

Do you really care about evangelism? And do you really care about conversions? Real Christians do! And Paul is exhorting Timothy to care greatly about these things. We've just prayed for the Twin Lakes summer staff, because they will have unique opportunities to share the gospel. There will be young people, some of whom who have come from good gospel preaching, gospel teaching churches...have been there all year long. The word has been being worked into their hearts, the Spirit has been kneading their hearts by the word, and they may be in crucial stages in their own personal growth and development, and some of you will be given the privilege of God of having divine appointments in those people. Their preachers and their Sunday School teachers and their parents have been working on them with the word—some of them for years—and you'll be there at the right moment, in which God will usher them into the kingdom.

There'll be others there who have never heard the word preached. They're not taken to Sunday School. Maybe their grandparents have gotten them to Twin Lakes because their parents don't take them to church. And you'll have the opportunity of speaking the truth. You'll want with all of your heart to speak them into life, but you can't speak them into life! You can't love them into life!

Only the Holy Spirit can bring them to life, but Paul's saying, 'Timothy, you're going to have that heart and burden. You're going to want to tell people the truth of Jesus Christ, and you're going to want to see people saved.'

And every Christian ought to desire that, my friends. We ought to really desire conversion. Do we desire that at First Presbyterian? Is that something that you regularly pray about? - 'Lord God, give us conversions through the gospel ministry of First Presbyterian Church. Let us see people who have never grown up in the church, and as adults hear the gospel. Let us see them come to faith in Christ, profess their faith, and be baptized. Lord God, let us see young people who have grown up under the influence of the means of grace, let us see them embrace fully the offers of the gospel, the promises of the Lord Jesus Christ, and come to saving faith in Him.'

That ought to be a heartbeat for us. That ought to be as much a part of prayer meeting as praying for those of us who are going through burdens and trials. We ought to be longing for conversions. Paul's pressing that home on Timothy.

You know, one great Christian said this: "When a church ceases to be

evangelistic, it ceases to be evangelical.” In other words, when you cease to care about the saving of the souls of sinners, you’ll cease to care about the gospel itself. When you cease to be evangelistic, you cease to be evangelical. We ought to pray, ‘Lord God, make us to be concerned for conversions, and give us conversions through this ministry, and cause Your gospel to go forth.’ Paul exhorts Timothy in this.

And then he says, “...fulfill your ministry.” In other words, discharge all your duties to the full. Do all of the things that you are called to do by God. Serve God fully. Aim to be steady. Aim to endure trial. Aim to preach the gospel. Aim to serve God fully. And that exhortation is just as much for you and me as it is for Timothy. That's the first thing that we see—this four-part exhortation.

II. Christians always minister in a transitional age-between two comings and a going.

But the second thing is this...look at verse 6. Here Paul is going to do two things: he's going to describe his situation (he's about to die), and he's going to describe Timothy's situation (he's about to be in a world without Paul). And both of those are vitally important. My friends, you as Christians always live in a transition age. Every Christian in every church in every generation lives in a transition age; that is, you live between two comings and a going. Timothy lived between two comings and a going.

Do you know what the two comings are that Paul talks about in II Timothy 4:1-8? The first coming that he talks about is the coming of a time when people won't listen to the gospel. The second coming that he talks about (vs. 8) is the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Every Christian lives in a day and age where those two comings are realities: the coming of a time where people stop up their ears, and the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But there's a going in this passage, too. What's *the going*? It's Paul's going. Paul is saying, ‘Timothy, I'm being poured out.’

Now I want you to see two things about this that Paul is saying. First of all, by telling us the situation of his own going, his soon departure - that Paul is about to die. He's about to be executed for the faith. Paul is giving Timothy an example. You remember Paul thought of his whole life as a living sacrifice. We quoted it from Romans 12:1 in the commissioning of Twin Lakes staff: “I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God to present your bodies, your whole selves as a living sacrifice.” Paul thought of his life as a living sacrifice to God, and isn't it interesting how he describes himself in verse 6: “I am being poured out as a drink offering.” You remember Numbers 15. When the lamb was sacrificed, the last thing that happened in the sacrificial offering was what? The pouring out of about a gallon of wine, right next to the altar. And Paul is saying to Timothy, ‘I'm being

poured out like that very final part of the sacrificial ceremony. I'm being poured out.' He's saying, 'Timothy, I have poured myself out for the gospel. I have spent every last ounce of energy in me for the gospel. I am being poured out like a drink offering.' And he's saying, 'Timothy, you do that, too.'

There were people who used to go to C. H. Spurgeon and say to him, "You're working too hard." And he would say, "I work myself to death, and I pray myself to life again." He wanted to pour himself out for the gospel.

But Paul not only tells this to Timothy as an example to him, he tells him to motivate him, because there's going to be a day and age where there's no Paul around for Timothy to go to for counsel. There's going to come a time when Timothy can't send a messenger from Ephesus to Paul, wherever he is, and say, 'Paul, how should I handle this? What should we do?' Timothy's going to have to minister in a world where there's no Paul. And my friends, many of us in this congregation have benefited from the quiet, faithful, consecrated service of saints who have served this congregation well, supported this congregation in its worship and work, and they're not going to be here. And we're going to have to step up when they're not here.

Not only are we going to have to step up, we're going to have to at that time start training a generation under us, who's going to step up when we're not around. There is no generation of Christians that can afford to rest upon the laurels of the faithfulness of the generations that go before them. We always have to recognize that that faithful generation that has blessed us, has given us an example, has supported us—they're not going to be with us always. One day we're going to be the ones giving those examples, and right now we need to be preparing a generation under us that will name the name of the Lord—will praise Him, love Him, worship Him, serve Him, and tell His gospel.

And so Paul is reminding us that we live and minister in a transitional age, between two comings and a going; and our own day and age will see a going of faithful men and women. Will we step up when they're gone?

III. Christian life and ministry as an athletic contest, race, and exercise of trust.

There's a third thing I want you to see here. Look at verse 7. Here's Paul's assessment of his service. A lot of people would have looked at Paul and said, 'You know, Paul, you're a brilliant man. You're an educated man. You're a tremendous orator, you're a great writer. You had so much potential. You have wasted your life. You have just thrown your life down the tubes, because look at you: you started these churches, and...let's see...let's look at the church in Corinth. (Yeah, that's a great success!) And let's look at all the squabbling going on in the Christian churches, and let's look at all the pagan opposition and

persecution against your teaching. Why, you've just wasted your life!

And the Apostle Paul says, 'Oh, no! I have fought the good fight. I have finished the course. I have kept the faith.' That's his three-fold assessment of his service, and we see his picturing again the Christian life and ministry as an athletic contest, a race, an exercise of trust. He's been engaged in this good fight, this good contest, this good match against Satan and against the powers and principalities; against the world, and the flesh, and the devil; and against Jewish and pagan opposition and violence; against religious error and persecution; and he has been faithful to keep fighting that fight. Paul sees that as a life that was worth it.

And then he says that he's been running the race. It's the picture of a long-distance run, and in that race he has had one holy passion. He has had his eye on crossing the line, and the prize of the glory of God through the salvation of sinners.

And he says, "I have kept the faith." In the ancient games, you remember, those who participated in the games had to vow, they had to pledge that they would play by the rules. There was an oath of loyalty, and it's as if Paul is saying, 'I've fought the fight, I ran the race, and I was faithful to my pledge of loyalty. I kept the faith. I defended and proclaimed the true gospel. I continued to live in trust of the promises of God.

Now, why does Paul say that to Timothy? Because he knows that the world is going to say to Timothy that Timothy's labors are in vain. And the Apostle Paul wants to say back to Timothy, 'Living life like I have lived it is not a wasted life. This is what you ought to aspire to. You ought to aspire to fighting the good fight, and finish the course, and keeping the faith. That's what you ought to aspire to.

If you haven't read John Piper's book *Don't Waste Your Life*, let me just challenge you. We've got about 95 copies of it at the back door of the church tonight, and you just pick one up and take it home and read it. *Don't Waste Your Life*. That's what Paul is saying to Timothy. The world may have a very, very negative assessment of how he's spent his life, but Paul knows good and well because he has run the race with one holy passion, he has not wasted his life.

I think one of the saddest biography titles that I've ever read is the title of Malcolm Muggeridge's autobiography. Do you remember what it's called? *Chronicles of Wasted Time*. Muggeridge, the phenomenally world-renowned journalist, once upon a time the editor of one of the most famous magazines in Britain, spent most of his life as a Marxist Socialist, without a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. And towards the very end of his days, by the mercy and grace of God he was saved, and he trusted in Christ for salvation. And when he looked back on all his years before, all he saw was wasted time. He had wasted so much of his life on things that didn't matter, and he had finally come to know what

really mattered at the end of his life.

Don't waste your life. Start spending it now for the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what Paul's saying to us.

IV. Christian life and ministry focused upon a singular future hope.

Then there's one last thing. Look at verse 8. Paul sets before Timothy his expectation: "In the future there is laid up for me a 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 is telling Timothy the confident expectation in which he lived and ministered in order to focus our hearts and minds on that singular future hope of the Christian. He's fixing Timothy's eyes on the one hope that we have in this life.

And I want to say two things about this. The first thing is this: Paul's speaking of his confident expectation that the Lord is going to reward his life of faithful ministry is not in any way a contradiction of the glorious and biblical doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

The rewards of God for faithful servants of the Lord—and by the way, this teaching is not only found in II Timothy 4, it's found all through Jesus' teaching, all through the Old Testament as well as the New—the teaching that God will reward His faithful servants, and that He saves us not by our works, not by our faithfulness; but by our faith alone, through His grace, in faith in Jesus Christ. Those two things are not contradictions. They go together hand in hand, because ultimately speaking these rewards are rewards of God's grace. We strictly do not earn them. In His mercy, He gives them.

But the thing I want you to see is this: Notice that Paul endures what he endures in this life because his hope is on something that's more important. You see, his treasure is not here. His satisfaction is not here. The ends of his fulfillment are not here. They're somewhere else. They're on that crown of righteousness which will be awarded to him on the last day. And isn't it interesting that Paul is interested in that crown of righteousness? He longs for a day when he will not only (because he already is) stand before the Lord fully forgiven; he longs for that day when sin will have been totally eradicated from him, when its presence and power is gone. When he stands before God because of his faith-union with Jesus Christ not only in the imputed righteousness of Christ, but cleansed of sin forever—never again having to struggle with sin and temptation, fully restored to the image of God. That's what he longs for.

I just want to ask you: Is that the greatest thing that you long for? Is that your greatest aspiration personally as you think of the glory to come? To be rid of sin, and to be made fully righteous in glorification before God forever? Paul can't wait!

He longs for that!

My friends, Paul also longs for what he calls “the appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ,” and he says everyone who has “loved His appearing” will receive that crown of righteousness from the coming Judge, the Lord Jesus.

Do you love His appearing? Do you long for the coming of Christ? Not just because you prefer heaven above hell, but because you prefer the glory of Christ and communion with Him above the sweetest pleasures of this earth? It is precisely people who are so heavenly minded as to love the Lord's appearance more than anything in this world who are the most earthly good. And it is the people who love the things of this world who are of most earthly un-use.

It is not until you learn to love God that you can really learn to minister in this world. When you love this world, you can't love this world like this world needs to be loved.

And so Paul is calling Timothy to focus his eyes on this future hope, and he's calling you and me to focus our eyes on that future hope. Remember Paul's exhortation and his situation, and his assessment of his own ministry, and this hope that he sets before your eyes; and Christian, place your hope right there.

Let's pray.

Lord God, grant that by Your grace we would be good soldiers of Jesus Christ. We ask it in His name. Amen.

[Congregational Hymn: *Soldiers of Christ, Arise!*]

The Lord be with your spirit, and grace be with you all, both now and forevermore. Amen.

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