

“FINISHING WELL IN THE MINISTRY”

II Tim. 4:7

“I have fought a good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith.”

“Time and tide wait for no man”; “Time flies”; “Your time is up”, these are common sayings that we hear regularly. They apply to those of us in ministry as well as to everyone else. At age seventy seven I am nearing the point of retirement but I have no plans, at this point, to cease from some type of ministry and I don’t have a date circled on the calendar to die – nor do any of us!

However, we must be realistic and there comes a time when the mind conjures up more than the body can perform. My age and my physical problem that has been with me most of my life, are taking their toll – and adjustments must be made. I am pacing myself more these days. Even Jesus recognized that at some point there is a “finish.” He said in John 4:34 “My food, is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.” And in John 19:30 He said, “It is finished.” To all work there is ultimately a “finish”.

And when we approach that time we have the great models of the Lord and of the Apostle Paul. Toward the end of his life Paul surveyed and summarized his ministry. He said, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

But I have wondered why he said it in the order in which he did? I used to think that he should have said, “I have kept the faith” first. But age and experience have brought me to agree that he had the proper order. If he had not “fought” and “finished” he could not have said, “I have kept the faith.” Only as we fight for the faith and finish in the faith can we say that we have kept the faith. All of us who take seriously the challenges of the ministry want to be able to say honestly what Paul said, don’t we?

Let us focus on the phrase: “I have finished”. At some point, unless the Lord comes first, everyone of us will arrive at that phase of life and labor. There will be a “final lap”, a “finish line” a “last chapter” for us all. Therefore, finishing well certainly should be a concern for all of us, whether we are surveying our past ministry or analyzing our present ministry.

In addressing the subject of approaching the “finish line” let us look at 3 areas:

- The Definition of Finishing Well.
- The Design for Finishing Well.
- The Desire To Finish Well.

THE DEFINITION OF FINISHING WELL

What is finishing well in the ministry? Stanley & Clinton in their work “Connecting: Learning How To Learn From Others” define finishing well like this: “To finish well does not mean to reach perfection, but like Paul, to keep pressing on toward it. So when your time comes to an end, you are still growing in your love for Christ and intimacy with Him, still pressing on to make Him known, still living as His disciple and loving the people God places in your life, and relentlessly seeking to know and do God’s will.” Summation: keep pursuing perfection, keep growing in love for Christ, keep making Him known, keep following as His disciple, keep loving people, keep seeking to know and doing God’s will. That is certainly an acceptable definition of finishing well, isn’t it?

Another defining phrase used today for qualifying what is meant by “finishing well” is: “Success In Ministry.” This is a controversial phrase for there are so many confusing criteria for what “success” is. Kent & Barbara Hughes, in their book, “Liberating the Ministry From The Success Syndrome” refuse to use the term and conclude: “we found no place where it says that God’s servants are called to be *successful*. Rather, we discovered our call is to be *faithful*.”

Another author, Jon Johnston in his book, “Christian Excellence: Alternative to Success” relegates the word “success” to a secondary level by contrasting the quality of *excellence* with the quality of *success*.

I believe a more acceptable approach is the one by Darius Salter in his volume, “What Really Matters In Ministry”. He realized that the word “success” has fallen into disfavor in some circles in that it has become (and I quote): “an industrial-age term that relates more to job status and production.”

Instead of refusing to use the term in an acceptable context, or relegating it to a lesser quality, he redefines it as he understands its original intent. The original intent from the Latin is “to follow after to an acceptable conclusion” and then submits Scripture to define what the “follow after to an acceptable conclusion” entails.

Kenneth Gangel observes as follows: “The world scoffs at any biblical criteria for success. And what are those criteria? Perhaps the three most important ones are: “love” as is seen in I Cor. 13; “a servant attitude”, as seen in Matt. 20:24-28 and “faithfulness” as seen in Matt. 25:14-21.

Joseph Stowell gives us this challenging summation: “Success in Scripture is a matter of living out our lives according to God’s standards in undaunted routine faithfulness.”

Finishing well in ministry or success in ministry then will ultimately be evaluated by God based on God’s expectations, not mans! Therefore, I want to “follow after to an acceptable conclusion” from God’s perspective! What God’s expectations and what is His perspective?

THE DESIGN FOR FINISHING WELL

Paul’s communication to the Corinthians reveals his design for ministry. “We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise. We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the field God has assigned to us, a field that reaches even to you. “ (II Cor. 10:12-13) Note the phrase “but will confine our boasting to the field God has assigned to us.” God has uniquely designed us individually and has uniquely designed a personal ministry for us. And it is God’s design that we finish well utilizing the giftedness with which He has endowed us.

The larger context in II Cor.10:13-18 gives rise to at least 3 questions regarding ministry: (1) Am I in the place God wants me to be? (2) Is my ministry fulfilling God’s purpose for me – i.e. is it glorifying God? (3) Is my ministry pleasing the Lord?

God is not a cookie-cutter Employer! He designed each of us with a different personality, for different purposes, places and periods of time. He gave us differing gifts, placed us in different cul-

tures, communities and churches and no two are alike and no two require the identical type of minister or ministry!

Allowing someone else to set the philosophy, agenda and priorities of our ministries will be ruinous to finishing well especially if they do not share similar principles and precepts of Scripture. I believe one of the most besetting sins in some ministers lives is the sin of mimicry – copying another's ministry style, philosophy, music, programs etc. This will eventually lead to discouragement because Saul's armor will not fit! Dr. Warren Wiersbe says that when we copy another's ministry, "You can expect discouragement because of a fake confidence that leads to defeat."

There is no telling how much ministerial energy, time and money is expended trying to conform or to compete with someone else's design for a successful ministry. Paul wrote to the Galatians and said, "Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ." (Gal 1:10)

My dear brothers, be the exception! Have the holy audacity to be who God made you to be; to do what God tells you to do; to be your own unique Spirit-filled self; to build your ministry as God dictates. Determine the needs of your congregation, minister with the ability that God has given you and you will finish well. God has designed you for just such a ministry – being true to His design assures us that we will finish well.

THE DESIRE FOR FINISHING WELL

The design for a ministry well served is from God, however, the desire to finish well must come from deep within the Savior's servant. I desire to finish well, don't you? I cannot imagine that anyone would want to finish badly in ministry. The desire to finish well is one of the basic desires of a true shepherd who is not a hireling. The Apostle Paul expressed his desire when he said, "that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus." (Acts 20:24)

He communicates two motivating principles in that statement:

First, The Satisfaction Principle - "*that I may finish my race with joy.*" Dr. Lehman Strauss, a friend for many years, said to me late in his life, "Don, I do not want to finish up a bitter and sad old preacher." And he didn't!

Second, The Stewardship Principle - "and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus." Knowing that I must give an account to Him who gave me ministry creates in me a desire to be and do my best to the very end!

There are many exhortations & encouragements to finish well in ministry that have been given throughout the centuries. As far back as the mid 1600's *Richard Baxter, in his standard pastoral classic entitled, "The Reformed Pastor", wrote an entire section titled: "Keeping Up Your Earnest Desires And Expectations Of Success." He defines success as faithfulness issuing in fruitfulness and wrote, "God seldom blesses any man's work as much as he whose whole heart desires success."

In some sense every minister of the Word of God can be honorably successful if they desire to be so in the best sense of the term "success". Unfortunately, many seem fearful of desiring success because they have known men who employed dishonorable means to gain what, to the

human eye appeared to be success. As a result, they use nothing, do nothing, and consequently accomplish nothing!

The desire must be present not only to enter the ministry - "If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work." (1 Tim 3:1) but desire must be present to end the ministry well – to receive the "Well done, good and faithful servant." (Matt. 25:21)

CONCLUSION

Paul finished well. He said, "I have finished the course" and could look forward to the crown. He had been through great difficulties: he had been through some dark valleys; he had many enemies; he had been beaten, shipwrecked and jailed; he had been wounded and scarred; he had shed tears and experienced a broken heart; he had been maligned, misunderstood and misrepresented.

Did he get tired? Yes. Did he have hardships? Yes. Did he get discouraged? Yes. Did he have opposition? Yes. Did he keep pressing toward the finish line? Yes! What enabled him to "finish well?" He said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Phil 4:13) That has been my life's verse these many years. When we draw upon His ability instead of our inability "we are more than conquerors through him that loved us." (Rom.8:37)

Let us follow the example of Paul: He refused to give *over* to the world, he refused to give *in* to the flesh, he refused to give *up* to the Devil. He finished the race well! Let us follow after to the same acceptable conclusion.

In 1968, Tanzania chose John Stephen Akhwari to represent them in the Mexico City Olympics. Along the way as he ran, he stumbled and fell, severely injuring both his knee and ankle. It was seven o'clock in the evening and a runner from Ethiopia had won the race. Everyone else had finished and there were only a few thousand spectators left in the huge arena. All of a sudden a police siren caught everyone's attention.

Limping through the gate came 36 year old Akhwari with his leg wrapped in a bloody bandage. The people cheered. A reporter at the gate asked him the question that was on everyone's mind: "Why continue the race after being so badly injured?" He replied, "My country did not send me 7000 miles to begin a race; they sent me to finish a race"

The Greeks had a race in their Olympic games that was unique. The winner was not the runner who finished first. It was the runner who finished with his torch still lit. I want to finish the race even though I might have to limp to the finish line and I want the flame of my torch to still be lit for Jesus!

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