

“GO FOR THE GOLD (#3): FINISHING WELL”

(2 Timothy 4:1-8)

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[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 8-11-24]

--I--

1. Read CEB Text: 2 Timothy 4:1-8 and Pray.
2. **[WATCH "GO FOR THE GOLD" STAFF VIDEO ("Olympic Attire" -- 2:00)]**
3. I'm not sure how to even follow that! So let me just say this... During the 1996 Summer Olympics here in Atlanta, one of the events that my wife and I attended was the Women's 5000 meter track race at Olympic stadium (what's now GSU's Center Parc Stadium). ¹

A--The winner of that event finished in a little under 15 minutes, and most of the rest of the field finished within the next minute or so.

B--But the athlete I remember most from that race was (I learned later) a young woman from the west African country of Niger named Rachida Mahamane (Má-ha-máh-nay).

1--Her time was not one that record books would remember -- in fact, she finished dead last. But, she was the first female Olympian from her country, and was only *14 years old*... at that time one of the youngest athletes ever to compete in the modern Olympics.

2--Seeing how far behind the lead she was as she was running, and knowing that she would never have a chance to medal, she could have quit.

3--But she didn't, because she knew she was doing what many athletes only *dream* of doing... she was competing in the Olympic games!

4--So, after 19 minutes and 17.87 seconds -- a full 3 minutes after the rest of field had finished the race, and after being passed *twice* along the way by the winners -- Rachida *finished the race*, and I remember being moved to tears when she received a standing ovation from the entire stadium upon doing so.

C--Now, I could have just as easily told other such stories from this past week in Paris, but my point today is that if we're going to compete a race, it's going to require *perseverance* -- *not* necessarily so that we can finish *first*, but so that we (like Rachida) can "*Finish Well*."

4. So today as the world celebrates the end of the Paris Olympics, I want to wrap up our "Go For The Gold" series on "*lessons for the Christian life from the summer Olympics*" by using today's scripture from 2 Timothy 4 to talk about the importance of **PERSEVERANCE** in our lives of faith.

A--Here, towards the end of his own life, we find the elder apostle Paul thinking about the "Olympics" in *his* day & time (the "*Panhellenic Games*"), using sports metaphors and language to give advice to his young ministry partner Timothy.

B--*Specifically: his words then remind us of one attitude today which I believe can prevent us from persevering in our "race of faith", and two others which enable us to do so.*

--II--

5. First, Paul essentially tells us that in the "race" called the Christian life and faith, there are those who never finish because **they GIVE UP and BURN OUT.** ²

A--In Verses 3-4 Paul describes these as "*people [who] will not tolerate sound teaching. [But] they will [instead] collect teachers who say what they want to hear because they are self-centered. They will turn their back on the truth and turn to myths.*" ³

B--Like me, maybe you know some folks like this...

1--Christians who start out "on fire" for God, full of energy, boldness, and passion, but who never learn to *pace* themselves, or to plant deep spiritual roots. ⁴

2--So, when the emotional "high" is gone, or when the "new thing" grows stale, or when a pastor or other church member offends them or hurts their feelings, or they experience tragedy, disaster, or some kind of internal struggle,... they get disillusioned and angry.

3--And they use that as an excuse to "*Give Up*" and "*Burn Out*" -- to abandon their faith, or their church ⁵, or to quit praying, reading their Bible, or even to outright reject their relationship with God, convinced that it's all just show... and that Christians (or at least, the ones *they* know) are hypocrites, and that perhaps even God Himself is just a myth! ⁶

C--In other words, something causes them to "stumble / fall" in their "race" of faith, and instead of picking themselves up, brushing off & getting back in the race, they use that as an excuse to remain on the sidelines, pouting and complaining about the unfairness of the game, or the other players, about their coach (their pastor), or even about the host of the race (God)!

D--Well, God never promises that the "race" of faith will be easy. ⁷ Instead, the struggles of our lives can make us either *Better* or *Bitter* -- they can help us become stronger, OR we can allow them to turn us away from God and from His people entirely; But the choice is *ours* as to which we will choose.

6. Thankfully, though, besides having to beware of "*Giving Up/Burning Out*", there are two other attitudes that CAN help us persevere and "*Finish Well*" in the "race" of faith.

--III--

7. The first of these is found in **those who STEP-UP** -- it's the attitude of people of faith who're not afraid to face difficult tasks and situations; who "step up" to a challenge and take it head on, even when others around think they're crazy to do so.

A--I can't tell you how many times I've ministered to church members and friends who faced challenges such as losing their job, getting cancer or some other disease, the breakup of their marriage or dissolution of a friendship, or the loss of a loved one, and the pain they felt was so overwhelming that they had a hard time facing life after that.

B--But many of these same people remembered Paul's words to Timothy in Verses 1-5 of today's scripture... *"I'm giving you this commission in the presence of God & of Christ Jesus... Preach the word. Be ready to do it whether it is convenient or inconvenient. Correct, confront, & encourage with patience & instruction.... keep control of yourself in all circumstances. Endure suffering, do the work of a preacher of the good news, and carry out your service fully."*

C--In other words, *"Even when you're faced with challenges, hurts, frustrations, tragedies and disappointments, don't shy away from running the race of life and faith. Instead, put on the 'track shoes' of faith in God, step up to the start line, and run with passion, because God is with you!"*

8. Yet, if we're going to persevere to the goal in our "race" of faith, then not only do we need to "step up", but **we also need to FINISH-OUT.**

A--In Verses 7-8, Paul writes this to his young apprentice...

"I have fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith. At last the champion's wreath that is awarded for righteousness is waiting for me. The Lord, who is the righteous judge, is going to give it to me on that day. He's giving it not only to me but also to all those who have set their heart on waiting for his appearance."

1--He's saying, in effect, *"It's taken me a while, Timothy; but I've done it! I've finished the race of life & of faith. And you can too IF you'll stick with it!"*

2--He was saying -- in effect -- that Christian life and ministry is hardly ever a *SPRINT*, but more often is a *MARATHON* in which the slow-but-steady tortoise wins in the end, beating even the fast hare. ⁸

3--In the prayer of the poet Orin Crain, *"Lord, remind me each day that the race is not always to the swift; & that there is more to life than increasing its speed"* ⁹

B--In other words, unlike the Olympic games, the "*crown of righteousness*" that Paul talks about doesn't go to Christians who've memorized the most scriptures, or who've had their name on the church roll the longest, or who pray the most eloquent prayers.

1--Nor does it go to *churches* that have the "coolest toys," the largest attendance, membership, the nicest facilities, or to those with the most "cutting edge/hip" worship, or to those who have the most charismatic preachers, staff, or leaders.

2--No. The "*crown*" goes to those who steadily, surely, and *faithfully* serve Jesus to the very end. ¹⁰

C--"*Finish-Out*" faith, you see, is faith that perseveres and persists in doing God's will, in God's way, in God's pace to very end -- like the Nigerian runner Rachida Mahamane (Má-ha-máh-nay) that I mentioned at the beginning of my message -- it's a faith that may not seem fast or "cool" to some, but it *perseveres* to the finish in GOD'S time, rather than our own.

--IV--

9. You see, as Paul watched the "Olympics" of his day, ones of the parallels that he made was that, as we seek to "*Finish Well*" in the "Race of Faith" which is our Christian life, we have some choices:

A--We can either ***Give-Up*** and ***Burn-Out***, like many have (and do!),...

B--...OR we can *persevere* through all that happens by ***Stepping-Up*** and ***Finishing-Out***.

C--So, what challenges and obstacles are YOU facing in your life and faith today?

D--Whatever they are, God invites you to choose to FINISH WELL the race of faith. Will you do that?

10. [PRAY]

ENDNOTES:

¹ The event was held at Atlanta's Olympic Stadium (now known as Center Parc Stadium, home for Georgia State University sports events) on July 27, 1996.

² I think Paul might also add even another way that prevents people from "finishing well" the "race" of faith: sometimes there are folks who MIX-UP -- that is: they confuse the start-line with the finish-line. I have known people like this -- maybe you have, too... people who have some dramatic spiritual experience like conversion or "filled with the Spirit", and consequently begin thinking that they don't need the church or other Christians anymore. After all, they were "saved" in a revival 20 years ago, or were "baptized in the Spirit" at a retreat 3 years ago, and so they don't need all that other church stuff! But isn't this kind of like saying you had a wedding ceremony 20 or 3 years ago, but you haven't seen your spouse since? Oh, you may be married, but it's *not* much of a marriage, is it? You see, biblical salvation is *not* a static state that we achieve, but an ongoing relationship that we must continually cultivate and grow in. So, whether its about Christian faith or life itself, we dare not confuse /"mix-up" a milestone event for the completion of the journey -- it's not the finish line; it's just the start!

³ We can also see a sense of this in Verses 16-17, where Paul complains about some so-called people of faith who abandoned him, saying that in his time of need "*no one came to my support, but all deserted me!*"

⁴ Jesus also describes people who experience this attitude in his "*Parable of the Sower*" in Mark 4:1-9.

⁵ Some who experience this try to move onto the *next* church, the *next* preacher, the *next* religion that (they believe) will set them on fire (in ministry-circles, we sometimes call these kind of Christians "*church-hoppers*," and unfortunately they're "a dime a dozen"). What they don't realize, of course, is that the problem *isn't* with the church they're leaving, or the preacher they don't like, but with their own selfish, restless spirit.

⁶ As one example, several years ago, I remember reading a USA Today article about an atheist who participated in a “de-baptism” ceremony, where she publicly rejected the Christian upbringing of her childhood.

⁷ In fact, Paul himself could have gotten bitter about the way church people treated him. But instead, in Verse 17 he reminds Timothy that even through the unfairness, through the difficulties, through the scandals, through the pain and hurt, God was faithful and so we in turn should be faithful back to Him *and* to His people.

⁸ You will remember the secular fable, in which the prize for winning went not to the hare who was the quickest and fastest, but to the tortoise who was the most persistent and perseverant.

⁹ Orin L. Crain, from his poem "*Slow Me Down, Lord,*" cited in Tim Hansel, When I Relax I Feel Guilty (Chariot Family Publishers, 1979).

¹⁰ Too often in our culture today we focus so much on *winning* that we forget sometimes that the running (i.e., the race itself) is often as important (or more so) than the prize we receive for getting to the goal first.