

FIGHT, FINISH & KEEP THE FAITH

II Timothy 4:7 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

In the last few months, five men and women of God have been called from among us to Jesus' side in Glory. First, Norm Kneeland, then his wife, Maren Kneeland, then Janell Huff, then Pastor Larry Johnson, and the latest call was to John Blatter. In the midst of our profound times of grieving and still we are in this season of grieving, I have no doubt that some of us have been to all five of these funerals and asked ourselves the question, what will be said at my funeral? It is an honest question that we shouldn't run away from. I am drawn to the words of a coach 20 years ago in 2003. Just before his team left the locker room to play for the national championship of college football at the 2003 Fiesta Bowl in January, Jim Tressel, head coach of the Ohio State Buckeyes, gathered his team for one final talk. After going over the game plan, he asked his team one simple question, "How do you want to be remembered?" It must have worked, because when the game was over, the Buckeyes pulled off in a double overtime, one of the great upsets in recent memory, defeating the Miami Hurricanes, and in the process, ending Miami's 34-game winning streak, and winning the national championship.

That question hangs in the air for us, "How do we want to be remembered?" What do we hope people will say about us after we are gone? How will the people who knew us best summarize the 40, 50, 60, 70, 80 or 90 years of our lives? In the north-western little city of Florence, Alabama, Ray Pritchard told of going to a family graveyard in the forest about a quarter of a mile off the road. He was told of a pre-Civil War cemetery there, so he and his friend climbed over a low wall and began looking at the old gravestones, most of them over 150 years old. The markers read "Loving father," "Beloved mother," "Darling son," "Rest in Peace," "Asleep in Jesus," until they came to the owner of the land. There was a five-word statement that summed up his whole life: "A man of unquestioned integrity." Just five words. Nothing more, nothing less. How do we want to be remembered?

I believe the time to think about how we want to be remembered is not someday, but today. Dr. R.G. Lee, pastor of the Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, preached a message called "Payday Someday." He said, "You can only do one of two things with Jesus. You can "yes" or "no." You cannot say both. You can let Him in or shut Him out. You can't do both." In our lives, beloved, we either take a stand for Jesus, or we take a stand against Him. Jesus Himself said in John 3:18, 36, "Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the Name of the only begotten Son of God. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him." Dr. Adrian Rogers, Dr. R. G. Lee's successor, at Bellevue Baptist Church, told how Dr. R. G. Lee had a vision of heaven as he was dying. He said to those gathered around him, "I can see Jesus, I can see my mother. I can see the Golden City." When he was asked to describe what he saw, his last earthly words were, "I can't describe it. My vocabulary is inadequate, and I never did it justice in my preaching."

Last words of great men and women of God are important. Today, God has drawn my attention once more to preach a fresh message on the words of the apostle Paul passing on the baton of his leadership to Timothy. Paul told Timothy in II Timothy 4:7, “I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race; I have kept the faith.” We as pastors here in church have for years had devotional times every Tuesday morning at 8:30 AM. I could never tell you how often with Pastor Larry, we all talked and prayed about finishing well. This morning, I want us to examine these last words of the apostle Paul who finished well. He painted three portraits of his Christian life, three portraits of a true believer’s (1) way of life, (2) our walk of life, and (3) our work for Jesus—the fight, the race, and the keeping of what has been entrusted to us. As we look at these three portraits, I ask you, “Will each of us be able to say the same words Paul said at the end of our lives?”

I HAVE FOUGHT THE GOOD FIGHT! (I.) (v. 7a) This confession of Paul shows us that Paul’s heart was the heart of a sportsman. He is picturing an athletic picture, an event, a struggle, and the athletic event appears to be wrestling. Paul is picturing a good fight in which none of us should scorn to take off our coats and go to the mat for God. Just a few years ago, a blind Russian pastor, Mikhail Khorev told his church, “Our enemy is at work today, trying to lead the church into a quiet rut, a life with no struggles and no victories. Beware of this. We will never win the lost to Christ, mentor new believers, or see new churches grow up in an opposition-free environment. Every one of the ten churches Paul was used of God to see raised up for God’s glory, were established in the face of adversity, arrests, stoning, and Paul himself was stoned outside Lystra and thought to be dead. Not one of them began in an opposition-free environment, not one. Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Berea, Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus.

Notice Paul said, “I have fought the good fight.” Not all fights are good. Each of us must make strategic decisions as to which fights to fight, and which to fight first. We must know what to fight and when to fight. It’s so easy for us as Christ-followers to get into bad fights, senseless, self-serving fights, that even if we won, would not advance the Gospel, or bring Jesus glory. To get a flavor of the good fight, turn to II Corinthians 11:22-28. In Romans 8:37, Paul wrote, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.” Paul was dogged by enemies at every turn, like Jesus, and his enemies plotted to take his life. In Ephesians 6:12, Paul made it clear this good fight was far more than just a physical battle. He wrote about his good fight, his wrestling match, saying, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, (that Nathan preached about last Sunday night) against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

When we do battle in the good fight of faith, and we are all in battle for the Lord, no matter whether it is in Wyoming, California, Colorado, Michigan, Oregon, Florida, Maine, or Texas—wherever we are serving Jesus, we will sooner or later

be in a struggle with evil powers. They can be battles from the world or battles within the church. In Acts 20:29-30, Paul warned the Ephesian elders in Miletus, “I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them.” For Paul, he was telling Timothy God had shown him his good fight to fight was over! The Greek word describing this good fight of faith is given by Paul in I Timothy 6:12-14, saying, “Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you were called and which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in His testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The Greek word for fighting the good fight could best be translated, “I have agonized the agony.”

The word for fight is **agonidzomai**. It means to struggle and compete in the Games for the prize. The world looks on at our fight of faith as sheer madness. In Paul’s fight for Christ before Festus, as Paul defended the living Christ and the power of His resurrection, Festus said in a loud voice, in Acts 26:24, “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.” Beloved, expect the world around you to laugh at you for not joining in with them in their drinking parties, their crude joking, and their immorality. At the Judgment Seat of Christ, Paul writes, in I Corinthians 3:10-15 before the eyes of Jesus, He knows how to judge our works, our fight on the mat. Jesus alone will declare whether our fight has been the good fight built on gold, silver, and precious stones. Jesus alone knows if we have built on wood, hay, and stubble. Only true believers will be at the Bema Seat of Christ. Those building on deceptive foundations, denying the authority of God’s Word will be saved, but so as by fire, for any works denying the authority of God’s Word will be burned up. Secondly,

I HAVE FINISHED THE RACE! (II.) (v. 7b) Probably no one in our congregation knows the imagery of Paul’s words here better or more closely than our celebrated marathoner, Brenda Gray. Paul’s dying declaration not only pointed to his life being a wrestling match on the mat for God, but a marathon for Him. Paul wrote in I Corinthians 9:24, comparing the Christian life to a race. He wrote, “Do you not know that in a race, all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.” In I Corinthians 9:27, Paul spoke about athletes exercising self-control in all things to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable wreath. He went on to say, “But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified.” Paul is telling us we can come to the end of our race, finishing it, and yet lose the prize of hearing Jesus say to us, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

Ben Johnson emerged from the 1988 Summer Olympics as Canada's national hero winning the gold medal in the 100-meter race in 9.79 seconds. I watched the race

again last Tuesday afternoon. Ben Johnson clearly won. Yet, no athlete in Canadian history ever had a more precipitous fall from grace after he tested positive for doping, using steroids, disqualifying his gold-medal winning run, so that Carl Lewis got the gold medal. Paul is saying, "Fight the good fight," not doping spiritually speaking, for we can't make God's Hall of Faith, winning gold medals on worldly drug-enhancing steroids." I ask each of us today, "Are we trying to blend in with the world as we seek to live for Jesus? Are we running by God's rules, or trying to win our matches by means Jesus will never honor? God knows far better than any voiding sample the Olympic Committee examines, if we've fought the good fight of faith. Paul spoke in Philippians 3:13-14, saying, "Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

Beloved, God didn't save one of us to merely get in the race. He called us to finish the race. Just getting out of the starting block is not enough. Jesus never saved one of us to just start the race. He saved us to finish the race. But you may say, "But I've been an addict." Give it up and run now for Jesus, not drunk with wine, for that is dissipation. (Ephesians 5:18) You may say, "As a single person, I gave up my virginity years ago." Confess your sin to Jesus, and He'll forgive you, I John 1:9, and He'll make you his forgiven virgin daughter or His pure son. Get up from your immorality and let Jesus help you stay pure and a virgin until you marry or until death if you remain single. You may say, "Pastor, I've been a slanderer and a gossip all my life. I can't stop." Give it all to Jesus, give up slandering and gossip and by God's Holy Spirit's help, keep confidences, and refuse to slander and gossip for the rest of your life. You may say, "I was born a critical person with a bitter spirit; I accuse many people, because I know I am proud." Put away that childish thing. Sell out to Jesus til' the end of the race. But you add, "I'm an angry man or woman. I am often full of rage and revenge." Cast your anger into Jesus' arms. Give it to Him He's the one who can take away the garbage in our lives, so you can run for Him, anger free from here on in.

Some of you are new believers. As you've started at the starting line, don't you know that somewhere out there is a finish line? That's a good principle to keep in mind for all of us. Out there somewhere is a finish line for all of us. Most of us probably like to think the finish line is a few years down the road—maybe ten years or 20 years or 30 years away. Those men and women God took home this year probably had no idea this was the year for them to go Home to Jesus. That day may come sooner for me, or you, than we expect. But whether sooner or later, it is bound to come because "it is appointed unto man once to die" (Hebrews 9:27) You and I have an appointment with death. We don't know when or where or how, but it's coming for us all. Can we say to Jesus when that day arrives, "I have finished the race," or will our confession have to be, "I'm sorry, I dropped out." I cry out to us, "Finish the course, finish the race." In the Christian race, it's not about who is fastest, smartest, most well-known, who is the best "good ol' boy," or any other worldly measurement. God only wants us to race for Him to the finish. Thirdly,

I HAVE KEPT THE FAITH! (III.) (v. 7c) c This keeping is the act of a trustee. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonian church in I Thessalonians 2:3-4, “For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the Gospel, so speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.” In legal and theological terms, the Gospel is what we as trustees of the Gospel have been entrusted with. It takes four elements to make up a trust. The trust itself, in this case, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Trustor or the Benefactor, the trustee, and the beneficiaries. Suppose you are given a trust of one million dollars to hold for the benefit of your children. If you set up the trust as the trustor or benefactor, and let’s say, you make me the trustee of the trust, then I know your children are the beneficiaries. As the trustee, I have a duty to fulfill requiring diligence to use your money wisely. I can give my own money away or risk it in stocks, or on speculative ventures that may crash. But I have a higher duty as a trustee to guard your trust. When the day comes to hand out the trust and divide it among your children, the question will be, “Have I guarded it and wisely invested it so the beneficiaries will receive what they were promised?”

After Paul’s word on keeping the faith, we are going to celebrate the body and blood of our Lord, sharing the Lord’s Supper. Paul as a Gospel trustee, wrote in I Cor. 11:23-27, “For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus, in the night in which He was betrayed, took bread. And when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, This is My body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of Me. In the same way, also He took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.” Paul kept his trust. Have we?

So, what is this Gospel trust we are to keep in faith? This trust is the good news of the Gospel that God our Father sent His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ to save us from our sin and to give us eternal life. Jesus, born of the virgin Mary, lived a sinless life, died an atoning death for us in our place, was buried, rose from the dead on the third day, ascended into heaven from where He poured out His Holy Spirit on all who believe, and this same Jesus who died for our sins, is coming again soon, to bring us Home to Glory to be with Him and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

That’s the trust we must proclaim and pass on to all who will repent, believe, and receive Jesus, the beneficiaries of Jesus’ trust. You and I are called to keep the faith, so others like us can be Christ’s beneficiaries. This is our watch. Norm, Maren, Janell, Pastor Larry, and John Blatter guarded the priceless treasure of the Gospel. They refused to reinterpret it, compromise the message, erode the trust’s authority, or whittle away at the truth of the Gospel trust to fit our culture. Bending the Gospel to our desires will change the nature of our trust itself. When God takes us Home to Himself, will He find us faithful? Paul declared in I Cor. 4:3, “It is required of stewards/trustees, that they be found trustworthy.” Will we be? Have we fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith. May it be so. Amen.