

“Finishing the Race”

Good morning. It's wonderful to be back here again and it's wonderful to be sharing the Word of God with you this morning.

I'd like to begin today by telling you a story. One evening five couples gathered in a home with the representative of a couple venture firm. They were looking to invest in a lucrative property deal. The risks were moderate and the returns were very high. The capital venture firm had a good reputation so the couples were willing to risk everything. They took out huge loans in the hope that they would strike it rich. Through no fault of their own, the investment tanked and all five couples lost everything. They were, in effect, bankrupt and homeless. Their lives were ruined.

A very rich businessman heard about their plight and took pity on them. He called them together and told them that he would buy each of them a brand-new house in the same area. He would own each of the houses but the couples welcome to live there indefinitely and for free. All that was required of them was that they would open the homes to him for inspection once in awhile. The couples were very, very grateful and agreed to his terms. They moved into their homes and began to live happy and productive lives.

On the appointed day, the rich man went to the first house for the inspection but the couple there said that the house was theirs. They had been living there long enough to claim ownership and the rich man was not welcome to just walk into their home and start checking things out and making judgements. They sent him away.

The rich man went to the house of the second couple. They had done quite well financially since receiving the house and were quite pleased with their lot in life. They gladly showed the rich man into the kitchen, and the living room. They wouldn't show him into the dining room where they had a large and valuable wine collection. Neither would they allow him into their study where they had their bank books and investment portfolios. They were unwilling for the rich man to see those. They felt he might somehow disapprove, or ask for his property back or simply meddle in their business. So although the rich man asked if he could go into the dining room and the study, they refused and so he left the house.

The rich man went to the house of the third couple. They greeted him warmly and welcomed him into their home. They gave him snacks and drinks and showed him all through the house. Except for one room. One door remained closed. He asked them if he could see in there but they explained that that was the bedroom and that was private. The rich man said that he understood the privacy nature of the bedroom but he did need to inspect the entire house and that included the bedrooms. They were indignant at this and he insisted that it would be really weird if he came into their bedroom. He had no place there and he was simply not to go in. They escorted him to the front door. The rich man left the house and moved on.

He went to the house of the fourth couple. They greeted him warmly. They gave him some snacks and drinks and chatted with him about their lives. They showed him all through the house. Except for one door which was boarded up at the end of the hall. The rich man asked what was in that room. The couple looked sad and defensive. "Nothing," they said. "We just never go in that room." "Why not?"

the rich man asked. The couple looked uncomfortable. The husband explained, "Our baby died in that room. AIDS. It's just too painful. We don't go in there."

"Could I still go in?" asked the rich man. "Sorry, it's just too painful," said the wife. "If we go in together," said the rich man, "that's when the healing might begin." But for the couple it was just too painful to open that door and they refused. The rich man went away.

Then the rich man went to the fifth couple's house. They welcomed him in and showed him around the house. The kitchen was in a bit of a mess, and they were a bit embarrassed about that. The living and dining rooms were fine and the bedrooms and bathrooms relatively neat and tidy. The family room had some DVDs that should have not been there and this caused further embarrassment. They promised to remove them. One of the bathroom mirrors had a nasty crack running down it after the couple had had a fight and a phone was thrown. They apologized for this. The rich man told them not to worry. He understood that life has its ups and downs and he said he would replace the mirror.

After seeing all the rooms, the rich man asked if he could sit in the living room and talk some more. They agreed. The rich man explained that he owned many estates and resorts all around the world and he would be happy for the couple to visit any of them for any length of time for free. He took out and gave them his card which gave them full access to any of his properties and resorts. The couple couldn't understand why he would be so generous to them. He explained that, simply, as they had trusted him and opened every room of their house to him, he wanted to open every part of his estate to them. He wanted to share his life with them.

I hope you can see the analogy in this story. We were created by God. Our lives belong to him. And when we begin in the Christian faith, we accept Christ into our lives. We don't accept him into part of our lives. We welcome him into every room regardless of its state. You can't be a little bit Christian just like you can't be a little bit pregnant. You can't give Jesus part of your life. That's not an option. He doesn't want that. It's all or nothing. Total surrender is how you come to Jesus. It's how you start in the faith.

Today I'd like to talk about going the distance in the faith, finishing the race. I'd like to look at this in three parts.: **The beginning of the race, the middle of the race and in the end of the race.**

The story I started with highlights **the beginning of the race** (and **sometimes the middle**). It's about **surrender**. Believing with your *whole* heart. Receiving Christ into *every* area of your life.

In **Matthew 13**, Jesus tells the parable of buried treasure. (It's a one verse parable. Jesus is much more succinct than I am!) In the parable of the treasure, a man finds treasure buried in land and it goes away and he sells everything so that he can secure it. He doesn't sell a few things to claim a part of the treasure. He sells everything to claim the whole treasure. That's what the kingdom of God is like. That's how you start the race. It's total submission. Jesus said in **Matthew 16**, "Whoever would come after me must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me." No half measures. This is not about embracing a culture. It's not about following rules. It's about committing to the ultimate relationship. If you want to finish the race, you have to start it! And you have to start it right.

The great truth of **Romans 10:9** rings as loud today as it ever has before. "If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

If there is anything in your life that is holding you back from being right with God, from declaring that Jesus is your Lord, from total surrender, then can I encourage you today to submit everything to Him. Give him your whole life. That's how you start the race.

Surrender all.

Let's move to **the middle of the race**. Maybe you gave your life to Jesus some time ago. But life is hard, maybe your walk with God is a little dry, maybe the world is distressing, maybe your sin is weighing heavily on you. There are many obstacle to overcome.

I want to share with you **two passages to strengthen you for the middle of the race**. **The first is Ephesians 5:15-20**

¹⁵Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. ¹⁷Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. ¹⁸Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, ²⁰always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul gives us some wonderful teaching here to sustain us. I'm going to pull **three points** out of this passage (but there are more if you want to do some homework).

1. "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery." It doesn't have to be alcohol. When life gets hard, don't turn to the world for comfort. Don't be fooled into thinking that any relief you find there will be good for you or long lasting. It won't be. Whether it's in a bottle, on a screen, in a store or in an ideology, if it's not of God it will not satisfy. It will only lead you to a worse position. Sin *never* delivers what it promises. Don't look to the left or the right. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.
2. "Be filled with the Spirit." Don't ever let your faith become an academic exercise. There's lots for us to learn. We need to know who the true God is. But it cannot just be a head knowledge. To run the race to the end, we can't do it in our own wisdom or in our own strength. We must be filled with the Holy Spirit. This filling isn't a one time event. The tense in the original Greek grammar here is the present continuous. "We must go on keeping being filled with the Spirit". This filling *can* happen as a result of prayer. But it usually happens as a result of extraordinary prayer, of hungering and thirsting for the presence of God.

Living the Christian life - *trying* to live the Christian life - without the Spirit, I think can actually be harmful. Trying to do God's work without God will only lead to exhaustion and burn out and break down - or pride if we manage things. Mental health is a big issue nowadays, made all the more prevalent through the pandemic. Without wanting to be simplistic in any way, I do wonder if we, as Christians, struggle with mental health because we are not being continuously filled with the Spirit. We're making decisions that take us outside the will of God - we're doing things that God never intend for us to do, and we're not doing some of the things that God is calling us to do. And that's exhausting.

What Jesus said in **Matthew 11:28-30** is profound: "²⁸Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Being filled with the Spirit of Jesus removes our weariness and gives us rest. His yoke is easy and light. It's sad how infrequently we realize this truth in our lives.

3. What else happens when we are filled with the Spirit? Paul says,
*We speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit.
We sing and make music from our hearts to the Lord.
We always give thanks to God the Father for everything.*

When we are filled with the Spirit, our speech becomes godly. The Spirit leads us to speak God's words, His songs. Our speech is no longer interested in grumbling or gossiping or cussing or lying. Rather, we speak to one another in the words of the Spirit.

We sing. We make music in our hearts. This is a fruit of being filled with the Spirit. There's no drudgery, no gloom, no frustration, no confusion. We have joy that removes all that and that leads us to song. And we remember that old teaching of God from back in **the book of Joshua**: "The joy of the Lord is your strength."

We give thanks. This is the new natural inclination of our hearts. We see the good in others and thank God for that. We see the blessings in our own lives and we thank God for that. We see the victory of Christ in all things and we give thanks for that.

The second passage to sustain us in the middle of the race is from **James 2:26**: *faith without deeds is dead.*

Surrendering all to Jesus. Being filled with the Spirit. That's faith. But faith without deeds is dead. True faith must produce more than feelings and attitudes. It must produce deeds. Paul writes in **Ephesians 2:10**: "We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

I shared earlier today about the work of **DMI**. I have been a supporter of DMI for over 25 years, a volunteer with DMI for almost 10 years and on staff for 3 years now. Why? Because I love the way that DMI combines genuine faith in Jesus, and loving deeds which prove the genuineness of that faith. Seeing the vulnerable cared for in transforming ways, and led to Christ is deeply fulfilling. Faith and actions working together. I want to encourage you to be prayerful and intentional and active in producing deeds, under the leading of the Spirit and in the strength of the Spirit.

To go the distance in our faith, we need to start by surrendering all to Jesus. To continue in the race, we need to be filled with the Spirit, and we need to have a faith that is alive to produce good works.

To finish the race, we need **hope**. Christian hope is not the wishful thinking of this world, it is the blessed assurance of God's Kingdom.

Paul wrote to the church in Rome,

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith...we boast in the hope of the glory of God." Hope is a natural outcome of faith, and it's not a timid, hidden hope. It's an outspoken hope - confident and bold. We "boast" in our hope of God. Our hope is the end game of our life in Christ. Paul continues here, "Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."

This progression of suffering, perseverance and character development leading to hope parallels Jesus' teaching I read earlier where those who would call themselves Christians must deny self, take up their cross and follow to find hope. Following Jesus inevitably leads us to hope.

Hope for what?

Don't be fooled by some teaching in the modern church. It's not hope for a better life. It's the hope of eternal life. Jesus didn't come to give us a better life, as though what we have now is pretty good, it just needs to be tweaked a bit. Jesus came to give us *new* life because we were wretchedly lost in our sins and apart from God, and Jesus restores us to God when we put out faith in Him.

How does Jesus do this? Paul continues here in **Romans 5**: “Hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Rom 5 1-5

1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we^[a] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we^[b] boast in the hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only so, but we^[c] also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Have you ever been to a Christian funeral? It's sad to lose a friend or a family member, especially if they are young. We miss them very much. But Christian funerals are not about sadness. They are about hope. The funeral of a Christian is beautiful because we delight in the hope of eternal life with Jesus.

In **John 11**, we find this account:

John 11:21-26

²¹ “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

²⁴ Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

This is the great hope of the Christian faith. Rooted in the historical reality of a risen Lord and the inspired teaching of the Holy Spirit, this hope of eternal life is our ultimate prize. Jesus’ question to Martha at the end of this passage was key for her and it is key for ourselves: “The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. *Do you believe this?*”

I hope you do. I’m going to pray about this in a minute but before I do, let me recap. How do we go the distance in the faith? How are we to finish the race?

Submit your whole life to Jesus. Give him access - give Him Lordship - over every part of your life. Be filled with the Spirit, and produce deeds that bring glory to God.

Hold onto the hope of eternal life that we have in Jesus.

Pray.