
Maintain Your Form and Finish Well in the Race of Faith

A sermon on 2 Timothy 4:6-8 by Coty Pinckney |
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Many expected the Beijing Olympic marathon to be slow, as runner after runner would succumb to the pollution on top of high heat and humidity. So when this morning the leaders took off at close to world record pace, a number of runners – including the top Americans, Dathan Ritzenheim and Ryan Hall – decided around three miles that that was suicidal, and backed off, hoping to run a slower, more even pace, and pick off stragglers. Such tactics had worked well in a number of past Olympic marathons.

But not today. Sammy Wanjiru of Kenya had other plans. He had prepared for these conditions. When the day dawned quite clear for Beijing, he was confident he could run a fast pace all the way to the end.

And he did. With a little over two miles to go he picked up the pace – and immediately dropped his last competitor. Running smoothly, relaxed and strong, he entered the stadium with a large lead. The crowd roared, cheering him on. He celebrated as he ran the last quarter mile on the track. Sammy Wanjiru finished well.

Our question this morning: Will you also finish well?

To get the gold medal, you have to finish the race. The marathon is 26 miles 385 yards. If you stop at 26 miles, 384 yards, you do not win – no matter how far ahead you are at that point.

The 1954 Commonwealth Games are remembered not only for the Miracle Mile between Bannister and Landy that I mentioned two weeks ago, but also for a case of NOT finishing well. The WR holder for the marathon, an Englishman, Jim Peters, set a pace in hot and humid conditions no one else cared to match. He entered the stadium with a huge lead – at least 10 minutes. He had run more than 26 miles. But with only half a lap to go, he collapsed. He got up and fell six times. He tried to crawl. But he did not make it to the finish line. He was rushed to hospital – and though he recovered his health and lived until 1999, he never raced again.

For the last several weeks we have been considering the biblical images of running the race of faith.

We have seen that we must first decide: Am I a runner? If so: We must be consistent and disciplined in our training. We must battle our besetting sins, whatever they may be. We must stay alert to the unexpected temptations and hindrances that Satan throws in our path. Yet we must not focus on dealing with sin – we must keep our eyes fixed on Jesus as our joy, as the one with power to help us complete the race, and on his return. We also must work hard to rest in Christ, actively depending on Him always. Jesus doesn't want our toiling. He wants our trust. So that is our main work. Our tasks are then done in dependence on Him; we pull the yoke by His power. He is responsible for the outcome.

Today, as we finish this series, we look at the finish line, using 2 Timothy 4:6-8 as our text.

Paul writes this letter from prison. He knows he will die soon. He is finishing his leg of the race, and is passing the baton to Timothy. So, reflecting on his own life, he concludes with these thoughts about finishing the race:

I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Henceforth 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. 2 Timothy 4:6-8

We'll look at this text under 3 headings:

- Maintain Good Form to the End!
- Remember the Medal!
- Join the Cloud of Witnesses!

Maintain Good Form to the End

You are at the end of a hard race. Your legs feeling heavy; your muscles are feeling tight. Fearful thoughts enter your mind: "I can't do it! I'm falling apart! I can't kick! I can't finish well!" As those fears increase, your form begins to fall apart: Your shoulders tense up, raising your forearms, thereby shortening each stride; your face and neck become tight. You are no longer relaxed. And consequently, you slow down.

Most runners slow down at the end of a race in part because of fear, not solely because of tired muscles. This aspect of slowing down is completely in control of the runner.

How can you fight that? How can you teach runners to finish well?

The key is maintaining good running form all the way to the end. Much training at the elite levels aims to enable the athlete to do just that. Through mimicking conditions at the end of a race, the runner learns to respond rightly. A good coach will give his runners lots of practice in dealing with those feelings of fear. His coaching will become so ingrained in his athletes that they will finish well. This is true for me even today, many years after I last ran a serious race. If when finishing a hard run, I start to feel my legs tighten, without even thinking I'll check my shoulders and my jaw, focus on the elements of my stride, and work to maintain good form to the end.

Thus, instead of feeling fearful when tiring, a well trained runner will have just the opposite sense. At the end of the race, as he feels tightness in his legs, he'll think, "This is it! This is what I'm trained for! All my opponents are hurting at least as much as I am. And I KNOW that I can dig down for that final sprint. I've done this thousands of times in practice. OK. Here's where I break the race open. 1 2 3, Hit it!"

Just so in the race in faith. We are to *maintain form*. Paul says: "I have fought the GOOD fight." The word translated "good" does not mean "morally upright." Paul surely was morally upright, but that's not what he is communicating here. He is saying, "I fought well. I ran the race well. I maintained my form to the end."

What does maintaining form mean in the race of faith mean?

It means to do all that we have talked about in the past four weeks:

- Be consistent, be disciplined
- Keep going through the pain
- Rejoice in the Lord always
- Be alert to unusual temptations
- Focus on Jesus
- Strive to rest
- Rest while striving

That's all part of maintaining good form.

And if, like a runner, you have trained yourself for godliness, the right response to crises will be ingrained into you. When a challenge comes that tempts you to lose form, you will respond by focusing on Jesus, resting in Him, rejoicing in Him. You will tell yourself, "It's natural to panic. But Jesus has prepared me for this. I have His Word. I have the examples of those who have gone before me. I know He is faithful. By His grace, I can do this – and I can endure and rejoice in Him to His glory."

This is what Paul did. That's why he could say, "I have fought the good fight." Consider his life (we'll do much more of this in months ahead as we journey through the book of Acts):

Paul and Silas praised God in the Philippian jail;

- he was beaten and shipwrecked, but continued to be faithful to his calling;
- he proclaimed the Gospel boldly even when he knew that would result in persecution.
- He was afflicted, persecuted, perplexed, and struck down, but never in despair.
- He never acted ashamed of the Gospel,
- he never lashed back at his persecutors,
- he was never quarrelsome.
- He kept his good form, focusing on the Lord Jesus Christ, rejoicing in him, despite all the challenges the world could throw at him.
- He ran the good race.

So he summarizes all these points by saying, "I have kept the faith." There are two aspects of this keeping faith we should note. First, Paul **lived out** the faith – that's what we've just seen. He set an example; he showed what having good form means. Second, he **guarded and protected the faith**. As a teacher, he had to watch his own teaching, and he had to refute those who taught wrongly – as we saw in our series on Galatians. So Paul taught the faith well, he taught the whole counsel of God, and he argued effectively with those who tried to distort it.

Thus, in keeping the faith, Paul was fulfilling the instructions he gave Timothy in his first letter: "Watch your life and doctrine closely" (1 Timothy 4:16). He lived out the truth, and he guarded the truth. He kept the faith.

Think for a minute about good form in the race of faith. Good form is what enables you to run well, to run fast, to get you to the finish line first. Good form does not necessarily imply that you will look great to others.

For most of the Beijing marathon, the eventual 3rd and 4th place finishers looked a lot better than the eventual silver medallist. But there are no style points in running – whoever gets to the finish line first is the winner, not the runner who looks best. Good form only matters if it helps you run faster.

Just so in the race of faith: The opinions of others only matter as they reflect biblical truth, and as they help you to live out biblical truth. The key is to focus on Jesus, to rest in Him. The key is *not* any particular way of doing that which has worked well for someone else.

So we are to maintain form. And we are to maintain it to the end.

- For the marathoner, that means maintaining form all the way to the finish line, all 26 miles, 385 yards.
- For the sprinter, that means running well all the way through the tape – not letting up don't at the end.
- For the race of faith, that means maintaining form all the way to death.

How often do you contemplate your death?

Our society pretends there is no death. But the Bible teaches just the opposite:

- Psalm 90:12 "Teach us to number our days."
- James 4:14: "What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes."

Regularly contemplate your death. It may come tomorrow. It may come decades from now. But unless Jesus returns before your death, you will die. So prepare for it – like a runner training for the end of the race.

Paul has done that. He has contemplated his own death many times. So he writes in today's text, "I am already being poured out like a drink offering" – an apt image for one whose head will be cut off.

But note how Paul talks about his death. Does he say, "I'm really fearing the executioner raising the ax!" No. Like the runner confident in his final kick, Paul looks at his forthcoming death positively.

Notice the words he uses:

Verse 6: "The time for my departure has come." Death is a departure. The ship is leaving port, departing one country, heading towards another. This is a common event, simply a time of transition.

So Paul's first word picture is a neutral image of death: It is a change. It is normal.

But then in verse 8 he gives not a neutral but a positive view of death. This leads us to our second heading:

Remember the Medal!

Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day

Understand the image. The word "judge" here does not picture a courtroom. Instead, Paul is continuing his running image. Paul is running his race. Jesus is at the finish line. Paul is looking to Him, keeping Him in his sights, running to Him.

But Jesus is not only the goal, but also is the finish line judge. Earlier in this letter Paul had written,

An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. (2 Timothy 2:5)

So the 2nd and 3rd place finishers in the Beijing men's 200 meters were disqualified by the judge. They stepped on the line on the curve. They didn't compete according to the rules.

Jesus is the finish line judge. And Paul is confident that he *has* competed according to the rules, that he will not be disqualified, that he will finish the race by God's power, and thus that he will receive the victor's crown.

So do you see the positive image of death? Death is not a negative. It is a necessary step toward the crown. It is the last 100 of the race.

Now, Paul is very clear that this crown is not something he earned. In all his letters, he tells us, "I didn't earn this by my merit, by my work. It's all of Him. I was the chief of sinners. I rejected His plan, His Gospel, His Way. He created me for His glory, but I turned my back on Him. So I deserved His just condemnation. But He sent His Son to die on the cross, and He opened my eyes to see Jesus as my Savior and Lord. Through faith, the benefits Jesus gained at the cross are credited to my account. He brought me to Himself. He has enabled me to run the race. He will bring it all to completion. He will give me what I don't deserve."

So as Paul approaches that final finish line, Jesus, the finish line Judge, declares, "HE IS MINE! He has My righteousness!"

He forever will be My beloved! He will forever have My character! He will forever be My delight! He together with all believers of all times places will be My precious bride: Holy, spotless, perfect."

This is what is coming. So the Word tells us again and again:

"The one who endures to the end will be saved." Matthew 24:13

"If we endure, we shall also reign with him" 2 Timothy 2:12

"Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." Revelation 2:10

So maintain good form to the end. Remember the medal. The crown of righteousness, and all that implies, will be yours.

Join the Cloud of Witnesses

Paul writes 2 Timothy not as autobiography. He's not trying to record his feelings, he memoirs. He doesn't tell Timothy about fighting the good fight and finishing the race to record a fact about his life. Instead, he is exhorting Timothy and all subsequent readers: "Do this! Run the race! Maintain YOUR form! Keep the faith!"

He makes this absolutely clear in the last half of verse 8: This crown of righteousness will be awarded "not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing."

Paul is saying, "Timothy, long for Jesus' appearing! Focus on Him, on His return! You can do this by His grace! Look to Him! This crown will be yours too! Endure to the end!"

Do you see what Paul does here?

Even as he is entering the stadium, finishing his race, completing his marathon, he is encouraging Timothy to run HIS race, to complete HIS marathon.

In effect, even while he is still alive, Paul has become part of the great cloud of witnesses of Hebrews 12:1. Do you remember that image?

"Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses . . . let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

We noted that these people are witnesses in two senses. First, they bear witness to Jesus' faithfulness. Second, they look at us, they encourage us to lean on Jesus, to depend on Him.

That's what Paul is doing here: He joins the cloud of witnesses encouraging Timothy and us to run the race.

This is a key complement to the racing image. The race of faith *is not run alone*. Right now, we are together, running the race together, all together headed to the finish line. And right now, we can be part of that great cloud of witnesses.

God puts us together to do this for those like us, who are going through similar struggles, as well as for those NOT like us, who can help by having a different perspective on our struggles:

- Older to younger: What a blessing it is to those of you in your teens, twenties, and thirties to have in this same church older folks, several decades ahead of you, to tell you of God's faithfulness over the course of their lives, to speak of their running the race, to describe their challenges and God's faithfulness to them.
- Younger to older: Again, what a blessing to the older folks to have you all who are young in age and young in the faith in the same body. You remind us of the enthusiasm of newfound faith, and you display the marked change in life after God's miracle of new birth.
- Across cultural and ethnic differences: What a blessing to see the same faithful God working through the same Word, with people who are completely different from each other.

We are all running the race together. Right now, we are to be part of that cloud of witnesses for each other, as we bear witness to the grace of God

Conclusion

Let me expand on that image in conclusion:

Picture now the race of faith in all its glory. Millions of runners, from all times and places, representing every tribe and tongue and people and nation. Men, women, boys, girls, young, old, healthy, sick, black, white, Asian, African - All called by God's grace, all looking to Jesus, all running the race to Jesus. Satan is there too, tempting the runners, trying to divert them, to throw obstacles in their path, to get them to pick up objects that will weigh them down.

In this great race, some have finished. They stand with Jesus at the finish line, bearing witness to His faithfulness. They cry out, "He enabled me! You can do it too! He is faithful!"

Others are quite near that final line, and, like Sammy Wanjiru this morning, they are running well. They too cry out, like Paul, "I'm closing in on the finish line. I've run a good race by God's grace. I've kept the faith. You can too! Keep those eyes fixed on Jesus! Endure to the end!"

Then there are others, perhaps stumbling like Jim Peters, collapsing close to the finish, or sitting on the side of the road, massaging a sore calf muscle, weeping – they're not even half way, and they're wondering if they can possibly make it.

They need your help. You need theirs.

Will you cry out, "God is faithful!"

Will you massage that stiffened calf, to get your fellow runner back in the race?

Then there are those on the sidelines, telling you you're foolish, that the Beijing pollution will kill you, that you can't run that fast to the end, that you'll never make it.

Will you both *focus* on Jesus – and *exhort them* to enter the race? Will you complete the team, bringing in all the number of the redeemed?

Ahead of you are many hills, along with many twists and turns. Not only heartbreak hill, but betrayal hill, cancer hill, loneliness hill, abandonment hill.

But on all these hills, throughout the course, there are thousands and millions who have gone before, crying out to you through the Word, through history, through those alive today: "He is faithful!"

And there are thousands and millions behind you who need to hear *your* faithful witness: "He is faithful!"

Your final 385 yards may be straight up a mountainside. Or it may be easy and downhill. But whatever it may be:

Keep the faith. Fight the good fight. Finish the race. Hit that final sprint.

The crown is ahead. So run to Jesus! And praise Him – together with all the saints – for all eternity.

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