

The Art of Finishing (Dying) Well

My Title for this sermon comes from a phrase often used in the 15th and 16th centuries. “**Ars Moriendi**,” Latin for “the art of dying well.”

The late Middle Ages were a time of uncertainty, upheaval and death.

Bubonic plague, also known as the Black Death, killed over 20 million people – two-thirds of Europe’s population. Famine struck repeatedly and throughout the 1300s and 1400s barely a year went by without conflict, rebellion and war.

Facing so much death and destruction, people looked to religion to help them understand what happened at the end of life.

Educated men of the Christian Church realized that people needed practical guidance in the face of death.

In 1415, an anonymous Dominican friar – following the teachings of the Spanish priest Saint Dominic of Caleruega – set out to work on a handbook for dying. Written in Latin, guides (***Ars Moriendi***), were written and illustrated to help priests support people through their final days, offering spiritual guidance and practical advice.

These guides would have primarily been read by priests and scholars, as they were some of the very few people who knew how to read and write.

Ars Moriendi guides were split into **six chapters**. The **first four** were focused on the spiritual needs of the dying. The text reminded them to have faith in Christ’s love and steered them away from temptation, preparing them to go to Heaven after death. The **last two** chapters were for family and friends, instructing them how to behave at their loved one’s bedside and suggesting ways to pray for their immortal soul.

A black and white woodcut from *Ars Moriendi*, shows grotesque devil figures around a dying man's bed, and angels looking down upon him.

These two pictures show the **temptation to despair** and **triumph over despair**.

Due to the popularity of these guides, shorter versions of *Ars Moriendi* were written in 1450, focusing on **five temptations** common for Christians in their final days. *These temptations were:*
Temptation to renounce one’s faith.

Temptation to despair or hopelessness in the face of death,
Temptation to impatience: To stop practicing charity & patience for others.
Temptation to vainglory: To take all the credit for their achievements instead of being humble and thankful to God for His mercy and grace.
Temptation to avarice (greed): hold on to material possessions – not let go.

Illustrations of devils and angels surrounding a dying man. Devils tempting the dying in each of these areas.

The popularity of *Ars Moriendi* continued well into the 17th Century and beyond. In 1651, the Church of England decided to put its own spin on the original Latin *Ars Moriendi*. A cleric called Jeremy Taylor penned two books called *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*. The books earned him the nickname '*the Shakespeare of Divines*', thanks to his poetic writing style.

The Art of Dying Well was on Paul's mind when he decided to write his **second book** to young Timothy, his protégé, and said, "*Tim, let me tell you how I feel right now. Allow me to give you a view of what I've got going on inside me as I think about finishing well.*"

Due to persecution, Paul was in prison in Rome, more than likely in the Mamertine Dungeon. There, beside the river, damp and dark and cold, the Apostle Paul wrote this last letter to Timothy, his dear son in the faith.

2 Timothy 4:6-8, "*For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. **Finally**, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.*"

Sensing that the end was near, Paul gave these final words of encouragement, challenge, and caution to a young man that he had mentored and disciplined in the faith. Paul sent this letter hoping that Timothy, who was in Ephesus, would receive it in time to come to him in Rome before anything bad happened or winter set in.

But if that were not possible, then this letter would serve as Paul's last will and testament and would prepare Timothy to do the ministry in Paul's absence, to ensure that the gospel was extended to the next generation.

Even though Paul is lonely, he's content with what he's been able to accomplish and he's full of anticipation for both His future home in Heaven and the life of promise lies still ahead for young Timothy.

Illustration: Like a coach giving the game plan with only 10 seconds left on the game clock, Paul is encouraging **his young protégé to finish the game of life strong and to stay true to the gospel.**

His expected finish was an opportunity to challenge someone younger to live well and finish well too.

So in the spirit of the Apostle Paul, let's let the conclusion of this year spur us on to living the next year to the fullest.

Call it coaching from the **2019 Finish Line** – Now, to do 2020 right we need to acknowledge first that...

I. We All Have A Course We Must Run

Paul starts out by using two figurative expressions to indicate that his finish line was near for him.

With these figures, I'm sensing resignation on the part of the apostle. He's ready to go. He knew that this was the Lord's course for him and he was determined to stay on course in spite of the odds stacked against him at this dark hour. He's surrendered.

First, he compared himself to an ***offering or sacrifice***.

In **2 Timothy 4:6** he says, "*For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand.*"

The "drink offering" referred to here terminated the great Day of Atonement. At the end of all the offerings, a drink offering, a jug of wine was poured out upon the altar. Paul sees himself in that way.

Second, he compared himself to a **traveler** who was getting ready to get going. He was at the departure gate, boarding pass at the ready, and bags in hand.

Each of us has a course that we must run. Like Paul, there will come a time in your life, when you will need to **resign yourself to the course** that you must run.

You'll have to "*pour out some of your plans*" like a sacrifice and say "*goodbye*" like a traveler to some of your wishes in order to run the course that the Lord has for you.

And let me say this, **it's your course**; it's **not someone else's course**. You're called to run the course that the Lord has for you.

Paul told Timothy this at the end of **2 Timothy 4:5**, "*...Fulfill your ministry.*"

Don't worry about trying to be me. You be you. Clear the hurdle of comparison and follow Christ.

You may feel the call to education, and you'll need to enroll as a college freshman. It may not be the college of your choice, but it could very well be the educational course that the Lord has planned for you.

You may feel the call of a job, and you'll need to accept the position. It may not always be with the company that you wanted, but it's His course for you.

You may feel the call of a marriage, and you'll begin a life together with another person. You may be married already and having second thoughts about your marriage, do all you can to stay the course He has put you on.

You may feel the call of a new ministry in your church, and you'll need to initiate a plan to make your church a better place. You may not have the ability that you would like to have or the resources you would like to have, *but it's his course for you.*

You may feel the call to accept Christ and you'll need to do that, but you will soon find out that your faith will be challenged and the Christian walk may waver. *But this is the Lord's course for you.*

Could I offer to you words in the spirit of the apostle?

"Run the course that you've been given and run it as best as you can."

At times, it will feel like your life is "*a drink offering being poured out*". It is not an easy task, but *it's necessary to stay the course.*

William Barclay a Scottish author, radio and television presenter, Church of Scotland minister, and Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism at the University of Glasgow, once wrote: "*The one thing necessary for life is staying-power, and that is what so many people lack. It was suggested to*

a certain very famous man that his biography should be written while he was still alive. He absolutely refused to give permission, and his reason was: 'I have seen so many men fall out on the last lap.'"

Paul was not going to fall out on the last lap. He was determined. We need to look at the end of each year and say, *"If this next year is my last lap, I'm going to run it well!"*

Application: To do that, you have to surrender to the Lord's course. Oh, you're on a course, *but is it the **Lord's** course?*

You're making progress, *but is it on the **right** road?* You're running faster than you've ever ran before, *but will you come out at the **right** finish line?*

So, to do 2020 right we need to first acknowledge that we all have a course to run and the right course is the one the Lord has for us. *Then Secondly...*

II. We All Have a Coach We Must Listen To

Before Paul departs on his voyage, he looks back over 30 years of ministry and described the course he was on using **three brief phrases**.

2 Timothy 4:7, *"I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith!"*

Notice here that his emphasis is on **completion**. Any good coach is going to teach his players that they must **finish what they start**. Paul does this by comparing himself to these three figures: a **fighter, a runner, and keeper**.

Like a fighter, Paul weaved and bobbed his way to victory, measuring and landing as many blows as he could on the enemy.

Like a runner, he stayed in the race even when his body and mind were exhausted.

And he had **the mentality of a steward, manager or caretaker** - he kept the gospel treasure safe. *He never cut corners. He was faithful in what was entrusted to him. He never fouled out.*

And now, he could feel the sense of accomplishment and die well knowing that he played to the best of his ability.

This was Paul's primary goal in life – to finish the course well (Ars Moriendi). And it was a goal he set for himself years beforehand.

Back in **Acts 20:24**, Paul told the leaders of the Ephesian church, *“I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.”*

This goal setting was a principle Paul wanted to pass on to Timothy to live by too. **Ars Moriendi** to die well – plan ahead to live well.

The Greek Philosopher **Epicurus** is quoted as saying, *“The art of living well and the art of dying well are one.”*

Finishing well isn’t a last-minute decision. So, listen to Coach Paul!

Men and women listen to Coach Paul! Don’t take your greatest contributions back to the locker room with you. Don’t drop out of the Christian race when your best lap is still ahead of you.

Some of you have incredible potential to offer lives of great service and blessing. Don’t allow temptations to rob you of finishing well. **Keep the faith, Hold on tightly to Hope, Be patient, charitable, humble, thankful and generous.**

Work hard against the temptations to be opposite. End the year with a new start in mind do that you will one day, when you have finished your life’s work and it’s time to close the books, you’ll have the joy of a job well done.

Finish what you have started and do it with integrity! It is important to start right, but it is imperative to end well. So, end 2019 well and start 2020 right!

How about that project you’re working on for your boss? Will the finished-product be first-class, or simply mediocre, with excuses attached as to why it couldn’t be better?

And what about when you’re called to do something behind-the-scenes? Do you stay at it until it’s done right, or do you settle for “good enough to get by”?

Listen to the coach.

Fight hard! Finish strong! Keep Living out the Faith!

Abraham had walked with the Lord for over a century. James says he was a “friend of God” what an incredible thing to be known for.

How about you? What would people say about you who dealt with you this last year? What do you want them to say about you as you finish out 2020? What will people say about you when you finish your race?

It is obvious that God isn't looking for perfection. Abraham didn't live a perfect life. Some of his warts were written down for us to see in God's word.

Early on he had faith issues as he waited 25 years for a son God had promised - so he jumped the gun and took Hagar as his concubine, and along came Ishmael. He also had a habit of lying and trying to pass his wife off as his sister in order to save his own hide as if God couldn't do that for him.

While he hadn't been perfect, **he had lived by faith**. Whenever he did fail - the Bible shows Abraham **going back to the land of Canaan** and returning **to an altar** he had made in the past or constructing a new one.

He believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness and he ultimately was willing to faithfully sacrifice his own son whom he loved; because God had asked him to. *In the end, Abraham finished well...*

Genesis 25:7-8 NIV, *“Abraham lived a hundred and seventy-five years. 8 Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people.”*

Genesis 25:7-8 NLT, *“Abraham lived for 175 years, and he died at a ripe old age, having lived a long and **satisfying life**.”*

The New American Standard Bible and New Living Translation translate it, that he died *“satisfied with life”*. It's actually a better translation from the Hebrew.

For Abraham to be satisfied with life indicates that as he looked back at the last 175 years - even if he saw rising and falling - he was pleased with how his life turned out.

Abraham lived the truth of the statement that **dying well means living well**. **Living well means living faithfully not perfectly**.

And for Abraham and Paul, living well meant leaving A Godly Legacy.

Abraham, passed God's blessing to his son Isaac.

Paul passed God's blessing on to Timothy.

We would do well to pass on the lessons of a life lived well to our loved ones!

Leaving a godly legacy starts today; with how we're living.

So, commit to living out your faith well in 2020.

If we live well, we will finish well. And then, like Paul...

III. We Can Anticipate A Crown

2 Timothy 4:8, *“Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.”*

Paul is looking ahead to the moment when earthly work is done and a heavenly existence is begun. And, he again employs the use of a Olympic coronation to make his point. **He talks about a crown.**

This undoubtedly motivated Paul to stay faithful until the end. In Paul's case, it was the finish line of life where a crown awaited him.

This is a fundamental principle of life-success. Picture where you want to be and never stop pushing toward it! In order to finish strong, think about what's ahead and anticipate your outcome and focus on the finish line.

Are you struggling to get through school? **Focus on graduating.** Picture yourself crossing the stage to receive the hard-earned prize of your diploma.

Are you raising a houseful of small people with sticky fingers and dirty diapers? Take your focus off the grape-jelly handprints on your couch and **put it on the end product** – mature adults who love God, who work hard, who are responsible citizens, and who are capable of handing down their faith to the next generation.

Are you depressed with your marriage? **Picture yourself**, hand-in-hand, walking along the beach with a life-partner who has weathered the storms alongside you and been there every step of the way.

Are you completely dominated by alcohol? Picture yourself, sober, happy, joy-filled, loving your family without guilt and doing things with your time and resources that are changing people's lives.

Are you caught up in the values of this present age and your family has suffered for it? See yourself 20 years from now, after throwing yourself fully into the things that are eternal like your family. **See the daughter** that you

loved and cherished rush up to you and hug you and thank you for giving her the tools she needed to succeed in life. **Picture your son** who would rather spend a weekend with Dad than party with the guys because Dad is the neatest person he knows.

*Are you in a professional vocation? **Envision how** you can use your position and influence to move people toward the Savior.*

Always keep the finish line in sight. **Focus the future in all of your life goals**, but especially in your Christian walk.

Paul talks about a crown for those who set their affection on Christ's appearing. Paul enjoyed life with its many up's and down's, joys and disappointments.

There was this focused attention that characterized every day for him. ***"Maybe this is the day that Christ will appear."***

He gave his heart fully to this hope and that's what motivated him in the meantime to finish what he had started until that day. He wanted to be found faithful.

IN CONCLUSION:

Are you on the right course? Are you listening to the right coach? Are you focused on the right crown? Paul Is Cheering you on! I am Cheering you on! Your family and loved ones are cheering you on!

When I think of the legacy, we all want to leave behind I can't help but think of the words to one of Steve Green's songs, "Find Us Faithful." It reads...

We're pilgrims on the journey
Of the narrow road
And those who've gone before us line the way
Cheering on the faithful, encouraging the weary
Their lives a stirring testament to God's sustaining grace
Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses
Let us run the race not only for the prize
But as those who've gone before us
Let us leave to those behind us
The heritage of faithfulness passed on through godly lives

Chorus

Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful
May the fire of our devotion light their way
May the footprints that we leave
Lead them to believe
And the lives we live inspire them to obey
Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful
After all our hopes and dreams have come and gone
And our children sift through all we've left behind
May the clues that they discover and the memories they uncover
Become the light that leads them to the road we each must find.

You are on a course, listen to your coach, live well to finish well, anticipate the crown and leave a legacy that shines the way for those who follow. Let's commit to this in 2020.

Let's Pray!