

Fulfill Your Ministry!

Theme: Finish well for ultimately will have to give account for how well we fulfilled our ministry.

Text: II Timothy 4:1-8

Series: Live With the End in Mind

I am going to ask you do something that is difficult this morning. It also will be a bit uncomfortable, but this is an absolutely necessary exercise if we want to fulfill God's purpose for our life.

Please, close your eyes. See yourself going to a funeral of a loved one. It is a dear family member that has passed away. See yourself walking up the pathway to the church at the appointed time for the service. Your heart is a combination of heaviness over the loss, yet gratefulness for the quality of life this person has led. From the sanctuary is wafting the reflective mood of the organ music. The front of sanctuary is graced by colorful floral arrangements that express the love and care of those gathered. As you enter the sanctuary you greet family and friends that you have known all your life who are there to share this moment with you. You wonder what they must be thinking and feeling on this occasion.

You make your way to the front of the sanctuary and look inside the casket, and to your shock you come face to face with yourself. You are the reason that all these people have gathered. You find a seat and wait for the service to begin. You glance over the printed order of service and see that there are four speakers who are going to share in the eulogies, their thanksgiving for your life. There is a member of the family, a close friend, a colleague from work, and a fellow believer from church. You wonder, what will they say?

You can open your eyes now. What is it that you would want people to say about you at that time? What do you think people would say about you if the time was now? One day that time will come for us all, unless Jesus Christ returns first, and we will be remembered in a particular way. For me the tombstone will read 1947 – ? fill in the closing year. The question is, what did I do with that little dash while I was here? This is an exercise I put myself through this week in preparation for this message. I asked myself, what would I want written for my epitaph? What would people say that my life stood for, represented? Beyond saying that, "Greg adored his wife, Lily, and daughter, Aimee, and was loyal to his close friends, what might they say about the purpose I was called by God to fulfill? I would hope people might say, "He loved Christ's bride, the church"; he taught and modeled for us: "We don't have it all together, but together we have it all." I am passionate about the church of Jesus Christ being the church which God intended. I still hold to the ideal that we can be the extension of Jesus Christ here on earth. I have never lost optimism that in our day I will a part of a

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body of believers who truly are the multiplied hands and feet of Jesus. This is what gets my heart pumping and raises my emotional fever.

We come this morning to our sixth and final study on Paul's last letter to his son in the faith Timothy. The dominant theme in this letter is Paul motivating Timothy to fulfill his call or as he says in v. 5, "**discharge all the duties of your ministry.**" Make it to the end, Timothy, having finished well, completing what the Lord has given you to do. Timothy is it take up where Paul is leaving off. He is to be a transmitter of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, just as Paul has. Instead of shrinking in fear, which Timothy is inclined to do, he is "**to fan the flame of the gift of God**" (II Tim. 1:6). Instead of being ashamed of the gospel of Christ and his servant Paul in a Roman prison, he is to stand guard over the good deposit entrusted to him. Instead of dropping the baton that has been passed to him from Paul, Timothy is find reliable people who will pass the baton as well.

Paul's final motivational message is to ask Timothy to *live with the end in mind*. He does this in two ways in our passage this morning. First, he transports Timothy into the presence of Christ as the one to whom he will have to give account. Secondly, he uses himself as an example as one who is at the finishing line with a clear conscience. In between Paul reminds Timothy to discharge his ministry with passion.

Read II Timothy 4:1-8

I. See yourself giving account of your life before Jesus Christ himself.

Live with the end in mind and plan every day toward that end. Paul takes Timothy before the throne of the King Jesus, "**In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge:**" (II Tim. 4:1)

There will come a time when we stand exposed before God and Jesus Christ, before whom we must give account for what we have done with the call or purpose which we have been given to us. The Scripture speaks of two judgments. First, there is the Great Judgment of all humanity which determines one's ultimate eternal destiny. For those who are in Christ we need not fear this judgment, because we have the judge on our side. But secondly, there is a judgment for Christians as to what we have done with the gift of salvation that has been given to us. In Corinthians 3 Jesus Christ is pictured as the foundation upon which we are to build our lives. Paul raises the question as to the quality of materials out of which we construct our life on the foundation of Jesus Christ.

"If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will

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bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames" (I Cor. 3:12-15) Paul is saying that our lives in service to Christ can be made out of material that will be preserved through the tests of his life, or made of materials like wood, hay or straw that will not survive fire. Though Paul does seem to indicate that even if all of our building materials are burned up, if Christ is our foundation, we will be saved, yet without much reward.

Paul uses another image besides judgment to impress upon Timothy and us. He says "in view of his appearing and his kingdom." The word "appearing" is *epiphaneia* from which we get the word *epiphany*. The word epiphany was used for the Roman Emperor's succession to the throne. Yet everywhere the Roman emperor traveled was considered an epiphany as well. The advance troops would announce the coming of the emperor which was a signal to the populace to put their towns in order. Streets would be swept clean, and building projects would be completed. Everything had to have the proper appearance for the emperor.

Timothy is to shape up for the king is coming. I love the true story of the battleship which was on maneuvers in heavy weather. The visibility was poor with patchy fog, so the captain remained on the bridge. Shortly after dark, the lookout reported, "Light, bearing on the starboard bow." The captain ordered the signalman, "Signal that ship: We are on collision course, advise you change course 20 degrees." Back came the signal, "Advisable for you to change course 20 degrees." The captain said, "Send, I am a captain, change course 20 degrees." The reply came back, "I am a seaman second class, you had better change course 20 degrees." Now the captain was furious. He spat out, "Send, I'm a battleship. Change course 20 degrees." Back came the flashing light, "I'm a lighthouse." The battleship changed course.

There is a sense in which we are on collision course, and may need to change direction. There is a fixed point that is immovable; a lighthouse by which need to set our destination. Against this backdrop of one day standing in the presence of Jesus Christ and assurance of his appearing, Paul issues his final admonition to Timothy in the strongest terms, "I give you this charge..." It is a solemn and emphatic utterance with the full force of testifying under oath in a court of law. "I solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth." Timothy, I have warned you as strongly as is humanly possible.

II. Paul then reminds Timothy of the call or purpose for which he must give account. He has been called to a particular ministry. In v. 2-5 Paul states the reason he has been put on this planet. Paul goes back over again that for which Timothy will be held accountable. V. 2 begins with "Preach the word",

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while concluding verse 5 with “**discharge all the duties of your ministry.**” In between he fills in the nature of this preaching ministry.

We could easily dismiss this charge to “**preach the word**” as a message to preachers, not to all of us. It is true that Paul has a particular type of apostolic ministry in mind that certainly is not the call of us all. Yet there is a sense we are all called to share the gospel over coffee at Starbucks, over lunch with a colleague, inviting our neighbors into our homes, or the most difficult of all, talking with family members.

What I want us to see here is that each of us has a particular call, ministry or purpose which we are to discharge with passion and diligence. It is the intensity that Paul presses upon Timothy that I want us to first catch and then we will turn to the particulars of our duties we are to discharge.

Let’s pile up the phrases Paul uses here to get a feel for the accumulated fervor that is building in this text. He begins with his charge, “**Preach the word.**” The “word” is another way of saying what he has been saying through this letter: Announce, declare, herald, trumpet the gospel, the good news, Jesus Christ. “**Be prepared in season and out of season.**” There must be a sense of urgency. “**Be prepared**” means to stand by, or be ready. Don’t fall asleep on the job. “**In season and out of season**”: Whether it is convenient or inconvenient, opportune or inopportune. This is not *carte blanche* for insensitivity, as if we can be rude in sharing the gospel or barge into people’s lives whether they are receptive or not. The emphasis is on our readiness to be available to the opportunities that are presented.

Timothy’s preaching should consist of three levels of appeal. He is to “**correct or convince, rebuke, and encourage.**” On one level Timothy is to “**convince**” by appealing to the mind. Persuade through sound argument because a believer should have a satisfied mind. Secondly, his preaching should have the element of “**rebuke**”, which is an appeal to morals. If someone’s behavior is off-base morally then they need to be brought up short and turned away from self-destructive actions. Finally, Timothy is to “**encourage**” which is an appeal to the emotions. This is a word of comfort to those who are fearful. You have probably heard it said that good preaching is to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”

The 17th century pastor, Richard Baxter described the kind of preaching that is needed today and in every age. “**Let the people see that you are in good earnest...You cannot break men’s hearts by jesting with them, or telling them a smooth tale, or patching up a gaudy oration. Men will not cast away their dearest pleasures upon a drowsy request of one that seemeth not to mean as he speaks, or to care much whether his request be granted.**”

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Why is this kind of intensity necessary? Paul tells us in v. 3, 4, “For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.” In chapter 3 Paul piled up 19 adjectives to describe the decadent pagan Roman and Greek cultures of his day starting with “lovers of self” and concluding with “rather than lovers of God.” He said that “there will be terrible times in the last days.” But now in this chapter Paul is not speaking about the world out there, but what will happen within the church or the believers themselves. Timothy is going to face a tough audience from within.

There is a great and frightening truth here. Left to ourselves we will go to seed. We will seek the easy and comfortable route through life. This is human nature. Especially in a wealthy country like the United States, self absorption is a constant temptation. We will make decisions that simply pander to our own wishes and desires without regard for the welfare of others. It is easy to allow the fires and passions of love and service to Jesus Christ to die slowly and be ultimately quenched by the dominant cultural message that life to its fullest is *feeling good, looking good and making good*.

Frankly, we need the kind of preaching that will arouse us from complacency. Given our tendency to slide down the slippery slope of self-indulgence, we have to have preachers that will wrestle for our spiritual lives, who will wake us up. We need to be reminded that we are in a life or death struggle for our souls and our culture. Paul says we have a hearing problem, there is something wrong with our ears. He calls this the “itching ears” disease. The symptoms are that we tend to accumulate teachers that simply pander to the latest titillating ideas or those who tell us what we want to hear.

I have vivid recollections of a Christian young woman who came to me to share that she wanted to get married. There was a problem, she said, her would-be husband was not a follower of Christ. She asked me what I thought. As compassionately and loving as I could, I showed her in Scripture that it was clear that believers and unbelievers were not to marry or more positively that marriage partners needed to have a common devotion to the Lordship of Christ. I said that a follower of Christ is often called to do the hard thing. We wept together because her heart had already become emotionally wedded to this man. She left our conversation, stating that she would do the hard thing. The next thing I knew she had changed her mind and was planning to marry. She told me frankly, that she had gone to her pastor at her home church and he had said that I was taking a too strict a position on this issue. Then she spoke the line that has rung in my ears ever since. “He told me what I wanted to hear.”

The “itching ear” disease is wanting to have our assumptions and lifestyles affirmed and not challenged. It is Christianity without a cross. It is what Bonhoeffer called *cheap* grace versus *costly* grace. It is a grace that costs us nothing. It is the gospel that begins and ends with the message “God loves you and accepts you as you are” without the balancing message that says, “And He loves you enough to change you into what you need to become.”

So Paul sums up his admonition to Timothy in light of the prevalence of “itching ears.” In v. 5, “be sober minded”—keep your head about you when everyone else is losing theirs; “endure hardship”—it won’t last forever; “do the work of an evangelist”—

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keep telling the good news; “**discharge all the duties of your ministry**”—fulfill your call, for one day you have to give account for what you have been given to do.

I hope I have conveyed the intensity of Paul's admonition. Each of us has been given a purpose, call, or ministry for which we will one day give account. I believe the call God has given me to be a steward of the vision of the church as a community, the body of Christ alive to its full ministry potential. God comes to each one of us, and says, “**Here is a job to be done and you are the one to do it.**” It is our passion. It is the need we care about. God has a service to perform through each of us which is our place of intensity, the thing we feel deepest about, which is Christ's compassion working through us.

If you have been around me long enough, you will know that a man named William Wilberforce is one of my historical heroes. As a member of the British Parliament from the latest 1700's to 1832 to led the charge and was ultimately successful in ridding the British Empire of slavery. This was his call. He almost missed it. At age 25 and already a politician he had what he called “The Great Change.” He was converted to Christ. He thought he was to abandon politics for professional ministry in the church. It was John Newton, the converted slave trader and composer of the beloved hymn, *Amazing Grace*, who said he needed to stay in politics and not enter the pastorate. After much prayer Wilberforce concluded that Newton was right. In his journal in 1788, he wrote, “**My walk is a public one. My business is in the world; and I must mix in the assemblies of men or quit the post which Providence seems to have assigned me.**”

III. Finally, after exhorting Timothy to fulfill his ministry, Paul pulls out the trump card. He says essentially, “**I have made it to the end, and you can too.**” The end is here. “**For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come**” (II Tim. 4:6) Paul is saying that his ministry is finished. His earthly life is over.

He uses two dramatic images to convey the immanence of his death. He compares his life to a sacrifice, the pouring out of a drink offering on the sacrificial alter. Every Roman meal ended with a kind of a sacrifice. A cup of wine was poured out to the gods. Though Paul was executed by the Roman government, he did not see that his life was being taken from him, nor that he was losing his life at the hands of another, but it was offered up to God.

Then Paul turns to an even more dramatic image when he writes, “**the time of my departure has come**”. Picture a boat being loosed from its moorings and drifting toward the horizon. “**Already the anchor is weighed, the ropes are slipped, and the boat is about to set sail for another shore.**” Henry Van Dyke paints a beautiful picture of dying. Our lives are like a white-masted ship that sets sail for another shore. Someone will stand watching while the white cloud of our sail heads toward the horizon and finally the speck will vanish. Those watching will say, “**There, she is gone.**” But, “**gone where?**” For as soon as the sight of the boat is lost, there are those on the other side who are watching as well, raising voices with a glad shout, “**Here she comes!**”

Then v. 7 Paul writes his epitaph. My guess is that if Paul had done the visualization exercise with which we began this message and could have written in his

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journal what he wanted to be able to say at the end of his earthly life, we would have seen these words, “I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith” (II Tim. 4:7). What a wonderful thing to be able to say at the end of your days. I have completed what I have been assigned to do. Paul knew that the reward for that was not going to come in this life.

He looks ahead to where he wants Timothy to look, “Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on the day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (II Tim. 4:8) Images from the original Olympic Games dominate v. 7, 8. Paul saw his life like a race, and now he sees himself being declared the victor. The greatest prize one could receive was a laurel wreath that crowned the head of the winner. This is equivalent to the gold medal proudly worn around the neck of first place finishers in the modern Olympics. Here the wreath is the crown of righteousness awarded by the only One who counts, the righteous judge.

There is a wonderful reversal implied here. Though the demented Roman Emperor Nero had pronounced judgment upon Paul unto death, God has reversed Nero's verdict and declared him righteous. You get the sense that Paul is more than ready to step into the new life of the world to come. The evangelist Dwight L. Moody remarked toward the end of his life, “One day soon you will hear that I am dead. Do not believe it. I will then be alive as never before.” As two guards in a German prison during WWII took Dietrich Bonhoeffer to the gallows, he briefly took a friend aside to say, “This is the end, but for me it is the beginning of life.”

Paul had completed his run. Timothy must now complete his.

“We cannot rest for ever on the leadership of the preceding generation. The day comes when we must step into their shoes and ourselves take the lead. That day had come for Timothy. It comes to us all in time.”