

5 Essentials to Ensure You Finish Strong

Is it just me, or are you aware of how many leaders and regular Christians seem to be falling by the wayside? Pastors committing suicide, resigning because of sexual escapades, “throwing in the towel” from discouragement or confessing they’ve just lost their passion for vocational ministry, people committed in local churches for decades simply dropping out and drifting in passivity.

John Calvin, one of the fathers of the Reformation, said in his dying hour, “All that I have done has been of no value. The wicked will gladly seize on the word. But I repeat it again, all that I have done is of no value.”

Have you ever felt like him? Can you identify with his feelings of failure and deep discouragement?

At the end of our lives, we don’t want to reflect back like John Calvin and feel regret and remorse. We want to finish well and full of hope like the apostle Paul. Let’s remember that if we want to finish the course and keep the faith, we’ve got to fight the good fight every single day. “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, and I have kept the faith.” (2 Tim. 4:6-7).

In my room, I have a plaque with challenging words to remind me to continue running the race when I have setbacks: “Failure is never fatal and success is never final.”

What can keep us on course in our Christian life? Starting is easy, but sticking is hard! I believe a quality decision to be obedient in five areas is essential if we’re to finish as strongly as we started.

Five Non-Negotiables to Finish Well

▪ Radical Commitment

Our commitment to Jesus as Lord must be radical in the most literal sense of the word. “Radical” is a derivative of the Latin word for “root,” and our response to the gospel must be rooted in a fundamental inward change demonstrated outwardly in behavior.

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21).

John the Baptist saw the need for an outward expression of inward change and instructed his hearers to “bear fruit worthy of repentance” (Matt.3:8). Just look around and see the damage done by the prevalent heresy of salvation apart from true repentance, where people are called to believe, but not taught to obey.

While convalescing at home from surgery recently, I watched a popular, likable minister on TV who was upbeat and motivational. At the end of His inspirational sermon he gave a brisk 30-second invitation to “make Jesus Lord of your life;” “say this prayer with me;” then he smiled glowingly assuring the listener, “if you prayed this prayer, you are born again!”

This quick “tack on” appeal concerned me greatly as he reassured everyone they were Christians and saved if they simply repeated an extremely deficient prayer prefaced by little explanation and virtually no call for repentance and obedience.

▪ Authentic Relationships

New Testament Christianity is not merely a meeting to attend but a life to be shared in meaningful friendship with other Christ-followers. It’s a death to independence and a

commitment to obey God through active involvement with other believers who are part of a local church family (Acts 2:42-47).

Everyone experiences ups and downs on their faith journey. God intends for us to find the support, encouragement, accountability and correction we need in a community of committed Christians. "Walking in the light" (see 1 John 1:7) with God and others is the biblical way of keeping us in a place of refuge, free from deception.

God's design is to set us in spiritual families (Ps. 68:6) where we cultivate healthy and helpful relationships. "Two are better than one, because there is a good reward for their labor together. For if they fall, then one will help up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has no one to help him up" (Eccl.4:9-10).

▪ Importance of the Home

Our homes must be our top priority. The centrality of marriage and family provides men and women with the "checks and balances" that are essential to staying on the right track and finishing well.

When Billy Graham was asked if there was anything he would have done differently in his life, he said he would've spent more time in prayer and with his family, and would have refused to be pressured into so many speaking engagements.

Years ago, on a couples retreat, it became evident to me that being away from my wife and children on a ministry trip to South Africa would place too severe a burden on them. I saw that I was overextended and realized God's reminder that my family responsibilities superseded work and ministry. It was His gentle intervention to cancel the 12-day trip. When I submitted my feelings to the leaders in South Africa, they not only honored my appeal but said they respected me more for placing the health of my home above my job.

▪ Christlike Character

God places a premium on character development so we glorify Him, draw others to Him through our lives and have the inner stability to handle the challenges that come our way. Our task is not to strive to be successful but rather faithful, while leaving our success in His holy hands.

Oftentimes people fizzle out in their Christian life and don't finish well because they fail to steward their trials well. God works in our lives regularly to develop endurance. And certainly there are times when we feel those first three letters "e-n-d" describe our plight, but if we can stand the pull, He will pull us through!

"When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realize that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance. But let the process go on until that endurance is fully developed, and you will find you have become men of mature character" (James 1:2-4, PHILLIPS).

▪ Bearing Fruit

God wants us to bear fruit "that will remain" (John 15:16). It does us well to regularly pause and ask ourselves, "Am I merely being busy, or am I really being fruitful in serving God?"

Activity is not the same as achievement. There are times we must re-calibrate to enhance our intimacy with God and clarity in knowing exactly what He wants as seasons change in our lives.

God is more concerned about the quality of our work, not the quantity (1 Cor. 3:12-15). James Ryle, a dear friend and key leader in the Promise Keepers ministry who went to heaven not long ago, confessed repeatedly that when he brought his church

to a thousand members, he sensed the Lord admonishing him, "My Son, you're very successful in attracting a crowd but very unsuccessful in building a church."

James said it was a turning point in his life.

Here's the deal: Finishing well should be all of our goal in this Christian life. These five insights have helped scores stay on course to produce fruit that remains. Will you join us on this journey for the glory of God?