

The sermon

Intro

How do you view the Christian life?

Some view the Christian faith negatively. It's outdated ideas. Outdated morals. It's pushy. It takes the fun out of life. It's joining a bunch of hateful and judgmental people.

Some view the Christian life as a past decision. Believing a set of facts that gets you out of hell.

Some view the Christian life as a set of moral obligations. Not cursing. Telling the truth. Showing up every Sunday. Going to Bible studies. Giving 10% of your income. Reading your Bible and praying every day. Showing up at church workday.

There's elements of truth here. I don't want to discourage morals, attendance, giving, service, etc., but there's more to it than that.

This morning Paul uses a variety of helpful metaphors to get us thinking about the Christian life.

READ PASSAGE

Body

Point 1: Christian, view yourself as living sacrifice (4:6)

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering,

"For" = explanation. Timothy needs to *"preach the word"* (4:2) and fulfill his ministry (4:5) because Paul's death is imminent.

"already" = the process has already begun.

"being poured out" = a present reality.

"drink offering" = Paul's life is a sacrificial offering to God.

and the time of my departure has come.

Paul's death is imminent. Near. But not immediate. Paul expects Timothy to be able to visit him before he dies (4:9, 13). Not getting out of prison this time.

Application

What does this mean for us?

We exist to be living sacrifices for God's purposes.

That sounds really grand, virtuous, but not really specific. What do we mean?

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. –

Romans 12:1-2

- 1) Living to please God.
- 2) Refusing to imitate the patterns of the evil world system that's opposed to God.
- 3) Experiencing the transformation that happens when your mind is made new by Scripture.

In a previous Roman imprisonment, in which Paul expected to be released, Paul said this:

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. – **Philippians 1:21**

While he lives, Paul exists to honor Jesus and labor for the churches. If he dies, it's gain. His soul will immediately be in the presence of God in heaven.

Christian, why do you exist? To be a living sacrifice for God's purposes.

Practical question: in what ways are you seeking to please God as a living sacrifice?

Point 2: While you live, fight the good fight (4:7)

I have fought the good fight,

Paul speaks of his life like it's already over.

Paul's looking back on his life and saying I've done well.

Is he prideful? Arrogant? We might struggle with this. Or get annoyed with people who speak like this about themselves.

I don't think that's what's going on here. He continues to view himself as a living sacrifice. He's continuing to submit to God's will: execution by the state. He's continuing to express his concern for the churches by positioning Timothy to succeed him. Paul's not getting lazy, apathetic, careless.

Paul's stating the truth in the presence of God with a clear conscience. In examining his life, Paul can say without reservation he has accomplished what Jesus gave him to do. Paul would also say:

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. – **1 Corinthians 15:10**

Paul's work was first and foremost God's work. God without fail supplied Paul the grace needed for Paul to fight well.

What does he mean when he says "I have fought the good fight"?

First, the Christian life is a fight. **Second**, it's a fight worth your effort.

The Greek verb translated "*I have fought*" is used to describe physical fighting, whether a soldier in battle or a gladiator fighting to the death. It can mean competing in an athletic contest. It's used figuratively of non-physical struggle. In each case, there's struggle, effort, straining, opposition.

In John 18:36, the verb's used of the fighting Jesus' disciples would have engaged in against Jesus' captors if Jesus' kingdom was of this world.

In 1 Corinthians 9:25, the verb's used of the athlete's struggle during competition.

In Colossians 1:29, the verb's used of Paul's struggle for the maturity/spiritual growth of the believers in the churches (1:28).

In Colossians 4:12, the verb's used of Epaphras struggling/wrestling for the Colossians in his prayers.

Fight here means something like Paul's struggled for the gospel in the face of opposing forces. He didn't quit when the opposition got hard. He continued to fight. When mobs rose up against him for preaching Jesus. When he was imprisoned. When false teachers slandered him. When false teachers gained ground in the churches. Paul continued to battle.

"I have fought" means Paul's fought, but the fight continues until his departure comes. He's still being poured out.

The picture that comes to my mind is boxing. Rocky IV. Rocky against Ivan Drago. Rocky takes beating after beating. But he keeps getting up. He doesn't throw in the towel. He continues to fight. The will to keep going. He lasts until the 15th round where he knocks out Drago.

Paul pictures the Christian life as a fistfight.

Rocky fought for his dead friend. Paul's fought for the gospel.

“good” = excellent, noble, praiseworthy.

Worth his time. Worth his effort. Worthy his suffering.

Paul's example encourages us to assess where our efforts are directed. Am I fighting a good fight? To assess if we're willing to fight. Am I fighting?

Life is striving, struggling, wrestling for something noble. Not apathy. Not hiding out. Not seeking ease. God wants us engaged in struggle.

As long as you're still alive, you're in the fight. As long as you're still alive, the fight isn't over.

1. Fighting against our own sinful desires.
2. Fighting against Satan's schemes.
3. Wrestling in prayer.
4. Fighting for renewal of the mind by meditation and memorization of the Scripture.
5. Fighting for a life pleasing to God.
6. Fighting for the souls of sinners through evangelism.
7. Fighting for the maturity of the saints by modeling godliness, offering humble correction and sound counsel.
8. Fighting for the health of the local church by protecting unity and works of service.

As long as you're still alive, the fight continues.

Practical question: what are you fighting for?

Point 3: While you live, finish the race (4:7)

“I have finished the race,”

Paul speaks as if the race is already over. The end is near. He's on the last lap.

“I have finished” is a verb that means to complete, finish an activity/goal.

Paul's race isn't a literal marathon, 5K, or NASCAR race. The idea is Paul's finished the task God gave him: apostle to the Gentiles.

He's fulfilled his ministry (4:5) we could say.

Illustration

The illustration is a footrace. Paul started, continued, finished the race. When his calves ached, when the stomach pains came, when he was breathing heavy, when the hills drained his energy, when he said to himself I'm only 25% done and I feel spent, when he wanted to quit, he kept going. He looked towards the prize that awaited him (1 Cor 9:24) and he kept running.

The Christian life is a marathon, not a 40 yard dash at the NFL combine. The Christian life is grueling, draining. The Christian life is endurance. The Christian life is continuing, not quitting. The Christian life is fighting through the obstacles. The Christian life is looking ahead to the prize that awaits those who finish the course.

Application

As long as you're still alive, you're in the race. As long as you're still alive, the race isn't over.

For Paul, making it to the finish line meant completing the task God gave him. What tasks has God given you?

For me, it includes parenting and pastoring. It's not a sprint. It's a long view. One stride at a time. Pacing myself for sustainable ministry. The race keeps on going. The fatigue builds. The end isn't in sight. The goal remains in view. One step at a time. Gradually getting closer to completing the task.

As long as you're still alive, the race continues.

Practical question: what's your finish line? What's my task?

Point 4: While you live, keep the faith (4:7)

"I have kept the faith."

"kept" = to hold onto the Christian faith. To not give up the Christian faith. To continue in the faith. To continue trusting in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

"the faith" = the set of truths that makes up Jesus' gospel, the apostles' doctrine, *"the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints"* (Jude 3).

The truths contained in ***"the faith"*** would include:

1. The deity of Christ.

Jesus has eternally existed as God the Son.

2. The Trinity.

God has eternally existed in three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit.

3. The incarnation.

God the Son from all eternity took on a fully human nature without losing his divine attributes.

4. Jesus lived a sinless life.
5. Substitutionary atonement.

Jesus died in our place. He suffered the punishment we deserve. Jesus' death satisfied the Father's wrath.

6. The resurrection of Jesus Christ.
7. Forgiveness of sins.
8. The new birth.

God sets us free from slavery to sin by dwelling within us.

9. 2nd coming.

Jesus will come again visibly with unmistakable signs.

10. Final judgment.

All the dead will be raised. The believer will go to eternal life in the kingdom of God. The unbeliever will go to eternal punishment in hell.

Application

Paul kept the faith.

He didn't revise the faith to suit a sin he wanted to commit.

He didn't revise the faith to suit a loved one's sin.

He didn't revise the faith because a friend of his believed something that wasn't true.

He didn't revise the faith to protect himself from Jewish persecution

He didn't revise the faith to accommodate the threats of metal workers in Ephesus.

He didn't revise the faith for financial gain.

He didn't revise the faith to keep more people in the church.

Paul kept the faith as received. And he kept trusting it.

The Christian life is a marathon. Trusting in Jesus day after day. One day at a time.

As long as you're still alive, there's a faith to keep.

Practical question: how are you going about keeping the faith?

Point 5: Christian, your reward will come (4:8)

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. – 4:8

Let's ask some questions.

Who gets the crown?

All Christians. *"all who have loved his appearing"* = all true believers.

Paul's not saying there's a group of Christians who will be angry when Jesus returns because their favorite movie hasn't been released yet, the Patriots are about to win the Super Bowl, they have a trip to Hawaii in three days. Not what we're saying here.

This crown will be given to every believer, not a select few.

Who gives the crown?

"the Lord, the righteous judge" = Jesus. *"his appearing"* refers to the Lord's appearing. The Lord is Jesus.

When will Jesus give the crown to his people?

When he visibly appears at the end of this age (Matt 24:29-31; 25:31-46; 2 Thess 1:5-10).

What is *"the crown of righteousness"*?

Interpreters list two options:

1. The crown is the reward for our righteousness.
2. The crown is righteousness: = the perfect state of righteousness we receive at the 2nd coming.

Context suggests the crown is the reward for our righteousness: the victor's crown was a wreath awarded to the winner of an athletic contest (1 Cor 9:25). Sounds like the promises to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3. For example:

The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, ²⁷ and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. ²⁸ And I will give him the morning star. – Revelation 2:26-28

I'm not saying we earn our eternal inheritance. We're saved by faith. We continue by faith. And God sustains our faith by his power.

Application

The point? Being a living sacrifice is hard. But it's worth it. Keep your eye on the prize. We'll reign forever and ever with Jesus in the kingdom of God. The curse will be undone. We'll be able to dwell in the presence of God's glory. We'll live in a state of perfect righteousness. Death will be no more. Every threat will be removed. No one will sin against you ever again. You won't wrestle with fear, selfishness, rage, etc. ever again. It's too good to be true! But it is true!

Jesus conquered sin on the cross. Jesus conquered death at his resurrection.

Practical question: is the crown worth the fight?

Conclusion

This morning we've learned that the Christian faith is fighting, finishing the race, continuing to trust God's word. We've learned that those who do will be crowned by Jesus.

Maybe you're asking, will I be crowned? How can I know for sure?

If that's you, you can have certainty. God's a communicator. He tells us so we can know.

Here's the problem. We sin. We do life our own way. But God can't tolerate sin because he's good. So he punishes sin.

The same God who can't tolerate sin is merciful. He delights in rescuing us from ourselves, our brokenness, our sinful condition.

Jesus died on the cross as a substitute such that whoever believes will escape God's wrath and experience forgiveness of sins and receive the crown of righteousness. If you believe, Jesus took the punishment in your place. If you persist in unbelief, you will face his wrath when Christ returns.

The cross relieves us of guilt. The cross shows us the seriousness of sin.

How can you be sure you're right with God? Confess your sins. Acknowledge your only hope is Jesus taking the wrath in your place. Ask God for forgiveness on the basis of Jesus' death. And trust that you're forgiven. Because God receives all who come to him through Jesus.

If you trust in yourself, you'll be rejected. If you trust in Jesus, you'll be accepted. So turn from your sins by trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection.

Christian, keep fighting the world, the flesh, and the devil. Finish the race. Keep the faith.