

When the Race is Over

Luke 18:9-14

INTRODUCTION

If I were to ask “What passage of Scripture was read at the last wedding you attended?” many of you would respond “1 Corinthians 13” (the love chapter).

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (vv. 4-7)

I've officiated at several services where that has been read. It's a common choice, and one that certainly matches the occasion.

If I were to ask “What passages of Scripture were read at the last funeral you attended?” you might respond:

- Psalm 23: *“The Lord is my shepherd ... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.”*
- John 14:1-3: *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”*

Again, these are verses that are very well suited to the occasion.

Today's epistle lesson contains another selection that is commonly read at funerals (2 Timothy 4:7-8):

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store 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 longed for his appearing.

Earlier this month I officiated at the funeral of an extended family member, and this text from 2 Timothy was one of the ones read that day (as were Psalm 23 and John 14).

The author of these words, the Apostle Paul, wasn't dead yet, but he soon would be. It won't be long until he is beheaded by the Roman Emperor Nero. The reality is that when Paul writes *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith”* he is about to cross life's finish line, and he knows it. So these are among the very last words that this faithful man of God will write before he crosses into eternity.

Have you ever thought about what you might write if your race was nearly over? What would be the descriptive phrase that summed up your life? Would it be this one?

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store 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 longed for his appearing.

I think the Apostle's words are powerful, and I hope that if those words are read at my funeral, people would say "Yep. That describes Tom perfectly."

But how does one get to that point? How does one move from wherever life finds them on their faith journey to the place where they can say what Paul said when his race was over?

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store 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 longed for his appearing.

I think the answer can be found in our Gospel lesson for today. There Jesus tells the story of two men. We don't have any indication that either of these two men was about to cross the finish line, but story does shed a lot of light on what they thought about the race they were running.

One man was a Pharisee, a member of the religious elite of the day. The other was a tax collector, prominent in the community but in a profession that was not highly regarded by his fellow citizens. Both men were important. Both would have been wealthy. And, on this day, both went to the temple to pray.

But that is where the similarities stop. Their similarities may have put them at the same starting line, but the races they were running were different indeed.

#1: THEY HAD A DIFFERENT STANDARD FOR COMPARISON

Listen to the prayer of the Pharisee:

"God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector." (v. 11)

We can always find someone worse than we are, can't we?

- If we cheat on our taxes, we can point to the girl who was just arrested for shoplifting.
- If we get angry, at least we didn't beat our children like the guy next door.
- When I got a C on an exam, I was always able to tell mom and dad the names of all my classmates who failed it.

At times we will even use this kind of comparison to boost our self-images. You know what I mean:

- I woke up this morning feeling pretty discouraged, but then I realized that many people are worse off than I am.

And while those things aren't nice and probably need to be confessed, they aren't nearly as dangerous as attempting to evaluate the quality of our Christian faith by comparing to the nearest sinner. Or other Christians.

John Sirasky, who was the band director at North High School when my kids attended there, would always tell the students to line up alphabetically by height. The upper classman would laugh as the freshmen scrambled to arrange themselves.

At the end of our lives, God won't be lining us up based on how we compare to other people. He won't say "all you really bad people on the left, and you moderately bad people in the center, and all you folks who are better than the rest, gather over by the choir." There will be a separating at the time of judgment, but the standard won't be how we compare to the others around us.

It will be, as the tax collector in our story clearly understood, based solely on how we compare to God's standard of righteous. And, as the tax collector in the story clearly understood, based on that standard, he was in need of God's mercy.

The Pharisee needed God's mercy too. He just didn't understand that he did.

The Apostle Paul once described himself as the chief of all sinners – the worst of the worst. Yet as he prepared to finish his race, he was confident that a crown of righteous awaited him. If he had been like this Pharisee, he would have looked at the people around him and said, "My sins are worse than theirs." And he would have had no hope of ever receiving the crown. But because he had placed himself in front of the standard of God and had realized his need for forgiveness and mercy, now a crown of righteousness awaited him.

There is nothing beyond God's forgiveness.

#2: A DIFFERENT ATTITUDE IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

I'm also aware of the different attitudes these two men displayed in God's presence. You see it best in the words that describe the tax collector:

*But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."
(v. 13)*

One writer puts it this way:

In the New Testament's telling, Pharisees often display a punctilious adherence to Jewish Law. The Pharisee depicted in this parable went beyond his fellows, fasting more often than was required, and giving a tithe on all he received, even in cases where the religious rules did not require it. Confident in his religiosity, the Pharisee asks God for nothing, and thus receives nothing.

On the other hand, tax collectors were despised Jews who collaborated with the Roman Empire. The parable, however, does not condemn the man's occupation, but describes him as one who "recognizes his state of unworthiness before God and confesses his need for forgiveness." Coming to God in humility, the tax collector receives the mercy that he needs.

You also see that difference in the way the artists try to capture it. Notice the imagery on the slide: one man looking up with arms widespread, the one bowed low.

People who finish the race well understand what it means to be in the presence of a holy God. No matter how good or important you are, you are still puny in comparison to God.

#3: A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON THE THINGS THEY HAD DONE

Notice too what these two men said about all they have done. The Pharisee listed all his "good deeds." The tax collector spoke of his sins.

Some people come to the end of their lives, hoping that they have been nice enough, generous enough, friendly enough to earn God's favor.

- I did all the religious things – and more!
- I gave far more money than was expected!
- I read the Bible over and over!

But the Bible is clear. Even the good we do is judged as bad if our relationship with God is not what it should be. Look at Isaiah 64:6:

Our righteous acts are like filthy rags...

At the core of our faith is the teaching that we cannot get into heaven based on the good we do. The possibility of heaven is based on the good God has done through Jesus Christ. And this is the reason ... if our lives are not right with God, good stuff is actually bad stuff. You are, in many ways, better off not doing it.

But for the one whose life is centered on Christ, those good things accomplish great things.

APPLICATION

When the time of prayer was over, the two men left the Temple. Both returned to their lives. They were a lot alike when they entered the building, but when they left, they were very different. Something happened while they prayed. Jesus describes it this way:

I tell you that this man (the tax collector), rather than the other (the Pharisee), went home justified before God. (v. 14)

If their lives would have ended at that moment, only the tax collector could have said:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store 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 longed for his appearing.

Only the tax collector had been justified before God. Made right. A life in proper alignment.

He got there because he recognized that:

- No matter how many good things he did, it would never enough to erase the ugliness of his sin. So he was in desperate need of God's mercy and forgiveness.
- His only proper response in the presence of a holy God is one of complete and total humility.
- Whether he was better than someone else or worse than they were, it was all the same, because the only proper standard for comparison is the holiness and righteous of God.

Invitation ...

Amen.