

The Overflowing Life – Part 5

Legacy: Living Beyond Yourself

2 Timothy 4:6-22

February 26, 2006

This is the final sermon in a series we've been calling "The Overflowing Life." This message is entitled "Legacy: Living beyond yourself." A legacy is defined as "something left behind, something handed down from one generation to another." My friend Delbert Groves sold a very successful printing business in Florida and moved to Africa to work with the poorest of the poor. He designs and manufactures small, hand-cranked carts that can be used for people who can't walk. Why did Delbert give up a comfortable life and move to Zambia? He always likes to say, "When we're dead and gone there are only three things we can take with us: our faith in God, the love we've shared with others and the stories that people tell about us." The stories people tell about you – that is your legacy. What will people say about you? As they stand around the casket, as they stand around your hospital bed, and they start in with, "Do you remember when Susan or John ...?" how will they finish the sentence? The stories they share will be your legacy.

Everyone will leave some kind of legacy. You will leave a mark on this earth. You will blaze a trail – even if you're not trying. I'll never forget leading a funeral service for a man named Walt who died in his driveway, drowning in a pool of his own vomit from his last drunken stupor. Walt blazed a trail. And as the family gathered around his casket there were stories, stories of loss, pain, anger and sadness.

I would venture to say that most of you are here this morning because you're fueled by a search to make life better. Maybe you're a follower of Jesus or you're just a spiritual person - but all of you would like to leave a life-giving legacy. Perhaps you've pursued and maybe even achieved success. Success is no guarantee that people will remember you or that you'll be satisfied. A long life doesn't guarantee a good legacy either. I could live until I'm 150 but if I'm self-centered, living for my comfort and my agenda, if I'm always asking "what can I get out of life?" rather than "what can I give back to God who has blessed me?," then who cares if I live another year? It's the donation of our life that matters, not the duration of our life.

What will your legacy be? What tales will be told about your life? The Bible passage you just heard contains the final words from a man named Paul to his protégé in the faith named Timothy. Paul is going to die. He's on trial for his faith, in a time when the emperor Nero was imprisoning and executing followers of Jesus. We know from verse 16 that Paul has already made one defense – and it went poorly. Perhaps in a matter of weeks, Roman guards will haul him out of his jail cell, lead him along the Ostian Way and chop his head off. This is Paul's final chance to leave a legacy to his loved ones. It's an intense passage, filled with deep pathos and struggle.

But before we explore this final legacy, we have to remember the larger context of Paul's life. You see, his whole life was one long, ongoing response to God's grace. Every breath he took was a gift of grace. Back up with me to his first letter Timothy chapter

1:12-16. Did you notice how he lived under the overflow of God's grace – "The grace of our Lord was poured on me abundantly"? Do you see how this passage exudes God's amazing grace? As we look at the legacy he's leaving and as we ponder the legacy we might leave, it should challenge us but it will never crush us. God's grace is always available to you – even if you've made a mess of your week or your life. This passage says, "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man." Each of us will complete the sentence "Even though I was once a ---" Even though I was once a cold, self-righteous, religious, selfish, addicted, angry, fearful man or woman, but now we're living under God's overflow of grace. "The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly." Are you living under the overflow? Do you know how his grace is being poured out on you abundantly? Does that stun you and overwhelm you with joy and hope? That is the Gospel. Everything flows from God's abundant flow of grace in Jesus.

Now we're going to explore this question: how do you leave a Gospel-filled legacy? As you live under the overflow of God's grace, how do you respond by pouring back? As a Gospel-changed person this passage will throw a searchlight on three things: Did I finish well? Did I love well? Did I suffer well? Those three questions will form the outline for our legacy.

First, did I finish well? Remember Paul knows his death is coming. So he begins by addressing Timothy in verse 1 – "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..." Did you notice how serious this is? This is Paul's last shot at wrapping up his legacy and passing it on to his friend Timothy. Then in verse 6 Paul begins to outline his own legacy, he'll say this: it's all about how you finish the journey. Will you finish well? Notice verse 6. Paul uses a powerful picture of how he wants to finish his journey with Christ – "For I am already being poured out like a drink offering." It was one of Paul's favorite expressions for how he wanted to live his life. In another New Testament passage he said the same thing (see Philippians 2:17). He's giving us a vivid picture from the great Day of Atonement. At the end of all the offerings, a jug of wine was brought out and poured out on the altar. The Greek word was *spendomai*. The goal of our life is not to save as much as we can – either financially or emotionally or relationally; the goal is to spend our life. What are you spending your life on? You will spend it on something.

There's a wonderful story in the Gospel of Mark about an unknown woman who carried a small bottle of very expensive perfume into a dinner party. We know it contained rare perfume, perhaps valued at many years' worth of earnings. She could have saved it. She could have let it sit on the shelf. She could have said, "At all costs, I will not spend this valuable resource. I will protect it and guard it." But she knew that every gift – whether it's the gift of money, or physical strength, or freedom, or faith, or athletic or artistic or intellectual talent – every gift is for spending. So she poured it out on Jesus' feet and head, as an act of devotion. She finished well.

Then Paul tells us how to finish well by giving us three athletic images all taken from the equivalent of the Olympic Games: I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Or as someone has translated this verse, “I have competed well in the athletic contest of life, I have finished the event that life assigned me, and I didn’t foul out of the game.” Now Paul is not saying, “I have achieved my salvation and therefore God finds me acceptable.” All of this is a response to the Gospel, the overflow of God’s grace when we don’t deserve it. But as we respond, we realize that this requires enormous amounts of focus and concentration and dedication. No one dabbles at being an Olympic athlete.

And then we’re told the prize for finishing well: (verse 8) “Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge will award to me on that day.” He’s talking about the garlands that were placed on the heads of the victors in the Greek games. It’s ironic because in a few weeks the emperor Nero, a man who was hell-bent on persecuting Christians, would condemn Paul and then chop his head off. But it didn’t matter because God, the real ruler of the universe, the only one whose opinion ultimately matters, would place a victor’s wreath on Paul’s head. And, ultimately, that’s all that matters for us. We may win all kinds of prizes and games and achieve all kinds of awards, and set all kinds of records and please all kinds of people, but the victor’s crown from God is all that really matters.

Am I finishing well? Am I spending my life? Or am I just hoarding it, saving it, protecting it, staying comfortable and safe with it?

The second question to ask about leaving a Gospel-centered legacy is this: **Did I love well?** After Paul finishes this stirring survey of the past (“I have fought the good fight”) and hope for the future (“there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness”), I love verse 9: “Do your best to come to me quickly.” And then he repeats it again in verse 21 – “Do your best to get here before winter.” Although he’s finished the course and stayed focused and poured out his life to the end, just like every human being on this planet, he’s still a frail human being with a deep, unquenchable need for connection with other human beings. As the song says, “We all need somebody to lean on” – and no matter how far we journey forward in the spiritual life, that fact will never change. I know a very wise and mature follower of Christ who told me recently, “In these latter years of my life I just ache for my friends. I ache for them!”

Paul ached for his friends too (see 2 Timothy 1:4). This passage is full of friends. Notice the names in verses 11-12 – Luke and Mark and Tychius. Notice the names in verses 19-21 – Priscilla and Aquila and Erastus and Trophimus and Eubulus and Pudens and Linus and Claudius. If you read through the New Testament, you’ll see the high priority set on friendships. Unfortunately, we don’t always live that way. That shouldn’t be true for the follower of Jesus. Jesus had friends. The Apostle Paul mentions over 90 friends by name in his letters. Paul was friends with a diverse group of people: the rich and poor, the powerful and the powerless, men and women.

Friends do nice things for you. You can ask them to bring you a coat before winter so you don't get cold (see verse 13). But more than anything, for a follower of Jesus, friends, challenge and stir you to love God so that you do finish the journey well. (Story).

Do you have friends that spur you forward? When you feel like giving up, when you feel like you can't finish well, who do you call? Let me address two groups of people here. First, if you're between the ages of 15-25 let me ask you this: do you have friends that encourage you to grow in your faith? There are few decisions that will shape you more than your choice of friends. Choose friends. Choose lots of friends. But make sure you have some close friends that know your heart, your secrets, your sins, your struggles and that can therefore challenge you to grow in Christ.

If you're over 25, let me challenge you with this thought: you know the importance of friends. You know how, as the Bible says, "Iron sharpens iron so one friend sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17). But you're convinced you don't have time for this. Or if you're a guy, you're tempted to say, "My wife is my best and only friend." How sweet. Then you'll retire and you'll drive your wife nuts – because she has other friends besides you. Be like the old man I mentioned earlier: admit that you ache for friends, pursue them, join a small group, make this a top priority in your spiritual life.

Because when you're lying in the casket, no one will tell stories about how much you achieved or how many games you won or how much money you made or even how many hours you put in at the office. They'll tell stories like these: "He brought me a cloak when I was cold." "She made me a meal when our family was hurting." "He prayed for me when I felt like giving up." "They helped lead our small group." "When we were kids daddy always used to surprise us with presents and trips to the beach." "She always had a way of making me feel God's presence." Part of your legacy of an overflowing life is this: do you love well? Do you count your money or do you count your friends? Are they friends that spur you closer to Christ? Are you that kind of friend to others?

Third, do you suffer well? The question for all of us is not "Will I suffer" (that's a given) but "How will I deal with suffering when it comes my way." About 15 years ago the psychiatrist M. Scott Peck wrote a book called *The Road Less Traveled* in which he started the book with this famous line: "Life is difficult." And he went on to say that whenever we try to avoid that reality, we end up with some kind of neurosis. Life is difficult. In other words, eventually, life will break your heart. Life will wound you; relationships will hurt and disappoint you. The question then will be: will I suffer well or will I suffer poorly? Do I try to arrange my life and protect myself so I will avoid suffering? Do I maximize my comfort? How I respond to suffering will leave a mark; it will leave a legacy.

Notice verse 16. This refers to the preliminary investigation before the formal trial. We don't know what Paul had been charged with, but we do know from other historians at this time (Tacitus and Pliny, for instance), that the emperor Nero had accused Christians of all kinds of crimes: atheism, because they refused to worship the emperor;

cannibalism, because they ate the body and blood of Jesus; and of a general “hatred of the human race” because they didn’t participate in violent entertainment. Roman law allowed the accused to call his friends who could help in his defense. They could serve as your attorney, defending you, advising you, or just standing there to show sympathy for you. Notice what Paul said, “No one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them.” Paul isn’t feeling sorry for himself; he’s just stating a fact. No one showed up. Where were his 90-plus friends? We don’t know.

I don’t have time to explore it here but these verses have so many parallels to Jesus’ crucifixion. This is Paul’s Garden of Gethsemane experience, the place where Jesus prayed right before he went to the cross, the place where Jesus surrendered and yielded his life into the hands of his loving heavenly Father. He couldn’t see it all. It didn’t make sense. And it was still painful, but Jesus surrendered because God is good. He suffered well.

And with Christ’s life within him, Paul could suffer well also. See verse 17. It doesn’t make him bitter and filled with self-pity. It’s hard. It hurts. Life can break your heart. But in the midst of the hurt, Paul says, “But the Lord stood by my side and gave me strength ...” Yes, your parents or your ex-spouse or your children or your friends may hurt you, but remember this: God is standing by your side. And he will strengthen you, literally “God will infuse you with strength and make you dynamic.” And not only that, but for Paul this gave him a chance to share the good news of Jesus with others. No wonder the last words from his pen would be (see verse 22): “The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.”

I’ll never forget my mentor, Doc Hinerman, and how he suffered well. After a glorious thirty year career at Park Avenue United Methodist Church in south Minneapolis (the first racially integrated church in the Twin Cities), Doc “retired” and started at another church in North Carolina. It was supposed to be his golden years; instead, they turned into the darkest years of his life. His wife Dorrie became so tortured by her arthritis that she could hardly move. Doc had to carry her almost everywhere. Her bones kept breaking and snapping, but Doc kept caring for her. Then the good people of Doc’s church didn’t like his plans to reach the minorities in the community, creating all kinds of conflict. Then Doc had a stroke. Every time I called Doc, in the midst of his personal suffering, he would ask me, “Tell me about your life. How are you? How is that beautiful wife of yours? How are your children?” And then he would always say, “Mathew, my son, I am so proud of you. Stay the course, son. Never give up.” By suffering well, Doc left me a powerful legacy of the overflowing life of grace.

Perhaps you’re suffering and your greatest fear is that no one will notice. No one cares. Please remember, first of all, that the Lord stands beside you (verse 17). Secondly, you are leaving a trail. You will leave a story. People will notice how well you suffer and then they’ll tell stories like, “Do you remember when the hard times hit him? He leaned into God. Do you remember when she was knocked down? She was so real and honest and earthy – she even lamented to God – but it was so clear that the Lord was standing by her side. That’s how I want to live my life when hard times come.”

What kind of legacy are you telling? What are you leaving behind? Does it begin with God's grace? Are you on path to finish well? Do you love well? Are you suffering well – or are you prepared to suffer well? I want to leave us with one more picture of a Gospel-centered legacy. The following scene focuses on the journey of love between a father and his son. But in a way, this is a story of our relationship with a God of overflowing grace; and it's a picture of the legacy that God calls us to pass on to others.