

“I have fought the good fight”

by Pastor James Hughes

II Timothy 4:6-8

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Greenwood Wesleyan Church

“⁶For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. ⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

⁸Now 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.”

In this less than 60 word speech, the apostle Paul has given us his farewell speech. It ranks right up there with Lincoln’s Gettysburg address. Those of you who are baseball fans may remember from history the final farewell of Lou Gehrig in Yankee Stadium. Suffering from an incurable disease, he stood at the home plate and tearfully said farewell to the fans who had cheered him on for many years. He said, ‘soon or later, the time comes when each of us must hang up the spikes.’ That time had come for the apostle Paul.

The apostle Paul viewed life as a journey and death as the time of our departure. In just a few words Paul presents a picture of a runner who has competed honorable in the race. The best way to understand Paul’s word picture is to picture in your mind an athlete coming off the field, having given his or her very all. It has been a total effort. Having given his best, Paul now sees himself as crossing the finish line. The focus is not on winning as much as it is on finishing. The Christian life is not a competition to necessarily run better than others. It’s a commitment to run all the way to the finish. The apostle Paul had kept his vows. Unfortunately for many, long-range commitment is often replaced by short-range gratification. A woman was reportedly asked on her 50th wedding anniversary, “In all of these years, did you ever consider divorce?” “No, never. Murder often, but never divorce!”

I also want us to consider Romans 3:23, “for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”

Today at about 1 PM, the green flag dropped at the Indianapolis Speedway, signaling the start of the world’s most celebrated auto race. Before the rain stopped the race, 33 gleaming, low slung, turbocharged weapons shot out of the fourth turn screaming through the starting gate at speeds in excess of 200 miles per hour.

Today, before they could complete 20 laps the toll had started to be taken. I believe there was a driver-caused accident. Had the race been able to continue, no doubt there would have been tire problems, gearbox or transmission failures, fuel management problems and a host of other calamities. Anybody who follows the Indianapolis 500 knows that not all the cars that start will actually finish the race.

However, on the pace lap, and even on the first few racing laps, every car looks invincible. Unbeatable. Unstoppable. Each car individually looks like the winner! Each car looks like it will be the car to receive the checkered flag and the winner’s circle. But

the people who follow Indy every year understand that the goal is not just to start well, but to finish well. Trophies rarely get handed out to those who cross the starting line of a race. It's not the starting line that matters so much as the finish line. The prize and the money go to those who crossed the finish line.

Nearly all of us have in our memories the scandals of previous years. Many of us have tried to come to grips with the fact that many people have started well, have crossed the starting line, but who have not been able to cross the finish line. Many people have been forced out of the race for one reason or another.

What's wrong? People are asking 'what's going wrong?' What ever happened to ethics? What ever happened to morality? Politicians, community leaders, preachers, men and women in all walks of life seemed to be falling apart at the seams. Judges, athletes, priests, business men and women...why are so many going bad?

I stand before you this evening and honestly admit I don't have all the answers...but I have a few.

The first answer that I want to give to the question "why so many people falling morally and ethically?" is a theological answer. There is a theological explanation to this whole mess. How could a well respected Wall Street broker who has amassed more millions that he could ever spend,... why would he do something illegal and risk his career and fortune?

I don't understand athletes who have it all...they have fame, health, money, and youth. Why would someone like that mess around with cocaine? Why the multiple marriage affairs and sexual sins?

I am tempted so say, "read your Bibles!" There's no mystery to this stuff. This kind of thing is called 'sin!' It's called greed. It's called envy. It's called lust. It's called pleasure seeking. It's called unbelief. It's called sin.

It started back in the garden of Eden when Adam and Eve had plenty, but they wanted more. They were not content with a few simple commands that God had given them. The evil one whispered into their ears. And they listened. Jesus called the evil one "the father of lies." He whispered to men like King David, a great leader. He said, "go ahead and take Uriah's wife as your own. Go ahead, and no one will ever know."

He whispered to Judas, "go ahead, get into the bag from some extra pocket money. No one will ever know." He whispered to a man named Demas, and said, "forget all this nonsense of living and spreading Christianity. Eat, drink, and be merry. You only live once. Go for the gusto. Do your own thing man. Be your own man."

Need I remind you that the whispers of the evil one have been heard and heeded to some extent in the lives of every person in this place, including my own? Why then should it shock us when someone falls...especially a leader, falling to the kind of deception that many of us have fallen to at one time or another?

What I am driving at is this: the Bible has maintained all along that men and women are born into sin and beyond that are prompted by the evil one to make sinful choices. The sociologists and psychologists are telling us that people are born good and that if they are born into a healthy environment, and if we can educate them and give them a meaningful role to play in society, they will lead good lives. Occasionally one will go bad, but that is sort of a mystery. What you need to know is that you were born good and you ought to express that goodness. That's what many professionals have said.

Please excuse my frankness, but that's ignorant! The Scriptures say we are born sinful. We are born sinful and have gone wrong before day one! Jeremiah 17:9 says, "the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked."

You were born that way. I was born that way. And if you've ever been around a couple of kids you have probably seen the proof. You don't have to take Little Jimmy or Susie around behind the garage to teach them how to sin. Have you ever visited a nursery? Have you ever watched the kids? Have you ever seen a little kid go over and shove some smaller kid down and take his or her toy? Who taught him to do that? It just happened, you saw it, but who taught him how to do it? You see, we were born in sin!

The first step to Christ is to admit that we are sinners and that we are in need of a Savior. That's the first step. It is to admit that we have fallen short of God's Divine expectation in our life.

The problem that I'm talking about today has to do with people who have taken the first step. They began the race, looking good, starting well, but somewhere along the way there has been a crash...tire problems, a blowout! Gearbox failures....I suspect that the evil one has whispered and they have listened.

They are no longer in the race. They too have fallen for whatever reason. They had a good start. But somewhere during the race they hit the wall. The evil one whispered and they listened to his pack of lies.

Somewhere along the way they swallowed the line...hook, line and sinker. They need to discover that the evil one's lies are not that grand, glorious or great. And really are more dangerous and damning than anything else. We all know of people who are out of the race today because they believed the lies of the evil one. We all know of people who cannot re-enter the race because of: bad habits, failed marriages, financial setback, hurtful relationships, old grudges, non-biblical traditions, wrong choices.

Bottom line...sin! What I want to say is this..."for heaven's sake, get rid of it! Let go of it! Get over it! Go through it! Go under it! Start where you stopped! Just get back into the race!"

Purpose within yourself that with God's help you are going to cross the finish line. You may have started well, but you need to finish well. You may have fallen. But get back

up and get into the race, so that you will be able to join the apostle Paul, saying “I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.”