

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer

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The Importance of Finishing Well

2 Timothy 4: 9-11a

The writer Ernest Hemmingway once came across a newspaper ad that in his opinion formed a sad but perfect six-word short-story. The notice read: "Free baby shoes. Never been used." There is a similarly sad short story in the New Testament concerning a man who is mentioned but three times. I suspect most of you have never heard of him. His name is Demas. We first take notice of him in Paul's letter to Philemon, where Paul is noting the presence of friends who are in with prison with him, sustaining him by their encouragement. Paul writes, "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers." Note the simple fact that Demas is listed ahead of Luke in Paul's reference. The second time we find Demas mentioned is in the letter to the Colossians. Again, Paul is in prison, again he is writing to friends, again he is noting those attending to him in his incarceration. This time he writes, "Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you." In this second reference, Luke is mentioned first, coupled with a word of endearment, but we cannot read too much into this subtle change. But there is no mistaking the meaning of the third reference. In the second letter to Timothy, incorporating, we suppose, one of the last messages Paul ever wrote, the apostle writes, "Demas, has deserted me, having loved this present age and gone to Thessalonica." These three mentions of Demas constitute a graph, plotting the graph of a man's spiritual pilgrimage. "Demas, my fellow worker; Demas; Demas has deserted me, having loved this present age." In that plotted arc we find the sad story of a man who began his career in faith with integrity, distinction, and passion – but he did not finish well.

Demas, I grant you, is a minor New Testament figure, but he represents a prevalent spiritual type. Demas is one of those people whom Jesus is describing when he tells the parable of the sower. Our Lord noted that there are people whose hearts are so hard and inured to God's Gospel that the message of Good News bounces off them like seed off a rock. Demas is *not* such a person. Demas began his faith pilgrimage with great openness to God. The Good News took root in him. He was someone of importance in the early church, someone who befriended Paul, someone whom Paul trusted. But Jesus no doubt knew a lot of people like Demas, souls who were all fiery with enthusiasm initially, but evincing a faith that lacked staying power. The Gospel takes root in them initially, but somehow amidst sad times or happy times, those roots remain shallow; those roots are not cultivated. Over time, Demas' enthusiasm waned, his faith cooled, his pilgrimage stagnated: "Demas; Demas, my fellow worker; Demas has deserted me, having loved this present age."

What I am trying to say to you this morning, my friends, is that starting well does not mean finishing well. If I say the word "Titanic," nobody thinks of a brilliant ocean liner emanating invincibility and luxury. We think of a barnacle-encrusted, colossal crypt, lying in the abyssal depths, symbolic of tragedy. Demas has what it takes to be a great person of faith, but he does not summon the ability to sustain it.

Indeed, though Demas is an obscure Biblical figure, I suspect many of us resonate with his story far better than we do with more famous spiritual characters.

For ours is a society that puts enormous emphasis on beginning well.

American parents, so determined to give their children the best of beginnings, have made Dr. Spock one of the best-selling authors of modern time.

Toy companies and educational companies offer a host of cool tools so parents can teach their children their abcs and math tables at the earliest possible age, because everyone is so keen on starting their child's learning process on the best foot possible.

Certainly, starting well is important. But starting well is not tantamount to finishing well.

I know, in the wake of the Panthers' upset loss, that football is a rather painful topic to introduce this morning.

But for those of you who are students of the game, you will recognize the name of Todd Marinovich, a phenomenal football player who burst on the sports scene in the early 1990's.

Todd Marinovich was raised from the cradle to become a great athlete.

One of his parents was a former professional athlete himself, and both parents trained this child from the crib to be an athletic superstar. He came to be called a "test-tube quarterback."

By the time he had entered college he had never eaten a Big Mac or an Oreo.

He had never known the gustatory pleasure of a Little Debbie.

When he was a child and went to birthday parties,

he would take his own cake to avoid sugar and refined white flour. He ate only unprocessed dairy products.

Colleges started recruiting him when he was a high school freshman,

and he ended up being the first freshman quarterback at Southern Cal to start since World War II.

If anyone had a marvelous athletic beginning it was Todd Marinovich.

But by the time he was a senior in college, the young man whose body had never known a Big Mac had already experienced his first arrest for cocaine possession.

The kid who never ate an Oreo in his youth spent the next ten or fifteen years addicted to hard narcotics of one kind or another.

The kid who was raised from the cradle to be All-Pro

ended his career being listed by ESPN as one of the greatest flops in sports history.

Starting well is important, but great beginnings do not guarantee great ends.

In 2007 UCLA published a survey of some of its students' religious practices.

They interviewed incoming college freshmen and found that 44% of them said

They attended religious services frequently. Participation in a faith community was part of their life.

By the time those same students were juniors, that 44% number had dropped to 25%.

By the time they were juniors, only 25% professed that participation in a religious community was a regular part of their schedule.

Demas is not a dusty, obscure Biblical figure; Demas is an all-too-prevalent spiritual type.

How many young people's story follows this narrative: they were raised in the faith,

nurtured in spiritual principles, grounded in Biblical knowledge,

but somewhere along the way they lost their spiritual passion. They lost their holy habits.

They began to slide away from the faith that once nourished them.

Their relationship with God became one more relationship among many.

How many of us have traced the arc of Demas' spiritual career in our own lives?

When I look at Demas, I realize that Christians fall into the most ridiculous of spiritual arguments.

To this day Christian theologians argue over the issue of apostasy,

the act of falling away from Christ and turning one's back on one's faith after having committed to it.

You might be interested to know that there are many theologians and millions of Christians

who believe that apostasy is not possible.

I look out upon you older Christians who were raised on the doctrine, "Once saved, always saved," a key tenet of classical Calvinism. This view says:

once you have made your profession of faith, you are not only set for life, you are set for eternal life.

Once you have professed your faith in Christ, you cannot fall away from God.

You might be interested to know that the seminary where I was trained, the seminary that has trained every pastor who has ever pastored this church, has in its Abstract of Principles the notion of "once saved, always saved," the perseverance of the saints.

Maybe at the theoretical level that argument has some merit, yet truly this doctrine has no basis in reality.

Demas is proof positive that people can be committed to faith in Christ, can practice faith in Christ, can be defined by participation in the community of Christ, then can fall away by their own bad choices.

Do not tell the apostle Paul that apostasy cannot happen. He saw it happen. We see it, too.

Why did Demas fall away from his faith? Why did Christian service cease to be important to him?

Was he an early victim of burnout? I think that is possible.

Think of the letters that Paul writes where he mentions Demas. All are written from prison.

Demas sees firsthand what it costs to be a believer.

Demas knows that Paul is a marked man, and knows that if he continues in the faith he will be a marked man, too.

Does he want to continue to practice a discipleship that demands so much from him?

Maybe the ceaseless drain of commitment burned him out.

Then again, maybe faith was not what Demas thought it was going to be.

Maybe he thought, 'If I become a follower of Christ, it is going to bring me power, it is going to bring me status, it is going to bring me some measure of wealth and self-esteem.

If I am a follower of Christ, then God will bless me with wonderful things.'

All of the television preachers say something like this.

All of the television preachers say that if you follow Christ you will be blessed with material wealth beyond measure.

But Paul would have said to Demas, if you follow the Christ, you are going to end shackled like I am.

Because the Christ who followed God's will with absolute obedience ended up as Christ crucified.

The television preachers don't say that.

Demas may have thought that his faith was going to bring him some benefit, and when it didn't bring him any tangible blessing, he quit it.

Legend has it that Demas ended up as a successful priest in a pagan temple in Rome.

He probably died in his bed, surrounded by creature comforts, having lived a long and peaceable life.

On the other hand, legend says Paul was crucified upside down during the reign of Nero.

Yet Paul is cherished in the Christian church as the great apostle to the Gentiles,

and Luke is cherished not only as the author of one of the Gospels,

but as the writer of the first history of the Christian church, known as the book of Acts.

Paul, Luke and Demas, all experienced the same adversities, all weathered the same challenges, but two of them knew the importance of finishing well, and one did not.

I've read this passage many times, but this week I noticed a truth that I never have before.

Paul, as you know didn't write his letters. He dictated them to an amanuensis, which is a fancy name for a secretary.

I'm going to tell my secretary Peggy tomorrow that she is now an amanuensis.

An amanuensis is a human dictaphone.

Just prior to Paul's saying, "Demas has deserted me," he dictated these valedictory words:
"I am already on the point of being sacrificed.
The time of my departure has come.
I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.
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."

Do you hear the trumpet notes of triumph in that testimony?
I have fought the good fight! I have finished the race! I have kept the faith!
Here is a man for whom serving God is not a stair step for anything,
It is just a delight for his soul.
We have all crafted ambitions that we want to realize over the course of this year.
We have all made resolutions intended to improve the quality of our lives.
Can we keep those resolutions?
Not if they are but carrots dangled before our eyes.
To keep ambitions that truly make a difference, those hopes must swell out of the depths of our souls.
To pursue life-changing goals we must be claimed by a purpose that is higher and greater than we are.
Certainly Paul is claimed and fueled by a cause that is greater and higher than he is.
Likewise, we must allow ourselves to be claimed and fueled by a cause greater and higher than our lives
and structure our lives in such a way that we are fed by the Spirit
and nourished by God's presence, strengthened with might daily in the inner person.
That's the only way to conceive and sustain a commitment to a transforming goal.
We must be claimed by a higher purpose and fed by a higher energy
than we are capable of manufacturing ourselves.

A final observation: I suspect that it was Luke's friendship with Demas that caused him
to include a parable of Jesus that only he records. Only Luke records Jesus as saying,
Which of you wishing to build a tower, does not stop first and count the cost,
lest he lay the foundation for the tower, only to discover that he doesn't have sufficient resources to finish it, so
that people come by to mock his effort?
How many of us have laid great foundations on wonderful projects,
then found that we lacked the will and the wherewithal to make them come to fruition?
I am not going to ask you how you intend to begin in 2009
I am going to ask you to envision how you intend to finish it.
May God's Spirit so put before your eyes worthy goals and strengthen your spirit with inner might
that those ambitions might become reality.
But keep this warning before your eyes:
Demas, my fellow worker; Demas; Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present age.

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