

“AT ALL COST, FINISH THE RACE!”
Deuteronomy 31:1-6, 2 Timothy 4:1-8, Acts 20:13-38
July 5 & 6, 2025

“It’s tough to live a focused life. From every direction, something or someone clamors for our attention. A distraction draws our eyes and the next thing we know, we’ve swerved off the road and headed down another detour.

“One Chicago youth pastor came up with a clever way to keep his group on track. Concerned that the balmy beaches of Florida - the site of their upcoming evangelism trip - would lure the teens from their purpose, he fashioned a cross from two pieces of lumber. Just before they climbed on the bus, he showed it to the group.

“I want all of you to remember that the whole purpose of our going is to glorify the name of Christ, to lift up the Cross - the message of the Cross, the emphasis of the Cross, the Christ of the Cross,’ he announced. ‘So we’re going to take this cross wherever we go.’

“The teenagers looked at one another, a little unsure of his plan. But they agreed to do it and dragged the cross on the bus. It banged back and forth in the aisle all the way to Florida. It went with them into restaurants. It stayed overnight where they stayed overnight. It stood in the sand while they ministered on the beach.

“At first, lugging the cross around embarrassed the kids. But later, it became a point of identification. That cross was a constant, silent reminder of who they were and why they had come. They eventually regarded carrying it as an honor and a privilege.

“The night before they went home, the youth leader handed out two nails to each of the kids. He told them that if they wanted to commit themselves to what the cross stood for, they could hammer one nail into it and keep the other with them. One by one, the teens drove their nail into the cross.

“About fifteen years later, one fellow - now a stockbroker - called the youth leader. He told him that he still keeps that nail with him in his desk drawer. Whenever he loses his sense of focus, he looks at the nail and remembers the cross on that beach in Florida. It reminds him of what is at the core of his life - his commitment to Jesus Christ.”¹

Do you also struggle with distractions that draw your commitment to Jesus Christ away from your daily living? Are you easily ashamed of being a follower of Jesus? What if you were to make a cross and take it everywhere you went, in demonstration to your commitment of faith in Jesus? Would you also become embarrassed about being one of the Lord’s disciples? How then will you remain focused on following the Lord Jesus?

In Deuteronomy 31, Moses wanted the people of Israel to stay committed to serving the Lord God Almighty. In the final chapters of the book, Moses announces that his leadership was coming to an end, and he desperately wanted the people to keep their eyes upon trusting and serving the Lord. He told them, “*The Lord your God Himself will cross over ahead of you. He will destroy these nations before you, and you will take possession of their land...Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you*” (Deuteronomy 31:3 & 6).

Joshua was designated as their new leader who would be the representative of the Lord for the people so that they could follow him and continue to do the work of the Lord. They had the Ark of the Covenant with them to remind them of God’s presence. They had the Tabernacle upon which to gather on a regular basis to pray to and worship in God’s presence. They had the Ten Commandments and the Laws of God with them to guide them. They had the memories of how God guided them and led them out of Egypt and through all the lands of other nations to get to the point of possessing the Promised Land. Moses called them to be faithful to the Lord in all

¹ (Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Ultimate Book of Illustrations*, [Nashville; Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998] pg. 97)

they did, so that God would bless them and provide for them abundantly. As long as they remained faithful to the Lord God Almighty, they would find success and peace. If they would follow all that God commanded them, they would flourish as a nation. Their commitment to the Lord God Almighty would become the shining light to all the nations of the One True God.

The Apostle Paul challenged his disciple, Timothy, to do the same thing, to remain committed to Jesus Christ so that he might be found faithful. He says, *“Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry”* (2 Tim. 4:2-5).

Being a disciple of Jesus, then, does not mean that we let the Pastor and Ministry Leader do all the work of ministry. It means that every person becomes involved in the work that God has called them to do, so that it is not overwhelming for any one person, but is shared by all. Leading and attending Bible studies, teaching Sunday school, participating in small discipleship groups, working on committees in church leadership, visiting the shut-ins, inviting others to join you in worship, and sharing your faith with one another - all of these build into the life of people in the church and are ways that keep the church of Jesus Christ growing in our world today.

Just coming to worship once a week is not enough to even maintain your faith. Much more is demanded of us as followers of Jesus so that we grow deeper in our faith and help others grow in their faith, too. Then, having done that throughout your life, you might be able to say with Paul, *“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...to all who have longed for His appearing" (2 Tim. 4:7-8). The crown of righteousness does not just come to us as we believe in Jesus, but as we live for Jesus in all our ways for the glory of the Lord, and then building the Christian Church.

Take for example Jack Martens. "Jack Martens was a minister in San Francisco who marched to the beat of a different drummer. He was not ordained and didn't preach from a pulpit, but Martens was a pastor nonetheless. Ask over 10,000 students who through the years have benefited from his ministry on the other side of his music stand.

"You see, Jack Martens was a band teacher to 12-, 13-, and 14-year-olds in the inner city of San Francisco. For 33 years he braved the challenges of less-than-ideal teaching conditions at Ben Franklin Middle School to courageously live out his faith. Over 50 percent of Martens' students were from broken homes, the same number were on welfare, and nearly that number coming from families where English was not their first language. To that score add the fact that funding for the arts was all but cut off in Jack's school district. Still the 56-year-old, bearded band teacher shepherded his students through the less-than green pastures of life. 'I love these kids,' he admitted. 'And they love me. In me they can see my love for Jesus Christ.'

"Although Martens kept a Bible and other Christian symbols on his desk, it was his interaction with the kids that gave his witness a melody line. He ate lunch with them to help them talk through their problems and stayed after school to help with difficult fingerings. Through the mechanics of music he was able to show his students they are capable of something beautiful. He was a committed follower of Jesus who viewed his secular work as a sacred calling."²

² (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishing, 2002] pg. 183-184)

This was also what the Apostle Paul did in his life. He lived each day as a witness to the love and grace and salvation of the Lord Jesus Christ. He lived Jesus before all the people he encountered. Be it at his work as a tent maker, or as he addressed folks at the Synagogues or the marketplaces, people could see that he was different. Even though he had to face some very difficult challenges, Paul took Jesus with him every day so that the people could see the difference it makes as we have Jesus as Savior and Lord.

We hear about this in Paul's life as he addressed the leaders of the church in Ephesus for the last time. As we look at the next section of our study of the Book of Acts, we find Paul is traveling toward Jerusalem in completion of his third missionary journey. It was there that he gave testimony of his work for the Lord Jesus after his conversion. He told the account of his ministry and also laid out his desire for the church to continue to remain faithful to Jesus in all they did. Listen to Acts 20:13-38. (READ Acts 20:13-38)

Now, it was made known to Paul through the Holy Spirit that prison and hardships were in his future as he served Jesus. But that did not scared him away from giving his life to telling others about Jesus. Paul had made a commitment to live for Jesus no matter what might come along. The Holy Spirit had been faithful to guide him all during his ministry, and He was now leading him into opportunities to do even greater things, even if it meant prison and hardships.

But Paul reminds the Ephesian leaders, *"I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus"* (Acts 20:19-21). He goes on to make a great statement of faith, *"However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the*

race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying the Good News of God's grace" (20:24).

Paul was totally sold out for Jesus! He had committed his life in service to the Lord as a messenger of God through Jesus Christ. He opened up the eyes of the blind to help them to see the need for Jesus in their lives. He enlightened folks to the goodness of God, challenged their disbelief, and corrected their errant thinking. He encouraged anyone who would be a follower of Jesus so that they might live a life pleasing to the Lord. He did not think his life to be important in any other way than to live for Jesus.

It wasn't about gaining wealth, or security, or power, or property. It wasn't about creating a name for himself by influencing others to follow him. It was about living in a way that demonstrated the value of having Christ Jesus as Lord of his life. Paul wanted to finish his life as a servant of God. He wanted to "*press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 3:14). It didn't matter about pleasing other people; what mattered the most was pleasing God in all that he did. And if that meant prison or hardships, so be it. For God's glory!

That's where John Wesley got the inspiration for the Covenant Prayer that he wrote and lived by. He says,

"I am no longer my own, but Yours, (oh God).

Put me to what you will, rank me with whom You will.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed by You or laid aside for You, exalted for You or brought low by You.

Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to Your pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, You are mine, and I am Yours. So be it.

And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.”³

That’s the kind of commitment that God desires for all of us as followers of Jesus Christ!

That’s the dedication we are to give the Lord Jesus so that we might be pleasing in God’s sight.

That’s the statement of faith Jesus invites us all to have in our lives as His followers.

But over the centuries, Christians have become lazy in their theology as well as their commitment to Jesus Christ. Most Christians consider it the job of their pastor to do all the ministry for the church. Most Christians think its ok for them just to attend worship once or twice a month, if not once or twice a year. They make their appearance before the Lord and say to themselves, “Here I am, Lord, for my yearly check-in. See you next year!” And then they go out and do whatever they want to do! So you find them at the races on Sunday. Or the golf course. Or the marina. Or the cabin. Or the campground. They neglect a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, but they expect that the Lord Jesus will hear their prayers when they get into a bind, or when things turn up-side-down. REALLY! Yes, that’s the sad state of Christianity here in the United States today.

And then many who call themselves Christians turn to every other religious doctrine and discipline other than the whole Book of the Bible, and they begin making up their own rules to live by that are in complete contradiction to what God’s Word says. And if that isn’t enough, they adamantly teach these false beliefs in order to convince others to follow their strand of religion. It’s not Christian, but they call it that. It’s not according to the Bible, but they make their claims that it follows God’s Word. So many people today live in complete ignorance of what the Bible teaches that when someone tells them something that sounds good, they’re all over it, even if it is never found on the pages of this Book (the Bible). That’s where Christianity

³ (Our Great Redeemer’s Praise Hymn Book, [Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2022] pg. 740 & 742)

gets a bad name from, people who call themselves followers of Jesus but do not do what He says. Jesus says in Luke 6:46, “*Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?*”

So Paul warns the Ephesian leaders to be careful. He says, “*Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which He bought with His own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard*” (Acts 20:28-31).

The only way to keep the wolves out of the flock is to become the shepherds who are ready to face the lies of Satan being spread throughout the world. You must prepare yourselves AT ALL COST in order that you can FINISH THE RACE in faith in the Lord Jesus and do the work of the church. Followers of Jesus are not to be wimps, but strong in the Lord, fully reliant on God for all things, ready to do His work, for His glory, not your own, giving of yourself for the sake of another. That is our call.

So, each of you has been given two nails today. If you would like to make a commitment for Jesus Christ today, to be His disciple and to work at making other disciples around you, I invite you to come forward and nail one of the nails into this cross during the last hymn. Then keep the other as a sign of your commitment to Jesus. If you choose not to do that, you can simply leave the nails in the pews.

Father, I pray that each of us would once more commit ourselves into Your service today. I pray that Your Holy Spirit would lead us to do the work of the church by taking Jesus with us wherever we go. Let these nails be our sign of recommitment to You, so that You know our hearts, and that everyone knows our intention to follow Jesus, with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. This I pray, in Jesus Name. AMEN.