

Living
The Maximum Life
With
Power and Purpose

The Art of Finishing

Steve Flatt

The Art of Finishing

This is the final lesson in "The Maximum Life - Living With Power and With Purpose" Series. If you have examined your mission in life, shaped a vision, set goals and secured right relationships, you need to follow through to the end.

How do you finish the race? Scripture several times compares life to a race. Paul says in Acts 20:24, "...if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me." In 2 Timothy 4 Paul wrote "I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Notice the metaphor, not just of running the race, both times Paul talked about finishing the race. Life is a marathon not a sprint.

If you've ever watched a marathon, in its beginning there's this huge crowd all clumped together. As the race progresses, the crowd thins out. Some finish well, others not so well, and some don't finish at all. That's really pretty typical of life. It's not how you start in life that really matters, it's how you finish. What has happened to you in your life up unto this point is not nearly as crucial as what you do with your life from this point forward. It's how you finish that's important. If through this series or other experiences or teachings you get on track to live the maximum life, then let me encourage you to live it until you die. Finish it and claim the prize.

"Run in such a way as to get the prize." (1 Corinthians 9:24) You don't just run. You don't just run aimlessly, you don't run in mediocrity, if you're going to run, then run in such a way as to get the prize. As we conclude this series I hope the acrostic FINISH will help you keep that course all the way to the finish line.

Focus

If you prepared a vision statement for your life, if you prepared goals to accomplish that vision, keep those things in front of you. That's why I stress writing them down. In your life you need to regularly sit down and review your values, your visions and your goals then evaluate "how am I doing". Zig Ziglar said, "We all need to regularly do a check-up from the neck up." Plato said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Paul said "Examine yourselves to see whether you're in the faith; test yourselves." (2 Corinthians 13:5) And in Proverbs 4:26, Solomon said "Ponder the paths that you walk." These great statements can be summarized in "Regularly looking at your values and goals and praying about them will make a bigger difference in your life." Then as you make out your daily agenda ask the question: Is what I say important and reflected in my daily time? That's the key to the maximum life in how you finish the race.

Intercept distractions

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and run with perseverance the race marked out for us." (Hebrews 12:1) The writer says in this race of life to throw off everything that is going to weight you down. You don't run a marathon in a suit of armor. You don't enter a triathlon in an overcoat. You shed anything that would hold you back, that would hinder. You eliminate the distractions.

What are the things in your life that would distract you from living the maximum life? Well, thousands of things. It might be the distraction of a) thinking about making money; b) wrong relationships; or c) the idea that busy is better. You just clutter your life with all these things. There are thousands of things. But probably the number one thing that hinders most folks from the maximum life is their past.

So many people are stuck in their past. They're holding on to the guilt of their own wrongdoing. They're holding on to the hurt of the wrongs that have been inflicted on them. If either of these described you, you're not living the maximum life. Let me remind you, if you're going to drive down life looking in your rearview mirror, you're sure to wreck. You've got to look out in front of you staying focused and not distracted by what is left behind.

"Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do:" (look at this) "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:13) Paul is remembered for his great Christian service but he was also a great Christian persecutor. Paul had plenty to feel guilty about. But knowing he was forgiven by his Savior, Paul said, "No, no, I forget the past and I press on. I won't be manipulated by my memories."

Now you who are in Christ can either rehearse those guilt feelings or you can release them. If you're going to live the maximum life, if you're going to finish the race, let go of the grief, let go of the grudges, let go of the guilt. They're holding you back, they're wrecking you and they're only hurting you. Throw aside your past, your fears, your guilt and your doubts; intercept those distractions.

Note the reward.

Let me ask you a question: Why would we want to live the maximum life in the first place? Why go all out for God? Why make the effort? It's really pretty important because if you can't answer the why, you won't make it to the finish line. The why determines the how long. The why will determine the effort you put into it. Why go to all the trouble we've talked about? Why examine your values? Why make those goals? Why worry about relationships?

1. The purpose - Remember that God put you on this earth for specific purposes. "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Ephesians 2:10) God has some things, some good things that He made us to do. He had a blueprint for us before we were ever born. Frankly, if you don't fulfill that purpose it does not matter how much money you make, how many people answer to you or how many magazines you get your picture on the cover; if you don't fulfill God's purposes for your life, you're a failure. That's harsh, but it's true. Anything that does not do what it's been designed to do is a failure by definition. The only way you're going to have any lasting satisfaction and joy is by fulfilling God's purpose. That's why you make the effort.

2. The ultimate reward. - "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man aimlessly..." (1 Corinthians 9:25-26) Do you see what Paul says? He says, oh yes, the Greek, those folks in their little Olympics, they run for a stephanotis, a crown of victory; a little gold medal or something else. But do you know why we run? It's not to work our way into heaven because God gave salvation free to all who claim it through faith, trust and obedience. We want to run in a way that's honorable to that calling all the way to the finish line.

Observe, there are three kinds of motivation in life. There is: a) internal - when you motivate yourself.

b) external - when people or things are catalysts to motivate you.

c) eternal - when a heavenly reward that never disappears motivates you. The key to finishing the race in the maximum Christian life is to keep your eyes on the finish line and what's just on the other side of it.

"So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." (2 Corinthians 4:18) Paul continues that thought in the next verse, "Now we know that if the early tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands." (2 Corinthians 5:1) Do you wake up every day and think, I'll make the most of my journey in this tent, but I really have got my eye on that mansion? The key to persistence is perspective. Do you want to finish? You've got to concentrate on your purpose and not your problems. "Obstacles are what you see when you take your eyes off the goal."

Incorporate good habits.

You know we have talked about deliberately and systematically choosing your course in life, and all that's true. But frankly, some of you, a lot of you won't try the steps to the maximum life because you're thinking that's too much work and too much trouble. But as you become consistent in your choices and as you become disciplined in your decisions, it almost becomes automatic. In other words, you develop good habits. Frankly, life would be too tedious, it would be too overwhelming if we had to break down and analyze every thought and action. What if you had to think about every breath, inhale and now exhale, think how terrible. What if you had to think about everything you went through? God didn't make us that way. He created us to become creatures of habit.

Back to the analogy of a marathon runner. When he starts for that first half-mile or mile, he concentrates on setting a pace and getting his breathing in rhythm. But after about a mile, he doesn't have to think about that anymore. In fact, he will go miles without thinking about his pace or his breathing. Most of them let their minds wander a thousand miles away. Why? Because they have developed a pace and set good running habits. Then they're actually able to relax. Inevitably, you will develop habits. Make sure that you are developing the habits that lead to the maximum life.

Strangle discouragement.

I intentionally use Strangle discouragement. Choke it before it chokes you. Galatians 6:9 states "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if (see that word) "if we do not give up." I have circled that "if" word in my Bible. Folks, discouragement is a deadly enemy of your life mission. In fact, I'm convinced that discouragement is the greatest weapon that Satan has because nothing will render you more ineffective more quickly. The moment you get serious about living the maximum life to make your life count for God, the devil will try to discourage you, especially early on. You've got to push past the discouragement to make it to the finish line.

Again using the race analogy, discouragement to me is like hitting the wall. Have you ever heard that term? Runners use the term, "hitting the wall," because late in a distance race there's a point where every part of the body just begins to scream. It begins to shut down. The only way a runner gets past the "hitting the wall," part is through pure perseverance, and that's true in the race of life.

I'd like to give you a neat little formula, something that would instantly make your pain go away and just say, "Hey don't worry about that." I can't do that. Perseverance is the key. Somebody once said, "The secret to success is to outlast your critics." Isn't that good? Wellington, the great British general, once said, "The secret

of the British army's success is to fight five minutes longer than the enemy." You don't measure a man's greatness by his wealth. You don't measure a man's greatness by his talent. You don't measure a man's greatness by his education. You measure a man's greatness by what it takes to discourage him. Great people are just ordinary people with extraordinary determination. They just don't quit.

"Therefore, my brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:58) Can I paraphrase that for you? "Hang in there. Hang in there, God is going to reward you for your efforts."

I do want to say this though it's no magic cure, if you're sitting there right now discouraged and wondering how life could get any harder, any tougher, or any worse, be assured that your Savior is sitting right there with you. If you're going to live the maximum life, there will be points along that life where God will test your commitment. Now He doesn't test it so that He'll know how committed you are. Our God knows everything. He already knows how committed you are. He tests your commitment so that you will know how committed you are.

How are you doing with perseverance? Do you finish? How do you handle failure? When things don't go right, when you make a mistake, do you have a little pity party and say, "Poor me, poor me." Do you complain, do you argue or do you give up? No! You strangle discouragement before it strangles you.

Hold on to Christ.

If you cooperate, God will give you the power to hold on. He'll give you the power to complete it. You don't have to do it alone. He'll help you if you'll cooperate.

"Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6) "He will keep you strong to the end so that you will be found blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 1:8) No doubt some of you studying this lesson are going through difficult times right now. You don't feel like finishing at all. You may feel like you're going under. You can't figure it out. God is not through with you. The race is not over. He who began His good work in you wants to bring it into completion in your life. Hold on to Christ.

"To this end I labor, struggling with all His energy, which so powerfully works in me." (Colossians 1:29) Some of you are just beginning the journey, seriously. Be assured those who run the race effectively and who head for the prize and who live the maximum life will do exceedingly more than all they ever thought or imagined because of the power of Christ working within them.

Have you examined your life as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 13:5? Have you tested your faith? Are you beginning at last? Are you well on your way to living the maximum life? Or are you wallowing in discouragement? Hold on to Christ. If you are not in Christ, now is the time. Put your trust and faith in Him by obedience to His gospel message, His message of reconciliation.

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