

Leadership Letter

Planning to finish well?



As we move into the last month of this year, it's a good reminder for us to finish this year well. However this month's topic goes beyond this month and is concerned about finishing our life well. If you are reading this letter and you are still in your 20's or 30's you might think – finishing, I am only just starting, this isn't for me! Well surprise, surprise, it actually is. You can't start early enough to think about finishing well. If you wait until later when the finish line is in sight it will be too late. The right attitudes and values required to finish well need time to develop and mature so there's no time like now to start. It's due to a lack of focus on the finish line that so few men and women in the bible finished well.

The apostle Paul understood finishing well. When meeting with the Ephesian elders for the last time in Acts 20:24, he said: "... I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me." For Paul, finishing meant completing his God given task or destiny. For some being imprisoned for the last part of their life would have been discouraging and an anticlimax, but for Paul it became an opportunity of leaving a legacy. It seems he did most of his writing in the last 15 years of his life. What joy filled his heart as he testified at the end of his life: "*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith*". 2 Tim. 4:7.

I have received feedback from a number of people lately that have made the comment, "finishing well is harder than I thought!" As I am quickly heading towards the 60 mark, these comments have impacted me and encouraged me to give it some more thought. I have borrowed heavily from Robert Clinton's writings on this important topic and would recommend his articles for further study.

Howard Hendricks shares that the bulk of the people who failed to finish well in Scripture, failed in the last half of their lives. The reasons vary, but at the core, something caused a lack of zeal, resolve and love for Christ. Bobby Clinton in his book, *Connecting* says: "For some it was a clear point of decision or an experience that became a fork in the road... and they did not choose the correct fork. For others it was an accumulation of small choices that moved them further away from being Christ's disciple."

Robert Clinton through his studies of biblical leaders identifies perhaps 1 in 3 that finish well. Some exhibit all of the following characteristics, others a good percentage. How are we doing?:

- 1. Commitment to God:** We experience a living vital relationship with God that continues through every phase of development and becomes an anchor for our lives. We are able to enjoy intimacy with Christ and experience repeated times of inner renewal. As leaders we need regular encounters with God where we are inspired, challenged and changed. We can't rely on revelations and testimonies of God moving in our lives dating back years! (Hebrews 12:2 fixing our eyes on Jesus)
- 2. Life long learners:** We maintain a positive learning attitude all our lives. We never stop pursuing the goal of becoming more like Jesus and recognising that the more we know, the more there is to know. There's never a point when we have arrived – we continue to grow and develop fruit throughout our lives. Teachability is the foundational quality and the word of God is the key source in that learning. If you find it difficult to learn from those around you, take that as a warning sign. (Hebrews 12:2 the author and perfecter of our faith..)

3. **Depth of character:** We have come to terms with our identity, our personality, gift mix, strengths and weaknesses. We know our sphere of anointing and are able to focus in this area. We become people of integrity, honesty, transparency and trustworthiness. (Hebrews 12:1 let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles)
4. **Perseverance:** There are always enough troubles in our lives that require us to have perseverance to press through. Difficulties, pressures, trials are great teachers and enable us to learn discipline and strength of character. Hebrews 11 is the hall of fame of those who didn't all complete their destinies but were pursuing Jesus even to death. To realise our destiny will take time and requires the character quality of perseverance. (Hebrews 12:1 run the race with perseverance..)
5. **Passionate about something:** We develop a clear goal ahead, a sense of destiny and know God's hand is on us for something special and leave behind a real contribution, or legacy. Around mid life, as leaders we need to be able to focus and articulate our passion. We soon realise that things don't just drop in our laps and if we are to see our inheritance we have to give it all our energy, prayer and time. (Hebrews 12:1 the race marked out for us.)

Categories of Lasting Legacies (Robert Clinton): Take a look at the following categories of legacies and identify which one(s) you are aiming at.

Saint	a model life that others want to emulate
Stylistic practitioners	a ministry model that others want to emulate
Mentors	extensive personal ministry; end product: changed lives
Pioneers	start new works for God; end product is new churches, new movements, new works for God
Founder	a special category of pioneer who starts a new Christian organisation; end product: the organisation
Crusaders	those who correct wrongs: end product changed institutions, societies.. which reflect justice, fairness..
Artists	those who introduce creative ways of doing things: end products – whatever is created – as well as a model for how to do things differently
Stabilizers	those who can work in churches, movements and other organisations to improve them and keep them alive and consistent; end product: the organisation is revitalized and efficient
Researchers	those who find out why things happen the way they do in Christian endeavor; end product: an understanding of the dynamics of things that can help others in Christian work
Writers	those who can capture ideas in writing in order to help others in Christian work; end product: the writing produced
Promoters	those who can motivate others and inspire them to use ideation, to join movements...; end product people committing themselves to new ventures

There are so many men and women who have gone before us who leave us with an example of running the race with perseverance. Rite and I read a daily devotional called "On this day in Christian history" and it's full of stories of known and unsung heroes of the faith. Here are a few to inspire you:

George Mueller: In 1835 with a burden for homeless children, he opened his first orphanage in Bristol, England for 26 children. Other houses soon started. He refused to ask for funds but God miraculously provided for their needs. During the course of his 93 years, Mueller housed more than ten thousand orphans, prayed in millions of pounds, traveled to scores of countries preaching the gospel and recorded fifty thousand answers to prayer. The day before he died, he was still handling orphanage correspondence and protesting that he felt fine.

Eric Liddell: The film Chariots of fire focused on his running career and reminded us of his decision to not run the 100-meter race because it was on Sunday. He won a gold for the 400-meter race the next day. However there was another passion that began as a child born to missionaries in China. The following year after winning the gold medal, he left Scotland to become a teacher in China, married Florence and started mission work there. He was imprisoned in a Japanese camp during the war and died of a brain tumor in 1945.

Catherine Booth: Born in 1830 to a puritan family, she had read the bible eight times before the age of twelve. She excelled in studies after several severe illnesses thought she could be the most useful to God by being a minister's wife. Catherine Booth was eloquent and compelling in speech, articulate and devastatingly logical in writing and for over twenty years defended the right of women to preach the gospel on the same terms as men. At first, Catherine and her husband William had shared a ministry as traveling evangelists, but then she came into great demand as a preacher in her own right, especially among the well-to-do. She died at 61 having had a great influence in missions through the Salvation Army that they had pioneered and encouraging single and married women in ministry.

Raymond Lull: He didn't start well being saved from an immoral lifestyle in Majorca, but at thirty two while writing erotic poetry he met with Christ and was powerfully converted. He had a burden to reach Muslims, learned Arabic and started a school for the training of missionaries. He then spent years meeting with popes and cardinals trying to persuade them to establish similar schools in Europe. At fifty five, he began his real missionary work targeting North Africa. He made repeated trips even in his eighties at the risk of his life to reach Muslims. He advanced Christian missions like no one else in his age. He died in 1314.

What can hinder us in finishing well, apart from not following through on the five areas listed above?

1. Mishandling Money: Where leaders have positions of decision making, without clear accountability structures and other leaders who can say no, it becomes easy to mishandle finances. Practices of using perks, mixing of personal and ministry finance, conflict of interest, and other issues of greed can slip into the life of the leader. Too many leaders have fallen due to some issue related to money including biblical leaders like Gideon with his golden ephod and Ananias and Sapphira lying about their generosity.

2. Inappropriate sexual relationships: We live in a society charged with sexual temptation. Jesus placed the bar high by challenging us by saying in Matthew 5:28, *anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* This is an area of sin we tend to slide into gradually and all the time there is an

underlying issue with lust, thought-life and sexual gratification. The bible shares the classic integrity test of Joseph, who fled under sexual temptation as well as the failure of David's adultery with Bathsheba. From this point David's leadership never fully recovered.

3. Abuse of Power: Where leaders develop effective ministry, they also establish power bases to get things done. This is not wrong in itself but can be the foundation from which power can be used wrongly. People also tend to put these leaders on pedestals and give them titles where they become free to lead, make decisions and move in the directions they feel without the necessary accountability. With power so available, it becomes easy to misuse it. Jesus is all too clear of the misuse of the Pharisees power, who lorded it over the people. We are called to servant leadership.

4. Pride: The bible speaks so much about pride and yet somehow it creeps into the very fabric of leadership. Whether insecurity or superiority, self-centeredness, competitiveness, judgment, intolerance, prejudice, or whatever form it comes in, it grows like a cancer and permeates our leadership. We must continually recognise we can do nothing of ourselves and only God is able to bring positive outcomes from our ministry. Peter learned this principle the hard way – declaring that he would never deny Jesus.

5. Critical issues in the family: We are all aware of the problems that can develop in marriage, between siblings, and parent-child relationships. There are a myriad of issues that can cause hurt, dysfunction and hinder us from being effective in our lives. We see David's family live out a modern soap opera with rape, revenge, adultery and murder. How desperately we need to apply biblical values for family, marriage and singles in ministry.

6. Plateauing: Clinton believes that most leaders plateau several times in their ministry, especially when they are competent. Our strength becomes our weakness where we can continue to minister without the anointing of the Lord in our lives. We must of course differentiate between the plateauing for good reason of consolidating growth and reaching our optimum level, compared to plateauing because of a lack of strategy, continued focus, loss of vision or sinfulness.

This plateauing is often seen at transition points in our lives. These take place when we are moving from one role to another, from line leadership to influence leadership, from full time work to some form of retirement or slowing down. Passion is the key and as long as we keep the fire burning in our heart, whether we are wearing important hats is not the issue, it's who we are and whether we are being obedient to what God has spoken to us.

Forewarned is forearmed. There are many other reasons why leaders don't finish well—usually all related to sin in some form. So just as a marriage or friendship builds and develops over a lifetime through times of regular, intimate, meaningful connection and communication, so is our life with God.

Let's be part of a breed of believers who are aware of our own frailty but *throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.*

Until next month

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