

**Finish, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr.**  
**2 Timothy 4:1-8 and Matthew 14:22-33**  
**Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 10 August, 2008**

Today is “Football Sunday,” a tradition of about thirty-five years here at Elon Community Church. It’s a day when this congregation says, “We support you, we are behind you, we hope you win, and we hope you don’t get hurt!” Just remember that win or lose, we will love you and we will be here for you.

The Apostle Paul commonly used images of physical contests in his writing. He spoke of “putting on the whole armor” in the struggle against evil.<sup>1</sup> In his first letter to the Church at Corinth, Paul talked about boxing and about running a race.<sup>2</sup> He said that when he’s running, he doesn’t run aimlessly. He runs in order to keep himself under control.

That is something to take seriously: don’t run aimlessly. I run. I try to get in three three-mile jogs a week. I don’t run aimlessly, I run for a purpose. I run to keep my weight, my cholesterol, and my blood pressure under control.

In his second letter to his companion Timothy, Paul wrote again about running a race. This was late in his career. He said, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”<sup>3</sup>

Finishing is important. Often when I am out jogging early in the morning, I get tired and out of breath. I think about how much farther I have to go. I think, “Maybe I should just quit and walk.”

I ask myself, “Why am I doing this?” Then, I think of my purpose.

“I’m doing this for my health,” and I plod on.

When I’ve finished the run, I feel good, as though I’ve accomplished something. “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

I understand that coach Lembo has chosen for the Phoenix this year, the theme “Finish!” Think about that— Finish! It’s so easy to quit when you’re tired. It’s so easy to be distracted by other things. My mother and my father taught me early in life, don’t begin a new activity until you’ve finished the one you’re working on. When I fail to heed that advice, I notice a pile of clothes here that I didn’t finish putting away because the phone rang, and “Oh, that’s right, Fred called, and I have to contact those committee members.” I didn’t finish calling those folks because it was lunchtime and I had to make a sandwich, but I left the dishes in the sink because the cat was hollering for her food. Until those tasks are finished, I feel messy. It’s difficult to concentrate.

Finish! Don’t be distracted. Don’t think about next week’s game until you’ve completed this one. If you’re going after someone to tackle them, finish the job! Don’t be distracted by his size or speed.

I’m not that much of a golfer, but I understand that I will make a better shot if I follow through. A good drive is as dependent upon how the swing ends up as where it begins. If I slap the ball for a putt, it goes the wrong direction. I have to finish the swing— follow through.

*USA Today* has ranked Elon #8 nationally in the Football Championship Subdivision. That’s

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<sup>1</sup>Ephesians 6:11

<sup>2</sup>1 Corinthians 9:24-26

<sup>3</sup>2 Timothy 4:7

nice. That feels good, but it doesn't mean much before the season begins. How are you going to finish? What those great rankings mean is that you have the potential, but you've got to work hard. You've got to finish!

Paul also said in this passage, "always be sober" and "Endure suffering."<sup>4</sup> Listen to the old guy. You can put up with pain. Some of the finest people I know are the ones who have endured suffering. One who's arm was shot off in the war became a college president and was a better golfer with one arm than most who play with two. One who suffers from arthritis is one of the most caring and creative people I know. One who endured suffering on the cross had the strength to say, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing."

Too often, when we can't endure the pain, we turn to drugs or alcohol to deaden the pain, whether it's caused by the loss of a lover or the loss of a game. Be sober and endure suffering.

Listen to this that Paul wrote: "Athletes exercise self-control in all things."<sup>5</sup> You have grown up when you have learned your boundaries and potential and don't need others to control you. You have self control.

One factor that often prevents us from finishing is fear. We have in Matthew a story where one of the main actors is fear. The disciples were out in a boat and a storm came up suddenly. They were afraid. The waves were splashing over the sides of the boat and threatened to sink it. The wind was blowing against them, keeping them from making it back to shore. They were out there for hours. To add to their fears, in the early morning hours they saw someone walking towards them on the sea. They thought it was a ghost. As the figure got closer, they recognized who it was, and they were even more afraid! They cried out! Jesus said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."<sup>6</sup>

Good old Peter thought that was a neat trick, walking on water. He wanted Jesus to teach him to do it. Peter got out of the boat and began walking on the water too. But, when he noticed the wind and when he looked down, he became afraid and started sinking.

The opposite of fear is faith. Faith is not about avoiding the suffering, the pain, or the strong winds. Faith isn't a simple joy or an escape from troubles. Faith is about finishing. Faith lives boldly in a difficult world. When faith sees suffering, it ministers to the hurting, to the victims and outcasts. Faith plods on, even when it is tired, not aimlessly, but with a purpose.

Faith is about freedom from fear. Peter didn't sink because the winds were strong, but because he "became frightened." It was fear that threatened to drown him. Faith will keep you from drowning. Faith will help you finish.

Have faith in your coaches, have faith in yourself, and have faith in God. Fight the good fight, finish the race, keep the faith!

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<sup>4</sup>2 Timothy 4:5

<sup>5</sup>1 Corinthians 9:25

<sup>6</sup>Matthew 14:27