

Finishing Strong

Message given at the 2017 Influencers Forum by Bill Newton (April 27, 2017)

(Bill addressed a group of Christian businessmen who are committed to having an influence in the world through their service to God. He was asked to speak to the issue of finishing strong in both one's walk and ministry.)

I don't know why all of you came, but I am glad that you did. Whatever your reason, I desperately want you to listen. I want your attention.

Introduction

You can remember my points as triple "S" "P" "H." Three "S"s and a "P" "H."

- Satisfied. Finishing strong requires a goal – to be satisfied in Christ.
- Spirit. Finishing strong requires us to learn to walk by the Spirit.
- Self. Finishing strong requires us to learn to die to self.
- Progress. Finishing strong requires us to learn to be satisfied with progress, not perfection.
- How. Finishing strong requires our attention to how we do things (process), not just the results.

I am assuming two things in our discussion today – that these things apply to those who already have a relationship with Christ and who are willfully committed to finishing strong.

"Satisfied" is the first "S."

"Satisfied" is the key word in the proper definition of the goal of finishing strong. This may seem like a strange key word to use for a goal, but I hope you will be convinced it is precisely the right word. Knowing the goal is important! You cannot finish strong unless you know what the finish line is. In business we say, "It is not just doing things well that determines a successful business; it is doing the right things well!" In simple terms, you cannot hit "The Target" if you do not know what it is.

In business and life we are sometimes like Alice, in "Alice in Wonderland," who questioned the Cheshire cat:

Alice: Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?

The Cheshire Cat: That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.

Alice: I don't much care where.

The Cheshire Cat: Then it doesn't much matter which way you go.

Alice: ...So long as I get somewhere.

The Cheshire Cat: Oh, you're sure to do that, if only you walk long enough.

We can do the same thing in business, in life, and in our walk with Christ, can't we? Striving for the wrong things, staying busy, active as a beaver and happy with "busy" "ness" while never really discovering what the "one" "right" thing is. The one right goal.

Many of you probably have seen the movie "City Slickers." In the movie, Mitch is the unhappy city slicker played by Billy Crystal who is looking for meaning in his life. He encounters Curly, a real-life cowboy who knows just what he wants and how to get it. Here's the advice Curly gives to Mitch:

Curly: Do you know what the secret of life is? [*holds up one finger*] This.

Mitch: Your finger?

Curly: One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and the rest don't mean ____.

Mitch: But, what is the "one thing?"

Curly: [smiles a smile only Jack Palance can smile] That's what you have to find out.

That one thing is satisfaction. John Piper states the goal very clearly, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him." If that is not biblical enough for you, Paul said, "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord..." (Philippians 3:8 NASB) I hope you got that!

Piper is simply restating in 21st Century jargon what Paul reflected upon. It is not:

- rewards from organizations,
- accolades from men,
- fortune or fame,
- amassing wealth, or giving!

Our goal in finishing biblically strong (in business terms) is to maximize the glory that we can generate for God with our lives. How do we do that?

- We do it by becoming persons who are satisfied in Jesus, and Him alone.
- We pray and strive to become men who are:
 - fulfilled if our only friend is Jesus, and it is us and Jesus against the world.
 - learning "God will be most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him."

You may have any number of objections to that goal. What about works like giving, working, helping others, missions, ministries, etc.? Those are good things, aren't they? Answer: "Yes." Let me explain how works fit in here. What do tadpoles do when they are transformed into frogs? They cease swimming and become world class jumpers with entirely new appetites. What do caterpillars do when they become butterflies? They are transformed into world class fliers with entirely new horizons for their hungers. Why do they jump and fly and have new appetites? Because they have become new creations.

The same should be true of genuine Christians when we become satisfied in God and in Him alone. We become new creations with new identities, new appetites and new powers granted by our Transformer – God. Works are not the goal; however, they should be the natural outgrowth of our new identity.

Think about this with me: what did New Testament converts do? They started strong, they finished strong, they gave sacrificially, they helped each other and they changed the world! They "jumped and flew differently" because they were new creations. The same should be true of us! God will be most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him. The first "S" is for "Satisfied" – the goal in finishing strong.

The second "S" is for "Spirit."

If you want to finish strong you must learn to live by the Spirit. Paul says it this way to the Galatian church: "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature...Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." (Galatians 5:16, 25 NIV)

This is a very easy instruction to read, it is a very easy instruction to say, but it is a very difficult instruction to learn how to live out – especially for us as men. We have been taught to be independent in sports, in business and in life. The five P's of success have been drummed into our heads, "**P**roper **P**lanning **P**revents **P**oor **P**erformance." I went to two schools that taught, "You can do anything if you just set your mind to it!" Many of us still love the American image of John Wayne, or Dirty Harry, or Jack Bauer. But the Bible interrupts our delusions of independence and says,

- You are dependent on God for everything.
- You can do nothing of value to God without faith.
- Did you get that? Nothing! No! Thing!

I am pushing the issue that this is un-natural for us as men. But we must learn to do this or we cannot finish strong. I would love to give you three easy steps to get there, but I cannot. All I can do is tell you how God taught me and then encourage you to pray that God would teach you.

Here's how I first experienced this work of God. I had just bought my first company and I stood before 100 employees and held up this Bible and said, "We will run this company on Biblical principles and if you see me doing anything which you believe is not biblical, I want you to tell me about it. I may or may not agree with you, but I will never hold it against anyone for doing that."

I left that meeting and went immediately into a staff meeting with my senior managers. A few minutes into the meeting I could feel the first curse word about to come out of my mouth. A little background might help. I was a jock growing up: football, baseball, basketball. Coaches are not known for their clean talk and neither are athletes. I had the meanest men in my division in the Navy, the ordnance men. I could and did cuss like a sailor. When I became a believer, I realized that I needed to quit cussing and I tried – quarters in a jar; penalties for this and that. Nothing worked very long, and I'm a pretty disciplined guy. So, when I stood in front of those people and said I wanted to run things biblically, I really didn't know what that might mean.

Back to the conference room. A staff member began to do what I call "blowing smoke." That is waxing on about something about which they knew absolutely nothing. My fuse was short. I could feel the first "BS" coming out. I don't want this to sound weird or anything like that, because it wasn't. The message came to me as clear as a bell, and the message was this: "Bill, you just stood before these people and said you wanted to run things here My way, according to the Bible. At this moment you are about to defile me. Are you going to do what you said or are you going to defile me?"

It was like God took a hot coal and touched it to my lips. That was over thirty years ago. I can't say I have never slipped, but you could probably count on one hand the slips in thirty years. The important point is this – I didn't do this! I had tried, but I couldn't. God did it all by his Spirit. Folks if you are going to die to self you must know your identity and know that you cannot live the Christian life on your own. Apart from the Spirit of Jesus in me and in you, we cannot finish strong.

Since then God has taught me how to rely on Him and not myself. The Bible says that we are to speak the truth with love and gentleness. I can speak the truth naturally and easily. The "love and gentleness" parts are beyond my human capabilities. The first time I realized I could not pick and choose truth over love and gentleness, and be obedient, I was almost paralyzed. I had to pray, "God, I know you want me to speak the truth with love and gentleness. I'm OK with the truth part, but the love and gentleness parts are a different matter. If you want me to do that, you are going to have to help me and put words in my mouth, and compassion in my voice, because I don't have either. To be honest with you God, I am petrified to take on this task, but I will. Help me!"

If you want to finish strong you must learn to be dependent on the Spirit of God to help you do what you are humanly ill equipped to do. The second "S" is for "Spirit" – live by the Spirit.

The third "S" is for "Self."

If you want to finish strong you must die to self. Dying to self involves giving up what means most to you apart from God. Each of us has different "idols and gods." These take the form of hopes and dreams that drive us, satisfy us, shelter us and sometimes protect us. It begins when we submit to it and then it bores deeper and deeper into who we are. This dying never ends.

I had been a believer for 8 years when my dying began. What I remember about that day are the words, "You can't fire David!" I'll never forget those words. I was responsible for 900 employees (90% women) at

four locations. One of my division presidents had an affair with one of his employees. Word was that they had met and consummated the affair at the office.

After getting all the facts and talking with the offending president, I decided that he had to go. How could you have husbands sending their wives to work, worried that the boss might be hitting on them, I reasoned? It seemed like a no-brainer to me. Off I went to the CEO's office to get the final okay, expecting the conversation to be short. How wrong you can be!

I presented the evidence. The case was solid – open and shut. There was no debate about the facts. When I finished, I heard, "You can't fire David!" It took me a few seconds to recover my equilibrium. I hadn't expected a debate.

"Why?" I asked.

"Well," he said, "I look at every female employee who walks in the door as a possible bed partner, and we can't fire someone for doing what I do regularly."

I won't bore you with the whole debate. I brought up the Bible – boot that out, no relevance here. Polluted culture – well King David had hundreds of wives, didn't he? What about the husbands – that's their problem! It's just not right – says who? Sexual harassment never even came up.

After about forty-five minutes of heated discussion I was spent and stunned. Eyeball to eyeball, I said, "You're the boss. I must do what you say. However, I'm not sure I can manage this way and I'm not sure I want to learn how."

I left with a dilemma. Maintain security or do business God's way? Die to my most treasured hopes and dreams? Remember, that's what dying to self means among other things. I had joined this company to make a lot of money and advance quickly, and I had. I had restricted stock grants coming to me for several millions of dollars. All I had to do was stay in the company. I had grown up poor and had always wanted to be financially secure. This job offered me that assurance.

But God had other ideas. God was feeding me biblical truth with a fire hose at our local church. I took that truth to heart. Could you honor God and manage in an environment that was not just secular and pagan but hostile to biblical principles?

I studied Daniel who worked for a pagan. He managed to maintain his integrity and flourish. Nehemiah did the same. I asked for advice from godly men. But, I couldn't figure out how to walk the tight rope upon which God had placed me.

With tears in my eyes and no idea what was next, I decided I had to leave. Maybe someone else could've managed the ambiguity, but I couldn't. I wasn't as mature as Daniel or Nehemiah. I walked away from the millions and the security I had always sought. My boss never understood why I left. At the time, I didn't understand either.

That was thirty-two years ago. I can see now what I couldn't see then. God wanted me to grow up, to trust Him for security and not the company. I had to begin the process of dying to self. To finish strong I had to die to self. What a great temptation it is to see our companies, our bosses, or our retirement plans as our security.

Be willing to die to self. Acting on that willingness is necessary to finish strong. The third "S" is for "Self."

The next letter is “P” for “Progress.”

If you want to finish strong you must learn to be satisfied with progress and not expect perfection. Paul says it this way to the Philippian church, *“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on...”* (Philippians 3:12 NASB) Progress, not perfection. That is all that we can expect on this side of heaven! To expect perfection is to misunderstand the depth of the sin that indwells each of us. My own journey continues to reveal that the deeper I get into the Word and the more serious my walk, the more I have become aware of the deep-seated hidden sins within me.

- When I do well, what is my motive?
- When I study and teach, have I learned the lesson first?
- When I learned the lesson, did I apply it?
- If I did, did I expect something from it?
- Is there anything in me that is pure?

Some of you are perfectionists. I am married to one. Perfectionism is a most fertile ground for the attacks of the evil one. Satan comes at you in your imperfections and says, “If you were really a good Christian, finishing well, you wouldn’t struggle with _____.” (You fill in the blank.)

Perfectionism is also a fertile ground for discouragement. When was the last time you had a perfect day? We all know the answer, don’t we? What does that answer mean to a perfectionist? It means a lot of self-flagellation. Perfectionists are familiar with beatings. Perfectionism can keep you from finishing strong!

If you cannot overcome your perfectionism on your own, get help from a friend, a counselor or a fellow rehabilitated perfectionist. If you want to finish strong, learn how to be satisfied with progress, not perfection. The “P” is for “Progress,” not perfection.

The “H” is for “How.”

God is more concerned about the “how” than the “what.” Again, this may sound strange, especially coming from me. When Pastor Alistair Begg first came to Parkside Church, one of the first books that he taught was Nehemiah. The title of the series was *“Doing God’s Work God’s Way.”* This is the process God desires. Yes, He want us to “do.” It is the natural outgrowth of who we have become. But more importantly, He wants His work done His way!

God taught me this in a painful way. I learned to use leverage in finance at Harvard and on Wall Street. I saw nothing wrong with it. I was a believer when I bought my first company and my debt to equity ratio was somewhere near 40 to 1. About one hundred thousand in equity and 4 million in debt. I thought nothing of it! I had a first class law firm, a solid bank behind me and numerous investors standing by to help with equity for the next acquisitions. My plan was to buy 10-20-30 companies and grow a nice sized conglomerate.

But God had other ideas. Parkside Church asked me to teach a course on biblical finance. Being totally ignorant of the “biblical” part and fully conversant on the financial part, I said, “Sure!” I thought to myself, “This is a no brainer.” What a nit-wit!

I began reading material by Christian financial advisors like Larry Burkett, Ron Blue, and Randy Alcorn. What a shock to my system. Everything I was doing was 180 degrees out from what God said in His Word. So I began asking questions. My pastor’s eyes glazed over when I asked about subordinated, non-encumbered debt. Businessmen usually asked me one question, “Is it legal?” No one had deep and definitive answers. God gave me a spirit of dissatisfaction with answers that could have allowed me to go ahead.

I called Larry Burkett and asked for help. “Can’t help you,” he said. “You are a for-profit company and we are non-profit. But you can call Ron Blue. He may be of help.” I called Ron and he had a COO who was an

experienced businessman about 20 years my senior who agreed to meet with me. I flew to Atlanta, arrived at 8 AM and we spent a whole day together. We outlined a box that could guide my decision-making going forward. The box had four sides.

The Box with four sides:

- “Is it biblical?” was on the right side
- “Is it logical and financially viable?” was on the left side
- “Is it legal?” was on the bottom
- “What was my motivation?” was on the top – this is what gave me trouble.

Why did I really want to build this conglomerate? What motivated me? Now, understand that I could have spun a good tale. I believe that we all can delude ourselves and rationalize any ungodly motives into heavenly sounding objectives. But, God wouldn’t allow me to go there! I am grateful to Him for that.

My motive really wasn’t the money or power; it was that I wanted people to think I was cool, competent, and successful. I wanted to be a big deal in people’s eyes. God grabbed me by the throat and made me realize that my motivation was sinful and that I had to let that dream go as well. But, this wasn’t dying to self. This was learning that God was more interested in how I ran my company or companies than He was in how many I owned and how big they had become. Did I trust Him enough to do my business God’s way, not mine? God was more interested in HOW I ran SATEC than what SATEC was to become.

He has the same interest in you! Whatever you are doing and accomplishing, are you doing God’s work God’s way? The “H” stands for “How.” God is more interested in how we do what we are about, than what we accomplish.

That’s a little about my journey to finishing strong.

- The goal is to be satisfied in God and God alone.
- God must teach us to be dependent on His Spirit.
- We must die to self.
- We must learn to be satisfied with progress not perfection.
- God is more concerned with the “how” than the “what.”

My hopes and prayers for you are that you may be blessed in a manner that far exceeds how God has blessed me. Remember—He can do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine. Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” The way to have a full life, is to finish strong!

Prayer.

Father, you know these readers and listeners and you know where each one of them is spiritually. I pray for them! I pray that if any of my words have been confusing or unhelpful, that you would either clarify them by your Spirit or lobotomize them from their brains. In Jesus’ Name we pray, Amen.

Bill Newton

Bill was raised in Texas, graduated from the U. S. Naval Academy as President of his class and was a scholastic All-American in football. He flew A-6 Intruders, has five Distinguished Flying Crosses, and flew 250 combat missions in Vietnam.

Earning an MBA from Harvard, he orchestrated two division turnarounds at Boise Cascade, and joined Progressive Corporation, where he advanced to Executive V. P. Bill left Progressive and purchased SATEC Systems, quadrupling sales over 11 years and purchasing 6 other companies. He sold all his interests and became an investor and Board Member.

He was ordained to the Gospel ministry by Parkside Church in 2003, and was called to ministry in Asheville, NC, where he currently pastors. He taught in Seminary in Uganda, Africa and returned to Asheville to start a small church in a rural county.

Bill ran his companies with Biblical principles, was active in FCCI, and is passionate about seeing men become the biblical leaders they should be. He is on three boards, writes occasionally for "World Magazine" and "The Journey" Newspaper, and is married to his high school sweetheart, Linda. He has two grown children, and three grandchildren.