

THE CHRISTIAN OLYMPIAN

1 Corinthians 9:24–27

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My topic today is “The Christian Olympian.” And our Scripture passages have been chosen because they, of all the texts of the New Testament, most interrelate athlete themes to the running of the Christian life: 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, where Paul speaks of running in such a way to get the prize and going into strict training in advance of the race. And Hebrews 12:1–2, which are the verses of the marathoner, because he’s describing a race that requires perseverance, a sprint. It requires running all out. A marathon necessitates perseverance. Then 2 Timothy 4:7–8 describes Paul at the end of his life, signing off by saying, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth I’ve got a medal—a crown of life—laid up for me.”

As I have gone through these Scriptures and as the events this week of the Olympics have taken place, it seems to me that there are four aspects of the Olympian that relate to the Christian.

These four aspects are that the athlete, as well as the Christian, is to have a goal. Secondly, if the goal is to be achieved, there must be a period of training. Third, the race must be run. And fourth, the prize is awarded.

I. First, the goal.

Olympic athletes have determined what goal is theirs. It may have been, first of all, to select what sport they would engage in. And for others, it meant that for finding the phase of the sport, within that particular sport, in which they could win. Once you have defined what you’re going to do you go for it—and isn’t that, by the way, like the Christian life? Where Paul says “not all of us have the same gifts”—no athlete can enter every contest.

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No Christian can possibly fulfill every ministry that's needed to make the body of Jesus Christ function effectively. It really is necessary that each of us prayerfully determine where God has gifted us and where He has given us interests, where our gifts could be developed, and to settle upon those as our goals. When the goal or the particular sport and event has been determined, then the goal is very simple—to win. To cross the finish line first. Or to end up number one in the competition and maybe, hopefully, along the way, to break a record. When we speak of goals for the Christian life, we face a paradox, because on the one hand, a goal has already come to pass for us the moment we accepted Jesus Christ into our life. For, at that moment, we were raised to a position of complete perfection and righteousness and we received eternal life. So that there is nothing we can do beyond what we have already done in confessing Christ, to win that particular race, the race that involves the gift of eternal life.

However, there is also present a balance to that in that the Scriptures, that while eternal life is totally dependent upon God as His gift to us, at the same time, there is a race involving Christian service and Christian responsibility that I am to run. It is God working out His good pleasure in me, but it is I working also.

So Paul, writing in 1 Corinthians 9:26, says of the race of Christian service “I do not run like a man running aimlessly” (NIV). That would certainly be odd—wouldn't it? —to look at an Olympic contest where a runner was simply out running around in circles, reversing himself on the oval track mid-course and doing funny things like that, not knowing where the finish line was. Paul says, “As a Christian, I don't run aimlessly. Neither do I box the air. That is, when I'm in a sparring match, I'm landing blows on my opponent, not just idly fanning the breeze!

Paul's opponent, by the way, is not represented as another person, but it's his own flesh, which he must keep in subjection. Successful and productive Christians, as well as successful and

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productive athletes, are driven by a sense of purpose. They have this awesome sense of not wanting to have trained or to have had a race that was run in vain. In other references to running, in the New Testament, Paul in both Galatians 2 and Philippians 2:16 indicates a great concern regarding this—that he might have run the race in vain.

With any of you who have kept a diary—I know the high dreams and goals that maybe you tend to transmit to a diary. One of the vanities of life is comparing the volume as you wanted it to be with what it actually turned out to be. Running in vain.

Someone drew a cartoon showing two men on Mars looking down on this world. Everyone was scurrying here and there and everywhere. One of the men on Mars said, “What are they doing down there on earth, all the running around that’s going on?” The other one said, “They’re going.” “But where?” The second man said, “They’re not going anywhere, they’re just going.”

A goal. How different are the lives of those who have made their time on earth count for God. I think of General William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army. He had a goal to reach and help the distressed and to minister in the name of Jesus. He was invited to Buckingham Palace a few years before his death. King Edward VII asked him to write in the king’s autograph album. Booth wrote these words, “Your majesty, some men’s ambition is art. Some men’s ambition is fame. Some men’s ambition is gold. My ambition is the souls of men.” Booth had a goal as a Christian and he succeeded.

What is your goal? Do you have goals? What is your goal for yourself? What is the Lord’s goal for you? What are your spiritual goals? What are your family goals? What are your goals for ministering to the body of Christ and being used by the Lord to minister to the world? People who don’t have goals generally wind up not doing anything. The Christian Olympian seeks of God a goal.

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II. The second phase of the Christian Olympian, the second important quality, is training or discipline.

From the context of Paul writing the Corinthian letter, we know that in biblical times at Corinth, the Isthmian Games were held. These were second in importance in the biblical times to the Olympian Games. In order to qualify, to participate in the games, an athlete had to take a vow that he had been in strict training for a period of ten months prior to the onset of the games. To not engage in the training or to have broken the training would have disqualified him from the games. That's why Paul, in the Corinthian passage, talks about the fact that he doesn't want to be disqualified.

Some have mistakenly taken that to carry the idea that Paul here was worried about losing his salvation. Actually, what he was afraid of in that passage is losing his opportunity to serve Christ in the same way. I think any of us who have been in the kingdom of God for some time probably can think of persons who have been significantly used in their service to the Lord but, in some way in their life, have fallen into sin or reproach of one kind or another that has disqualified them from further effective service to the Lord. Paul says, "The Christian must live his life under a continual regimen of discipline and training."

We know that a person may have a high goal and an individual athlete may have great potential, but they will never experience that goal, or realize it, unless discipline and training is a part of their life. If that's true of the physical realm, it's certainly true of the spiritual realm.

Discipline allows freedom in life. Paul uses that as spiritual experience—the discipline he's under. First Corinthians 9:25 literally reads, "But everyone who agonizes ["goes into strict training," NIV, but the literal word in the Greek we carry right over into the English language as "agony"] in all things controls himself." Training is seen as "agony." When Paul says, "I have

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fought the good fight” in 2 Timothy 4:7, the literal rendering of that is “the good ‘agony’ I have ‘agonized.’” Training and discipline.

Mary Lou Rettin left her home at fourteen and went to be near her coach, citing that she needed to really have the experience of training under top coaching. She gave this quote as to why she left her family in order to train for two years in gymnastics, “I knew that if I wanted to have a chance at a medal in the Olympics, I was not going to do it if I stayed home. And I had worked all those long hard years.” At fourteen years of age, she’s saying, “I had worked all those long hard years.” The dream pays off.

Paul indicates, in 1 Corinthians 9:27, that he disciplines his body because he knows that the body will be a bad master if it’s not made to be a good servant. So he disciplines himself. Might I add that Christian discipline is developmental discipline? If you want to begin swimming the 1,500 meters, and you have not been swimming at all, I would not suggest that you go out and do 30 laps. You’d probably not make it past the first 2 or 3. Work your way up.

Some people get stirred at times in meetings to really begin getting disciplined in their life spiritually. They say, “I’m going to go out and begin praying an hour a day. God’s called me to the discipline.” So you go and begin praying your hour and when the hour is up, you look at your watch and it’s only been five minutes. What has happened is you’re not in shape and you don’t get in shape all at once. It’s an incremental kind of thing. We sometimes don’t ever get in shape spiritually, because we assume that we can never get in tip-top condition. But we’ll never know whether we can get in tip-top condition spiritually unless, along the line, we begin and start the basics of edging into the disciplines of study and prayer and witness and stewardship. The strenuous self-denial of the athlete in training for a fleeting award is a rebuke to all half-hearted flabby Christian service.

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The athlete stays away from anything that would hinder his complete effectiveness. Discipline does that. It's interesting to watch how the swimmers even cut their hair very carefully so that they might get that extra fleeting momentary split of a second to give them extra advantage. And the runner in Hebrews 12 frees himself of entanglements, of weights.

Part of discipline is doing things by the rules. The Christian needs to have a concern for any significant break in the discipline which would take them out of the opportunity to serve Christ and His Body for even a short period of time.

One of the most classic cases in the Olympics of disqualification occurred in the 1908 marathon. Having run through the streets, until finally he staggered into the stadium, falling four times as he made the oval around the stadium, he was finally helped across the finish line by some well-meaning members of his team. He was disqualified as the winner because he had been helped. He had won the race, but the rules had been broken.

There are people in the Christian life who think that the ends justify any means you use. Do anything as long as you get results. The Olympics are telling us that the means are as important as the ends. That disqualification ought to be a concern, and the training and discipline of the Christian life ought always to be part of our experience.

III. The third thing about the Olympic Christian is the race itself.

Not just the goal and the training, but the race itself. Hebrews 12:1–2 specifically describes the race in terms of a marathon. That is, by the way, the Christian life. It is a marathon, if you've lived it for any degree of time. You find that, in your initial walk with Christ, you very commonly start out in a sprint. Then there comes that time in your run when you've found it, so that you really feel like you're running out of wind and air and you aren't moving seemingly as

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fast as you were when you started the Christian life. What is needed is a second wind and a fresh spurt to finish the race.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that, in order to finish the marathon, we must take off entanglements. That we must put on endurance—stamina is part of our walk. We must listen to the right crowd—seeing that we’re surrounded by such a crowd of heavenly witnesses. The swimmers have been talking about how the crowd has helped them, chanting “USA! USA!” Other U.S. athletes have commented on how the cheering in gymnastics and other areas have given them the extra edge in competition. So the writer of Hebrews is telling us that we’ve got a crowd that’s cheering for us. And, of course, it’s always important if you’re going to run well in life that you listen to the right voices. The right voices that are telling you that in Christ you can make it. Listen to those voices.

Then the writer of Hebrews says that, in the marathon, it’s important to keep your eyes on Jesus. Don’t keep looking around. Don’t keep looking back. Don’t lose valuable time by seeing where others are in the race. Look ahead to Jesus.

IV. The fourth element of the Christian Olympian is the prize.

Paul comments, in 1 Corinthians 9, that the prize for the Isthmian Games was a laurel wreath. That was the prize for the Olympics as well—a laurel wreath. They gave those before they gave medals. Now, of course, the gold medals and the flowers have replaced the laurel wreath. The laurel wreath withers. Paul says, “As Christians, we’re running a race, but the crown that we get does not wither. It is a crown of life [elsewhere also called a ‘crown of righteousness’].” As Paul is signing off his last letter, almost in his very last words—2 Timothy 4:6–8—he knows that he has agonized the agony, he has finished the race and has kept the faith. And that his death does

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not signal the end, but that after his death, he is going to be crowned. “There is now in store for me a crown of righteousness.” Finishing is important. God wants us to finish the race.

The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy that he had finished his course, that the time for his departure from life had come, and although physically he was dying, everything was yet ahead. The medal ceremony was coming.

That’s what sets us apart as Christians from everyone else. We know what’s ahead. God has laid up for the believer a crown of righteousness.

I missed the Olympics because I did not prepare in advance to be there. The Lord tells us, “There’s a great day coming. There is an opening celebration in the heavens called the ‘Marriage Supper of the Lamb.’ It is going to be unlike anything you’ve ever seen. It’s going to be something you’re going to want to be at. You’re going to also want to be prepared for your own medal ceremony, for the medals recognizing your Christian service.” The rewards that are given. That day is coming. Knowing that it’s coming, let’s not be foolish. Let’s get ready. Let’s have a goal. Let’s go through the discipline. Let’s run the race, that we may receive the crown.

Closing Prayer

Our Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Word and we thank You for the many ways that You relate the truths regarding our body to similar truths regarding our spirit. There may be some here, Lord, in the service today, who have no clear goals at this moment in their life. Maybe they’ve just had a real hard blow or have been living with a kind of knock down blow in their life, and they haven’t gotten back up to reestablish priorities and dreams and visions. You’re calling them to be renewed today, to see a new vision. Lord, others perhaps have let the luster of a particular goal for their family or themselves or their work for You to grow dim. I ask, Lord, that in this communion hour of prayer and worship, You would enlarge and make anew

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our dreams and goals that are from Your Spirit. I pray for many who may be spiritually out of shape. Lord, we all need to be disciplined. Show us those areas, Lord. Make us aware of how we can grow in areas that are atrophied in spiritual strength. If it is so simple a discipline, as arriving at a regular time to pick up the Scripture and open it and let it speak to us, we pray that that fundamental step of discipline may be taken. That we will here, in this service, make a new determination to go from here, to begin to attempt one discipline of the spiritual life that we have let grow stagnant. And go beyond that to become disciplined in our life for You. Others, Lord, have become tired running the race and have the wind out of them. We pray that You will renew them in the midst of their years. That You will give them strength. For we all want to finish. None of us want to be a drop-out. So many, Lord, in the Christian life today may be described as drop-outs of the marathon race, they have somewhere become enchanted with something along the route and left the race. Others maybe have tried to take short-cuts. Help us, Lord, to run the course You set out for us until the end, until that great day—when we see the crown that You have given us of eternal life, and when we receive the rewards that are given for the deeds done in the flesh. Keep us true to You. We ask, in Christ's name. Amen.