



THE RACE OF LIFE

I Cor. 9:24-27, II Timothy 4:7-8, Hebrews 12:1-3

In 11 days the eyes of the world are going to be fixed upon Beijing, China, as the 25th Olympiad of the modern era begins. We will be watching to see who can swim the fastest – jump the farthest – run the quickest – and play as a team the most effectively and efficiently on the court and the track. As Eugene Peterson writes: “You’ve all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. Run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades. You’re after one that’s gold eternally.”¹

I think most of you would agree that we live in a sports-oriented culture. Even the average pro athletes make more money than the President of the United States and most college coaches make more money than the professors who teach at our universities. It is truly amazing the salaries that some professional athletes make.

Our biblical text today from **I Corinthians 9:24-27** reveals the fact that the Apostle Paul also lived in a sports-dominated world. In spite of the primitive communication system of that era, the results of the athletic contests and **OLYMPIC GAMES** were known around the countryside, and they also became national heroes.

As a matter of fact, Cicero grumbled when a winning athlete returned to Rome – was accorded more prestige and honor than a victorious general returning from war. Some things never change. I am willing to wager that more of our youth know LeBron James and Tiger Woods than know McCain and Obama.

In the midst of this sports saturated culture – the Apostle Paul uses the imagery of the racer and boxer – to draw home the principles of living the Christian life.

In fact the Olympic Games and athletes are mentioned 40 times in the New Testament. So there are lessons to be learned and lived.

Well, let us dig into the word together – and see how our various texts help us to run the race of life – and keep our eyes on the prize.

FIRST, RUNNING IS A GOOD METAPHOR FOR LIVING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE.²

From the moment of our birth we enter the race. Accept this reality you are here – now get on with it. Your challenge is to be sure you run the good race – and run it

with honor. The only better alternative is heaven – and you will only get there if you run and finish the course laid out for you. The scripture declares, “Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

As Eugene Peterson shares, “Running requires training and concentration. It implies a goal.”³ Just ask Jared Weaver of our church, who ran so beautifully the 800 meter event. You cannot be a spectator and a runner. Someone once defined Monday Night Football as “22 million people badly in need of exercise watching 22 people badly in need of Gatorade.”

This is why Jesus said, “No one is fit for the Kingdom unless their hands are on the plow and not looking backwards.” He didn’t want His disciples to become lazy and apathetic. Jesus knew the goal was to be committed followers – not to be spiritual couch potatoes. Jesus did not save the world with a safe address – and sitting in a rocking chair. He saved the human race from a cross – “The Word became flesh.” Remember Christianity is not a spectator sport – our founder had nail prints in his hands. The Apostle Paul went to prison cells for his desire to run the race. There was a passion for life and service.

You don’t become an athlete simply by watching others who are. Likewise your conversion or baptism is only the beginning of the race. We are to be hearers and doers of the word. Everybody runs the race in the Christian faith. Everyone competes – what we choose is the level at which we compete. Begin where you are. Give what you’ve got. Step out in faith. Expect God to act in your life.⁴ In my office I have a poster I keep in front of me which states, “**If you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time.**”

Dr. Charles Stanley teaches his congregation, “We will not accomplish much in life if we do not have a clear purpose and mission in mind. The only way to consistently hit a target is to take careful aim.”⁵ That is why a good athlete trains so hard and removes all distractions. They literally hunger and thirst for a greater goal. In **Hebrews 12:1**, it shares, “Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sins that so easily entangle.”

Have you ever watched Tiger Woods set up and line up a putt for a birdie? His eyes and his whole body are totally concentrated on reading the greens, the direction of the wind, and gauging the speed of the putt. The same principle is at work in our relationship with Christ. The truth and the way flow from our relationship with Christ – because truth is found – not solely in the words of Christ – but from Christ himself. That is why our eyes are fixed and focused on him.

SECONDLY, PAUL SHARES THAT THE METAPHOR OF THE FIGHT IS ALSO AN INTEGRAL PART OF OUR CHRISTIAN WALK AND WITNESS.

Paul shares in **II Timothy 4:7**, “I have fought the good fight.” Faith is like a fight because many obstacles stand in the way of its development and growth.⁶ Paul faced many adversaries and opponents in his fruitful ministry and successfully opposed them.

However, he kept to the same path of Christian discipleship for the long haul and successfully completed his course.

A few years ago my primary care physician had to put me on Zocor because my cholesterol level was much too high. Years of ice cream, whoppers, pizza, cheese, and cream in my coffee had taken a toll. Spiritually we must reduce our television time, inappropriate novels, and other distractions that clog our arteries and prevent us from growing in the word and service to the Lord.

When athletes are in training they watch their diets very closely. We are to do the same in our Christian training. We are to watch our diet. Sound biblical teaching and counsel is not junk food – nor is it comfort food. It is solid food.⁷ We do not want to clog our spiritual arteries with worldliness which could lead to spiritual dullness and apathy. We are to feed on and be nourished by the sacred scriptures. Too many Christians suffer from ‘Designer Doctrine.’ They build their doctrine based on their desires and preferences.⁸ We must be careful what we let in.

While physical training has some value – it has limited value. Training in the scriptures and in matters of faith is beneficial for all ages and stages of life. Training in the word of God enables us to integrate every moment and experience into the life of faith. With these disciplines life is made simpler and more focused on the eternal gold.

THIRDLY, WE SEE THE IMPORTANCE OF A SUPREME GOAL FOR YOUR LIFE.

Please notice in **verse 26 of I Cor. 9**, that Paul says, “Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly. I do not fight like a man beating the air.” We are not shadow boxing – it is the real thing.

We learn from Paul who said the supreme goal of his life following his conversion experience was “**to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.**” Paul is no longer concerned with his purpose – position – power – but that of Jesus Christ. Now the emphasis is on a cause greater than ourselves – on a goal beyond this world – and a struggle worthy of our commitment. We are building a life – not making a living. You see, firm muscles are one thing – but a firm faith is the greatest tool for God’s game plan and spiritual victory. When you push against Death – you need the muscles of faith. You need the hand of God to win.

Recently Dr. Bill Hybels – famed pastor of the Willow Creek Church – shared that his church had made a mistake. They developed ‘seeker services’ to reach the unchurched. They kept track of their work over the course of many years. He said they were successful in getting people into the church – but had failed to make and sustain disciples of Jesus Christ. Mega churches don’t necessarily guarantee biblical disciples. Many folk unfortunately go to be entertained and to hide out. The late Dr. Boice would always remind us pastors that our work is “edification – not entertainment.” Jesus resisted that temptation in the desert – and so must we. If I had my way, I would require everyone to read Eugene Peterson’s **THE JESUS WAY** – and Chuck Colson’s **THE**

FAITH – and Richard Foster’s **THE CELEBRATION OF DISCIPLINE**. As G. K. Chesterton said decades ago, “It is not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting – it has been tried and found difficult.” It requires training and discipline.

Students in a third grade class were asked to respond to the question “What is the color of apples?” Most of the children answered red. A couple said green. But one student raised her hand and said white.

The teacher tried to explain that apples could be red or green or even yellow/golden. But never white. But the student was adamant, and finally said, “Look inside.” Look inside. Don’t look on the outside. That student was absolutely correct. It is the soul that truly fuels and energizes our life.

I remember how golfer Gary Player would respond to someone who said to him, “I’d give anything if I could hit a golf ball like you.” He would reply, “**No, you wouldn’t.** Do you know what you have to do to hit a golf ball like me? You’ve got to get up at 5:00 every morning, go out to the golf course, and hit a thousand golf balls! Your hands start bleeding, and you walk to the club house and wash the blood off your hands, slap a bandage on it, and go out and hit another thousand golf balls! That is what it takes to hit a golf ball like me!” To succeed at anything requires hard work and effort. We must remember – the race is a marathon– not a side trip to a club or gym.

For us, it means studying God’s word, hanging out with other Christians, going to the table, hitting our knees in prayer, giving of ourselves, and sharing what we have and building an everlasting kingdom.

We must lay aside every weight or encumbrance that prevents us from reaching and striving for our supreme goal. This is the truth that pulsates from **Hebrews 12:1**.

We come to church every week to confess our guilt, to renounce greed, to employ our spiritual gifts, and to seek the genuine mind of Christ in all times. We lay aside all things that prevent our souls and spirits from being fully used of God. Without this training and self-discipline – we can never be what God intends us to be. Put energy into your effort to win the good race.

LASTLY WE TRAIN TO FINISH THE RACE.

Notice in **II Timothy 4:7** Paul shares “I have finished the race.” Now, if anyone ever had the right to quit the race, it was him. The Apostle Paul faced more heartbreak than most of us. He had to respond to many roadblocks and detours – so he speaks with authority and experience. He did not lose heart. He kept running the race.

As the NBC Network advertises and whets our appetites for the upcoming Olympics – they have Morgan Freeman tell the story of Derrick Redman from the 1992 games.

Derrick Redman was competing for his country, Great Britain, in the 400 meter sprint, which is a demanding race. Derrick was in the race until he rounded the curve and a runner's worst nightmare took place – his hamstring muscle pulled and snapped. He was immediately in great agony and pain. He got up and began hobbling and hopping towards the finishing line. Derrick slowly began to make his way around the track. He was in such pain that the track officials pleaded with him to stop, but he pressed on. Suddenly, the television cameras showed a man who had gotten out of his seat and onto the field. He placed his arms around Derrick in a helping way. This time Derrick allowed the man to help him. It was his father. The crowd, sensing something special was happening, began to applaud and go wild.

Leaning on his father's arm, Derrick finished the race. Someone else got the Gold Medal, but Derrick won the hearts of millions. It was an incredible demonstration of courage, determination, and the power of love.

Afterwards, a reporter asked Derrick's father why he did it. His reply was simple: **"We started this together, and we are going to finish this together."**

That is exactly what Paul shares in countless letters about the nature and character of our God. I especially like how it is expressed in **Philippians 1:6** – "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it onto completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (NIV).

So that is the encouraging and good news that I want to share with us today. The miracle is not that we stand firmly with God – the miracle is that God stands firmly with us. It was God who began his good work in us – and will bring it to its rightful and faithful completion. That is why we sing songs like **"Great is Thy Faithfulness."** That allows us to sing **"Crown Him with Many Crowns."** We follow Christ – who endured the cross – and finished the race – finished his work for our salvation and redemption. Christ cried out from the cross, **"It is finished!"**

We follow a winner – a risen Lord! We are **victors** – not **victims**!

The race of life is not run in vain – but as part of a kingdom that is eternal and unfading.

In Paul's time Olympic champions were crowned with a wreath of leaves. We know that fame fades as quickly as the morning headlines. However, in the Christian's life our crown never fades and we live in the New Jerusalem – that beautiful city of God! So, remain loyal and keep running.

May this give you that bold confidence to be faithful and – living out the goal of knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection and finish the Race.

May God give you grace and courage so to do. **RUN!**

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
July 27, 2008 – preached at both services
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ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with its Translator**, NavPress, 2007, page 1784.

² Peterson, *ibid*, page 1785.

³ Peterson, *ibid*, page 1785.

⁴ Thanks to Ben Campbell Johnson via Bishop William H. Willimon.

⁵ Dr. Charles F. Stanley, **LIFE PRINCIPLES BIBLE, NKJV**, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN, 2005, page 1340.

⁶ Stanley, *ibid*, page 1423.

⁷ Peterson, *ibid*, page 1879.

⁸ Stanley, *ibid*, page 1429.