

INTRODUCTION

The apostle Paul, as well as other NT writers, frequently used terms to which their readers could quickly and easily relate. Not only is that a useful tool in writing, it remains an excellent tool for teaching. Word pictures, or metaphors, are especially priceless when describing the Christian life. Various agricultural terms, governmental terms, military terms, and athletic terms are used in the NT to describe different aspects of the Christian life. The ones we will focus on in our study will be the athletic terms.

Paul frequently used athletic terms to describe the Christian life and service. His epistles abound with illustrations from the Greek games. In the final four verses of 1 Corinthians 9 (vv.24-27), he reminds us of the perseverance, commitment, self-control, the spiritual fight, the discipline, and the need to “play by the rules,” and all for the sake of the gospel—to win others to Christ (vv. 19-23).

He will go down in history as one of America’s greatest athletes. He was born in a little one-room cabin on the banks of the North Canadian River, in the midst of a farming area about five miles from the Indian Territory line in Oklahoma. His Indian name was Wa-Tho-Huck; but he is better known as Jim Thorpe. He excelled in track and field. He played halfback in college. He played semi-pro baseball. He also played Major League baseball. In 1912, Jim Thorpe won the Olympics in the pentathlon and decathlon. But because he had earned fifteen dollars a week playing semi-pro baseball, he lost those medals. He had broken the rules.

There were strict rules prescribed during the Greek Games, as well. Paul used this thought when writing to Timothy: “And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules” (2 Tim. 2:5). The passage before us, 1 Cor. 9:25: “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training” (NIV).

So as we consider this illustration of the athlete, let us first realize:

THE GUIDELINES WE MUST FOLLOW

Prior to the Greek Games, there was a ten month preparation time. Even the practices were under the direction of judges who had themselves been instructed for ten months in the details of the games. During this ten month training period, the athletes had to watch their weight and exercise at the appointed times in the heat and the cold (not simply “fair-weather” athletes). The athlete would also separate himself from anything that would keep him from being at his best. There was commitment, discipline, and self-control. As a matter of fact, in a 1,000 year period, only six or seven broke their oath!

Many of today’s Olympic athletes started training even before they started school! It’s amazing the hardships, setbacks, sacrifice, expense, time, commitment, discipline, and self-control it takes to ever qualify for the Olympics!

I still remember seeing my old school friend, Bob Crabtree, running down the road. Bob was about my height, but weighed quite a bit less than me. He tried football, but just wasn't big enough. He wasn't tall enough for basketball. Apparently he wasn't into baseball or golf either. But Bob found something he could excel in: running! He ran track and cross country. Rain, shine, snow, or sleet, I would see Bob running down Old Columbus Road. I'm not sure how many school records Bob actually broke. How did he do it? He did it through discipline, self-control, time, commitment, sacrifice, and perseverance.

I recall seeing one of those motivational-type pictures one day while visiting a hospital. It was a picture of a runner in a race, and the caption under it read: "Winning isn't everything, but wanting to is." Tom Landry, former coach of the Dallas Cowboys was once asked what the difference was between a pro and an all-pro. He mentioned that their talents and abilities are basically the same. But the question is, "How badly do they really want it?"

Just how badly do we want to be used of the Lord? I mean, *really* be used of the Lord; and all for the sake of the gospel—to win others to Christ.

PREPARATION

Keep in mind, the private and personal training lasts longer than the public event. What is accomplished in public (e.g., the Olympics), is the result of long, strenuous hours, weeks, months, and years of private training and preparation.

I can still recall the two-a-day practices for football during the month of August. They were grueling. At the end of those practices, in order to go in sooner, you had to be the winner of your group's wind sprints! Two-a-days totaled approximately six hours a day. Then of course there were the two hour practices when school started; Monday-Thursday. You had to go through all of that in order to play forty-eight minutes of football! The same was true in baseball. In February, we had to run up-and-down the gym stairs and around the basketball court multiple times. And at the end of practice we had to run sprints! When it was finally nice enough to practice outside, we still had to run sprints: single, double, triple, and homerun. That's crazy! And all for just seven innings of baseball! But the purpose went far beyond the physical (although that was part of it). The purpose was to teach us discipline, obedience, self-control, perseverance, a team spirit, and the anticipation of being a winner. It pays off!

That's true of the Christian life. Our public ministry should always be the result of our own personal and private ministry before the Lord. When it comes to Christian ministry, our private time in devotion and preparation will determine just how effective our public ministry actually will be. In fact, public ministry should be the overflow of our personal and private time with the Lord. When it comes to teaching and preaching the Word, I have discovered that the preparation time far exceeds the presentation time. Aren't you glad of that?

SEPARATION

Every good and conscientious athlete knows to separate him/herself from anything that would prevent them from being at their best. Note the words of the writer of Hebrews:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us (Heb. 12:1).

“Weights” are anything in general that might impede our Christian progress. It may not even be something bad in-and-of itself. I love the Citi Bank Olympics commercial. It begins with a speed swimmer who dives into the water saying, “Take a day off? I don’t even take a morning off.” The scene changes to a weight lifter who says, “I haven’t ordered dessert in two years.” A woman bicyclist then says, “You know that best-selling book that everyone loves? I haven’t read it.” Then a discus thrower concludes by saying, “I haven’t watched TV since last summer. Hey, I’ve been busy!”

Now what’s wrong with taking a few days off? What’s wrong with reading a good book? What’s wrong with eating just one piece of a delicious apple pie? What’s wrong with watching the Olympics? Nothing; unless you’re in training for the Olympics and going for the gold!

“The sin” refers to those things specifically that readily and easily trip us up. In our 1 Corinthians 9 passage, Paul makes it clear that as an athlete for Christ we must radically and deliberately deal with any and all sin in our lives. He said, “Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air” (v. 26). Paul was saying that he didn’t “shadow box” with sin. He didn’t pamper with, or play around with sin. He struck straight at it! Someone once said, “Weights will hold us down; sin will hold us back.”

In verse 27, Paul said, “But I discipline my body [“keep under my body” (KJV)]; and bring it into subjection” [“I buffet my body and make it my slave” (NASB)]. When Paul said I “discipline my body” or “I buffet my body,” it literally means to hit under the eye, or to give a black eye. We are to deliberately and radically deal with any and all sin in our lives. We must aggressively give sin a black eye; not only for our sakes, but for the sake of the gospel; so that “we might win some.” He also states in verse 27, “And bring [my body] into subjection,” or “make it my slave.”

Paul is saying, if an athlete displays such commitment, discipline, and self-control in order to compete in a contest that will only last a few minutes or a few hours at the most, and all for a garland of oak leaves which will soon fade away, then shouldn’t the Christian be willing to display the same, so that he/she may effectively serve the Lord Jesus Christ?

CONCLUSION

The danger of laxness and indifference in the life of the believer is that it not only leads to a soft, flabby spiritual life, but it will greatly impact how others receive our message. Paul said, “But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (v. 27). I’m not sure what that all means, but I do know that if we aren’t careful as believers, we can lose our usefulness and effectiveness in ministry when we have weights and sin in our lives. When we play with sin and pamper sin in our lives, it’s not only to our detriment; it’s also a detriment to the advance of the gospel of Christ. We can lose our power in the Lord and the joy of the Lord when we fail to obey God’s Word. We might go through the motions, but we have lost the cutting edge. We lose the excitement and enthusiasm in serving the Lord and serving one another. Now...

WHO WANTS TO BE A WINNER?