

INTRODUCTION

Last week we looked at 1 Corinthians 9:24-27:

You've all been to the stadium and have 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. I don't know about you, but I'm running hard for the finish line. I'm giving it everything I've got. No sloppy living for me! I'm staying alert and in top condition. I'm not going to get caught napping, telling everyone else about it and then missing out myself (1 Cor. 9:24-27, *The Message*).

From that passage Paul used athletic terms drawn from the Greek games to beautifully illustrate the Christian life. 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). Those qualities that characterize the athlete should also characterize every believer.

1. *He plays by the rules.* The believer is characterized by obedience.
2. *The private and personal time in preparation far exceeds the public presentation.* Before any of the Olympians made it to London, they had to first invest hours, weeks, months, and years of long, strenuous private training and preparation. The application? Public ministry should always be the overflow of our personal and private time with the Lord.
3. *Commitment, discipline, and self-control.*
4. *The athlete lays aside anything that would prevent him from being at his best.* Just as the Hebrews writer admonishes us, we are to, "Lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares us" (Heb. 12:1b).
5. *There is a passion and pursuit for excellence.* While preparing this sermon, I couldn't help but think of the following verse: "Not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord" (Rom. 12:11). "Not lagging in diligence" can be rendered, "not lazy in zeal or intensity." Or the positive rendering could be "with intense effort, energy, and enthusiasm." "Fervent in spirit" means to be "red hot" in spirit. All that we do in serving the Lord is worth doing with zeal, intensity, and a red-hot spirit.

In the context of 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul is saying that if an athlete displays such commitment, discipline, and self-control in order to compete in a contest that will last only 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?

Last week we considered *The Guidelines We Must Follow*. We will now look at:

THE GOAL ON WHICH WE MUST FOCUS

In our passage from 1 Corinthians 9:26, Paul wrote, “Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty,” i.e., “not without aim” (NASB). Again, in its context (vv.19-22), Paul’s aim or focus was that he “might by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22b).

In Philippians 3:12-14 we discover similar terms, but somewhat of a different goal: Christlikeness. But the truth of the matter is if we are really going to be effective in reaching a lost world for Christ, they need to see Christ through our lives. Note the words of Paul:

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Although Paul had come to a level of spiritual maturity (Phil. 3:15), he fully accepted the fact that he had not attained or apprehended full-and-complete Christlikeness. Although Paul was approximately sixty years old and had been a believer approximately thirty years, he didn’t see himself as reaching some spiritual plateau or peak in his life. He didn’t even see a rest period from ministry until he approached death 6-7 years later:

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith (2 Tim. 4:6-7).

Although Paul knew first hand of the conflict with the world, the flesh, and the devil—the conflict itself was not his focus. Jesus was his focus. It has been said that the best defense is a good offense. That was certainly Paul’s philosophy and it was also his resolve. *Thirty years after his conversion Paul still remained focused.* That’s why with continuous effort he stretched and strained every spiritual muscle, as he bore down on the goal and the prize of full-and-complete Christlikeness.

Now note Paul’s focus: “This one thing *I do*, [completely] forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead” (Phil. 3:13). In the context, Paul illustrated the Christian life as running a race.

Every runner...

KNOWS NOT TO LOOK BACK

As believers, there are some things we should forget.

- Past Accomplishments

On February 3, 2008, as the New England Patriots came into Super Bowl XLII with an 18-0 record, their response throughout the regular season had been, "It's just one game at a time." They knew they couldn't rest on their past victories. They really learned what that meant when the NY Giants beat them 17-14. We, too, must not rest on our laurels, lest we become complacent, smug, and undisciplined. No matter our age or how long we've been a Christian, when it comes to Christian growth or service there is no spiritual peak or plateau. Whether it's school, our jobs or careers, there's always room for improvement. Paul knew he had further to go and more to do. But that's true of every believer.

- Past Failures

Although we should learn from the past, we must not live in the past. We all have things we should have done but failed to do. We all have past regrets. But dwelling on past failures ruins our usefulness. Kenneth Wuest wrote, "When a Christian has made things right with God and his fellow-man, the proper technique is to completely forget them."

- Personal Grievances

Some folks go through their entire lives with a chip on their shoulder. They carry grudges, harbor resentment, and become prisoner of their own hatred and anger. They are bogged down in their own self pity, and crippled by their own unforgiveness.

If any church or any individual believer wishes to get on with life, they must first of all stop dwelling on the past; stop resting on their laurels; and stop licking their wounds.

Every runner...

KNOWS NOT TO LOOK AROUND

If we are not careful we can become more interested in what the other fellow is or isn't doing, rather than focusing on what we should be doing. Jesus has a game plan for each of us; so let's neither try to copy someone else's race, nor try to run someone else's race for them. We need to stay in our own lane.

Truth is, if we spend all our time watching others, analyzing others, and evaluating others, we will lose our pace and lose our joy.

Every runner...

KNOWS TO LOOK AHEAD

When playing baseball I was always told while fielding the ball, "Watch the ball into the glove." When hitting, I was told, "Watch the ball all the way to the plate." When hitting a golf ball, the key is to keep your head down and your eye on the ball. When catching a football, you are to watch the ball all the way into your hands. The key is: **FOCUS, FOCUS, FOCUS!**

The writer of Hebrews had this in mind as he wrote:

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, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls (Heb. 12:1-3).

The word for “looking” means “to turn the eyes off and away from other things and to fix them on Jesus only.” The moment we start looking back at past accomplishments, failures, or grievances, our spiritual progress will be hindered. When we get caught up in analyzing or evaluating others, we will definitely lose our pace and forfeit our joy. When we allow the crowds and the voices of this sinful world to distract us, we are headed for sure defeat.

So what are we to do? Look to Jesus: “The author and finisher of our faith.”

He is our Life;
Our Goal;
Our Motivation;
Our Example;
Our Strength;
Our Savior;
Our Victory!