

Sermon Title: Competing to Win the Prize

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Sermon Purpose: To call the hearer to the practices of an Olympic athlete in pursuing the prize.

Sermon Proposition: There are six practices of a Christian who is competing for the prize of Christlikeness.

Introduction: The Greeks enjoyed two great athletic events, the Olympic games and the Isthmian games, and because the Isthmian events were held in Corinth, believers there were quite familiar with the analogy of running to win and boxing with purpose.

“How did ancient athletes prepare for the Olympics?”

How did the athletes of the earliest Olympics train before the Ancient Greek games? Historian Miles Russell explains:

Unlike today, there was no prize for coming in second in the Ancient Greek Olympics. Winning was everything, so athletes went to great efforts to achieve success, starting with arriving a month before the games so they could train and check out the opposition.

They not only had to master their own moves, but make sure they stay on the right side of the officials. Referees at ancient Olympic wrestling could whip competitors to make them stop an illegal move.

Housed away from society, much like a modern Olympic Village, Greek sportsmen were subjected to a punishing exercise regime in order to be at the peak of both physical and fitness and beauty – they wanted to look good if they were going to compete naked.

Diets were strictly controlled and competitors were expected to abstain from any pleasures, such as sex, which may physically weaken them.”

<https://www.historyextra.com/period/ancient-greece/how-ancient-athletes-prepare-for-olympics-games-wrestling-running/>

“Training for the Olympic Games in Ancient Greece

‘If you have worked in a manner worthy of coming to Olympia, and have done nothing in an offhand or base way, proceed with good courage; but as for those who have not so exercised, go away wherever you like.’ These were the instructions given to athletes and their trainers at the Olympic games in ancient Greece. The ancient Greeks took sports very seriously. Like today, training was important for athletes if they wanted to be successful at the Olympics.

Male athletes (no women competed in the early Olympics) spent ten months training before arriving at the site for the games. Whether they competed in sprints, wrestling, boxing, or another sport, practicing for the Olympic games made it tough for a young man to get a full time job. If he won at the Olympics, however, he would have fame and fortune.

A typical day for an athlete training for the Olympics involved going to the gymnasium. The gymnasium was different from today’s gyms. Back then gyms housed a covered running track, but the other facilities were outdoors and open to the public. After an athlete arrived at the gym, he took all his clothes off and stored his belongings in the changing room. Then a paid “rubber” covered the athlete’s body in olive oil. The athlete performed warmup exercises which were often accompanied by flutes. A coach supervised the athlete’s workout routine, which varied depending on the sport he competed in. For example, runners built up their strength by putting on heavy pieces of armor as they went around the track. Boxers practiced on punching bags made of animal skin and stuffed with grain or sand.

Coaches remain an important part of an athlete's training to this day, but in ancient Greece a coach who trained a winning athlete was revered and received equal credit for his student's accomplishments. The ancient poet Pindar described the crucial role of training to an athlete's success: 'not to be prepared beforehand is stupidity, for the minds of the unpracticed (sic) are insubstantial things.' Most coaches were former athletes who not only instructed an athlete on his sport routines, but also focused on diet, hygiene, and physical therapy.

Like the athletes themselves, coaches were most concerned with winning and they used some interesting techniques to motivate their students. For example, one coach told his love-struck student that the girl would marry him if he won. Spurred on by this promise, the student beat out the competition. Another coach stabbed an athlete who gave up during a boxing match.

The ancient Olympics had not team games, and no second or third place finishers. Victory brought an athlete and his coach honor. Most of the Greek city states could also be counted on to reward their winning athletes with money and other special privileges, such as free food and tax-exemption.”
[<https://heathervoight.com/2012/05/22/training-for-the-olympic-games-in-ancient-greece/>]

(Hebrews 12:1-2; Philippians 3:12-16)

I. The Christian runs the race to win. V.24

Philippians 2:16 holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.

Philippians 3:14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Hebrews 12:1 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,

- A. Runs vigorously
- B. Runs diligently
- C. Runs persistently

II. The Christian strenuously disciplines and controls himself. V.25a

The believer and minister of the Lord lives a life just as disciplined as an Olympic athlete.

- A. Disciplines their body.
1 Corinthians 6:12 All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.
- B. Disciplines their mind.

“Training and Education

In the course of training, while an athlete would spend a great deal of time training the body, usually through bodyweight exercises and acrobatics, time was also spent training the mind. A palaestra, or ancient Greek wrestling school, in addition to rooms featuring equipment like heavy bags, also featured rooms for education where the youths were taught the Greek ideals as part of an all-around education. The concept of “mind, body and spirit” was not just a slogan to the ancient athletes, it was a way of life.” [<https://www.livestrong.com/article/349071-ancient-greek-athletic-training/>]

Romans 8:5-9 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those *who live* according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. **6** For to be carnally minded *is* death, but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace. **7** Because the carnal mind *is* enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. **8** So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. **9** But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.

- C. Discipline in their associations.
- D. Discipline inwardly.
- E. Discipline outwardly.
To be temperate – is self-controlled, this is crucial to victory.

III. The Christian runs to obtain an incorruptible crown. V.25b

Romans 8:29-30 For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. **30** Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

James 1:12 Blessed *is* the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

Revelation 3:11 "Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.

Revelation 4:10 the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying:

This was a wreath or crown of greenery given to the winner of the race.

2 Timothy 4:8 Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.

1 Peter 1:4 to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,

IV. The Christian fights with certainty and without distraction. V.26

- A. Knows the rules
2 Timothy 4:7-8 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. **8** Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.
- B. Knows what he is fighting for .
- C. Knows who he is fighting against.
- D. Knows where to aim.
Four times Paul has mentioned the goal of winning people to Christ. (vv.19, 22)

V. The Christian learns to master his own body. V.27a

No genuine Christian can indulge the body and its lusts and expect to win the prize or crown. Paul uses the term discipline – literally means to hit under the eye. He knocked out the bodily impulses to keep them from preventing him from fulfilling the mission, calling, and responsibility of winning souls, preaching the Gospel, living the life and pursuing the prize.

VI. The Christian guards against any disqualification. V.27b

This is another metaphor from the athletic games. A contestant who failed to meet basic training requirements could not participate at all, much less have an opportunity to win.

Application:

1. Christians should run the race so that they will receive the reward from the judge, as if there is no second or third place prize.
2. Christians in order to receive the prize of conformity to the image of Christ, need to give an all-out effort and exercise self-control in all areas of life.
3. Christians may need to limit their liberties for the higher goal of attaining the crown/prize.
4. Christians with this view run and box with purpose, not aimlessly or halfheartedly.
5. Christians should be concerned about disqualification.