

## **“Going for the Gold”**

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*Hebrews 12:1-8 • 1 Corinthians 9:19-27*

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I don't know about you, but I really enjoy watching the Olympics. I think it's partly because they only come around every four years. They're sort of rare, you could say. I also think it's great that so many different nations, many of whom cannot get along in real life, can come together and compete without violence. I read that this year's Olympic games has the most number of countries participating ever. There are 204 nations represented in these games.

But I think most of all I am just amazed at the physical abilities of these athletes. Today Olympic athletes routinely run or swim at speeds that just a few years ago were considered impossible. In fact, so far at this year's Olympic games 60 world records have been broken and there's still a full week of events left.

The athletes who compete in these games are in top physical condition. They have been training every day for years just to have the opportunity to compete in the Olympics, and they want to win. Every athlete there hopes to take home a gold medal.

At the time the New Testament was written, Olympic games were quite popular across the Roman empire. The Corinthians were especially familiar with the games. The important Isthmian games were held in Corinth every other year. So in the New Testament we find several references to the ancient Greek games and they are used as metaphors for the Christian life. That's exactly what we find in today's readings.

In verse 19 of our passage from 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul says, “Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.” In other words, he's not set free in order to sit around doing nothing. Instead, Paul is saying that he's free to work for God's Kingdom. In the verses that follows, he then compares training to become like Christ to a race, a theme we also find in Galatians and Philipians, Hebrews and 2nd Timothy.

There are three things I want you to notice about this passage as it relates to this idea of sanctification, so let's dig in to it. First is the **desire**. Verse 24 says, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.” Apart from Christ we are dead in our sins. But when we are united to Christ we are made alive. The Holy Spirit places within us a desire to resist sin and to follow Jesus. With the help of the Holy Spirit we must continue to cultivate this desire. Paul reminds Timothy to fan his faith into flames.

Desire is not foreign to us. We all have desires. Whether it's a new car, or certain clothes, or a new job, or a big sizzling steak, we all know how to want something and for many of our desires, we know how to get what we want.

Our desire to become more and more like Jesus should be the passion of our lives. I'm not saying that the other desires are necessarily bad, the issue is what is most important to us. We should want to follow Jesus more than anything else.

Of course it's not easy. The earthly desires keep getting in the way. Not only that, the world's desires are frequently in conflict with God. We read in 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy that “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” and that brings me to my second point, **the discipline**.

Notice that verse 25 says, “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training.” I like the way the English Standard Version translates verse 27. Paul says, “I discipline my body and keep it under control.” If you've ever participated in sports you know the level of sacrifice that's required to compete well – early morning practices, evenings, weekends, strict diets to make sure you get the right nutrition.

One of the things that amazes me about Michael Phelps is not only his intense discipline in physical training, but his diet. He consumes

about twelve thousand calories a day. You and I could try to eat that much, but we still wouldn't be world-champion swimmers. It takes training and training takes discipline. Not only that, but if you want to win there are things you have to give up. As Paul points out, if it's true for winning the perishable prize, it's just as true for the only prize that counts—life with Christ. Our reading from Hebrews says, “let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

That brings me to the third thing I want us to see today in this passage—the **direction**. Verse 26: “Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air.” The goal of the Christian life is to be conformed to the image of Christ. John Ortberg points out that this is not a matter of trying harder, it's a matter of dying. Jesus instructed us to take up our cross daily and follow Him. We must die to our personal desires and replace them with His direction, with His purpose for our lives.

One of the things that has made the Olympic games so successful over the years is the high standard of sportsmanship. At the opening ceremonies the athletes take the Olympic oath that includes a promise to compete “in the true spirit of sportsmanship, for the glory of sport and the honor of our teams.” However, as it turns out, not all the athletes or teams live up to that oath.

You may have heard this past week that eight badminton players were expelled for intentionally throwing a match. They were losing on purpose so they could play an easier team in the quarterfinals. One newspaper said “some of the world's best badminton players hit some of the sport's worst shots.” Now lots of people are debating whether this strategy is against the rules or just bad sportsmanship. But I think there's something more important we can learn from this incident.

It seems to me that the real problem with these badminton players is that they had pledged to play for the glory of the sport and the honor of their teams. That means they should play every match to the best of their abilities. They didn't. They gave less than their best, disappointing the

fans who came to watch them play and as a result, they disappointed their teams and the sport.

When you decide to follow Christ, you are making more than a pledge. You are agreeing to take up your cross. You are agreeing to put to death those things that are not Christ-like so that they can be replaced with the very image of Christ. You are agreeing to make Jesus the most important thing in your life.

Ephesians 4 says, “we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” Every time you are faced with a decision you should ask yourself, “which of these things will help me become more like Jesus?” We have been set apart for a divine purpose and we are equipped by the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish that purpose. You and I have to train ourselves to see with what I call “kingdom vision.” In other words, we need to learn to see the world as Jesus sees it. We are to live as witnesses to what Christ is doing in the world. When people see you they should be drawn to Jesus by the way you live your life. We also should be constantly trying to find ways to be Christ's hands and feet in our community.

As Paul says in our passage today, “I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.” Then he adds, “I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.” That's our mandate, too. We are to do everything for the sake of the gospel, resisting sin and temptation and becoming more Christ-like, that we may share in its blessings. And trying is not enough. But if we have the *desire* to become more like Christ and the *discipline* to train ourselves in His service and we understand the *direction* that

God is calling us – to be holy because He is holy – we will in fact do all things for the sake of the Gospel and we will be true champions.

*Amen*