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Run to Win

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

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Like many of you, we enjoyed watching some of the Olympics yesterday, including the swimming relays. Each Olympian knows she or he is training to have the chance to compete and win a medal in a specific event. You don't train to swim the 100 meters and then arrive and get told, *"We've changed your event, you're now competing in boxing, try these gloves on for size."* Every Olympian knows what event she or he is training to compete in. What about you? Last week in worship, Nathan talked about the race of faith, and how it's a relay race, and each generation needs to pass the baton and the next generation needs to receive it and run with it. In **1 Corinthians 9:24-27**, the apostle Paul describes **how we're to run the race of faith. We're to Run to Win.**

*"Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, **but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified"*** (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

The key part of this passage is **the imperishable wreath** that Paul believes is worth sacrificing for, and pursuing, with single-minded focus. That imperishable wreath is **knowing Jesus and experiencing eternal life**. Paul compares his self-sacrifice to win people to Christ with a runner training to win a prize. Both the athlete and Paul give up things to achieve victory, but the athlete wins a wreath that will fade away, while Paul's prize will last forever.

This passage asks all of us – what are you willing to do win your race? Running to win requires at least three things. The first is Purpose and Passion. That may sound like two things, but to me, they're inseparable. No Olympic athlete is successful without purpose and passion; neither is any Christian. Purpose without passion lacks energy and fire. Passion without purpose lacks focus and direction. Passion is the energy of our soul. Passion is, *"Intense emotion compelling action; a strong devotion to some object, activity, or concept."* People lack passion for a variety of reasons, including a lack of clarity or direction, or even familiarity – we allow

something precious to become familiar and take it for granted, like the people around us, or the freedom we have each day, or even the gift of life itself.

People can lack passion because they have no purpose beyond themselves. People who live for themselves are in a small business. **God desires passionate Christians who live for doing God’s will on earth as it’s already being done in heaven.** That’s a big, global business that takes energy of soul. Paul writes in *Romans 12:11*, **“Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.”** You may think of zeal with people who are extremists, but God wants us to be full of zeal. At the end of *Luke 9*, Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem and the destiny that awaited him. Jesus says, **“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”** Jesus had passion and purpose.

Jesus invites us to make the most of our days with similar passion and purpose. In his book, *A Dangerous Grace*, Chuck Colson wrote of visiting Mississippi’s Parchman Prison: “Most of the death row inmates were in their bunks wrapped in blankets, staring blankly at little black-and-white TV screens, killing time. But in one cell a man was sitting on his bunk, reading. As I approached, he looked up and showed me his book – an instruction manual on Episcopal liturgy. (Not exactly what you would expect). John Irving, on death row for more than 15 years, was studying for the priesthood. John told me he was allowed out of his cell one hour each day. The rest of the time he studies. Seeing that John had nothing in his cell but a few books, I thought, God’s blessed me so much; the least I can do is provide something for this brother. ‘*Would you like a TV if I could arrange it?*’ I asked. John smiled gratefully, ‘*Thanks,*’ he said, ‘*but no thanks. You can waste an awful lot of time with those things.*’ For the 15 years since a judge placed a number on his days, John has determined not to waste the one commodity he had to give to the Lord – his time.”

Those of us who are not in solitary confinement on death row have so much more we can offer the Lord than our time. **But if we don’t first offer the Lord our passion dedicated to God’s purpose, we won’t offer our time.** While we don’t like to think about it this way, **there’s a sense in which we’re all on “death row”** – we just have more freedom and much better surroundings. None of us knows the length of our days; none of us knows how many times around the track we have in the race of life.

Winning in the race of life is not about money, or material things, or fame. Winning in the race of life includes being passionate about God and eternal issues; about our family and our significant relationships; about the calling God gives you to fulfill; about the next generation, and the poor, the hurting, and those who don't know Christ. Winning includes being passionate about what truly matters most.

A second thing running to win requires, in addition to Purpose and Passion, is Self-Control. A couple was trying to teach their daughter the fruit of the Spirit and she was reciting them, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and remote control." Well, she was close. The final fruit of the Spirit, in Paul's list in Galatians, is self-control – mastering our passions and emotions.

Self-control is hugely important in life, because a lack of self-control leads to all kinds of problems. On June 22, the FBI offered a reward of up to \$10,000 for information leading to an arrest and conviction in connection with deadly wildfires in New Mexico. The reward is for help in finding a "person, or persons, responsible for starting the fires." More than **24,000 acres** have burned, and an **estimated 1,400 structures** have been lost to the fires.

Like starting a forest fire, it requires little effort to produce a fire because of a lack of self-control. Anger, hurtful words, grumbling and complaining, failing to control desires and passions that lead to inappropriate behavior – all of these are like burning matches with the potential to consume acres of our lives, relationships, families, jobs, and futures. When we cause a problem, doing nothing to stop it or trying to run away from it to avoid responsibility only makes matters worse. One aspect of self-control is the ability to accept responsibility, try to make amends, and deal with the consequences when we've made a mistake or lost control.

While a lack of self-control leads to a host of problems, the ability to exercise self-control in all things, as Paul writes, in every aspect of our life and relationships, is vital to success. I was sorry to hear the news on July 17 that Pat Williams had died at the age of 84. If you don't recognize that name, Pat Williams was a basketball Hall-of-Famer, and the co-founder and senior vice president of the NBA's Orlando Magic. He was a sought after speaker and the author of dozens of books. Pat was just 29 years old when he was hired to run his first NBA team. Considered one of the best minds in sport, Pat

knew his responsibility was to produce a winner. But he also felt responsible to be a good representative of Jesus Christ. Pat and his wife, Ruth, were devoted Christians and the parents of **19 children** – they opened their hearts and homes to **14 children they adopted from four nations**, ranging in age from 28 to 42. For one year, **16 of their children were all teenagers at the same time!** His book, *Mr. Littlejohn's Secrets to A Lifetime of Success*, describes a segment of ABC's news show "20/20" (9/20/88) in which Dr. Roy Baumeister of Case Western Reserve University said, "If you look at the social and personal problems facing people in the United States ... over and over, the majority of them have self-control failure as central to them. **Studies show that self-control does predict success in life over a very long time.**"

Self-control is a key indicator of whether we'll be successful. By successful, I mean, not just in worldly terms, but whether we we'll be able to accomplish what God wants us to accomplish. Practicing self-control to grow in godliness has benefits, not only in the present, but for eternity. Self-control is mastering our passions and emotions, so they don't get the best of us and bring out the worst in us. A lack of self-control leads to many negative and damaging choices and behaviors, which often have painful long-term consequences. ***Proverbs 25:26* warns, "Like a city breached without walls, is one who lacks self-control."** Whether one is an ordinary person, or a person in a position of great authority and influence, a lack of self-control is embarrassing, revealing, and reflects a level of immaturity, and often, other negative traits and flaws. Dr. Baumeister concluded, *"If we're concerned about raising children to be successful and healthy and happy, forget about self-esteem. Concentrate on self-control."*

A third thing running to win requires, along with Passion and Purpose, and Self-Control, is Resilience. One of the things that's so inspiring to me about Olympians is **the passion, discipline, and determination they have to win.** They don't take adversity lying down, but get back up and get back in the race. Last month, as part of our Bicentennial movie series, we watched the 1981 Academy Award winning movie "**Chariots of Fire**". One of the main characters in the film is Eric Liddell of Scotland, who was the son of Christian missionaries and preparing to become a missionary himself. However, he was also a great runner. There's a scene in the film

based on a quarter mile race in July of 1923, in which Eric Liddell was competing as he prepared for the 1924 Olympics, which were in Paris, France – as they are this year.

Here's a description from "The Scotsman" newspaper after Eric Liddell's race in July of 1923, *"In Stoke on Trent, in a race run over a quarter mile, at the first bend he tripped over the legs of the English runner JJ Gillies, falling off the track. By the time he was back on his feet the last of the other runners was **30 yards away** and moving fast but Liddell attacked them with such pace that he finally overtook Gillies three yards from the line **to win** before collapsing, spent, to the ground. The circumstances in which Liddell won the event made it a performance bordering on the miraculous. **Veterans, whose memories take them back 35 years, and in some cases even longer, in the history of athletics, were unanimous in the opinion that Liddell's win in the quarter-mile was the greatest track performance that they had ever seen.**"*

In the film "Chariots of Fire", Eric Liddell's father tells his son, *"**You're the proud possessor of many gifts, and it's your sacred duty to put them to good use. Run in God's name, and let the world stand back in wonder.**"* His point is that people of faith should sanctify the world around them – not reject it – and we should use the gifts we've been given to God's glory. In the movie, Liddell says, *"**I believe God made me for a purpose, but He also made me fast, and when I run I feel His pleasure.**"* **What do you do in your life that causes you to feel the pleasure of God? That's worth thinking about.** Eric Liddell committed to winning on the track, but even more so, in life. He would go on to win the gold medal in the 400 at the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris, following his usual tactic, which he described this way: *"**I run the first 200m as hard as I can. Then, for the second 200, with God's help, I run harder.**"* Eric became a missionary in China, where he served until being interned in a prison camp in 1943 by the Japanese Army during World War II. Even there, his winning faith was an inspiration to others. He died in the camp, in the winter of 1945, and his final words were, *"It is complete surrender."*

Langdon Gilkey, who survived the camp and became a prominent theologian in America, said of Eric Liddell: *"Often in an evening I would see him bent over a chessboard or a model boat, or directing some sort of square dance – absorbed, weary and interested, **pouring all of himself into this effort** to capture the imagination*

*of these penned-up youths. He was overflowing with good humour and love for life, and with enthusiasm and charm. **It is rare indeed that a person has the good fortune to meet a saint but he came as close to it as anyone I have ever known.***"

Running to win the race of our life means running with **Passion and Purpose, shaped by Self-Control, and powered by Resilience**, so that we become more like Jesus. Running this way enables us to avoid painful and hurtful experiences and prevents us from inflicting them on others. Paul practices self-denial and disciplines his body, *"so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be **disqualified**."* For an Olympian, being disqualified because of a false start, and not being able to run your race after years of training and sacrifice, is beyond devastating. For any of us following Jesus, we don't want to be disqualified as a disciple or a witness because of a lack of self-control. Self-control frees us; it doesn't imprison us. Self-control enables us to do more for God and for others and to get the most out of our selves.

Paul says athletes exercise self-control to win a perishable wreath – why not practice self-control and discipline yourself, in every aspect of your life and relationships, **to win** the imperishable wreath of **knowing Jesus and experiencing eternal life**? I close with the words of **Titus 2:11-14**, *"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, **training us** to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and **in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly**, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and **purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.**"*

Blessing: 2 Timothy 1:7 (RSV), "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control." Go to run and win the race of your life.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Have you ever won anything – like a race, a game, a contest, or a competition of any kind (it could be athletic, intellectual, artistic, etc.)? How do you feel when you win?
2. What's required of women and men seeking to win at the highest level of competition, like the Olympics? What do they do (sometimes good and bad) in pursuit of victory?
3. Paul says that self-control is vital, not just for athletes, but for those of us who wish to grow spiritually and in godliness. Why is self-control important to “winning” in almost any field of endeavor?
4. What does a lack of self-control lead to in life?
5. What does Paul do to practice the discipline of self-control (see especially verse 27) that we can emulate?
6. What is your game plan for winning the race of your life?