

Going For The Gold 2021

Have you been watching the Olympics? Don't worry, if you haven't, you've got another week. I haven't watched as much as in previous years but once you start, it is compelling; the competition, the performance, people pushing themselves, their bodies and minds to do extraordinary things. That makes me think of Saturday afternoons in my childhood with Jim McKay saying, "Spanning the globe to bring you a constant variety of sports. The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. The human drama of athletic competition. This is ABC Wide World of Sports." (Vinko Bogataj the Slovenian ski jumper crashing every week).

I think of what it takes for those athletes to perform at that level, the work and training and preparation involved in attempting to win a gold medal at the Olympics. It's not something you decide one day and then sign up the next to compete. I guess you can if you are hoping for last place. I could finish last in any of the competitions, but the point is to win the gold! In order to win, it requires hard work, preparation, training, sacrifice. There are things you have to give up in order to win the gold. It will change your life forever, training to go for the gold.

The Apostle Paul used the backdrop of the ancient equivalent of the Olympic Games to make his point about Christian discipleship. To be a follower of Jesus requires effort, training, sacrifice. I want us to think of discipleship as going for the gold. Understand, we aren't talking about working hard in order to be saved. It's by grace alone that we're saved. We're talking about pursuing the goal to be all we can be in our walk with God. We're talking about sacrificing, doing whatever it takes to live for Jesus. What if you put as much energy and effort into serving Jesus as you did in your pursuit of winning at some athletic endeavor? That's what I'm talking about. Going for the gold in terms of your discipleship. What do we need to do to win the gold? The bible gives us some answers. The first thing is obvious.

Decide you are going for gold! Paul writes, **"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."** **1 Corinthians 9:24.** You don't start out hoping for last place, trying for the bottom five. Decide you are going for the gold and then run in such a way as to get the prize. Determine to do whatever is necessary to finish the race and win the prize.

Athletes do whatever they have to in order to succeed. It seems no sacrifice is too great to pursue the goal of winning the gold. Long hours in the pool, on the court, running and training. Some of these young gymnasts move away from family to train. They give up friends,

a social life, they are just laser focused on training and going to the Olympics and winning gold. It's serious to them. They train and sacrifice so they can run in such a way as to win the prize.

Christians should take following Jesus as seriously. We're running a race but I've seen Christians come casually to the starting block. Hands in their pockets, head in the clouds, caught off guard when the race begins. Paul says run in such a way as to win the prize. This is about eternity. This is about serving Jesus and living for him. It matters how you run! It matters that you train yourself in godliness, that you spend time with God in prayer, that you know and apply the word of God to your life! Run to win the prize. "But I'll have to give up some things, I'll have to sacrifice." Yes, you will. That's because you're going for gold. Do whatever it takes to live for Jesus, to run the race, to win the prize!

Paul makes this point in the next verse, **"Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training."** **1 Corinthians 9:25** Your spiritual life requires discipline. Followers of Jesus don't just live anyway they choose just as Olympic athletes don't live just as they choose. They've made a decision and it affects how they live, what they eat and drink, where they go, who they are with. They are in strict training because they have a greater goal in mind. They delay gratification because they are going for the gold. They do without things that matter to achieve things that matter even more. They are training their bodies and minds to perform at the highest level so they can win the prize.

The child of God goes into strict training. "That's not something I do, that's not what I choose because I'm going for the gold, I'm choosing heaven, I'm living a life that is pleasing to Jesus." We do without things that matter in order to achieve things that matter even more, things of eternal value and importance. I plan to stand in his presence someday and Jesus, the righteous judge, is going to present me with the winner's crown, so I'll say no to sin, no to things that won't help in my walk with God. I'm training my body, mind and spirit to perform at a high level of obedience to Jesus and to his Holy Spirit because I'm going to win the prize.

Don't be surprised when you are opposed. There is opposition. It's the nature of the games and the nature of our life with Jesus. 1 Corinthians 9 again. **"Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air."** **1 Corinthians 9:26.** You aren't out for a morning jog, you're competing in a race, not running aimlessly. Imagine if in the race, everyone takes off running in all directions! We aren't running aimlessly-

we are in a race, headed for a finish line, and opponents are trying to beat us. Run the race, stay on the track. Run to win!

You don't fight like you're shadow boxing, just beating the air. There is an opponent in the ring who is going to hit you. You have to fight to win. Imagine getting to the Olympics in boxing, getting into the ring and then when the fight starts you say, "Hey, this guy is hitting me! It hurts! I didn't know it was going to hurt." It's the way we respond sometimes as followers of Jesus. "I didn't know there would be an opponent! I didn't know I might get hit, that it might hurt. That this might be hard." Listen, there is an opponent in the ring and he has studied you. He's going to hit you. Fight to win the prize. Don't let the devil outbox you! God has given you strength. He has given you his Spirit. He has given you his word. He has given you discernment, wisdom, power to overcome so you can fight the good fight and win!

Sometimes we become our own opponent, our own worst enemy in the ring. Paul writes, **"No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize." 1 Corinthians 9:27.** Don't let your own flesh trip you up. Our flesh will war against and fight against God's Spirit at work in us. Our flesh will battle for control of our life. You'll have to fight at times against your own fleshly desires to make sure you keep pleasing God and serving him. Stay true to Jesus. Keep surrendering to him and his lordship in your life. There will be opposition, but we are more than conquerors through Christ. Keep going for the gold!

Play by the rules. If you are going for the gold, you have to play by the rules so you won't be disqualified. Paul writes to Timothy, **"If anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules." 2 Timothy 2:5** You can't win the gold if you aren't living by God's rules. There can be no success apart from living according to God's word, living according to his rules. The bible says God's word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Living apart from his word means running in darkness, stumbling along in the race, losing your way because you can't see where you're going without the light of his word. If you want to succeed in life, in business, in relationships, in marriage and family, in your walk with God, live according to God's word! Stop ignoring God's rules, his principles for living. Violating his word, his commands leads to failure and defeat. You'll be disqualified for the prize. You have to compete according to his rules if you are going for the gold.

Get rid of every hindrance. The writer of Hebrews tells us to “...**throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.**” **Hebrews 12:1** You won’t win the gold if you run the race with weights on your arms and legs. Athletes get rid of anything that will slow them down. Swimmers shave off hair, runners and cyclists look for ways to reduce drag. If the difference in gold and silver is 1/100th of a second, (won by a nose!) you eliminate anything that hinders or slows you down.

As followers of Jesus sometimes we are trying to run while dragging around the weights of sin, addiction, unforgiveness, bitterness, pride, anger and a host of other things. We can’t win the race like this! Get rid of the stuff in your life that keeps you from growing in your relationship with the Lord! Throw off everything that hinders you, the sins that entangle you and trip you up, the stuff that separates you from Jesus or slows you down in your discipleship. Get serious about running the race and winning the prize.

Stay focused on the prize. Why am I doing this? Why all the sacrifice? For the athletes in the Olympics, they are doing it for the gold medal (and the fame and money from product endorsements). Here is what Paul says about the race. “**Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.**” **1 Corinthians 9:25** They got a garland crown that would die in a matter of days, but we are talking about a crown that lasts forever. By a “crown that will last forever” Paul is talking about everything that eternal life with God in heaven can mean. He is talking about God’s presence and glory and peace and righteousness and every blessing.

Don’t lose focus. Don’t take your eye off the prize. I’ve seen Christians, late in the race, forget what it’s all about. It’s about Jesus, about heaven, about eternity. There is nothing here that compares. Stay focused on the goal, on the prize. Finish the race. Like the sermon last Sunday, don’t sell out for a can of soup. Don’t settle for less than completing the race and winning the prize! It’s about eternity. Stay focused!

You may not hear applause, but somewhere a crowd is cheering! One of the difficult things about this year’s Olympics is of course, no audience in the stands. I don’t know what effect that may have on some of the athletes if their particular sport is used to the energy of large crowds. But one of the things I’ve enjoyed is seeing the reaction of family and friends watching from home. If you saw the friends of Lydia Jacoby going crazy when this 17 year old from Seward Alaska won the gold medal for the 100 meter. There may not have been anyone in

Tokyo cheering for this unknown teenaged swimmer, competing against the world record holder in fact, but somewhere in Alaska there was a crowd cheering.

All the challenges and obstacles of your walk with the Lord, the sacrifices you endure and no one notices, no one applauds, and you start to wonder if anyone cares, if it matters, if it's worth it. Remember that passage we just read from Hebrews? The whole verse reads, **“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” Hebrews 12:1** We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses and they are cheering us on! All those saints who have gone before us are counting on us. Don't quit! Don't stop! Keep running, keep going for the gold. You aren't doing this alone. Somewhere a crowd is cheering. Finally,

Look who presents the gold! Paul said **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” 2 Timothy 4:7-8** In the Olympics, the fighter wins the fight, the runner completes the race and an earthly judge awards the gold medal. But Paul says when we win our fight and complete our race, we stand in the winner's circle and the Lord himself is the judge who awards to us a crown of righteousness! “Congratulations. By the sacrifice of my blood you were saved. You received my forgiveness, my righteousness, then you cast off all the sins that tried to hinder you. You trained, you were disciplined, you never quit or gave up. You ran with determination, you fought with purpose and passion and now, welcome home, enter into the joys of heaven. You've won the gold.”

The music begins to play. It's not the national anthem but it is words we know and we begin to sing, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain” and “To him who sits on the throne and unto the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and power forever!” This time, we cast our crowns at his feet and we bow because we know we are here only by his grace.

Go for the gold. Strive for the prize. Live your life in such a way that it is pleasing to the Lord. Don't lose focus, don't give up. Don't be discouraged. There is a crowd cheering somewhere. Keep going. The finish line is just ahead. Run. Press on. Lean in. Give it that last ounce of strength and energy and go for the gold. You'll never regret it, not for all eternity!