**Act Like Men**

**Running the Race**

I have never spoken at a men’s retreat. I am excited for this opportunity.

Until a few years ago, I had always wondered what it would be like to speak at a college graduation. As a prof I sat through a lot.

Then, 4 years ago, I was asked to give the main speech to a conference of the community college honors students. It was my chance. Not quite the same, but…

My talk: Do the hard thing. In life, when given a choice, always to the hard thing.

I have always done this, and it has served me well.

My lesson is the Bible version of that same speech.

There are two things I am going to do tonight that I do not normally do:

1. Use sports analogies. (Kate) But with men this is no problem.

2. Use myself as an example (except to talk about my struggles and weaknesses). But at the age of 67, in this context, I am going to go for it.

Our text will be 1 Cor 9:24-27

The Winter Olympics just finished month.

We are really inspired by the amazing achievements of all the athletes—especially the American ones.

I was encouraged when skater Brittany Bowe gave up her spot in the 500 m speed skating race so that Erin Jackson, the American champion in the 500 M speed skate could compete (she had stumbled in the US trials). When Erin Jackson became the first black female to win any medal in speed skating—and took the gold, I was inspired, both by the sacrifice of Bowe and the achievement of Erin. Erin had only learned how to skate 5 years before.

What is it that we like so much about the Olympics?

It is because people go all in—they devote their entire lives to achieving a goal, and become the best in the world.

As men, we are impressed by those who come out on top in athletic competition.

Raiders, Rams, LeBron James fire us up.

Why? As men, we appreciate accomplishment and excellence.

Well, Paul uses the Greek Olympics as a way to teach us about the Christian life, about being men of God, and about our going all in for God.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

In this passage Paul is giving us some great admonitions about the Christian life—especially for Christian men.

Point #1 Paul’s admonition: Run so as to get the prize.

What is the prize?

In the context, he is talking about his mission to save as many as possible for Christ. (read 1 Cor 9:19-23 inspiring!!!)

The closest analogy between an Olympic event and the Christian life is a Marathon race. It is not a sprint.

How does an athlete “run so as to get the prize” in an Olympic distance race?

1. They make maximum overall effort.

2. They pace themselves.

3. At the end of the race, they are utterly exhausted because they were “all in.”

Question: Is that how you are living your Christian life?

Are you running your Christian race in the way you would run a race in order to win?

Illustration: I have often driven myself to exhaustion.

1. Ended up in a hospital, near death, in Nigeria.

2. I also ended up in a hospital in Georgia due to exhaustion and a lung infection.

3. I have found myself in Jos and in Port Harcourt with a guy with a submachine gun the whole time.

4. I was preaching in Mexico City. I was so exhausted, I passed out during the sermon.

At the end of almost every day, I am nearly exhausted.

Maybe I had better do a better job of pacing myself, but…

Hebrews 4:11 Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish…

Look at the person next to you: Have you been making every effort?

Have you been running so as to win the prize? Are you, like Paul “pouring yourself out.” (Phil 2:17)

Or are you holding back a significant part of your life and energy for the sake of self?

I have an advantage over you. I am starting to see the finish line.

I can almost taste it.

It is that middle part of the race—mile 6 to mile 20 or so—that it is tough to keep your focus.

But the Christian race is a bit different. It’s like the Rock and Roll Marathon in San Diego… 1 Cor 9:23 We get to share the blessings along the way.

I talked to Vincent Lara last week. He is going into the ministry.

Jan and get to see the fruit of our work with singles in SD or Bakersfield.

Point #2 The Christian race is not like the Olympics in one very important way.

Who wins the prize? Answer: All those who “run so as to win the prize.”

So, The Christian race is not a competition except, perhaps with yourself. All the finishers who give it their all win! Blaine gets the prize. Mike Mackie gets the prize. Gregg gets the prize.

Heb 11:13-16 Those who are still running at the end of the race win!

Point #3 Their prize was a laurel wreath that lasted for a couple of days. They did NOT get gold medals!!! Our prize is eternal. Oh, it is worth it, yet so few people “run so as to get the prize.” Again, what about you????

Let’s talk about the prize.

2 Cor 4:16-5:4

It is eternal life with God in a new, immortal body.

v. 17 “An eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”

“A building from God, an eternal house in heaven.” He is talking about our immortal body.

Point #4 v. 25 Paul is admonishing us to “go into strict training.”

v. 27 Paul “beats his body.”

Do the Olympic athletes go into strict training? Yeah!!! Junk food: Right out! They pace themselves. They even schedule rest, but they do not skip training sessions.

Have you been eating spiritual junk food? A quick quite time. No spiritual depth.

They always have a trainer and they listen to their trainer. Do you have a trainer? Is there a spiritual mentor in your life, helping you to train for the spiritual race?

Here is an easy question: Which is more important: going to heaven or winning a football game/soccer tournament/cross country race?

Do we act like we actually believe this?

Illustration:

I set a goal about 8 years ago to know in-depth every single book in the Bible.

I set a goal 14 years ago to complete a 4-volume set on Church history.

Are you in strict spiritual training? What are you doing to prepare yourself for fruitful life as a Christian? Are you skipping your practice sessions (prayer, Bible study). Are you eating a lot of junk food (many hours indulging yourself in video games, parties, etc.)

Point #5 Paul admonishes us to not run aimlessly.

We need to have a plan.

I have this goal: I want to go on a mission team. I want to help one person to be baptized this year. I want to master the book of Galatians and write my own little lesson on the book. I want to help establish a new local HOPE program this year.

1 Timothy 4:7-8

Do you agree with Paul here?

Yes, it is true. For a Christian, physical training is of some value.

We will live longer.

We will be more productive. We will have more energy.

We will be a more inspiring example to others.

I was going to hike the Grand Canyon this weekend…

This week I ran on the treadmill 6 miles in 60 minutes.

I did 50 minutes on the stair stepper 4300+ steps

Why? I want to be in physical shape so that I can do more for God’s kingdom.

Being in shape is not a top Christian priority. It is not #2 or #3. It is probably not even priority #5 for a Christian, but it is in the top 10. How are you doing on that?

But also yes, it is also true that the dividends of spiritual training are vastly greater--that spiritual training is far more valuable. Do you agree with Paul on this?

Great!!! So, what are you doing? Are you all in for training yourself to be godly?

What does that entail for you?

Begin reading biblical commentaries? Go on a church planting? Get a degree to enhance your Christian gift?

2 Timothy 4:6-8

Paul is giving us a really helpful perspective here. He is at the end of the race, looking back on his own personal Christian Marathon race. He is about 60 years old, but his race is about to come to a close.

How is he feeling?

Was it worth it?

Did he ever get tired during the race? Are you kidding?

Did he ever feel like quitting? Sure he did.

Did he sometimes think he was crazy to be running this race while everyone else was sitting back and “enjoying” life? Probably.

Put yourself into Paul’s situation. Imagine yourself at 75 or 85 years old, looking back at your life.

Let us take some time right now to imagine you are in your twilight of your life. You are looking back at your Christian journey. Will you regret missing seeing a superbowl? Will you regret not having the newest gadget or that really beautiful decorating item for your home? What will you be thinking about?

Paul is thinking about the thousands who were saved from hell because of his effort. He is thinking about the spiritual companions who shared his journey.

Paul: I have fought the good fight. I am about the get the crown.

Oh yes, brothers it is worth it!

Brothers, let’s commit ourselves right here and now to be Christian Men.

Let’s go into strict training.

Let’s have a plan.

Let’s train ourselves to be godly, because godliness has value for all things.

And let us be encouraged, that as long as we “run so as to win.” Like Paul, we will receive the crown of righteousness that will never spoil or face.

Let’s be all run the Christian race so as to win.