

The Making of A Champion - Part Two: Discipline

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Pastor Jonathan Swenson, St. Mark's Faith & Life Center, 10 August 2008

As a little girl, Rachel Komisarz dreamed of being a gymnast. She worked hard and practiced long hours, but at the age of fifteen she landed wrong during a floor tumbling pass and broke her back. The result was that she was in a bulky back brace for a number of months. She was only allowed to remove the brace in order to lie flat on the floor *or* to get into a swimming pool.

So as an escape from the back brace, a love for the water grew. She went on to swimming competitively her junior and senior year in high school and in 2000 she moved to Louisville to begin the all-consuming task of trying to make it in the Olympics. Finally, the world watched while Rachel won a gold and a silver medal, in the 2004 summer Olympics in Athens - all because of the fact that **times of adversity and testing, followed by years of discipline and strict training, had paid off for her.**

In our current sermon series, we're focusing on themes from the Olympics as analogies to living the Christian life. Last week we focused on the attribute of **inspiration** - what motivates us to **GET IN** the race... and today, our attention turns to **discipline** as we realize what it will take to **STAY** in the race.

The apostle Paul stresses the need for discipline in **1 Corinthians 9:24-25**. Writing to the people of Corinth, Greece, he used a metaphor from their culture, where Olympic champions were the ultimate national heroes. Comparing the faith-life of a Christian to that of an athlete in a foot race, he 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. 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."***

"Run in such a way as to get the prize." So, *how do we do that?* And how do we incorporate this thing called DISCIPLINE into our faith walk on a daily basis? Well, to answer that question, this morning, we're going to look at three different aspects of DISCIPLINE -- specifically, the MEANING, the METHODS, and the MOTIVATION for spiritual discipline, as explained by Paul in this passage.

So, let's start out with the first one...

1. The MEANING of Discipline (What is it, according to Paul?)

If you were to ask most people what they think of when they hear the word, DISCIPLINE, you would often get a fairly negative response. As Ross Brodfuehrer put it, *"Discipline sounds like a bad word. Discipline bears a family resemblance to drudgery, duty and dreariness. It hints of routine and repetition. It smells of obligation, exhaustion and anguish. Discipline appears as a very sweaty straight jacket that will force its wearer to run endless laps and eat tasteless tofu. No wonder we avoid it. Discipline looks like the enemy."*

Well, *perhaps it is because of those types of associations with this word*, that Paul

lays out a different vision for the role of discipline in our life. Paul's definition for this word can be summarized with three simple words: "**Advance Decision Making.**"

Understood this way, "discipline" becomes a much more positive, motivating factor in our life. Paul says that, through ADVANCE DECISION MAKING we can choose to live our lives in a proactive way in order to look ahead and see what good and Godly goals we want to obtain -- *what we want to live our life FOR and what we want our lives TO HAVE BEEN ABOUT.* And not only that, but this analogy from 1st Corinthians essentially says that once we've made these types of **advance decisions**, we can go about the business of structuring the routines of our life to reach those predetermined spiritual goals.

We see this all the time in the sports world. An athlete makes an advance decision **to train and prepare so that** -- in the moment of "hitting the wall" -- he or she will have an extra reserve of energy and stamina to lift them to finish the race.

And this concept of "discipline as advance decision making" is true not only of athletics. It holds true in just about any area of life.

- It's tough to do your Taxes on the evening of April 15th, but *you make an advance decision* to start in February and you discipline yourself to do a little at a time it becomes manageable and easy.
- A young person makes an advance decision to remain sexually pure -- to save themselves for marriage.
- A middle-income family makes an advance decision to take out a fifteen or twenty-year mortgage instead of a thirty-year one, and disciplines themselves to go without some niceties in order to reap the benefit later on. Soon it becomes routine for them to make that payment.

The point is this: Whether in athletics or any other area of life, disciplined people decide ahead of time just how they plan to run the race... they have a plan and a strategy... and they discipline themselves to practice it so that in the critical moment, they are able to finish the race.

Second, how do we develop spiritual discipline? What are some of the methods? ...

II. THE METHODS OF DISCIPLINE (*HOW do we develop spiritual discipline?*)

The Greeks had a training ground for their athletic events, that archeologist say looked something like this. (ON SCREEN: PHOTO OF RUINS OF GREEK TRAINING GROUND). So, let me ask you this question: What does your **spiritual** "training ground" look like? To answer that question, we need to first do a couple of things...

- a. First, Name the area you want to focus on.** – Ask yourself where or how do you sense the Holy Spirit prompting you to change, or inviting you to seek spiritual growth? Is it in reading your Bible more consistently? Or growing your prayer life? Or becoming more patient with your spouse? Or applying Christian ethics to your leadership style at work? To what might the Holy Spirit, even in this moment, be prompting you to devote some time and attention?

John Ortberg has an interesting quote about this. He says, "**A discipline should match a vice you're fighting or a virtue you're pursuing.**" That is a good way to come up with a discipline plan. Anyone who has watched Tiger Woods over the years knows that when he goes into a streak where he hasn't won a major in a while, he intentionally tells himself, "*I need to go back and see what I can do differently in my practice routine.*" He is always looking for that little discipline in his preparation so that in the moment of competition, in the moment that it mattered his training & discipline will give him the edge. Well, in a similar way, the Holy Spirit, invites us to do a moral inventory of our lives from time to time, so that God can grow us more and more into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ.

b. Secondly, once you have identified the area where you feel called to grow spiritually, Paul would then encourage you to **develop a training regimen to address that area of your life.**

- Choose a time for daily Bible reading and for prayer – a time that you will COMMIT to, regardless how crazy your life is, and how stressful it might become.
- Or join a small group where you feel safe and encouraged to spend time in the Word of God. For you men, you might commit to attending Men's Fraternity, where you can be surrounded by other Christian men who laugh with you and encourage you in the ways that you seek to grow.
- Or maybe it means signing up for the Good Sense class to get your finances in order... or attending the Spiritual Gifts class, to identify your sweet spot for serving.
- Maybe it means you start serving in the flood relief efforts if you haven't already been doing so, so that you can experience the joy of putting your faith into action.

Whatever it is for you, this is a matter of making a specific plan for how you are going to open yourself to the work of the Holy Spirit.... so that God can bring about the necessary changes He is prompting you to make in your life.

c. Find a training partner... and then, **thirdly**, though this isn't mentioned specifically in this passage from Corinthians, I would add that it is good for each one of us to **find a training partner who will run the race with you** -- someone who you trust, and someone who will lovingly tell the truth back to you, to keep you on track with your spiritual training plan, and to help you reach those spiritual goals. As Ecclesiastes 4:12 says, "*two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work.*"

I have a friend like that named Eric. I can always count on him to ask me the hard questions, or to say the tough word to me when I stray off-course. But I know he says those things, and asks me those hard questions, because he loves me and wants the best for me and for my family. I try to do the same for him.

Find a training partner, who will keep you running the race. I can guarantee you that this will become one of the most important friendships you will ever develop.

So... we've defined the meaning of discipline, according to Paul... and we've talked about some methods. Now, let's remind ourselves of the motivation for developing

spiritual discipline in our lives.

III. THE MOTIVATION FOR DISCIPLINE

WHY is it so important to Paul, and ultimately to GOD, that we incorporate discipline into our lives? Well, let's look back to Paul's words in this passage. **"Run to get the prize,"** he says in verse 24. And then he continues in verse 25, athletes run **"to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever."**

Twentieth century Theologian Watchman Nee, reflecting on this passage, wrote, **"In order to receive a corruptible crown, people are willing to discipline themselves. Should we, who are to receive an incorruptible crown, be any less disciplined?"**

And the 'corruptible crown' mentioned here refers to the flowery laurels that the winners of the Greek athletic competitions were crowned with at the end of the race. We still see that symbol in the Olympics today. Now, granted, that crown of flowers and leaves looked nice, but then, remember that in the time of the original Olympics, THAT WAS IT! Champions in Paul's day received no cash gifts, no gold medal, no cover shot on Sports Illustrated. Their face wasn't plastered on a Wheaties box, and there were no lucrative six-figure endorsement contracts to sign the day after the Olympics. Instead they received a wreath of laurels that after a few days would die. That was all. *And yet it was motivation enough for them to train rigorously, with great discipline, for the honor of that prize.*

So, what about you and me? What "prizes" motivate us? If I said, "I'll give you \$10 if you are able to long-jump sixteen feet." You would probably tell me to get lost. You wouldn't give it a second thought. But if someone who could follow-up on his or her words said to you, "I'll give you a million dollars if next year at this time you can long-jump sixteen feet" – well, what would you do then? You would probably go home today and start working on your leg strength, and you would probably start running. You might even hire a coach. You would do everything you possibly could, and you would probably achieve that goal. And why is that? Because you want the prize!

But here is where the truth of Paul's words becomes incredibly important. The truth is: there is something worth a lot more than a million dollars that is in store for those who finish the race of discipleship, because, ultimately, the reward that Paul is talking about is the reward of eternal life.

Now, hear me say this, very clearly, this isn't some sort of works-righteousness theology. This isn't about earning your way into Heaven. In fact, Paul has already spent much of the first 8 chapters of book of 1st Corinthians emphasizing the **freedom** we have in Christ – that we are saved by **grace**, and not by our human effort... only the blood of the cross. **Chapter 1, verse 30** for example, says, **"Christ made us right with God, HE made us pure and holy. He (not we) freed us from sin. Therefore, as the Scriptures say, 'If you want to boast, boast only about the Lord.' "**

In other words, we *don't* get to heaven by how well, or how fast, or how efficiently we finish the race. Paul is careful not to say that. But **he does say** that there are important benefits or rewards waiting for us, depending on how we run the race. So what are these rewards, what is the prize *beyond the prize of eternal life* that has already been granted to us in Jesus Christ? There are several; let me name just a few...

MOTIVATION FOR RUNNING THE RACE WITH DISCIPLINE

a. First, you become more like Christ.

By the grace of God, and through the power of the Holy Spirit working in us, through spiritual discipline, we become more like Christ. That's what the concept of "sanctification" is all about -- God molding you more and more into the image of His Son, so that, by his Grace, for example,

- You still love your fiancée, even when they embarrass you in front of your friends.
- You maintain a spirit of forgiveness, even when you are being treated unfairly.
- You have wisdom beyond your *own* insight, when a friend comes to you for Godly advice in dealing with a difficult situation.

b. Second, when you are running the race of discipleship with consistent spiritual discipline, you experience the presence, and the power, and the peace of God in your life, even when faced with adversity.

- You have peace even when the news from the doctor is not good.
- You have joy when things at the office are chaotic.
- You can trust, even when the future seems unclear.

c. And then, third, when you run a disciplined life of discipleship, you might just bring someone with you to Heaven. When you are living this life with the next life in mind, people sit up and take notice. When people experience the genuine presence of the Holy Spirit IN YOU by the way you love them, the way that you genuinely listen to them instead of talking about yourself, the way that you serve them... then they start to believe that this Christianity thing MIGHT just be true. And **you might be the tool that God uses to fan the flame of faith in someone for the very first time.** You might be the one who takes someone WITH you to Heaven --- your son, your daughter, a parent, a co-worker, a classmate, a friend down the street... someone who would NOT have been spending eternity with Christ if it wasn't for your influence in their life.

And when it gets to that, my friends, well that is a priceless prize indeed. Peace with God, purpose in this life and eternity with Christ in the next. I hope we can all agree, that those, my friends, are things worth running for.

So, let me close with a few thoughts on the backside of this thing called discipline. Let me clarify, one more time, that this is not a message about "how you get to heaven by living a disciplined life." That is accomplished only by Jesus Christ on the cross.

But I *DO* hope you've heard this morning a message about *how to honor* the one *who*

made it possible for you to go to Heaven. You see, ultimately all the discipline in the world can still fail us, but Jesus will NEVER fail. He's proven that already. He proved it when *he disciplined Himself* to stay on a Cross when He could have come down. And he suffered for you and me, so that we could taste success, *eternal success*, even when we fail and fall.

Some of you may have seen the article in the Gazette last week, or seen the Visa commercials that tell the story of British runner, Derek Redmond. Derek was a favorite in the 400-meter event in the 1992 Olympics. And as the gun went off in the semi-finals, Derek had a great jump. In fact, as he hit the straight-away, he seemed to be in full control until suddenly he tore a hamstring, came up limping for a moment, and then, in agony, he fell to the track. After a moment, and obviously experiencing great pain, he struggled to his feet and began to hobble down the track, determined to complete the race. The crowds rose to their feet with deafening applause, encouraging him in his truly "Olympian" effort. But even *with* this encouragement, and even with all the training, and practice and yes, all the *discipline* that had brought him to this day... even so, it looked like it might not be enough. The remaining distance was just too far for him to cover.

But then something happened that would be forever marked in Olympic history. Derek's *father* jumped from the stands and ran out on the track to help his son. At first the officials, tried to stop him, but Derek's father was fully determined to reach his son. When his Dad came alongside him, Derek collapsed into his father's embrace and it looked, for a second, like that might be the end of it. But in the very next moment, father and son began to run, and to hop, and to hobble down the track, side-by-side, the son leaning into his Dad for support. The crowd roared their approval, and together, father and son limped to the finish line, to finish the race, together.

My friends, that is a picture of how it works for you and me. Sometimes, despite all our training, and despite our best efforts, we pull a spiritual hamstring. We sin, and we fail, and we disappoint. And *we might think that we have been disqualified from the race.*

But then, in that moment, when we are so *very* discouraged -- when we fall to the ground in defeat...it is then, and most powerfully then, that **the Father, God the Creator, comes alongside and allows us to collapse into his arms, and he gently whispers in our ears, "It's okay, my child. It's alright! The race is already finished. My Son has already won... He has worn the crown of thorns, so that you can wear the Crown of LIFE.**

So, lean on me, my child, lean on me. Come on -- let's go finish the race."

**DEREK REDMOND VIDEO: You Tube –
"DEREK REDMOND, DAD HELP SON TO FINISH THE RACE, COMPLETE"
(4:14 w/ Creed song, "Arms Wide Open")**