

## **The Making of A Champion: Inspiration**

**Rev. Perry J Fruhling, St. Mark's Faith & Life Center, 03 Aug 08**

Grace and peace...We're starting a brand new sermon series today and it is called "The Making of A Champion". The idea is to serve as bookends to the summer Olympics that will start this Friday. Many of us will be camped out watching the Olympics. We wanted to look at four key opponents that we believe tie in quite well with not just the sports analogy but also our own Christian life. Next week we will take a look at *discipline*. The last two weeks we'll look at *confidence* and wrap it up by understanding the celebration that takes place when you are *victorious*.

Today we begin by taking a look at *inspiration*. When you think about it, let's be honest, most of us have more in common with the couch potato than we do the Olympic athlete. As we stare and as we watch, no exercise will be taking place. We will simply say whether we approve or disapprove of the efforts made by the athletes.

Now the Olympics are quite interesting. If you are familiar at all with the history they start back to 776 B.C. It was held in an area called Olympia in Greece. There was a stadium that seated about forty thousand people, if you can imagine. People would come to watch one race. That was it. It was a little shorter than two hundred meters. Eventually they added some others. In 1896, the Olympics returned after a 1500-year absence in an effort to establish peace between nations – hence the flags here today. This year's Olympics come to China and the people there are ecstatic to host this great event. Now we can watch these athletes who have spent incredible amounts of time, money, effort, and energy, so that somehow we can watch them from our couch and say, "Boy, they are amazing."

There are many people in the Christian life that tend to be spectators rather than participants. They watch the things that Christians are doing, they hear the things Christians believe in but when it comes to actually getting involved in the action, it's a little bit tougher. What was the inspiration that motivated these athletes to pursue such a dream? What caused them to get off of their comfortable couch and exchange that for sweating, lifting weights, sore muscles, and no social life? In the New Testament the writer of Hebrews shares a section that hopefully can inspire us to get off the couch and get in the game. We're going to look at Hebrews chapter 12. But to help your understanding you need to know what the preceding chapter is all about. It is kind of a "Faith Hall of Fame". It goes through all of these great giants of the faith from the Old Testament, a "great cloud of witnesses," a number of people who had been faithful throughout their lives like Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samson, and Samuel. It even lists a prostitute named Rahab, whose faith and courage saved the lives of two godly leaders.

***Hebrews 12:1-3; "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses... let us run...the race..."***

If you are not a Christ follower I hope you will consider entering into this race called the Christian life. If you have been a Christian riding the fence, I want to challenge you to get off the couch and totally commit yourself by diving into the action. If you

are a committed Christian no doubt there are some areas of struggle and hopefully you will be inspired to be strengthened. The first area I want us to see is:

### **I. A History of Champions**

Did you watch the Baseball All-Star Game this year? At the All-Star Game they had more than 50 Hall-of-Famers present. To see these players who were the best of the best is pretty inspiring. In the same way previous athletes who excel in the particular area in which they are participating inspire Olympic athletes.

If we are participating in the Christian life then we look to some of those people. Those mentioned in Hebrews 11 were pretty ordinary people who ended up doing extraordinary things. We should think of ourselves as seeing a relay race where those who have finished their course and handed their baton on to the next person are watching and encouraging their successors.

What does it do for you when you face sexual temptation to think back to how Joseph handled it in the Old Testament? Or when you think of tough challenges you're reminded of Joshua, or when God's will involves doing an unwanted task you think of Moses, or when you must step out in faith you think of Abraham. But although those are helpful, let's realize we need some modern examples that inspire us. This church is filled with Godly men and women that I look up to.

There are groups of quilters who gather each week for several hours to fellowship and share their quilts of love with people around the world. Members in their 80's, George and Jean still participate in Vacation Bible School because they love children. About 80 youth and adults just returned from a week of serving in Colorado and Canada. Countless numbers of you have served hours and hours in the flood zone.

I hear each of these stories and I am so inspired. There is a sign that has always hung outside the Notre Dame locker room. It says, "Play Like a Champion Today." Traditionally, Notre Dame players touch the sign for inspiration as they head out on the field. They know all the great players that went before them have also touched that same sign. What the Hebrew writer is saying is, "I want you to run like a champion today."

The spiritual heroes give us a home court advantage by letting us know that they are on the sidelines watching and cheering us on.

Secondly:

### **II. There is A Challenging Expectation**

There is something about the challenge itself that inspires the Olympic athlete. **Hebrews 12:1 says, "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."** We need to throw off anything that can slow us down in the Christian life.

I told you that it would be a challenging expectation, and it is. How can you eliminate those entanglements? They may not be bad things, they may be good things but they are just not the best things. They might be good things but just too much of it. It's good if your kids are involved in sports or some type of lessons or hobby. But if you have them involved in so many things that church attendance is impossible and the family structure is more frantic than peaceful then those hobbies have become an entanglement. The Christian life is choosing between good, better and best. That's why Paul says in **Ephesians 5:15-16**, "*Be very careful, then, how you live--not as unwise but as wise, making the most every opportunity, because the days are evil.*" Remember that if the Devil can't make you bad he'll make you busy. He will take all of these good things and he will gradually suffocate your relationship with Jesus Christ.

How do we eliminate the entanglements? It can be tough stuff. Several years ago I heard leadership guru, Jim Collins, talk about how one year he had a goal of reading one hundred books. But the first night he sat down with a book in his hand and began to read the book, War and Peace. It is a four hundred-page book, just some light reading! He turned on Monday Night Football. He would read a little bit and then start watching the game. Finally after a little while he put the book down and watched Monday Night Football the rest of the evening. This is what he said, "I realized if I was going to reach my goal I was going to have to unplug the television set." Then he asks "What 'television sets' must you unplug in order to accomplish your goals?" That is the question that all of us must ask. What are the entanglements that we need to remove off of our plate so that we can throw off everything that hinders us?

Have you heard of the new Olympic suits being worn by our U.S. swimmers this year? They are wearing a Speedo LZR made of special materials. 44 world records have been set in this suit since it's release. It reduces drag and helps stabilize the body in the water. In our Christian life, God desires Christians to clothe themselves with love (**Colossians 3:15**). When we find ourselves focusing on others, we reduce the drag of the snares of this world. Throw off everything that hinders you. What are some things that slow you down in the Christian life?

Another reason Christians are inspired is because it is:

### **III) A Clear Course**

**Hebrews 12:1c** "*Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*" You see, although the road and the path are difficult and the race is going to be tough it's clearly laid out for us. A few years ago, Mike Delcavo participated in the NCAA cross-country championship held in Riverside, California. There were one hundred and twenty-eight runners. It was a ten thousand-meter course. About half way through he began waving for fellow runners to follow him. He turned off to the side and they laughed at him. Out of one hundred and twenty-eight runners only four others followed him. Guess what? He knew the course. He went the right way. The other one hundred and twenty-three were disqualified.

Following the crowd doesn't necessarily lead you in the right direction. Others may allow popular opinion or the media or their own selfish desires to dictate the direction in which they run. But our goal is to run the course and to finish the race marked out for us by Christ so that we will not miss the prize.

Gordon MacDonald, a Christian writer, writes about a time he was at the Pennsylvania relays, running in a relay team for the championship race. The man in the first lane held the record for the hundred-meter dash but also for arrogance. He said, "may the best man win...I'll see you at the finish line." The gun sounded and the record-holder led the pack, until about halfway through the race, when he pulled up lame. MacDonald says, "I was a gentleman and waited for him at the finish line. MacDonald's coach pulled him aside and said, "I hope you've learned a lesson today. It makes little difference whether you hold the record for the one hundred-meter dash if the race is four hundred-meters long."

The Christian life is not a sprint; it is a marathon. The course may be difficult, it may be long but don't get discouraged. Instead be inspired. The course has been clearly mapped out. There is only one way to Heaven and that is through Jesus Christ.

And so, most importantly we need:

#### **IV. An Ultimate Hero**

Jesus must be the focal point and the One we look to for guidance, direction and help. **Hebrews 12:2 says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the Cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the Throne of God."** Fixing our eyes on Jesus...we are to run this race with no eyes for any one or anything except Jesus. Don't focus on those running beside you but on what's in front of you.

In horse racing they focus on the poles, swimming they focus on the wall, basketball they focus on the hoop, and in running you focus on the finish line. Christians must keep focus on Jesus. Do you know why? If we are looking toward Him we continue to become like Him as well. People might see Jesus in us. But sometimes even we in the church can focus on programs and buildings and fluff where Jesus kind of gets pushed into the background. We fail to focus on Him any longer and we focus on other good things just not the best things.

A top executive from Disneyworld related how several years ago through exit surveys they found that some families were leaving the theme park disappointed. They couldn't understand it until they found a common thread. Here it was, all the people who left disgruntled said they had come to see one person. All day long they had not crossed paths with him and so they left disappointed. Do you know who it was? You got it. They came to see big Mickey but they couldn't find him. So do you know what they did? Every day of the week there is a parade that goes down Main Street with you-know-who

serving as a Grand Marshal. Now anybody who wants to see Mickey Mouse can see him. Now people leave the park happy and content because of whom they saw.

Let me tell you something. There are folks in our world and in our community who are spiritually hungry. They come into this church searching for someone. They come into your house and your neighborhood looking for someone. They may not realize it but they are looking for Jesus Christ. You might be the only Christ they see. Make certain that when they leave they are inspired because they have seen Jesus.

You see you're not in this alone! Jesus Christ set the perfect example that motivates us to want to follow in His steps. Some of you are old enough to remember back to the 1976 Olympics. There was a gymnast from the Soviet Union who did one routine and scored a perfect ten. Her name was **Nadia Comaneci**. Every judge and every one of us who saw her routine said the same thing, "She NAILED it"! She did nail it. The result was a perfect ten, which was unheard of in a competition - a perfect ten, flawless perfection in the eyes of the judges for a two minute time period. I wonder how many little girls were inspired to be a gymnast because of that moment.

But may I remind you of one whose perfection lasted for a tad longer than two minutes. His perfection spanned thirty-three years. When it came to living a perfect life, He NAILED it! But then they **NAILED Him**. They nailed Him to a tree where he would hang for six hours and in so doing His blood would cover over the sins of those who would commit their life to Him. I don't know about you, but Jesus is my inspiration. You may be tempted to head back for the comfort of the couch but the Cross compels us to stay the course just as Christ endured the Cross. **Hebrews 12:2 says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the JOY set before Him endured the Cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."**

Did you see that phrase, "FOR THE JOY SET BEFORE HIM endured the Cross." Do you know what it was? The only thing He didn't have was you, was me, was us. The joy that was set before Him was us. He had everything else. Does it blow you away to think that you were His inspiration to leave Heaven and come to earth? Today, the first step towards living a victorious life is letting Christ become your joy. I ask today that you put your trust in the perfect 10, who is waiting for you at the finish line.

Let's pray...