

Running the race \* 1 Corinthians 9:24-27  
August 21, 2016 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

As you know, there's this little thing called the Olympics happening down in Rio and the closing ceremonies are actually happening tonight. Anybody been watching the Olympics?

When the Olympics are on, I like to play this little game called, if your parents were Olympic athletes, what would they compete in?

Now have you ever thought about what it would take to get \_\_\_\_ into condition to compete at the Olympics? It takes real dedication and discipline, doesn't it? I read one training plan from an American swimmer Natalie Coughlin – she didn't end up competing this year but it gives you a sense of what's involved –

For the past three years, her training schedule has been EXACTLY the same, every day. Natalie is in the water about eight times a week, and each of those swim sessions runs anywhere from an hour and a half to two hours. Add in her gym time four times a week — in which she's weightlifting and cross training — for about the same duration, and you've got nearly 30 hours of intense workouts, every single week.

<http://www.popsugar.com/fitness/Olympic-Swimmer-Natalie-Coughlin-Training-Schedule-41038115>

A little closer to home, there's a runner in Brantford named Krista DuChene – she's actually quite open about being a Christian – goes to Brant Community Church – and I've read a bit of her blog. One entry really caught my interest because in it she talks about doing the math back in 2002 and figuring that 2016 would be her best shot at the Olympics. She spent fourteen years preparing to get to the Olympics and she's in Rio right now.

That dedication is incredible, isn't it? Athletes work hard to win. Their eyes are on the prize and they live accordingly.

Now if you think about it, that's a pretty apt motto for the Christian life as well – eyes on the prize and live accordingly, but unlike these Olympic athletes, we sometimes tend to be more sloppy than disciplined in our Christian walk.

That was certainly the case for the Corinthian church that Paul wrote to – that's the passage that \_\_\_\_\_ read to us this morning. See, in Corinth there was a group of believers – people who had been baptized, who ate the Lord's Supper, who self-identified as Christians – but they were doing a lot of not-very-Christian stuff.

When they came together for the Lord's Supper, they were not waiting for one another – the rich people would go ahead and eat before the poor folks could finish work and get there – you had divisions forming because people were choosing sides behind different leaders – and people were using God given gifts for their own glory, trying to become popular, rather than working to serve one another. That's sloppy Christian life. They may have had their eyes on the prize but they definitely weren't living accordingly.

To address this problem, Paul uses the picture of an athlete in training to say to the Corinthians and really to say to us – eyes on the prize and live accordingly.

Now here's the really neat thing and how it really ties into current events.

In Ancient Greece, the Olympics would happen every four years and they were just as prestigious as they are today. But here's the thing – the Olympics were only part of a four year cycle of Greek athletic events and every other year there was something called the 'Isthmian games.' Isthmian comes from 'isthmus' – a piece of land that bridges between two larger land masses and guess what city was in the middle of the isthmus – Corinth. So Paul is writing to a church in a city that hosts Olympic style games every other year – in fact, some scholars think that Paul would have attended those games when he was in Corinth – and he says – learn a lesson from these athletes and apply it to your Christian life.

Here's what I want to do today – I want to look really closely at this text – just four verses – because it's a very powerful image – but as one old commentary puts it- the metaphor creaks a little – that is to say – it's a good metaphor – but it's *just* a metaphor and if you push it too far, you can misunderstand it.

So let's get into this to see what God says to us and then I want to draw out for you three themes that will help us to apply it in our own lives.

Join me at verse 24 –

Do you not know that in a race all runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.

That last line is Paul's main point – run your Christian life in such a way as to get the prize. Go for the gold as it were – run as if you were Usain Bolt. Race with the intention of winning the prize, which in the Christian life is eternal life with God.

So, race in such a way as to get the prize – but what do we make of the first part?

'only one gets the prize?' Does that mean that at the very end, there will only be one Christian who wins the prize?

Of course not and this is where the metaphor starts to creak. The point of the metaphor is not so much who wins but how you race. Race with discipline, race with the singlemindedness that's required to win the prize. So Paul tells us 'don't just go for a leisurely jog in your Christian life, go for the gold!'

Verse 25 –

Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training – and this is true. You know this from athletes in our day in age but it was equally true in ancient Corinth. In fact I've seen many times this week that athletes in the ancient games would swear an oath that they would train and discipline themselves for ten months prior to the games or be disqualified. So notice, it's everyone, not just the winners – everyone who competes, trains.

We'll continue –

They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.

This is a neat statement. Paul says 'look – all of these athletes, they train hard, they makes sacrifices, they put in this tremendous effort and only one of them will win the prize.' And look at the prize he says – a crown of wilted celery. You train for ten months and all you get's a lousy celery ring? You gotta be kidding! Of course there's more to it – winning the race would earn you and your family and your city a great deal of prestige and some cities gave their athletes money – they got their face on the box of ancient Wheaties – but the point Paul says is this – those rewards will vanish. They put in all this effort, all this sacrifice, in the hopes that they will be the one person who wins – no gold, silver, bronze – just one winner – and if they happen to be good enough to win, their prize will eventually be gone. Their celery crown will wither. Somebody else will break their world record.

But Paul says – we are running for a crown that will last forever. In the Christian race, as it were, the prize is not perishable, but it is eternal life with God Himself. We are running to get a prize that will last forever.

So Paul says 'with my eyes on that prize, I want to live accordingly.'

Look at verse 26 –

Therefore – (since I am going after an eternal crown) – I do not run like a man running aimlessly. I do not fight like a man beating the air.

We have a picture of purpose here, right. Since he sees how great the prize is, he is going after the prize with purpose – not shadow boxing, not running aimlessly.

Instead, Paul says in verse 27 –

I beat my body and make it my slave – ok, pause. Is Paul telling us that we need to beat our bodies to faithfully run the Christian race? Is Paul telling us that we need to abuse ourselves to be faithful Christians? No. I don't love the NIV translation here and if you have the King James version or the Living Bible or the English standard version, you'll see a better translation. Paul literally wrote something like this – 'I treat my body roughly – which is to say I treat my body with discipline or self control' and I enslave my body – that is to say I put it under my control.' The force of this language is to say 'I don't just do whatever my bodily appetites feel like; I look at the prize and bring my body into line with what it will take to get that prize. Eyes on the prize means I act with discipline and self control.

And then verse 27 continues – I act with discipline and self-control so that after I have preached to others, I will not be disqualified for the prize.

Another tricky statement. Does this mean that a person can lose the prize by failing adequately perform? Right, if you push the logic of the metaphor it goes like this –

I want to win the prize.

I will work hard so that I will win the prize.

That sounds like works righteousness. That sounds like earning the prize doesn't it?

But remember, this is Paul who is writing this – Paul who in Ephesians wrote we are saved not by work but by grace through faith (2:8). Paul who in Titus wrote “he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy (Tit 3:5 NIV).”

I think to really understand verse 27, we need to set it beside a passage in Philippians that we didn't spend a whole lot of time on but here it is – Philippians 3:12-14.

12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

13 Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,

14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Phi 3:12-14 NIV).

Do you see what's going on here? The Christian race is not like a foot race. A foot race begins when they fire the pistol and you take off towards the prize. But the Christian race begins when God calls you heavenward. When we put our trust in Jesus, He sets the prize before us. By His work, He saved us and guaranteed for all who will trust and follow Him the prize of eternity with God. The prize is ours when we trust Jesus.

But what does Paul say? I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me. The prize is mine but I still gotta run the race.

And Paul applies the metaphor of the athlete here to say run that race with the same singlemindedness and fervour and sacrifice that an athlete runs with but this is where the metaphor creaks –

The athlete looks to the prize and trains his body and makes sacrifices in the *hope* that he will win the prize but

The Christian looks to the prize and trains his body and makes sacrifices in the knowledge that he will receive the prize, because of what Jesus did on the Cross. The prize is mine because of Jesus' sacrifice, so I'm gonna run with discipline and sacrifice to benefit Jesus' cause.

I think that's why Paul uses this language of 'lest I be disqualified' in 1 Corinthians because he's writing to these Corinthians who know the prize, who assume it's theirs, but they're just totally not living in light of it. They're like 'oh, we've got the prize, doesn't matter how we act, we act for our own benefit' and Paul says 'no no don't get it mixed up – we go for the prize acting for Jesus' benefit and the benefit of others.'

We need to rejoice that the prize is ours by grace through faith, not by works, but we also need to hear this warning to spur us to action - we need to run the race with purpose knowing that we will receive the prize.

Lots there eh? We've gone really deeply into God's Word but I'd hate for us to miss the forest for all the trees. Paul's point is pretty simple right? Look at how athletes train. They train hard for a prize they may not get, and even if they do win it, it doesn't last.

Paul's point in these verses is that that's the very level of commitment that we need to invest in our Christian walk but there are some key differences –

First – we run a race worth running. When an athlete enters a race, he knows that there will only be one winner. That's that 'many enter but only one wins' part in verse 24. But in the Christian race, every faithful contestant will win the prize because really Jesus has won it for us. We are simply running the race and if you can't lose, it's a race worth running.

Second – we have a prize worth winning. I love the bluntness of Paul's imagery. THIS inspires ten months of hard training? Wow. If THIS inspires utter commitment and sacrifice, then how much more should eternal life spur us on. Right? We're not racing in the hopes of getting a celery crown – we're racing, knowing that God will give us eternal life because Jesus already ran this race flawlessly, won it, and shared the victory with us. That's a prize worth winning.

And so, third, and this is more a similarity than a difference – with a prize like that, this is a lifestyle worth living.

So many people treat Christianity like a Sunday drive – if they're feeling up to it, they'll maybe go for it, but it doesn't really make a difference. But Paul says to us – look – eyes on the prize – Jesus has won it for you, eternal life is yours if only you will trust Him and follow Him and following Him simply means running the race with diligence and discipline and purpose.

I'll never forget the imagery used in Dallas Willard's classic 'The Spirit of the Disciplines.' He says – 'no athlete who expects to excel in his game will fail to prepare for it.' Right? I would never think to myself, "I'm just going to go up against the world's fastest man, Usain Bolt, and think I could beat him in the 100m dash." I would need to prepare. A lot. I would need to actually adopt a lifestyle of self-control, of practice, of regimented diet – the pursuit of the prize would become my life.

And Willard turns it over and says 'that applies in our Christian life.' We can't just go out into the world and expect to act in godly ways without preparing ourselves first through self-control and prayer and Bible reading and fellowship with other believers talking about God's grace. The pursuit of the prize needs to become our life.

And think about it – the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, to give His life as a ransom for many – that's how He won the prize – in living with self-control and discipline, we are simply following in Jesus' footsteps.

At the beginning, I mentioned our own Brantford Olympian – Krista DuChene – and I thought I'd close with an insight she shared on her blog – here's a screenshot of it – this was Valentine's Day 2016 and the caption reads "Last indulgence for six months until the Olympic marathon in Rio on August 14 2016. Chocolate always tastes better after a race."

And I'll share with you what she wrote –

"Love and sacrifices are part of Team DuChene's Olympic plans."

Today is Valentine's Day and I am sitting alone in my pyjamas in my hotel room after having dinner alone. It is the first February 14 I haven't spent with my husband. Tomorrow is Family Day and I will

spend most of it alone without my family on my return trip home. After racing the Vancouver First Half Marathon, I was to fly home in the afternoon but that flight was cancelled. But it didn't bother me. You see, every day spent with my husband is filled with tremendous mutual love and respect. And every day spent with my family is family day. I don't need these days marked on a calendar... If this Olympic year means a lot of sacrifices along the way, so be it. We can celebrate in exactly six months on August 14 after the Olympic Women's Marathon when Team DuChene is in Rio. Not alone."

The sacrifices pale once you've claimed the prize.

It struck me that that was a poignant picture of Christian life too. There are sacrifices along the way but there is a priceless prize waiting for us and once we've received it, we will celebrate forever and the hardships will pale in comparison to the eternal weight of glory.

So in the meantime – eyes on the prize and run accordingly.