

PLAYING THE GAME

I Corinthians 9:24-27

People have always been fascinated by sports. There is something about competition that appeals to them. They like to participate, and when they are no longer able to do so, they like to watch the competition. When a game in the World Series of baseball is played in the United States, or a world championship football game is played in other parts of the world, millions of people have their ears glued to the radio or their eyes glued on a television set. When the competition is really intense, they almost feel as if they are part of the game. Some of them are just about as tired when the game is over as are the athletes who actually take part in the contest.

Athletic sports have played an important part in the mental, moral, and physical development of the human race. In some form we find traces of these sports, pages of human history, but it remained for Greece, Great Britain, and the United States to bring them into their highest development.

Athletes who won in the Olympic Games at Olympia, in the Isthmian Games at Corinth, in the Pythian Games at Delphi, or in the Nemean Games in Argolis were the most honored people in the whole Greek community. They had it over the politicians and even over the military heroes. They were given front row seats at all public functions, were exempt from taxation, and at Athens had free meals for a year at the Prythaneum. For the race, however, the athlete received only a garland -- a garland of wild olive leaves at the Olympics, of pine needles at the Isthmian Games in Corinth, of laurel at the Pythian Games, and of parsley at the Nemean Games. In other words, an athlete did not run for money. He ran to win.

The famous Isthmian Games, and the great festival which was celebrated in connection therewith, were held every two years at the Isthmus, a few miles from and in full view of the city of Corinth. With these games Paul was very familiar, and from them he frequently drew effective illustrations. To the inhabitants of Corinth, to whom Paul was writing, these games were of the greatest interest. Some of them were present every four years when the games were played, and a few of them may have gone through the rigorous ordeal of actually taking part in the games themselves.

The contests attracted the trained athletes of the day from every part of the land. The honors accorded to the victors were coveted so much that there could have been but very few of the ambitious young men of Greece who were not fired with a desire to distinguish themselves in these contests. So, it is no wonder that Paul stimulated his own zeal and that of his Christian friends by reminding himself and them of the efforts and sacrifices which were made cheerfully for the sake of a perishable crown.

Paul had a great idea to put across. The games with which the Corinthians were so familiar gave Paul a good handle for putting across that idea. Paul said that he would do anything to get across the idea that Jesus Christ is the only Saviour. To his own people, the Jews, Paul would be a Jew in order to win the Jews. To those who did not know anything about Jewish law and custom, he would be as one of them in order that he might win them to Christ.

Knowing that sports were a big thing to the Corinthians, Paul asked them if they had ever noticed how those athletes in the Isthmian Games went at their jobs. He

said, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Well, I do not run aimlessly. I do not box as one beating the air; I pommel by body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified."

It takes something to be a real athlete. It takes something to be a real Christian. In some ways, what it takes to be a real Christian is very similar to what it takes to be a real athlete. You have got to play the game according to the rules, otherwise, you won't be in the game at all. You have got to strive for excellence, otherwise, you are going to be just another "also ran." You have got to go into training; otherwise, you are going to be either a disappointment or a failure. Play the game of life as it was meant to be played, and you will come out a winner. Paul said, "That is the way I do it, and you can do it too."

I. The Runner.

1. He had to prepare for the race.

The athlete who aspired to earn the victor's wreath was obliged to undergo severe discipline under the guidance of a skillful trainer, who required him to deny himself many pleasures, and to endure much fatigue and hardship. From the time that the athlete placed himself in the hands of the trainer, he was obliged to do as he was told. He could not eat what he pleased. He could not sleep when he pleased and as much as he liked. Unless he did what he was told, he could not hope to win the race.

2. He had to enroll for the contest.

It was a law of the Greeks that no young man could compete in the games unless he could prove that he was of pure Greek parentage. As the people watched the races, they knew that all competitors were Greeks by birth.

II. The Race.

1. He had to strip for the race.

Every superfluous garment had to be removed and laid aside because it would hinder the runner.

Concerning the Christian race, God's Word says, "Let us lay aside every weight." There must be a divestment of all encumbrances. Any weight that is an impediment in the race must be laid aside. Another thing which the Christian must lay aside is "the sin which doth so easily beset us." As Christians we have entered a race and started for a goal. If we are to reach the goal and win the prize, we must lay aside the sin which saps the strength, even such sins as a suspicious attitude, a critical spirit, an irritable temper, an unforgiving spirit, and an evil habit. Each one is expected to lay aside the sin to which he is most liable.

2. He had to make progress.

The tracks were measured, the starting point and the goal were fixed, the

course was laid out, and over this course every runner had to run if he hoped to reach the goal and win the prize. Running implies great exertion, progression, and perseverance.

The Christian life is a race that requires exertion. We must expect to put forth effort. We must expect to run in downright earnestness. In the actual running of the race some things will help tremendously:

(1) Maintaining a proper sense of direction.

We are to "run the race that is set before us." Some years ago, in a football game at the Rose Bowl, a player got possession of the ball and made a seventy-yard run. It was a brilliant piece of work except for one thing -- he ran in the wrong direction. In his confusion he lost sight of the right goal.

That is a parable of what may happen to any of us, if we are not careful. It should help us all, however, to realize that Jesus Christ is always out there ahead of us, giving us the right lead. If He doesn't give us complete answers to our particular problems, He at least gives us the direction in which those answers will be found. In this confidence we can say with David Livingstone, "I will go anywhere, provided it be forward." Yes, keeping our sense of direction is decidedly a help if we are to win in the race of the Christian life.

(2) Understanding that the race is not easy.

"Let us run with patience endurance." From this expression we learn that the Christian way of life is not intended to be a perpetual picnic. It is an adventure with Christ along a road with a thousand hurdles. It requires exertion. It demands stamina. It calls for perseverance.

When a young man and a young woman get married, for example, they set out on a course that can be compared to Paul's game. There are certain rules to this game they will have to observe, or they are not going to be playing the game. They promise to be faithful to each other. They promise to stand by one another, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness, or in health. If they don't do that, they are not playing the game. It isn't much of a game if one of the participants assumes the right to make up the rules as he goes along. It takes effort to win a race, and it takes effort to make a marriage go. Indeed, it takes a lot of self-discipline even to qualify for that race, a lot of self-restraint, a lot of grinding work, a lot of training to be in the race at all.

Many people want happiness in marriage, but they are not willing to make any sacrifice to get it. That is why the dockets in divorce courts are months behind. That is why delinquent children are running around because parents, thinking only of themselves, grow weak and flabby. That is why there is so much demand for family counseling to cope with misunderstandings, frustrations, bitterness, and loneliness, which are the trademark of so many family relationships today.

Playing the game of marriage is not just going through the motions. When Paul looked at those Isthmian Games he did not see men just going through the motions. They were out to win. They ran with a purpose. Determination was in their eyes, backed by months of hard training. They were ready to play the game, at whatever cost to themselves.

If athletes approached a sport with as little preparation as some people approach marriage, they would never be in the game. The winners in a championship game have a strategy of how they can best exploit the weaknesses of their opponents and capitalize on their own strengths. Many young people enter into marriage without any plan at all. They try to play the game without a plan, and often with little knowledge of the rules by which the game is played.

Paul had a game plan for his own life. He was going to follow Christ; he was not going to run aimlessly. He was in training, and out to win. Paul was right. Without Christ, you lose in the game of life. With Christ, life gets a purpose. With Christ, there is an incentive to live as life was meant to be lived. With Christ weaknesses are overcome and strength is increased. Everything depends on Christ.

Paul was not in training to win all by himself. He was following Christ. Following Christ, he had a real purpose in life. Following Christ, parents understand their children better and children understand their parents better. Following Christ makes for mature judgment, the kind a family needs if it is to succeed. Following Christ enables a family to get a true perspective on life and a set of true values to go with it. Following Christ, a family acquires a sense of unity. They are in this together, and they are going to win out together. Altogether they play the game. They know the name of the game, and what is more, they know the rules of the game. They don't expect life to be handed to them on a silver platter, but they are ready to acknowledge that everything good has come to them from the bountiful hand of God, as they follow with resolution and determination in the steps of Christ, Who gave Himself for us all.

The patience required of us is that of the plodder who persists in doing right. The grace of patience is like the one rivet that binds all of the machinery together. The Lord wants staying power that will go on with Him until life's last breath.

A race must have a beginning, progress, and a goal. The beginning, however promising, is not enough. It is the going on that counts. It is the finish that spells victory. Early in World War II Martin Niemöller, a Lutheran minister, was arrested by the Nazis and sent to a concentration camp. That caused his father, a retired preacher, to decide to reenter the active ministry and to do what he could to carry on the work of his courageous son. He prepared and delivered a sermon that became famous -- a sermon to which he gave the subject, "It Depends Upon The End." In it he told the story of Napoleon's mother, who one day said to her emperor-son, "Son, you think you are Napoleon, the world conqueror. But you have an anxious mother who asks you where you will end up, what will your outcome be?" It is a question that may well be asked any of us, "Where will you end up, what will your outcome be?"