

GO FOR THE GOLD: PRESSING ON TOWARD THE GOAL

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch

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TEXT: 1 Corinthians 9:24-25; Philippians 3:13-14

The long-awaited Olympics is finally here! How many of you watched the opening ceremony on Friday? I always love to see all the athletes entering the stadium from so many different countries – full of excitement and hope for the games. This year, there are 11,656 athletes from 206 countries that have gathered in Tokyo, Japan to compete in 33 different sporting events.¹

Of course, these Olympics were supposed to happen last summer. But due to the pandemic they were postponed. It is the first time that the Olympics were ever postponed rather than canceled. Three times in history - 1916, 1940, and 1944 – the Olympics were canceled altogether because of World Wars I and II. But the pandemic *postponed* the Tokyo games and you notice, they are calling this year's games "Tokyo 2020", even though they are being held in 2021. Part of the reason that they have kept the name "Tokyo 2020" has to do with all the merchandise and medals that had already been produced with the Tokyo 2020 brand on them. But also - the leaders of the Olympic Games agreed that having the games in Tokyo could stand as a *"beacon of hope to the world during these troubled times and that the Olympic flame could become the light at the end of the tunnel in which the world finds itself at present."*² The games will highlight all the dedication and perseverance and resiliency of the athletes who lived with such uncertainty throughout this past year – and will celebrate the coming together of nations in solidarity and peace.

I must admit I am not big on watching sports generally, but that all changes when it comes to the Olympics. The games are fun to watch and hearing the stories of the different athletes can be very inspiring and motivating.

The first Olympic Games were held in Olympia Greece in 776 BC and there was only one sport – a 200-yard dash. People came from all over the region to compete. Everyone had so much fun that they decided to do it all over again in 4 years and thus was born the Olympics. They slowly added other sports like equestrian events and the discus throw, the javelin and wrestling. The games in Olympia gave birth to other games held in other locations – one of them being the Isthmian Games, which were held the year before and after the Olympic games. The Isthmian games were held in Corinth – and would have been happening at the time that the Apostle Paul was living in Corinth for 18 months!! The games would have been a big part of the Corinthian culture – kind of like saying the Cubs or the Bears in Chicago. I think we can just imagine that the Apostle Paul knew about the games and perhaps attended them and enjoyed them while he was there. One scholar has even suggested that since Paul was a tent-maker by trade, he might have worked at constructing tents for the Athletes Village for the games!³

Thus, when the Apostle Paul sat down to write his letter to the Corinthians – and later to the Philippians – he decides to use something very familiar – the Olympic and Isthmian Games – and compare it to the race of faith... showing that we as believers need to be as serious and

dedicated to their walk of faith as the athletes were in their training and competing. And we will be doing the very same thing throughout the next 5 weeks of our new sermon series – “Go for the Gold”! We will use the Olympics as a lens through which we will find ways we can train our lives of faith – and run that race that is set before us – so that we can become committed, Christ-focused, and Spirit-filled disciples of Christ.

Let’s look how Paul compares the games with the race of faith – and challenges us to train as good athletes. I Corinthians 9:24-27 says:

²⁴Don’t you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win!²⁵All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize.²⁶So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing.²⁷I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others, I myself might be disqualified.

Each and everyone of us has a race to run! If you are a Christian, you are a runner! This journey we are on is a race of faith. But the big question for all of us is - how are we going to run this race? Are we running to win?

When we made our confession of faith- and said we believed Jesus was our savior, we received God’s acceptance. We have been saved through that great gift of grace and have received an entrance into heaven. But once we have been saved, what are we going to do with our life? Are we going to sit down and do nothing after receiving this great gift of new life in Christ? Are we going to just sit as a spectator in the stands or are we going to be active, growing runners in the race?

Paul says that athletes are disciplined in their training and focused as they strive towards the prize of winning. And they win a prize, like the laurel wreath, that eventually fades away. But we run for an eternal prize - a heavenly reward that never disappears. The actual word in Greek is “stefanos” - and is really best translated a crown. We receive a crown of righteousness in heaven for the way we ran the race. We want to run the race in such a way to receive Christ’s approval. One commentary puts it this way: “*the Christian life is a race to accomplish what God put us here for; a race to present ourselves approved unto God; a race to finish in a way so as to hear God say, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant.’*”⁴

How can we do that? How can we stay in the race – growing and living for Christ?

First, we must be intentional. Paul says that he “runs to win the prize” (v. 24) and “runs with purpose in every step” (v. 26). We have to make the effort to grow in our faith and serve the Lord. Think about people who run. Is there a difference between someone who runs around the block every so often, whenever it is convenient and someone who runs a marathon? Definitely. There is a difference in the seriousness and training, isn’t there? The marathon runner is intentional about training and running a lot so that he or she will be strong enough to run for 26 miles and hopefully win the prize.

If we are going to grow in our Christian faith, we need to be intentional and have to make some effort. Ask yourself, “how serious am I about my faith? What effort do I make to follow

Christ faithfully?" How often are we leaving our faith up to our convenience and comfort? How much do we find ourselves just going through the motions and not really giving our all, in worship and Bible study and prayer?

Being intentional in our spiritual life means that we have a plan to do things that will help us grow: We are involved in things that will help us grow in faith: regular worship, Bible study, Sunday School classes, small groups and prayer ministry. We make a plan to work together with other Christians in mission and ministry, sharing our gifts and talents. We get involved – and care for others! We make a plan to grow in our giving through our tithes and offerings. We are intentional about how we spend our time and do what we can to purposefully grow in our discipleship...following Christ's leading and guiding.

We need to intentionally make a plan – and then we need to be focused and disciplined. Our faith is something that requires training, commitment, and even sacrifice. It requires energy and effort. It is not something that is done haphazardly – or just occasionally. We need to make faith a part of every part of our lives.

Most Olympic athletes will tell you that they train 12-14 hours a day, 6-7 days a week for years in order to compete in the games. They eat, sleep and live a certain way in order to be the best they can be in their sport. In fact, you could say that the sport consumes them. It defines who they are – what they do and how they live. They stay focused and disciplined on that goal of being the best athlete in their sport.

If we are to live out our faith and grow in being disciples of Christ, we need to be disciplined and let our faith define who we are. Our focus on Christ is not something we do just one day of the week, when we worship. It is rather something that should be in every part of our lives – and direct our every thought and decision and action. Our focus should always be looking for ways we

Be intentional – be disciplined and focused – and be resilient and persevering. Olympic athletes have to keep going and getting up when they fall or when they lose a game. They don't let defeat defeat them. Instead, they actually use adversity and failures to push them on – and even motivate them to do better.

When Kristi Yamaguchi fell to the ice in the 1992 Winter Olympics, the crowd groaned. Everyone thought her chance for a gold medal had been destroyed by the fall. But Kristi quickly got to her feet, flashed a smile, and resumed her program. She received high scores from the judges, despite the mistake, and she won the gold medal. It happened because though she fell, she didn't stay down—she got back on her feet.⁵

Our Christian walk of faith can be at times very difficult. We can face many burdens – and make mistakes and even fall down or go the wrong way. And during those times, we can get discouraged, maybe even depressed or just want to give up trying. But it is not time to give up! We need to keep on, keeping on!

Martin Luther King Jr. once said: *"If you can't fly, then run. If you can't run, then walk.*

If you can't walk, then crawl. But whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward!"

It is this kind of attitude and perspective that the Apostle Paul emphasized in his letter to the Philippians. In Philippians 3, verses 13-14, we hear Paul say, *"I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus is calling us."*

Paul had to let go of the past guilt he had, in living in opposition to the Christian faith – and instead press on to that upward call of Christ upon his life. He kept straining forward and giving God his all. He wasn't going to let difficulties or adversity distract him - but instead kept pressing on to give God his all.

And we are called to keep pressing on – giving it our all to be more and more like Jesus – and looking forward to one day receiving that crown of glory in heaven.

Pastor Andy Morgan says, *"Even the Olympic motto tells us that we need to keep straining forward. The Olympic motto is 3 Latin words together citius ~ altius ~ fortius which means faster higher stronger. It's not fastest ~ strongest or highest, because the goal of the Olympics is to be always improving -- and the goal of our faith needs to be always growing into the likeness of Christ. Like Paul we are not there yet but we are straining forward to win the prize to which God has called us."*⁶

How are you growing spiritually? Are you growing and making it your aim to be more and more like Jesus? Do you have a daily thirst for His Word and for Him? Are you pressing on the upward way each day, or have you grown content with where you are? If that is the case, this week ask the Lord to renew your passion for Him and for spiritual things. Set your spiritual goals high and press on to higher ground.

Keep your eyes on God – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit! Keep on running! Keep on pressing on to higher ground – to receive one day that upward call – and prize of the crown of glory!

PRAYER

INVITATION

RESOURCES

¹"How Many Athletes Are in the Olympics for Team USA? By the Numbers."

<https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/sports/tokyo-summer-olympics/how-many-athletes-are-in-the-olympics-for-team-usa-by-the-numbers/3172363/>

²Scott McDonalad, "The Reason Why Olympics In 2021 Will Still Be Called The 2020 Olympic Games."

<https://www.newsweek.com/reason-why-olympics-2021-will-still-called-olympic-2020-games-1494333>

³Nicholas King SJ, "St Paul and the Olympic Games".

https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20120724_1.htm

⁴*Living for God's Approval*. <https://bible.org/seriespage/21-living-gods-approval-1-corinthians-924-27>

⁵ Jessica Miller Kelley, "Olympics Sermon Ideas and More".
<https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/3038/olympics-sermon-ideas-and-more>

⁶ Andy Morgan, "The Games, The Race", andyatfaith.blogspot.com/2016/07/the-games-race.html