

Lesson 2

AN ATHLETE

The Disciple's Commitment

"...Run in such a way that you may obtain it" (1 Cor. 9:24)

Man's respect for a commitment is sorely lacking in our world today. Promises, agreements, and contracts are broken with little thought to the consequences it will have upon others or upon one's own reputation. People do not seem to stick with things and see them through like they once did. This kind of an attitude does not work if one is to be a disciple of Christ.

Jesus requires a commitment from those who are His disciples. He was up front with men, telling them the cost of discipleship and demanding they count the cost before committing themselves to following Him. One who looks back is not fit for the kingdom of God (Luke 9:62).

Athletics In The First Century

The ancient Greeks were noted for their devotion to the athletic games and gymnastic sports. They believed it was just as important to develop the body as it was to educate the mind. After Rome conquered the Greeks, the Romans continued this interest in the games.

As a rule, the Jews found the games to be offensive. The games were a form of idolatry. They were played in honor of the gods, and began with a sacrifice being made in honor of the gods. Also, the contestants trained and competed in the nude. The Greek word for exercise (gumnazo) literally means "to practice naked."

There were four primary games: the Isthmian, Nemean, Pythian, and the Olympian. The Isthmian games were held every two years just outside of Corinth. The Olympian games, held every four years, were the most celebrated of these events. Our modern Olympics are based upon these games.

The games consisted of a number of events, including different kinds of races, jumping, discus, javelin, wrestling, boxing, and even contests between heralds and trumpeters.

Commitment

The act
of **binding**
yourself
(intellectually
or emotionally)
to a course of
action.

We **exercise** ourselves towards **godliness** in different ways (all of these verses contain Greek words that were used to describe different aspects of athletics).

Praying

- Rom. 15:30
- Col. 4:12

Obeying The Truth

- Gal. 5:7

Learning And Defending The Word Of God

- Heb. 5:12-14
- Jude 3

Spreading The Gospel

- Rom. 15:20
- Phil. 4:3
- Col. 1:29

Helping Other Christians

- Gal. 2:2
- Phil. 2:16

Willing To Suffer For The Sake Of The Gospel

- Heb. 10:32-33

Finishing The Course

- Luke 13:24
- 2 Tim. 4:7-8

Contestants were trained under very strict rules and supervision. They were required to prepare for a period of ten months prior to the games. Thirty days before the events began they resided at one place where they exercised regularly, followed a strict diet, avoided luxuries and got sufficient rest – all while under constant supervision. If a contestant failed to follow these rules, he was disqualified from the games.

These games were still very popular in the first century. Stadiums had been built in various places across the Roman Empire, and large crowds of people came to watch the contests. Because of their popularity, Paul was able to make good use of the games as illustrations throughout his epistles show. The athlete provided an excellent example of the kind of commitment Jesus requires from His disciples.

An Athlete Must Be Committed To Rigorous Training

If an athlete was going to win the crown, he knew he had to commit himself to training for almost an year in order to qualify for the games, much less be able to compete with other highly trained athletes. Paul makes some allusions to this type of training in 1 Cor. 9:24-27.

In verse 25, Paul says that he is “temperate in all things.” The word “temperate” means to exercise self-restraint, to have power over one’s self. The athlete has to abstain from all things (both unlawful and lawful) that would hinder his ability to compete at the highest possible level. A dedicated disciple must be in control of himself in order to be equipped to serve Christ (Gal. 5:23; 2 Pet. 1:6).

Paul also says, “but I buffet my body and make it my slave” (v. 27, NASV). The word “buffet” is translated from a word that literally meant to give someone a black eye. The idea is to strike an opponent, knock him to the ground, and keep him down (make him a slave). Paul applies this illustration to his own extreme practice of self-mastery. He did not physically harm his body, but he brought his passions into complete subjection. He was willing to do anything that was necessary in order to render total obedience to Christ (Matt. 5:29-30; Gal. 2:20).

In 1 Timothy 4:7-8, Paul tells Timothy to exercise himself toward godliness. The word “exercise” is translated from the Greek word *gumnazo* (from which we get our English word “gymnastic”). With the use of this word, Timothy would

have instantly thought of the exercises that prepared an athlete for his competition in the games. Paul is telling Timothy to stop wasting his time with worthless arguments and “get back into the gym!”

Godliness is piety or devotion to God. A disciple is to be committed to being a devout and dedicated follower of Christ. Just as an athlete is committed to his workout routine, disciples are to be committed to prayer and Bible study, being present for all of the assemblies, prepared for Bible class, etc.

An Athlete Must Be Committed To Competing By The Rules

In order to enter the games, an athlete had to prove to the judges he was of pure Greek blood, had not forfeited his right of citizenship through misconduct, and had undergone the necessary training. Likewise, no one can be a disciple of Christ unless they meet certain requirements set forth by the Lord (Luke 14:26-27).

Once an athlete was in the games, he had to compete according to the regulations governing the contest (2 Tim. 2:5). If an athlete broke the rules, he was not only denied the crown, but was sometimes disgraced and even punished. In our own time, we have seen Olympic athletes stripped of their medals because it was learned that they did not abide by the rules.

Paul even says that he could become disqualified (1 Cor. 9:27). He took great pains to make sure he did not lose his right to the crown. Entering the race does not mean we have won it. We must strive lawfully in order to win the crown (Matt. 7:21-23).

An Athlete Must Run To Win

The athlete is not crowned as a champion simply because he has trained and competed by the rules. It is not enough to be in the game. He has to run to win! The attitude he possesses as he competes is very important. An athlete cannot win with an “I’ve done good enough to get by” attitude. The victory goes to those who run to win.

Hebrews 12:1 speaks of an athlete’s determination to win. The writer encourages his readers to “lay aside every weight.” Runners and swimmers remove all extra weight and streamline themselves for maximum performance. Disciples must cast off and throw aside everything that hinders them from following Christ. These “weights” would obviously include sinful activi-

“The **hope** of eternal life is not sealed in a single glorious moment in one’s experience of conversion; but it is a **life-long** fidelity to the risen Lord, the running of life’s race **all the way** to the finish line”

(Coffman 142).

ties, but involvement in innocent things can become a distraction that weighs us down and keeps us from serving Christ to the best of our ability. If our desire to follow Christ is like that of an athlete, we should be willing to lay aside anything that weighs us down.

The writer also admonishes his readers to “run with endurance.” A runner needs the ability to “keep on keeping on.” The disciple’s race is not a sprint. It is a marathon. We must keep running until we reach the goal (Heb. 10:36). We cannot quit until the race is over.

Paul tells the Corinthians to “run in such a way that you may obtain” the prize (1 Cor. 9:24). In a literal race, there is only one winner. The athlete must run in such a way that he is the first one to cross the finish line. An “I have done good enough” attitude will not win the race. We are to serve Christ in such a way that, if Christianity is a race, we should be the first one to cross the finish line.

Paul goes on to describe the intensity of his spiritual training: “Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty” (v. 26). Paul knew what he wanted and was determined to get it. He had his eye on the prize. He was not distracted by weights or entanglements. He looked unto Jesus (Heb. 12:1-2), set his mind on the things above (Col. 3:1-2), and pressed toward the goal for the prize (Phil. 3:12-14).

“Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air” (v. 26). In the sport of boxing, a missed blow wastes energy and exposes oneself to the opponent. Paul did not waste any opportunities. He was deliberate and purposeful in his service to Christ. We must show the same determination and commitment in our service to Christ.

Conclusion

The citizens of the first century world were very familiar with the games. They knew about the training that was required, the rules that governed the competitions, and the efforts that were necessary in order for one to gain the victory. Paul called upon disciples to show the same commitment in following Christ. We are to exercise ourselves to godliness, strive lawfully, remove every hindrance, and run with endurance. Only those who have the commitment of an athlete will win the imperishable crown of life.

References

Coffman, James Burton. *Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*. Austin, Texas: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1977. 142. Print.

Questions

1. Describe the kind of training that contestants had to undergo in order to compete in the ancient games. _____

2. What happened to a contestant who failed to follow these training guidelines? _____

3. What does the word "temperate" mean? _____

4. How is temperance important to an athlete? _____

5. How is temperance important to a disciple? _____

6. In what sense does Paul "buffet" or "discipline" his own body (1 Cor. 9:27)? _____

7. Why does Paul "buffet" or "discipline" his body? _____

8. In contrast to bodily exercise, how is exercising oneself in godliness profitable for all things (1 Tim. 4:7-8)? _____

9. List some ways that we can exercise ourselves in godliness. _____

10. How must an athlete compete if he is to win the crown (2 Tim. 2:5)? _____

11. Why do we need endurance (Heb. 10:36)? _____

12. What are some "weights" that must be laid aside in order to follow Christ more effectively (Heb. 12:1)? _____

13. Are these "weights" always things that are sinful in and of themselves? Explain. _____

