

Wise Up – Winning Wisdom
1 Corinthians 9:24-27
March 19, 2017

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

In today's text, Paul alludes to the ancient Greek Isthmian games which were held in the city of Corinth the year before and the year after the Olympic games. These games included foot races, wrestling, jumping, boxing, hurling the javelin, and throwing the discus. The winner of these contests was given several prizes – a wreath made of leaves, a statue in the city to his honor, and a cash prize.

Paul observes that there are some commonalities between the life of the Isthmian athletes and the life of a Christian. They both need certain things in their lifestyles if they are to be successful. They need motivation, self-control, and exercise. Remove any of these and winning the prize is out of the question.

Motivation

To achieve success, proper motivation is indispensable. The importance of motivation was highlighted in a study done by the University of Michigan. Ninety-seven percent of the faculty members and staff who bet \$40 that they could stay with a six-month exercise program were successful. Only 19% of a non-betting group stayed with the program.

In the life of runners, different motivations cause runners to run differently. Some people run to win. These folks put all they have into every race. They channel every ounce of energy into crossing the finish line first. Other people run for health or just for enjoyment. They will never win. They don't care about winning. Their motivation for running is not the motivation of a winner.

The winner of a race never takes his eyes off the prize at the end. He wants the crown, the medal, the trophy, the cash. He runs for an earthly prize and an earthly prize is what he receives.

Motivation is equally important in the Christian's life, if he or she is going to win the prize. Differing motives will create widely diverse Christian lives.

Some Christians are motivated by a desire to please another person or maybe to please their own conscience. This Christian is never going to live the life God wants because their driving force isn't to please God. Their motivation is based in the approval of a

sinful human being – either themselves or another person.

Some Christians are motivated by a desire to have earthly blessings. The goal of their Christian life is to be happy, or wealthy, or well liked. Their motivation is earthly not heavenly. C. S. Lewis once said: “Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither.”

These motivations have no place in the life of a Christian. Successful Christians are motivated by what lies beyond the finish line, what lies beyond this life and this world. Paul writes: *Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever* (1 Co 9:25 NIV). This world is not our home and its riches are not our true reward. We compete for more than this world can give.

2 Timothy 4:7-8 *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day.*

1 Peter 1:3-4 *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you.*

Hebrews 12:1-2 *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, 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. 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.*

The way you run your Christian race will be determined by your motivation for running. If you are running to win the prize of heaven, then you need to know about the second thing athletes and Christians have in common.

Self-control

Successful athletes have self-control. They practice moderation in all things. Our text says: *Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training* (1 Co 9:25a NIV). They exercise self-control in all things. They eat healthy foods and avoid junk foods. They get the proper amount of sleep. They follow rigid training schedules. They often neglect social activities in order to stay within their training.

Self-control means sometimes doing things you don't feel like doing. Commenting on training and self-control, world class bicycle racer, Lance Armstrong, once said, “When it's pouring rain and you have to go and ride six hours in the mountains, there's no fun in doing that.”

The Christian without self-control is in danger of missing the prize. Our text tells us: *I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize* (1 Co 9:27 NIV). No one is above self-control.

Scripture warns us about the areas in our lives where we need to exercise self-control: *The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God* (Ga 5:19-21 NIV).

However, we're just weak human beings. How can we control our sinful nature? We can't – not on our own. Thank God the help we need is available. Paul writes to the Roman Christians: *We have an obligation – but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.* (Ro 8:12-13 NIV). The Holy Spirit will give you the power you need to bring your sinful nature under control.

Having the power of the Holy Spirit on your side does not mean your struggle with evil is gone. You will always be tempted. Saint Peter writes: *Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul* (1 Pe 2:11 NIV). We must still do things that seem difficult. We must still do things we don't want to.

Self-control is the perfect compliment to proper motivation. Without it, even proper motivation will fail. But having these two, there is still one more piece needed to solve the puzzle of success.

Exercise

The exercises performed by successful athletes are very impressive. Long distance runners train 10 to 20 miles a day. Swimmers swim as much as 10 miles per day. Gymnasts work out 8 to 9 hours every day.

Exercise is essential for success. Exercise readies the athlete for competition. Exercise tones the body to endure the rigors of competition. Exercise is the third necessary component for winning the prize.

When the Christian performs exercises to improve his or her faith and Christian walk, the benefit of those exercises extend far beyond this life. *Physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come* (1 Ti 4:8 NIV).

Exercise by bringing God's Word into your life: **2 Timothy 2:15** *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.*

Exercise by praying: **Philippians 4:6-7** *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God,*

which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Exercise by focusing on things of value: **Philippians 4:8** *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.*

Exercise by loving: **Romans 12:9-10** *Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.*

Exercise by serving God and your neighbor: **Romans 12:11-13** *Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.*

A Christian with winning wisdom is properly motivated. A Christian with winning wisdom practices self-control. A Christian with winning wisdom strengthens his faith by exercising that faith. When joined together, motivation, self-control, and faith exercising are of great value. Later in 1 Corinthians Paul writes: *My dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain* (1 Co 15:58 NIV).