

I. Introduction

1 Timothy 4:7–8

7 But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness;

8 for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

II. The Race: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

v. 24 “Do you not know that all, those running in the stadia, they run, but on the one hand one receives the prize?”

- A. Paul’s admonition is to bring the people to the point of understanding.
- B. The way that he does this is through something very common to them in their culture—the games.
 1. The games known as the Olympic Games, was a popular set of competitions originally limited to a simple foot race. The distance of about 192 meters (about 570 feet).
 2. The exercise grew in tremendous popularity garnering money, prestige, and popularity among the elite.

“The Hellenodikai also gave out the victory crown (kotinos) of wild olive leaves and an olive branch cut from the sacred tree (Kallistephanos) to each event winner. The olive was significant because the trees of Olympia were believed to have been originally planted by Hercules. Another prize could be a red woollen ribbon which was worn on the upper arm or around the head, especially for chariot racers as it was the horse owner who actually received the olive crown.

Victors were welcomed back to their home towns as heroes after the Games. Typically entering the city in a procession where they rode a four-horse chariot victors had huge banquets held in their honour and they could receive additional benefits such as exemption from tax and invitations to join the political elite. Cities also received prestige from victories at the Games and for this reason they sometimes offered financial incentives for athletes such as Solon’s 500 drachmas prize (a substantial sum considering one sheep cost one drachma at the time).

*However, the real prize for athletes was glory, fame and, in a very real sense, historical immortality. This was achieved through renown whilst still alive but was perpetuated after death via victor’s lists, personal statues and victory odes written in the victor’s honour.”*¹

- 3. This particular event became very popular so much so that the calendar was even ordered by its 4-year cycle.
- C. The prize for being the individual winner in the games was the prestige of knowing that you were the best of all the known world in that event.

¹ Mark Cartwright, “Olympic Games,” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, last modified May 23, 2013, http://www.ancient.eu/Olympic_Games/.

D. *The Olympics started in 766 B.C. and "In A.D. 393, Emperor Theodosius I, a Christian, called for a ban on all "pagan" festivals, ending the ancient Olympic tradition after nearly 12 centuries."*²

1. The goal of the games was to win, even to the death.
 - a) In the more physical games, like boxing (which was added to the games in 688 B.C.) the competition could even include the death of the loser.
 - b) Therefore, you had to be the best, or you would die.
2. Paul's analogy is fitting.
 - a) They would all understand.
 - b) However, Paul tells them, "Those athletes of the games compete uselessly."
 - c) There is a greater prize which extends beyond olive wreaths and the applause of men.
3. What is the goal? A qualified ministry!

E. Notice the context:

1. vv. 18-19 = complete love for the Lord, and thus, above reproach to those who receive his ministry.
 - a) Jews-as a Jew Acts 16:1-5

1 Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek,

2 and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium.

3 Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

4 Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe.

5 So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily.

- b) Those under the Law-as those under the Law.
 - c) Those without the Law-as those without the Law (i.e. Gentiles).
 - d) The weak-as weak
 - e) All men-as all men.
2. Paul's prize, then, is the ministry that is without blemish.
 - a) And, the blemish that can destroy one's qualification to tell someone about Jesus Christ is their behavior.

III. What are the obstacles to these things?

² site accessed 12/31 <http://www.history.com/topics/olympic-games>

v. 25 *“But on the one hand, therefore, all the one agonizing, these exercise self control all things. In order that they might receive a perishable crown, but we (might receive) an imperishable (crown).”*

A. Paul describes the exertion in the race.

1. He says that it is “agonizing” (ὁ ἀγωνιζόμενος).
 - a) This is the picture of the runner pushing his entire body to its limits in order to win the race, or the gymnast completely defying gravity and normal bodily limits in order to perform a move.
 - b) In the same way, the Christian is expected to go beyond their normal limits in order to minister.
 - (1) He/she is expected to strain himself/herself.
 - (2) They are called, here, to bring themselves to the point of absolute exhaustion in the ministry.
 - (a) Let’s look at an illustration in order to see what this looks like.
 - i) Luke 8:22-9:27
 - (1) He has already preached and taught the day before.
 - (2) He now tells the disciples to push away and take the boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee.
 - (3) A storm arose in the sea, which was common, but Jesus was asleep in the boat.
 - (4) They wake Him, and so begins His day.
 - (5)
 - (6) He calms the storm and rebukes the disciples.
 - (a) Notice the expectation here:
 - (b) “Where is your faith?” (v. 25).
 - Jesus expected them to have complete fearlessness, and faith in God, concerning their safety during the storm.
 - His sleeping demonstrates 2 things:
 - (7) Jesus had complete faith in God that they would be okay during the trip, so much so that He fell asleep.
 - (8) Jesus had exhausted Himself in ministry to the point of not being aroused by the tossing and running of the small boat in the storm (as well as the cries and shouts of the fearful disciples!).
- ii) vv. 26-39 = Jesus heals a crazed man from his demonic habitation.
 - (1) Here, the man meets Jesus and Jesus confronts the legion of demons in the man.
 - (2) Jesus sends the demons into a herd of pigs, after speaking with them.
 - (3) The man is restored and is in his right mind now, and returns to his village.

- iii) vv. 40-56 (Mark 5:18 “As Jesus was getting into the boat...), Jesus returns to Capernaum and immediately is confronted with the crowds and a man named Jairus whose 12 year-old daughter was very ill, and then died.
 - (1) Jesus heals the girl and gives her back to her parents.
 - (2) This is an exertion of power.

- iv) vv. 43-48 A woman who had bleeding for 12 years and had exhausted all her money on physicians who could not help her, came up to Jesus simply to touch Him believing that doing that would heal her (Matthew 9:21 'for she was saying to herself, “If I only touch His garment, I will get well.”’).
 - (1) Jesus states that He knew someone had touched Him because power had “gone out of [Him]” (v. 46).
 - (2) This allows us to assume that every miracle He did He did by the exercise of power. I would assume that would have some level of exertion and possibly fatigue.

Colossians 1:17

17 He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

Hebrews 1:3

3 And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,

- (a) You have to remember that Jesus, now, holds up all things by that same power.
 - (b) However, He is glorified and does not have a body that is subject to weakness.
 - (c) But, while on earth, He had a body just like ours (Philippians 2:5ff.).
 - (d) Therefore, He was susceptible to weakness, fatigue, hunger, thirst, etc...
- v) Matthew also identifies a paralytic whom He heals (Matthew 9:1-2).

- (b) The point is this:

Mark 1:45

45 But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news around, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere.

Mark 2:2

2 And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room, not even near the door; and He was speaking the word to them.

Mark 3:20

*20 And He *came home, and the crowd *gathered again, to such an extent that they could not even eat a meal.*

Mark 6:31–33

*31 And He *said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while.” (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.)*

32 They went away in the boat to a secluded place by themselves.

33 The people saw them going, and many recognized them and ran there together on foot from all the cities, and got there ahead of them.

John 21:25

25 And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.

c) Therefore, Paul writes to the church in Corinth, 1 Corinthians 15:58
58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

(1) And that work is the work of the ministry, first exemplified and performed by Jesus, then the twelve, now the rest of the disciples until He returns to get us (John 14:1).

(2) Paul states that his ministry is the “work of the Lord” and that Timothy’s ministry is also the “work of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 16:10
“Now if Timothy comes, see that he is with you without cause to be afraid, for he is doing the Lord’s work, as I also am.”)

2. So, if you want to see what ministry looks like, you need to see it in Jesus Christ, the apostles, Paul and his associates.

a) There is consistent ministry and a consistent theme of exhaustion, like their Shepherd Christ.

b) This must be why he spoke often of strength for the disciples:

- (1) Colossians 1:9-12
- (2) 1 Corinthians 16:13-14

13 Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.

14 Let all that you do be done in love.

- (3) Ephesians 3:16

16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man,

- (4) Ephesians 6:10

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.

- (5) Ephesians 1:19

19 and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might

- (6) Colossians 1:28-29

28 We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.

29 For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.

3. The ministry of Jesus Christ to His disciples requires an indomitable commitment to the work of the Lord.

- a) It is not tireless, because you do get tired.
- b) It is not without hunger, because you do get hungry.
- c) It is not without danger and cost and sacrifice, because all of those are normal.

- (1) 2 Corinthians 11:21-30 = Paul's ministry as characterized by the one who knows-Paul himself.

- (2) How is your ministry coming along?
- (3) How is your exertion?
- (4) Are you losing sleep?
- (5) Are you hungry?
- (6) Are you without comfort?
- (7) Are you in any danger?

d) Paul tells us to follow his example, and here it is.

- (1) That is not to say that you need to go look for these things.
- (2) However, if your service to Christ does not produce some level of these things, I have to wonder if you are serving Him at all.

- B. But, how do you get to this level of effectiveness in service?
- C. How can a normal man or woman, or young person even hope to approximate Paul, Jesus, or the other apostles like this!?!??

D. Here is the key: self-control.

1. v.25 ἐγκρατεύεται =

*"It simply tells us that for the sake of the goal towards which he strives, the commission which he has been given and the task which he must fulfil, he refrains from all the things which might offend or hamper. It is not for his own sake, or for the sake of any necessity to salvation, but for the sake of his brethren that he practises ἐγκρατεύεσθαι."*³

- a) Paul says that just as a runner, or a gymnast has mastery over his/her body, impulses, diet, exercise regimen, etc... so also must a Christian exert themselves to the same level of self-mastery in ministry.
 - b) Paul is saying, which was surely exemplified by his lifelong example, that ministry is ongoing self-mastery so that the race may be won.
2. This word has a wide use in the NT.
3. Let's look at some uses:
- a) The first use of the word in the NT is from Paul as He described the Christian life to Felix, the governor:
 - (a) Acts 24:24-25
 - (b) Imagine evangelizing and when an unbeliever asks you, "What is Christianity?", you can say, "It is faith in Jesus Christ which is characterized by righteousness, self-control, and anticipates the future judgment so as to keep our lives blameless for that day."
 - (c) Paul is stating here that the Christian life is mostly a life of righteous self-control.
 - b) What is this?
 - (1) This word that is used mostly by Paul is from two words: "in" "power/ability."
 - (a) "in" = a condition, sphere, or even location of something. It is "in."
 - (b) "power/ability" = dominance, control, power over something.
 - i) This is the ability to have power, dominion over yourself.
 - ii) It is self-mastery.
 - (2) It is not, however, self-reformation, but is best illustrated by Paul in this illustration.

³ Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 342.

- (a) Just like an Olympic-level athlete trains to get the gold in their event, so must the Christian also “train to get the gold” in obedience to Jesus Christ’s commandments.
 - (b) The only way to do this is to dominate yourself so that you can run faster, jump higher, and tumble better.
- c) How is it produced?
- (1) Ultimately: Galatians 5:22-23
 - (2) The Spirit of God working in you produces self-mastery.
 - (a) His work includes the dominion of your flesh, sin, innate perversions.
 - i) Again, this is not simply saying “no” to chocolate.
 - ii) This is the ability to absolutely overcome sinful impulses and strive to win the competition!
 - (b) Ministry is a competition: it is you against your flesh for the prize of dominion for the sake of service to Christ.
 - i) However, this is not simply some kind of mindset or manipulation of ideas.
 - ii) The production of the fruit of the Spirit requires your obedience to Him.
 - (1) Romans 8:5-13
 - (2) Our adherence to the things of the Spirit, the Scripture primarily, produces the fruit of the Spirit.
 - (3) This is being “Spirit-filled” (Ephesians 5:18).
- d) What hinders it?
- (1) The body is the house of sin.
 - i) Romans 7:21–23

21 I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good.

22 For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man,

23 but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.
 - ii) Therefore, the passions and impulses and reactions and habits of life before coming to Christ is still in you.
 - iii) He calls his physical body, “The body of this death!” (v.24).
 - iv) And, as he exerted himself in simply attempting to serve Christ and live righteously, he found in himself a hindrance to righteousness-himself.
 - v) To see this, we need to go further into our passage.

IV. vv. 26-27 “Therefore!, so also in the same manner, I run, not aimlessly; I the same manner I box, not as beating the air. But rather, I beat my body and enslave it, how that I myself, after preaching, might not become unapproved to others.”

A. Paul knows that he is called to be a “preacher.”

1. But that does not mean that he can relax and simply preach everywhere, and afterwards go home and take it easy.
 - a) Rather, he understands that he has an obstacle to righteousness, service, and running the race: himself.
 - b) Paul, here, uses many emphatic comparative adverbs and conjunctions.
 - (1) He is really raising his voice and attempting to get the misdirected, fleshly, and immature Corinthians’ attention.
 - (2) In using these comparative adverbs of manner, he is saying that to the same degree (possibly more so) that an Olympic runner trains runs his race, so does Paul exert himself in ministry; in the same way that an Olympic boxer fights to win the bout (knowing that the loser was usually near death, or dead), so does he also minister with the same commitment.
 - c) This takes skill, temperance, and commitment.
 - d) That is to say, it is unnatural.
 - (1) Here is how most Christians lives their lives:
 - (2) They wake up and go in and out of their day following impulses and thoughts they have. The words they use are the result of some kind of gain they desire. The decisions are based upon some kind of ambition desired. The way they dress, the music the listen to, the programs they watch are all determined by a desire, and interest, or an ambition.
 - e) Paul is saying this: you must master those desires and set them aside.

• ILLUSTRATION:

B. 1 Corinthians 7:1-9

1. Notice that Paul is not speaking of things that are sinful here.
2. He is talking about limiting the very good thing of marriage for the sake of the kingdom.
3. Paul is saying that there is a level of commitment, like an Olympic runner or boxer, that exceeds even the best of life for the sake of winning the competition.
4. This is the kind of thing Jesus, Paul, and the rest of the apostles are speaking of!
5. For the Christian, there are greater things in this life than the blessings of THIS LIFE.

C. Philippians 3

1. Your looseness in denying your interests, passions, ambitions, and the rest will affect the rest of us in the race.
2. Although we want to serve one another, precious time that can be given to ministry in more effective ways is spent on dealing with the same old sins in one another.

- a) Why not run?
- b) Why not run to win?
- c) Why not get in the race, compete to win the prize?
 - (1) Are we afraid to win?
 - (2) Are we afraid to exert self-control?
 - (3) Are we afraid to surrender the precious things we cherish, and protect, for the sake of the call of ministry of the kingdom?!!
- (4) If so, there may be a question as to the genuineness of a person's discipleship/ commitments to Jesus Christ.

Luke 14:33

33 "So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.

- 3. I realize what this sounds like.
 - a) But, where have I been mistaken in these things?
 - b) If nowhere, then we have to reckon with our failures to run the race, competing to win!
 - c) If somewhere, we can talk later today and correct such drastic commitment.
- 4. But I can tell you, my laxness will hurt you.
 - a) Ask yourself,
 - (1) What if (pastor Charlie) did not show up at church on Sunday?
 - (2) What if I did not prepare for teaching you?
 - (3) What if I did not demand of myself, my wife, and my children the high cost of practicing putting aside even the nest of the world for the prize of most value-knowing Christ Jesus?
 - b) I can tell you right now, If I relaxed, even for a moment, it will hurt your progress of sanctification.
 - c) Not because I am anything special, but I am part of the body and what I do affects you-for better or for worse.

V. Conclusion
Hebrews 12:1-3