

## **Training for the Prize (21)**

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Epiphany / Discipleship; Training; Disqualify; Gospel / Isaiah 40:21–31; Psalm 147:1–11; 1 Corinthians 9:16–27; Mark 1:29–39

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- › Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's all about the gospel for Paul. He says: "*I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.*" He does it all whether he is a servant of all, become as a Jew, or as one under or outside the law. He does it all whether he becomes as one who is weak. He becomes all things to all people. He does this all with his focus on the gospel. As he focuses on the Gospel in life and ministry, he understands that it is necessary to be disciplined. He understands that for the sake of the Gospel he needs to have self-control.

He puts this in terms that the people will understand. He describes the Isthmian Games. He describes that those athletes train and practice self discipline. Paul might have witnessed the Isthmian Games in Greece in the Spring of AD 51. This was a prestigious event, second only to the Olympic Games, was celebrated every two years of about ten miles from Corinth.

Paul begins this last part of our text with the footraces from the stadium. A number of runners would compete, but only would win the prize. Now we have to admit that Paul's analogy breaks down in the Christian life, for it's not just one who wins the prize we all do with Christ on our team.

He doesn't point to this analogy for salvation, but more to the fact that to be an effective runner, one needs exertion and self-control. And why does a runner train? Do receive a crown that is perishable. They want to be the best.

It is noted that every entrant in the Olympic Games back in those years trained for 10 months, and most likely the same is true for the Isthmian games. As is known from such contests both ancient and modern, the competitor must renounce not only bad habits, but give up many things that are fine for themselves, in order to focus solely and totally to prepare for the goal. And yes, this theme of self-control applies equally to the Christian life. After all, it is one of the fruits of the Spirit.

Now for the runner in the Isthmian games , it was important to exercise self-control to receive the crown, and some honor and glory and for their own pride. And the same goes for athletes today, they train to receive some trophy or medal and some honor and glory, but it is

infinitely more important for the Christian to train with self-control for the crown awaiting him...the imperishable gift of eternal life, as long as he finishes the race with Christ.

It's all about the Gospel for Paul. He knew it and he did not run aimlessly or as one boxing the air.

Paul was a sinner though and he admits that. He calls himself the greatest sinner, the chief of sinners. So did he always act with self-control. I would doubt it. Now do you practice self-control in all things? I know I don't. As I think about self-control, the part of our body that exhibits the least amount of control is the tongues. Many times your tongue and mine get us into trouble, because we don't practice self-control. We say things we don't mean...or we say things we mean, but should not have said.

Paul though tells us that he discipline his body to keep it under control, for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the word discipline the word disciple is included. To be a disciple means that one needs to be disciplined in order to be in self-control. To be a disciple of Jesus one cannot be running aimlessly or beating the air. One needs to have self-control, especially when it comes to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the witness we have to the world.

Our witness is not filled with self-control. Frankly, you might listen to the world more so than you do God's Word. My fear is now the devil is using this Covid-19 pandemic to keep you out of the Lord's House on a consistent basis. My fear is he's using your fear to keep you away from the very things you need to be trained in self-control. Perhaps you have become apathetic in your faith. Perhaps all you can do is think about yourself, about what you want, and not what is best for your fellow Christian.

Discipline in the Christian Life, in our Christian witness is not practiced as it ought to be. Whether it's in your vocations as family members, students, workers, or, yes, as members of the body of Christ.

Athletes train similarly today as they did in the first century. They did cardio, they lifted weights, they watched what they put into their bodies.

The same is true for the Christian, and more importantly since we aren't training for a few moments of glory, we are training for an imperishable prize and our Lord God has given us a training regiment, and this training regiment is all gifts...God's Word, Baptism, Lord's Supper. He gives to you and me the very gifts to keep our bodies under control.

These gifts do not change, they are the same yesterday as they are today.

Now do athletes run the race and play the game differently as it was done in the past. In some instances yes...for example in the NFL they didn't wear face masks on their helmets, to do they do. Times change and the way the game is played is different.

This is true also for the church, many of the ways we train are the same. Being lifelong learners of the faith is part of our training and that hasn't changed. Being in the Word of God, being constant in prayer, being in the Lord's house to receive his gifts, practicing confession and absolution, these things haven't changed. Our doctrine, the teachings found in Holy Scripture have not changed...but our ways of carrying out the message of the Gospel has.

And in this process, the Church can lose its focus, and many have. They, no, not they...we can be caught up running aimlessly. The purpose of the Church is all about the Gospel...it's to learn and share God's Word, it's to give Jesus to people, it's to offer hope a world that has no hope. When you read [Acts 2](#), the early church understood this, they didn't just see the church as social club, yes they enjoyed each other's company, but they also devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and prayer. The one prevailing thing that people are missing about the Church in the last 10 1/2 months or so is the social aspect. This is good...but what about the study of God's Word, what about the Lord's Supper, what about the things that give us life. A potluck doesn't do that. The Church shouldn't just be a social club. St. Paul would agree, he could see no purpose in activities that did not serve the Gospel and the edification of the church. One needs both, but the Word the most important. God calls us to love him and others. HE calls us to serve God by serving others...not just focusing merely on what we want, but looking at what others need...and what they need, what you need is forgiveness, life, and salvation. The charge was simple, yet very complex... "Go into the world and make disciples."

The task is given to you, dear people of God. The task does not change even in Covid times. The training is hard work, just ask any athlete when they train if their muscles are sore in the morning. Training for and living the Christian life is hard-work. Many times it hurts, it hurts physically, emotionally, and even yes, at points spiritually.

With any discipline process, with any process of self-control, any training process, one need an encourager. We call those people trainers or coaches. The good news dear saints is that we have one for us.

In Our Gospel reading, we hear the Savior of the World, in training:

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35 And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.

He lived out the the discipline process perfectly for you. He practiced self-control in everything He did, whether. it was in his healing ministry, casting out demons, preaching, or dealing with his enemies. He lived a life of self-control for you.

His disciplined life was a lifetime process, just as yours is. However, He is God, He is the perfect man. With our Coach, more than a coach, more than an encourager, our Savior kept his body and soul in self-control in thought, word, and deed, even while he was hated, spoken of evilly, and eventually killed by the hands of evil men. He never reacted with an unloving Word. He practiced self-control even on the cross...he didn't speak words of hate there, but words of Love... "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

He was humbling himself in discipline to the point of death and burial...and now God the Father has exalted Him. God the Father raised Him from the dead and Jesus Christ, lives and reigns for you in all eternity. Jesus Christ lives for you and he promised that the encourager would come....the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit came on Pentecost. He came in Acts to the Gentiles. He comes to you in your baptism and continues to be present with you in Word and Sacrament. Jesus Christ promised and gave the Holy Spirit as the one who keeps you in the one true faith. He is the one that encourages you in your sanctified life. He is the one along with the Father and the Son who is constantly involved in making you Holy as you continue to train.

For yes, even while we run this race of the Christian Life, our training is never over. It's a life-long process of discipline and self-control. It's not just the days or weeks that are leading up a one-time event....it's lifelong. It's hard work. And it's all for the sake of the Gospel.

Paul would admit, the race is long and its hard. There will be moments that its hard to keep the pace and keep the faith, there are moments that it would be easy to be disqualified and miss out on the crown of life...especially if you try to run the race on your own. You need Jesus. You need the Holy Spirit. You need your brothers and sisters in Christ to encourage you. You need the medicine of immortality...the very body and blood of Jesus. It's the gifts that He gives...and they are all gospel. Baptism, Lord's Supper, Confession and Absolution...they all give life...and it's in this life that we pass it on.

Even today, you continue to train for the sake of the Gospel, so that you should not be disqualified.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

- › Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.