

Run to Obtain the Prize

By

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(Sabbath Sermon)

Saturday, 24th October, 2017

Text: 1 Cor. 9:24-27

Discipline, the Key to Glory

Sports today is a multi-million-dollar business. Competitive sports has a phenomenally huge fan base across nations and cultures – and that is precisely the reason why it's an eye-popping money-maker for both sports entrepreneurs and players.

Sports personalities of renown have attained international stardom, and their cult of followers idolize them and follow their every game and even the details of their private lives. Some fans even accumulate their memorabilia – so they never part ways with them as long as they live!

The world of sports is a glitzy world of fame and wealth but behind the scenes is a rigorous regimen of regular training, dieting and medical check-ups to stay in top shape so that they may score the highest number of goals and win the trophy!

The key to the glory lies in discipline. It's an open secret, even though not many run-of-the-mill athletes are prepared to make the needed sacrifices:

“Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain.

“And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible.

“I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air.

“But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway” (1 Cor. 9:24-27).

Discipline is a critical factor in both sports and our spiritual life in Christ. In our case, we are to submit our bodies to spiritual discipline in all things. We need to subject ourselves to all the spiritual exercises required of us to stay in top shape spiritually. Let's not run simply to be counted as participants in the race without a goal to win but just punching the air! We are running a spiritual race from earth to heaven!

Therefore, let's not allow any aspect of our spiritual lives to go out of shape. And it's neither our soul nor spirit on which we are to exert the right influence and pressure. We are to discipline our bodies – how we handle our bodies has consequences for our spiritual lives!

Whip the Flesh into Line!

As believers participating in the spiritual race of salvation (see also Heb. 12:1-2), we must not give the body (the flesh and its desires) free rein, satisfying its every whim. We are to pummel

it; we are not to give anything to chance, thinking that the body will somehow conduct itself in a godly manner. It will not. It has its own way. The wording of how Paul treats his body suggests the body will not take godly discipline lying down. It is a rebel which must be whipped into line.

So he makes a conscious effort to keep his body under subjection. He does not run aimlessly without a plan. He means to win the race and therefore competes as the rules dictate – Be “temperate in all things”. That is to say, discipline all your bodily parts and desires and urges which could work against your spiritual life in Christ. Subjugate them to the will of God.

Bridle your Tongue!

This is a discipline of first importance. Or your religious practice is to no purpose:

“If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain” (James 1:26).

Bridling the tongue is a metaphor for controlling or disciplining the tongue. It’s an image borrowed from horse riding where the rider uses the bridle, which is a set of leather bands placed around the horse’s head, to control it.

So rule your tongue; don’t let it be your master. Don’t let it say things you wished you never said. Keep your lips pure from the vices of the mouth – lies, gossip, blasphemy, slander and character assassination. Instead, use your mouth for praise; use it to edify, to advise, and, yes, to rebuke and expose sin. It is also a scriptural command:

“Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them; for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret. But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light” (Eph. 5:11-13 NASU).

Failure to expose secret sins, even “the unfruitful deeds of darkness”, makes one complicit in the crime and therefore liable to divine judgment:

“Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them” (Rom. 1:32).

Surely, “Open rebuke is better than secret love”. For “faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful” (Prov. 27:5-6).

So train your tongue to do the things that please God. Ask God in prayer to help you tame your tongue so it might not land you in trouble. “Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth”, King David prayed, “keep [guard] the door of my lips” (Ps. 141:3).

Tame your Soul!

In other words, rule your human spirit by submitting your thinking and inner self and passions to the authority of the Spirit of God, for as scripture warns us, “He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls” (Prov. 25:28).

Accordingly, don't act on your feelings without thinking through them – without filtering them through the sieve of the Spirit and the Spirit-sharpened conscience. Don't do things simply because it feels good for you. Don't be driven by your impulses the way animals are driven by their instincts. Instead, renew the spirit of your mind by receiving the Spirit thereby surrendering to the lead of God's Spirit of grace.

Otherwise, you will be open to all sorts of evil and negative stimuli – like a city in ruins, a city without walls! All the evil thoughts and ideas the devil, “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2-3), will plant in the mind will get implemented. There are no protective fences in your mind against evil thoughts and suggestions. A thought only has to enter, and it's done.

And the saddest part of it all is that the broken walls of a broken spiritual life allow in only the evil desires and ideas of the flesh which come from the enemy, the devil. They grant broad access to a single influencer working through numerous surrogates. And nothing could be more depressing.

Broken walls are a picture of destruction, and thus accept only ideas which add to the destruction. It's a life that has shut out godly influences and stimuli because it would not submit to God, “because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Rom. 8:7).

So then, make your carnal mind submit to the authority of God's spiritual law. It would not ordinarily submit, for they are contrary to each other (Gal. 5:17). However, the carnal mind will end in death and disgrace. So do all to make it submit by the power of the enabling Spirit of Christ (Php. 4:13). Take an aggressive stance against it. Bro. Paul uses the expression, “I pummel my body”. I treat it as my personal opponent, my mortal enemy, for which reason I don't allow it to gain the upper hand. I check its every move; I restrain it; I never allow it to have its way. I make sure I remain in control by my spiritually renewed mind in Christ.

And it's not a mere game of wits; it's not a fun game!

It's a Deadly Game – the Flesh wants me Destroyed so I'm Fighting Back!

The flesh stands against the salvation of the soul. This is what the Apostle Paul dreaded: ‘If I allow the body, the flesh, the carnal mind, to have its way, I will be a castaway – thrown out and disqualified from the Kingdom of God. Even though I might have preached to others, I will be thrust into hell fire.’ “For a fire is kindled in Mine anger, and shall burn unto the lowest hell, and shall consume the earth with her increase, and set on fire the foundations of the mountains” (Deut. 32:22). “For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch” (Mal. 4:1).

So then, mere knowledge of God is not enough, if your inner man, where Christ dwells by His Spirit, is not in control of your overall life. For the Apostle Paul states ruefully but truthfully in Romans 7:18, “...I know that in me (that is, in my flesh), dwelleth no good thing...”

That's why our own late Apostle, Elder Enoch Ofori, whose good works we are celebrating today, was such a disciplinarian – a stickler for church discipline and righteousness. He would not compromise on any points of scriptural truth so that neither he nor any loyal member of the body of Christ would be a castaway. (See 1 Tim. 4:16).

Today, it's yours and mine to resolve whether we will discipline our bodies and make them submit to God or we will live as slaves to our fleshly desires and sin nature.

Beloved, your number one enemy is not even Satan but yourself- your carnal nature that takes delight in sin, that is 'comfortable' sinning in God's church.

Today, if you will abhor yourself and rue your evil deeds you will be heading closer and closer to the pearly gates of the Kingdom of heaven. The Master tells us, if a person does not hate his own life he cannot be His disciples (Luke 14:26). He really means "love Me" more than anything else in your life, including your very own desires (Matt. 10:37). So love His Word, love His righteousness, love His Spirit, love His direction, and you will become more and more like Him. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you" (Gal. 4:19).

The flesh cannot win. Travail in your own soul too. Wrestle in your spirit and thoughts crying out to God like the wretched soul in Romans 7:24 – "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" – until Christ is formed in you. Feel ashamed of both your secret and open sins, hate yourself, rue your evil thought – as the Prophet Isaiah exhorts, "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon" (Isa. 55:7).

Stop the blame games and look into your own soul. Recognize the evil in it and repent! Christ, the Saviour, will abundantly pardon! It's time you rent your heart, not just your garment (Joel 2:13)!

Otherwise, your sins shall find you out (Num. 32:23). This is the holy Assembly of the holy God.

He's the King. He rules our whole life – body, soul and spirit. Let everything in us, every part of us, submit to His holy will. We are His by right. Amen!