



Rev. Dr. Hurley Clayton, Jr., Pastor

March 5, 2017: 10:30 am Worship Service: Berean Tabernacle Baptist Church, Liberty, TX. Series: Part I: The Disciplined Life

The Disciplined Life: Run Your Race!!

“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.”

(Hebrews 12:1, NIV84)

I

According to (Acts 18:11), the Apostle Paul spent 18 months in the city of Corinth preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ and teaching Kingdom truths in the synagogues in the Roman colony. It represents one of the longest periods Paul spent in any city in Asia Minor. The city of Corinth was an adopted Roman colony; that is, it became an outpost for the demonstration of the universal Pax-Romana—the Regis of the Imperial Roman government; the reign of Roman military power; and, the rule of Roman culture. Corinth was also located on an Isthmus—a small strip of land that connects two larger territories bordered by the sea on both sides. In 51 A.D., the Isthmian games took place in this city at the Temple of Poseidon. More than likely, it was probably during the exciting atmosphere of the Isthmian games Apostle Paul was preaching the gospel in the streets of Corinth and teaching in the synagogues of the city. He couldn't help but notice how athletes from all over the world prepared themselves to compete for the prize of winning a laurel wreath. These Olympic styled public games played such an integral part in Greco-Roman culture and in the Corinthian community that a public office—the *aedileship*—was officially designated to serve as a benefactor for the welfare of the city. This would be someone comparable to the president of the Chamber of Commerce in contemporary society. The primary duties of the public office were to maintain the streets; the up-keep of the public facilities and market places where “the games took place.” These Isthmian games not only impacted the political and social atmosphere of the city of Corinth, but also left an indelible “imprint” on the pastoral theology of the Apostle Paul.

To the believers at Philippi, Paul confessed:

Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:13-15).

Application: Paul understood just like the runner caught up in a closely contested race, sometimes the difference between losing and winning is the ability to stretch yourself. When you have given all you can, it is the ability to dig deeper; to go a little further; to try a little harder.

To the believers at Corinth, you remember, he suggested:

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

Application: Paul understood that ultimately if Christians are going to win this battle; like the athlete they are going to have to learn how to prepare themselves for the race. They will have to learn how to deny themselves (1 Cor.9:24-27).

The “old saints” were not well read. I’m sure they didn’t know very much about the cultural society in the 1st century; the office of *aedeiship*; the Pax-Romana; nor the Isthmian Games. They had an intuitive sense about life and living, however, and they had an uncanny way of saying things. Without blinking an eye in response to some questions about life, they would say, “*Baby, you can’t have your cake and eat it too.*” If I have heard this once I have heard it a million times. I am not quite sure of its exact meaning. But, I know it is an indirect reference to self-restraint, self-discipline, a special degree of deny-ability. This is nothing more than a “old-saying,” taken from the speech of poor people engaged in the warfare of day-to-day living, but it is packed with eternal truths that will equip every believer “to run this race.” The Apostle Paul was not given to this kind of colloquialism, but if you listen carefully to his instructions to the community of faith “on the struggle” in the 1st Century, you will hear its echoes: “You can’t have your cake and eat it too.” Sometimes you have to do those things you don’t want to do, in order to achieve the things, you want to do.

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.”

(Hebrews 12:1, NIV84)

II

The games left such an indelible impression on the heart and mind of the Apostle Paul and its imagery continuously surfaces throughout his pastoral letters. More than likely, he carefully observed how the participants in the Isthmian games trained so rigorously and vigorously to develop stamina for endurance; and, to discipline their minds and bodies for the task that lie ahead. The athletes as well as the apostle were aware that with the grueling course before them *“the race is not given to the swift, but to those who are able to endure to the end.”* This imagery of strenuous training and striving in a race surfaces in several of Paul’s writings:

- In 2 Tim 4:7, Paul summarized his ministry of preaching the gospel and planting churches throughout Asia Minor as a grueling endeavor. It was not the course he had chosen for himself, but one assigned to him by the Resurrected Lord. Five times whipped with lashes; three times beaten with rods, stoned; and ship wrecked, he endured to the end. In his mind, Paul tied all of this together: assignment and agony:

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

(2 Timothy 4:7, ESV)

- In 1 Cor 9:25, Paul instructed the young believers in Corinth to stay focused on the goal. For him, the purpose of running the race was winning the prize and finishing the course. Like a coach instructing his team before a big race, he insisted:

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.”

(1 Corinthians 9:24–25, ESV).

Gabby Douglas was a Gold medal winner in the 2012 World Olympics and a Silver Medal winner in 2015. At 16 yrs. old, she was fully aware of the fact *“you can’t have your cake, and eat it too.”* In order to compete for the prize and finish was the course in her heart—being an Olympic athlete—she had to make some personal sacrifices. At 16 years of age, she moved over 3,000 miles away from home and family to study and practice with the celebrated coach Liang Chow. Gabby practiced six days a week and sometimes twice a day for a long time. The 2015 Olympic games were highly competitive, but “the Flying Squirrel”—Gabby’s imprimatur—performed with excellence. Not only did she handle the floor exercises, parallel bars, and the beam masterfully, but she was also able to overcome the criticisms leveled against her. She was not “running aimlessly,” she was not “running” to please the crowd, but she was focused on obtaining the goal. She disciplined not only her body, but her mind as well and ran to a Silver Medal in the 2015 World Olympic Games.

The Lord didn't have the Olympic Games in mind, He had something far more important than Gold, Silver, and Bronze medals in view: the eternal security of the believer. Jesus knew that self-restraint, discipline, and deny-ability were in order if the disciples were to carry out the mission and mandates of the kingdom. He said:

And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23, ESV)

III

In closely contested games when the competition is heated and the outcome appears to be questionable, the difference between the winning and losing is "razor thin." Home-field-advantage comes into play at this point. The winning edge is often given to the team that is competing in front of its home crowd. Paul appears to be saying to the Hebrew believers,

"Don't give up now, the crowd is "in the game" with you!"

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,"

(Hebrews 12:1, ESV)

In light of this "home-field-advantage" for the Body of Christ and the course set before us, Paul encouraged those believers who were already in a struggle. In a society in which position, power, and possessions rule and reign this word of encouragement rings loudly. It speaks loudly to a generation that desires "to have its cake, and eat it too!"

- On closer examination of the text, Paul exhorted the believers "to lay aside", "to throw off" or "put off". Contrary to the mind-set of the 21st century where the measure of success is the amount of possessions one obtains, Paul encouraged the 1st Century believers to lay aside (throw-off, put away) every heavy weight. Jesus warned the disciples of this subtle, but lethal desire "to have your cake and eat it too". He said: *"And he said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.""* (Luke 12:15, ESV).
 - Luke portrayed this imagery of "throwing off" and "casting behind" in the call of Peter and Levi the Tax Collector.
 - i. *And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him"* (Luke 5:10–11, ESV).
 - ii. *"And leaving everything, he rose and followed him"* (Luke 5:28, ESV).

- As Peter walked away from his fishing business to enter into the market enterprise of the Kingdom, and as Levi walked away from his books, so believers are encouraged to practice self-restraint, discipline, and deny-ability in their lives. Notice, however, these were not the only things Paul challenged believers to rid themselves. He also warned of “easily besetting sins” of the followers of Christ. Runners, on many occasions, were exhorted “to gird up their minds;” that is, to tie-up the long flowing gowns and garments so as not to trip. External obstacles may be easily avoided; internal opposition may be much more difficult.
 - With this in mind, the Apostle Paul warned the believers at Colosse. *“But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth”* (Colossians 3:8, ESV).
 - To the believers at Ephesus, Paul responded *“to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires,”* (Ephesians 4:22, ESV).

IV

Indeed, Christians are challenged to run their race. It is a difficult course to follow, but there is a great cloud of witnesses encouraging us, “Run Your Race!

- To Look to Jesus-
 - He is the Author and Finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2)
 - He is the Alpha & Omega (Revelation 21:6)
 - He taught us the power of a submitted life (Philippians 2:7-8)
 - He showed us how to endure (Hebrews 12:2)
 - He showed us how to finish well (Philippians 3:14)