

1 Cor. 9:24-27: 3rd before Lent [Septuagesima.] 24.1.2016

Living for a goal

²⁴ Remember that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize. You also must run in such a way that you will win. ²⁵ All athletes practice strict self-control. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. ²⁶ So I run straight to the goal with purpose in every step. [I am not like a boxer who misses his punches (I am not just shadowboxing). ²⁷ I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified.] [NLT]

Do you have an idea when the next Olympic Games will be? - and where? [Rio de Janeiro - August 3 – 21, 2016 and the Para Games are Sept. 7 – 18, 2016.]

There are people who have not just remembered that it's an Olympic year only now - they have been living for and preparing for these games for the past few years. I'm referring of course to the athletes who will / hope to / take part in the Olympics.

There is a difference between those who take part, and those who simply wish to watch some of the events. Those of us with an interest in watching the various events will probably find out at the beginning of August what the schedule is. The athletes have long known on what days a certain event will be, and when the final for that event is scheduled. For some it is simply the fact of being at the Olympics, but there are others for whom it has been their driving force to gain a medal - hopefully gold - as they have trained and adapted their diets and habits in preparation for the Games.

There is a clear difference between those who are participants as opposed to spectators. Spectators are not really involved, but for those who take part in the games, they

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Paul encourages us here to do the same as athletes do. What they do **to win a prize that will fade away**, we are to do as we strive to win **an eternal prize**.

The question for us is: are we spectators or participants in this race for the

eternal prize?

Spectators may be the kind of Christian who only goes to church, because their parents brought them to church, and they are simply continuing the tradition. Spectators may be those who approve of the teachings of the church, and believe that these will be a good moral base for life - but their lives are not changed by what they hear. If it's just a case of hearing the good news of Christ, but there is no determination to change how you live, there is no prospect of receiving the prize God offers.

For all who are no more than spectators - who have not allowed their lives to be changed -, there is no reason to continue going 'to church' when doubts concerning God and his love arise. Being a Christian only in name - a kind of 'fair-weather Christian' - holds the real danger that when it becomes more attractive to do something else on Sunday, our attention will turn away from Christ and his church. It is ironic that those things we often consider as blessings - good health and wealth - may lead to people being absent from the church which shows us the real blessing: the life God gives us.

To be 'participant' in the race for the eternal prize is different. For us the reminder today is about why we are here in church; why it is that we read devotions or attend a Bible-study. If that is not clear to us - if we do not have the goal of an eternal prize - any time, any money, any energy spent on 'church-business' will become too much for us.

That applies to attending confirmation classes, but also to our involvement in the activities of the church as a whole. When it just a shlep for us to do our tea duty, to help out with some maintenance at the church, or to volunteer for something like helping teach Sunday School, is that not because we don't really know why we are here?

As Christians we need less threats of hell-fire and damnation, and more pointers to our goal. We need to hear less of what we must do to be saved, but more of the fact that - through Christ - we are even now members of God's family. We need to be reminded of our home - that place our Lord has gone

to prepare for us, and where he awaits us, and where we are to really live!

Those who are in training for the Olympics will not only have good days, when their motivation to train is high. There may be days, when they would much rather just stay in bed when it's cold outside, or when it is raining. There may be days when it seems like too big a sacrifice not to attend a party, or to have a limited diet. That is when they need someone to remind them why they are doing all those things - to focus on the goal.

The same applies to us in our Christian life. After all, we don't just have high points as members of the church. There may be days when we just can't go on. Then we need someone to remind us of our goal, and to remind us to live as part of the community in which we are help one another to reach the eternal prize.

That is one of the primary reasons why we come together on Sunday mornings. Our church services are God's service for us - to encourage us to keep going when we feel tired and down. These services are to be like a 'refreshment stop' along the way in a marathon - to give us the strength for the next stretch of the way that lies ahead of us. Bible-study and daily devotions are to be like the energy bars which help us get by every day. There we hear again what God has given us. There we receive encouragement to carry on, and the strength to do so. There our goal is brought into focus once again.

It is quite amazing what people are prepared to change regarding their life and their life-style just to get something which does not last for ever: medals won in athletic competition tarnish with the passing of time. James Dobson - the founder of 'Focus on the Family' -, tells the story of how he dreamt of winning the tennis cup at the college he attended. He eventually achieved this goal, and was able to hold up the cup. Many years later when he visited his alma mater, he happened to pass a heap of things to be consigned to the dump - and there was the cup he had prized so highly as a student.

The prizes of this world fade. You and I, however, have a goal which is absolutely certain. We are assured of the prize by everything Jesus did on our behalf. This prize has already been won - for you! Your name has already been engraved on it. It is up to us not to lose sight of it now.

That is why we need to focus on the goal God has set us - so that we will continue to live as his followers. I'm sure that we all know that it's not only hard work being a Christian - it's not just a case of having to make sacrifices. God has given us moments of great joy and satisfaction as we go along the way he has set us. These are times that lift us up, when the going gets tough again, which motivate us to keep on keeping on.

We have been called to take part in the race for the eternal prize. Unlike those who take part in the Olympics in August, we do not know the date of our 'final'. Unlike them, however, we do not have to qualify to be in the finals by what we have achieved - we are in the final by the grace of God. Now we are in the race for the eternal prize every day of our lives - and there too it is God's grace and power that carries us through difficult times.

Even if the Bible has no direct reference to this, we may imagine that the angels who rejoice when one sinner repents, applaud us when we have made it through a difficult phase in our lives. At the end their applause will be for you and me, as we get to stand on the winners' podium - no steps for 1st, 2nd and 3rd, as we all get to stand on the same step.

God makes us worthy of taking part, he gives us the strength to make it through trials and temptations - but not without our input and effort. In the end, however, he gives us the prize which he won for us!