

Year-end Softball Devotional

In light of another season of softball and the recent Olympic Games in Beijing, I would like to speak on something related to sports today. One question I'd like to ask you to think about is simply, "Why did you play softball this year?" Moving beyond this simple question is a series of other questions, "Why do you play any sports at all?", or "Why do you aim to do well in school?", or "Why do you work so hard at your job?", or "Why do you try to maintain good relationships with people?" "Why do you try to live a good life?"

Before I address these questions, let me sidetrack a little. I will be running in a race tomorrow. I am a fairly competitive person and I want to win. I really like a quote that I recently heard from an Olympic athlete; he said, "I like to compete, because winning is fun". But I have been reminded again and again by various people that it is not all about winning, but it should be about having fun. Being a little bit puzzled, I wanted to see if the Bible has anything to say about athletic competitions. Sure enough, the Bible does! The New Testament finds its setting in the Greek world where athletic achievements are highly valued. It is not surprising that when one reads through the apostle Paul's letters, one can find plenty of athletic imagery. In his first letter to the Corinthians, one finds the following verse:

"Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it." (1 Corinthians 9:24)

I thought, "AHA! So it *is* all about winning!" But as I was thinking about all of this sports-related stuff, I was reminded of the time when I attended Teen's Conference as a 13-year old. The speaker that year, Mr. Bernie Smith, was sharing about his personal experiences in track and field. My interests were particularly peaked because, at the time, I was just getting into running and sprinting. Here was a man who not only enjoyed doing track and field events, but he was so good at it that he was actually going to major championships and winning significant meets. Yet he told us that he gave it all up! I was completely baffled. Why would he possibly do such a thing? Even more shocking was when he said that he gave it all up to serve God! Not knowing much about God or religion at the time, I was completely perplexed as to why *anybody* would give up something that they love, and from which they could become rich and famous, in order to pursue religious aspirations. Perhaps he was onto something!

Bernie then explained why he gave everything up for God. God, the Ruler of the Universe, loves us and wants to have a relationship with us; moreover, He has a plan for our lives. However, sin stands in the way. While most of us think of sin simply as wrong attitudes, bad intentions and evil behaviours, the problem is actually much deeper than that. Sin is a profound sense of independence and defiance of God and His rule. It is a disposition that says, "I am going to live my life my own way, apart from God." However, just like a crime, sin results in punishment. Yet, because God so loves us, He sent His own Son, Jesus, to die on the cross, taking on the punishment that we rightfully deserve, so that through Jesus, we may be forgiven of our sin. But not only did Jesus die for our sins, He came to life again. Through Him, we may be freed from our sin and

enter into a new life – a life of relationship and meaning with God. For Bernie, he gladly accepted this gift from God. What is more, he gave up his precious track and field career, trading it in for something that is infinitely more worthwhile – a life with God full of purpose, both for now and for eternity. The joy that exuded from Bernie as he was speaking was so genuine that it was impossible for him to have fabricated it all. I wanted what he was experiencing in his life. And on his testimony, I accepted Jesus into my life and began to discover this life of meaning that God had intended for me.

Returning to the passage in 1 Corinthians 9, its meaning becomes much clearer once read in context:

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.” (1 Corinthians 9:24-5)

Paul was not merely giving instructions on how to run a race; he was using the race as an analogy to how we ought to live our lives. Many of us today are chasing after temporary thrills and successes, including academic achievements, athletic accomplishments, public recognition and material wealth. But the reality is that no matter how great or satisfying these things may seem to be, they do not have lasting value. I read an article this week in the Globe and Mail about an athlete who experienced success in the 1988 Olympic Games. She said this shortly after winning her gold medal, “It was like euphoria after I won, but it didn’t take long to say, ‘What now?’ How do you beat this in life, reaching a gold medal on a podium on the Olympic Games?...It was kind of a reality check, realizing this is only a small part of my life.” For someone who has reached the pinnacle of what she has been training for her entire life, she, too, came to the stark realization that *even* this amazing experience was only transient. The question of “what next?” arose very quickly. And I am sure that we have asked ourselves this same question at various times in our own lives. Paul, on the other hand, is striving for a lasting reward – the God of the Universe Himself. The One who created us, who knows our pains and our joys, our strengths and shortcomings, wants to have a deep, meaningful relationship with us in spite of us. And He has made the provision for this to happen in Jesus Christ. And so, Paul trains very hard, focusing on one goal while relinquishing all others, running to the best of his abilities as one going for gold.

As we consider this “race” analogy in our own lives, two questions need to be asked. First, are we running the right race? For those who do not yet know the Lord Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour, I hope this devotional has been helpful to inspire some reflection on life and its meaning. Perhaps now is the time to start learning more about Jesus and what He offers us. For those of us who already know Christ, are we running this race of life in a way that is consistent with Paul’s admonishment? Let me suggest two yardsticks that are useful to measure how well we are running.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-9)

Are we loving God with all that we are? Are we giving more and more of our heart to God each day and less and less to other lesser loves? Are we loving others as much as we already love ourselves?

“So whether you eat or drink or in whatever you do, do it for the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10:31)

Are we doing nice things because we expect something in return, or in order to promote our own agenda? Or are we at all times thinking about how God can be praise and glorified through our lives?

In conclusion, the initial series of “why” questions really boil down to what we are chasing after in life. Are we on the right race? And if we are, are we running it to the best of our abilities? May we be able to say with Paul, when we meet our Father in Heaven:

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” (2 Timothy 4:7-8)