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Christian Participation Trophies

January 20th, 2019
1 Corinthians 9:19-27
United Part 3

The epitaph of a boxer named Agathos Diamon, from first century Olympia in Greece read: *Here he died boxing in the stadium. Having prayed to Zeus for a wreath or death. Age 35. Farewell.* I guess that is what they mean by going to die trying. Farewell, Agathos. The part of the world where Paul was writing the 1 Corinthians letter would have known of these kinds of fierce sporting competitions. The Isthmian Games were played near Corinth in 51AD. People throughout Greece would attend this sporting event every two years in the spring. These games were in honor of the Greek god Poseidon – the earth-shaking god of the sea. There was a stadium, a theatre, and a hippodrome used for the competitions. Athletes would compete in footraces, wrestling, boxing, throwing discus, javelin, the long jump, chariot races, as well as poetry and musical competitions. Athletes would risk their lives to prove their prowess and win the competition. So Paul, as an effective preacher, deploys the athletic metaphor in order to appeal to the minds of the Corinthians. Paul writes:

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

In the competitions in Paul's day there was no first, second, and third prize. There was the winner and there was everyone else. The winner got the crown. Some historians say that it was a celery crown, a notably perishable crown. In some cases the losers were met with the fate of Agathos, others simply returned home as failures, losers, and wannabes. It was a harsh world in the good old days.

Probably this sporting and competitive culture was very informative for Paul – he was a bit of a black and white, winner takes all kind of guy. When he transferred the sporting metaphor to the Christian faith he did so with the urgency of a competitive athlete. Paul urged the Corinthians to strive in the heavenly race for the imperishable crown. Paul believed that the spiritual race was exceedingly more important than the physical race.

However much resolve, focus, and commitment an athlete exhibits for an imperishable crown of celery – even more should the Christian display pursuing their faith in God. Paul believed it was one thing to talk about being a Christian; it was quite another thing to carry out the demands of being a disciple of Christ. Discipleship required sacrifice and dedication and training and total commitment.

In a culture where Christianity was new and countercultural and risky, Paul's messaging would have inspired some dogged determination from the Corinthians to stick with it and live out their faith. But in our culture where being a Christian is comfortable and acceptable and familiar, Paul's messaging does not translate well. He is too severe in his expectations. Sometimes, today's threshold for Christian faith feels like a rather low bar. In order to affirm your status in the Christian community you simply need to say something like: "Yeah, I go to church occasionally, I say my prayers when I have a bad day, I read the bible once, I believe that God exists." Paul would not recognize this version of passive Christianity. Where are the athletes sacrificing, punishing themselves, practicing self-discipline and playing to win? Where are these types of Christians?

There was a study conducted some years ago that analyzed the changing requirements for membership in mainline Protestant churches over time, in light of the decline of overall church membership. Logic would perhaps tell you that the denominations experienced decline as the requirements for membership became more severe. But the opposite was true. As decline set in, churches started to ease their requirements - fewer vows, shorter trainings sessions, less demands on time or money or commitment. The messaging probably looked desperate - if you have a pulse and can say that you might show up from time to time then we will take you. Perhaps it is the same trend, which began awarding all children participation trophies in little league instead recognizing winners vs. losers. I won't wade into such weighty childrearing controversies but I will say that the church waters down the gospel when it does not clearly spell out what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Jesus asked the first disciples to leave everything. Leave your old lives, your professions, your homes, and your families - take up your cross and follow me! All in, commit fully, sacrifice greatly. And they followed him. And their entire lives were transformed and their hearts were radically changed and imperishable crowns were received. Sometimes I think we need a little more preaching like Paul. I need a little more preaching like Paul. Paul says harsh things, in love. Paul says important things, faithfully. Paul says difficult things, with conviction. Paul would tell me I could do better. Paul would tell me I could try harder. Paul would tell me that it is critically important that I do better and try harder. Paul, as Christian life coach, could be super effective for me. Pray more. Serve more. Give more. Read more. Believe more. Preach more. You can and should do this!

Paul is like the high school track coach who says no you cannot go on vacation with your family and miss a meet. Paul is the baseball coach who does not care that your church is having a retreat and you would only have to leave practice 15 minutes early to pacify your pastor and qualify you for confirmation. Paul's the middle school hockey coach who demands perfect attendance at the 5am practices even if you are puking and it is a blizzard and your grandmother died the day before. Paul asks you to pick - who you will serve - what will you love - how will you live? Play to win. We love Paul for this and he is also very hard to live with.

I don't know that I would really want to wake up to Paul shouting in my ear everyday. Some days I might need a bit more grace, a bit more acceptance, a bit more serenity. But on many days, I need a preacher like Paul to motivate me, to excite me, to even terrify me. Do you want to receive the imperishable crown or not? Yes, Paul, yes I do. Then run the race of faith like you want to WIN...all in - for the glory of God.

For Paul, it was never about self. It was always about Jesus. It was always about the kingdom. We really should live our lives in a way so that we might win an imperishable crown in the kingdom of heaven. We should live our lives in ways that bring glory to our God. We should live our lives with God as our anchor, Jesus as our guide, and the Holy Spirit as our inspiration. These types of lives do take discipline, they take sacrifice, they take commitment. Our faith demands these things and our God deserves these things from us.

We know that God welcomes all of us; Paul is big on the including all people as potential followers of Jesus. But when we say yes to discipleship we are making a commitment and it will demand things from us. The costs are high but the rewards immeasurable. As Isaac Watts wrote in the hymn, *When I survey the Wondrous Cross*, "Demands my soul, my life, my all." When we consider our faith in these terms it does cause us to ask ourselves if we are doing enough, are we loving enough, forgiving enough, serving enough, praying enough, sacrificing enough. Our response to God's love for us demands a dramatic response that is what Paul was fundamentally after. Lives transformed. Lives overturned. Lives offered up.

Paul as the preacher implores us to live our lives so that we might win – win the imperishable crowns that await those who love and serve the Lord. Thank you, Paul for the searing reminder that I can do better, we can do better, the church can do better – all for the glory of God.

Amen.