

“Christ-letes”

Mark 1:40-45
1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Feb. 15, 2009
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My junior year of high school I made the varsity baseball team. Baseball was my life. My whole year revolved around baseball. I was obsessed. If I wasn't playing it, I was training for it, and if I wasn't training for it, I was watching it. But on my first day of varsity spring training, I learned an important lesson: Don't eat at an all-you-can-eat pizza bar prior to practice. I will not describe the painful, embarrassing, and disgusting event that occurred somewhere in left center field after 20 or 30 wind sprints. I ate at the all you dare to eat salad bar from then on. I learned that certain things were not compatible with the life of a baseball player in training.

Paul describes the Christian life in terms of an athlete's life. He writes, “Athletes exercise self-control in all things.” This of course, was in a pre-steroids era. If you have ever been an athlete you know that you must make sacrifices in your life style choices. If you are really serious about winning, you must cut out certain things from your diet. You must give up countless hours that could be used for more comfortable recreation such as watching the TV while regularly updating your Face book page.

Paul points out that athletes also have a goal in mind: a wreath. Before the Olympics got big advertising bucks and could afford gold medals, they gave wreaths made of laurel. The honor of victory was no less valued, though. The eyes of the athlete are always on the prize. Through every grueling work out and through every unsatisfying meal of salad with non-fat dressing, the eyes are on the prize. Everything that the athlete does has purpose and intention. Never aimless.

But the Christian athlete, the Christlete (if you will), has a different sort of prize. It is an imperishable prize. It is a prize that is not just for the person who finishes the race the fastest, it is for all who finish the race. That changes the whole strategy of a Christlete. Someone doesn't have to lose for us to win. We just have to keep running.

Just about every day that I drive to the church, I see this woman running. I've seen her run in the rain and even in sleet. I have no idea how far she runs everyday. As far as I know, she never stops. Nothing seems to stop her. She's determined. And I bet she doesn't always feel like doing it. She's focused on the prize.

Being a Christ-lete is not easy. Some mornings we wake up grumpy, tired, frustrated. The last thing we want to do is to be loving. And if being loving depends upon our daily mood, then we will fail to run the race. We must keep our eyes on the prize.

As Christ-letes we have to make a choice every day to follow Christ. It's not enough to make a choice just once and think that it will carry us through to the prize. Many of us can point to a moment in our life when we made a choice to follow Jesus. In

some church circles, we say this is when we were saved. But if Paul's analogy of the Christian life as being like an athlete is good, then we must continue to make that choice.

I'll never forget the words of a man who was an elder in the church in which I partially grew-up. I hadn't seen him for years. And though he had technically aged a dozen or more years since I had seen him, he looked fit as a fiddle and not a day older. I told him so and he said, "We make choices, Paul. We make choices." As Christ-letes we make choices. It's part of running the race.

The word choice in Greek literally means to cut. So with every choice one thing is chosen and some things are cut. Like on American Idol. When some contestants are chosen, it also mean some are cut. We make choices.

When we make a choice to follow Christ, we also must choose to cut certain things out. Like I had to give up eating pizza during spring training. There are some things in our life that work against our goal as Christ-letes. Some things that will hold us back or sidetrack us. Often, it is as Paul refers to, the pursuit of a perishable wreath, a goal other than the eternal goal. Here are a few that come to mind: pursuit of wealth, pursuit of security, the pursuit of comfort, and the pursuit of peace (that sounds wrong, but I will explain).

All of these fit right into the American dream. You might call them American Idols. The vast majority of people that immigrated to this continent were looking for a chance of wealth that they did not have in their own land. This pursuit of wealth drives our economy. It is presumed that the country would fall apart if we gave up this pursuit. The truth is we as a society sacrifice a lot to this pursuit. We are willing to help others as long as it doesn't take away from our pursuit of wealth. Clearly, ethics are overstepped when they hinder our pursuit of wealth. Look at the banking industry. It's a perishable wreath. In the end it is a dying and empty pursuit. It is not the pursuit of a Christ-lete.

We would all love to have wealth, but most of us would settle for security. We would be happy to just keep a roof over our heads and some bucks in our retirement plan. We would give up some of our freedom if the government will protect us from bad guys. And if a few foreigners get stuck in a holding facility, then so be it. As long as we are safe and secure. We would sacrifice a lot for this security. It is a perishable wreath. Not the pursuit of a Christ-lete.

At heart, human beings are comfort seekers. We like to be in a clean, dry, temperature-controlled environment. We like at least 2 square meals a day. We like to have a running vehicle of our own, not a bus. This list can go on. And we will sacrifice a lot for comfort. We will sacrifice the earth's environment for comfort and convenience sake. We don't like things or people making us uncomfortable. Even right here in the church. We seek comfort. We want padded pews. We want a group of people that smell nice, look clean, and won't cost us anything. We want sermons that make us feel good about ourselves. It is a perishable wreath. Not the pursuit of a Christ-lete.

The pursuit of peace seems like something that Christians should be about. And, yes, it is part of that imperishable goal. In the end, there will be peace. But Christ said, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. Those who love these any more than me are not worthy of me and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Jesus doesn’t make life easier for us. He doesn’t promise wealth, or security, or comfort, or even peace. We make a choice. We take a sword and cut away the pursuits of these other perishable wreaths and that will put us in opposition with family, friends, and society. It will not bring peace. It will produce conflict.

But we sacrifice a lot for peace. Often what happens, is that we don’t want the conflict that hard choices bring about, so we don’t make them for the sake of peace. We would rather “get along” than speak the truth and name the elephant in the room. We would rather let a friend continue on a path of destruction rather than confront him about his problem. We don’t want to stir up trouble. It’s a false peace. So in seeking peace, we sacrifice a lot. We sacrifice a chance of real community, real relationship. It’s a perishable wreath. Not the pursuit of a Christ-lete.

So what is this imperishable wreath we are to pursue? Eternal life. A life that begins when we begin the race and is complete at the finish line. It is both the reward at the end of the race and also strength that we are given to run the race. It is both the perfection of creation and the perfecting of creation. Like the runner whose joy of running is equal to the joy of finishing victorious. This is the Christian life, the life of the Christ-lete. It won’t line your pockets with wealth, but it will make every moment precious. It won’t bring you security and safety, but it will secure you and save you for all time. It won’t make life comfortable, but it will give you the greatest comfort. It won’t make your life peaceful, but it will instill in your heart the peace that passes all understanding.

We are preparing ourselves for an eternal life, an imperishable life and it will take a lifetime of training and preparation.

Cut out the fatty foods of comfort and wealth. Abstain from the empty calories of security and false peace seeking. Feed yourself with a healthy, soul food diet of prayer and bible study. Build your spirit muscles by doing acts of love and compassion. Prepare yourselves for the greatest victory celebration of all-time by lifting your hearts in praise. Let no obstacle stop you. And remember, the only way you can lose is to not run the race. There are still plenty of spots on the varsity team. Spring training starts today. Watch what you eat.