**Paul’s Athletic Metaphors**

This COVID-19 pandemic that we are currently dealing with has changed the world we live in for the time being. One of those changes is that competitive sports have come to a standstill. Typically if I turn on the television 90% of the time it is going to be to watch some kind of sporting event, or to listen to the latest news about a particular sport or athlete. Athletics is a huge part of the world today, but this is nothing new.

In Paul’s writings he used athletic metaphors many times. It was something that Paul could relate to and others at this time could as well. Athletic competition was a large part of the Roman society and many other cultures at this time. Paul uses these metaphors much like Christ used parables to relate to the life of a Christian. Not only did Paul use these metaphors to relate to the life they lived, but the trials they would encounter and even the rewards of living this life in an acceptable way before God.

In 1 Timothy 4:7-8 Paul uses one of these metaphors to describe an athlete training for the contest when he writes, *“But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness. For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.”* When an athlete is going to compete in some athletic competition they must prepare for the event ahead of time. They must find their weak points and strengthen their ability. Likewise as Christians we must prepare ourselves for the events of this life. We must always be preparing for what lies ahead. When we see that we are weak, we must continue to improve in those areas. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2:15, *“Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”* In our Christian lives we must study to find out where we are lacking spiritual strength and when can strengthen ourselves in those areas.

When someone desires to compete in any competition they must compete by the rules. In 2 Timothy 2:5 Paul says, *“And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.”* There are rules to every athletic competition. You cannot win the competition if you do not play by the rules. Likewise we as Christians must know the rules that God has set forth so that we have a chance to win the prize. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 Paul writes, *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”* God has given us all that we need to know in the scriptures, so that we can live according to what He wants of us. We like the athlete must know and keep the rules.

To win any contest we must first decide that we will be competing in the contest. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, *“Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: 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.”* An athlete who is truly competing for the prize goes in to the contest with the mindset that they will win the competition. There would be no reason to compete if this were not the case. The athlete will try their very best to ensure that they win the prize. Likewise we as Christians must have the same mindset. That nothing will stop me from reaching my goal. In Philippians 3:12-16 Paul has this attitude when he writes, *“Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. 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. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you. Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing.”* We cannot ever think that I have already attained the prize. We must press on until we lie silently in our grave. Many times I have watched sporting events where one team or person thinks they have the competition won and someone else comes out on top. We cannot have this attitude in our Christian lives.

Finally at the end of the competition there is the awarding of the prize. In 2 Timothy 4:6-8 Paul writes, *“For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.”* Just as an athlete competes for the prize we do likewise. We must fight on until the event is over, and then if the Judge determines that we have won we shall be awarded our crown. We will not be the one who makes the final decision if we have won or not, this will be left up to God the righteous judge. In 2 Corinthians 5:9-10 Paul once again writes, *“Wherefore we labour, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.”* God, “The Righteous Judge,” will look at what we have done and compare that to the rules that have been set forth and then if we have been found faithful we can rejoice in our reward.