

# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

## THE OLYMPICS OF THE SPIRIT

*"Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable."*


*I Cor. 9:25*

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## THE OLYMPICS OF THE SPIRIT

*"Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable."*

I Cor. 9:25

The Olympic Games have come and gone for another four years. Thanks to press and television coverage most of us were at least aware that the games were on. The more avid followers will remember record shattering performances by trained and talented athletes; instances of biased refereeing; policy squabbles among high officials; and striking ceremonial pageantry. The entire world will long remember the tragic killing of Israeli athletes in Munich.

I confess that I am not an Olympics enthusiast. Too many of the skills that are tested do not belong to life today. Running, jumping, swimming, boxing -- yes. But how many people have ever touched a javelin, much less thrown one? Or a discus? How many of earth's citizens have so much as seen a bobsled, a rowing shell or a vaulting pole? Many of the events in today's Olympics feature skills that are woefully out of date or hobbies that only the rich can pursue.

New York City's Recreation Department was on the right track this summer when it staged its own olympics that featured such sports as stickball, boxball, stoopball and Chinese handball.

If we are going to measure physical prowess let us feature events that are tied to our style of life. Like subway dashing - from change booth to closing door. Taxi-hailing. This competition would be in two sections -- fair weather and foul. Bus-catching -- with and without bundles, from a standing and running start. Line-standing, as in a bank or post office or supermarket. Just plain waiting -- as in an out-patient clinic of a hospital, or a doctor's office, or a downtown parking garage.

The Greeks arranged the Olympic games to celebrate proficiencies that mattered to them. The games should be up-dated to reflect the skills that matter to us!

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All that I have said thus far is in the nature of a gentle jibe rather than a serious concern. File it under trivia if you will.

But what is a serious concern of mine is the way in which we Americans ascribe exaggerated importance to the heroics of the athletic field and neglect the heroics of the inner-man.

Mark you, the Bible does not demean the physical. Authentic Biblical religion does not issue in slack-jawed, flabby-skinned, emaciated asceticism. Man's body is the handiwork of God and the temple of the Holy Spirit. There is something good and salutary about a well-groomed, well-conditioned, nimble, healthy body. Indeed, St. Paul appealed to Christians, on the strength of God's mercies, that they present their bodies to the Lord as a living sacrifice. (Romans 12:1)

But while the Bible does not demean the physical, it clearly indicates, from first to last, that man's most notable achievements are not of the flesh but of the spirit.

Our fascination with the star athlete in this country is an exercise in mistaken magnitude. Sports enthusiast though I am, I stand ready to concede that a society that pays its quarterbacks in six figures and quibbles about the cost of guards for ravaged public schools is a society that has a perverted sense of the heroic.

While we lionize our athletes there are men and women all about us whose achievements are hard fought triumphs of the spirit against long odds.

\* \* \*

Perhaps what is needed -- and this is my proposal -- is an Olympics of the spirit. Were such an event to be staged, I dare to suggest that entries in at least these categories would be in order.

One category would be resilience. Here would be demonstrated the incredible capacity of people to bounce back. Gravely ill, they fight through to a recovery of their health. Phased out of one job, they train themselves for another. Uncoupled by divorce, they pull themselves together, avoid acute self-pity and begin again. Stung by the advent of death that cuts them off from one long loved and cherished, they resume life alone, determined to carry on.

The dictionary defines resilience as "the power to return to the original form or position after being bent, compressed or stretched." Such power, I believe, must be a derivative of faith.

The classic testimony to resilience is offered by St. Paul in his second Corinthian letter: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed: perplexed, but not driven to despair: persecuted, but not forsaken: struck down, but not destroyed." (II Cor. 4:8,9)

Salute the acrobat on the trampoline, but reserve your loudest cheers for the soul that having fallen finds the strength to rise.

\* \* \*

A second category would be stamina. Here would be exhibited the ability to see some worthy business through to the end. To mount up with wings is easy -- we have all had our Apocalyptic seizures! To run and not be weary -- is a little harder, but still common. We have all had our seasons of prolonged enthusiasm. But to walk and not faint -- this is the test that separates the sunshine soldier from the committed warrior. To stay with it and at it and on it -- day upon day upon day -- this is stamina!

You are in the presence of the heroic when you are with a man in his late forties, fifties or sixties who has the same enthusiasm and perserverance for his cause that he had at the age of 21. Frequently these are not spectacular folks, they're just there. They answer the bell every morning. They are careful to groom themselves. They move about with purpose at home or on the job. They manage to stay informed about the world. They mark out a sector or two for personal involvement. They resist the shrill beckonings of current fads and fashions. Against all manner of assaults they maintain a steady confidence in God.

Even Christians can slacken off and fall back. Paul could write to the Galatians, "You were running well: who hindered you from obeying the truth?" (Gal. 5:7) Paul could say again in another place of one who had started with him, "... but Demas has forsaken me." (II Timothy 4:10) Somewhere along the journey a brother had run out of stamina.

I was struck a while ago by the name of a sports car club in this country that I had never heard of previously. It is called the Press On Regardless Sports Car Club of America. That's an inspired name. Every year this little-known club sponsors a rally called the Press On Regardless Rally. It is usually held in the fall of the year in Michigan. The course runs to some 2,000 miles. Most of it must be driven at night. The terminal point is Alma, Michigan. Press on regardless! This is what is meant by stamina.

Paul was an exponent of this same idea. "Forgetting what lies behind (whether good or bad) and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 3:13,14)

Salute the marathon runner, but reserve your loudest cheers for the soul that endures to the end.

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A third category in our Olympics would be courage. I think here of people who have come to terms with what they want to do and what they can do. They have reached an accommodation between their aspirations and their abilities. Especially do I have in mind those who suffer physical handicaps of any sort.

Many such have demonstrated a laudable ability to adjust to their limitations and gone on to do what they are able. These fellow human beings are life members of The Thorn in the Flesh Association that was founded by St. Paul. What Paul's thorn was we are not given to know. Perhaps this is just as well. Each of us can fill in whatever it is that irks us about our limitations. Paul acknowledges that "a thorn was given me in the flesh. Three times (a Greek idiom meaning an indefinite number) I besought the Lord about this that it should leave me, but he said to me: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" (II Cor. 12:9)

Those who demonstrate the kind of courage that I have in mind are aware that life is not God's master-piece but God's material. We must make a go of it out of less than perfect stuff or conditions.

A few years ago I read a biography that meant much to me entitled, One Man's Education. It is a summary of the life of Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis, a gentleman whose name will always be associated with Yale University. Lewis learned a valuable lesson from a relative who had suffered an incapacitating illness. "His illness and long convalescence taught him to endure boredom, to accommodate himself to a curtailed life, and to substitute agreeable interests for those denied him, a lesson I find useful now in old age." 1

The courageous seem able to achieve more with little than many do with much. Salute the rugged water polo player, but reserve your loudest cheers for the souls that refuse to be overwhelmed by loss.

\* \* \*

Still another category would be inspiration. I confess that this term is flat. It seems almost useless. All the bubbles and vivacity have gone out of it. I scanned the Thesaurus in search of a better word but without success.

By inspiration I am thinking of people who exercise a God-given ability to get others started and keep them going! Let faces in your ken rush to mind, for we all know such. These are large souls of such spiritual heft and power that they carry the rest of us along. They seem always, in the words of scripture, to have bread enough and to spare -- for us. Their stock in trade is encouragement. They require very little maintenance from the rest of us. They go on from day to day managing their life well and helping us to manage ours a little better.

Eric Berne in his readable and helpful book Games People Play, talks about everyone's need for strokes. As children we need the physical stroking of our parents. As we grow older we continue to need physical stroking, but we also need mental stroking in the form of compliments, praise and appreciation. The inspiring people that I wish to extol move through life without requiring many strokes from others. They tend to be on the giving end of encouragement and praise and seldom on the receiving end.

Their achievements may not stand out in high visibility or brilliance, but we know that they are there for us, and that we are the better for their being there. Salute the man who can press 440 pounds, but reserve your loudest cheers for the soul that can lift others closer to their full potential.

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The last category that I would suggest is initiative. Under this heading men and women would stream who have learned how to stride into life. They do not play life back on their heels, content to merely counter



the moves and blows of others. Instead, they stride into life and demonstrate initiative.

Following that sweeping 11th chapter of Hebrews where we are introduced to the stalwarts of faith from past generations, the writer goes on and speaks about the need for discipline and says, "Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees." Those words might well be translated, "Take a new grip with your hands and forge steadily ahead."

People with initiative live on the offensive. Instead of cursing their genes, their parents, their circumstances, or their luck, they buck the negatives and assume responsibility for their lives.

Such people usually have a few cc's of ego in their makeup, and this is not all bad. Yousuf Karsh, the celebrated photographer, tells a story about Frank Lloyd Wright which he admits may be apocryphal. The tale has to do with the architect's appearance in court as a witness. The clerk asked him his name. He replied, "Frank Lloyd Wright." The clerk continued, "What is your profession?" He said, "Architect. Pardon me -- a correction -- the greatest architect who ever lived." As they left the court a friend said to him, "Frank, do you not think it was a little immodest of you to speak as you did about your profession and your talent?" Wright raised his eyebrows innocently and replied, "But I was under oath." How flat life would be without folks like this!

Usually such people can be found resisting prevailing winds and countering the dominant culture. Often they stand daringly alone. Those who are familiar with "Variety" magazine are aware that Hal Bone serves that publication as a drama critic. Mr. Bone is stationed not in New York but in New Haven, Connecticut, where most of the shows present their premiere performances. This gentleman's reviews are usually the first reviews printed anywhere. He has "cased" for the first time such productions as Voice of the

Turtle, Streetcar, Tea and Sympathy, Pajama Game, South Pacific, Oklahoma, and others. He works alone and never discusses a premiere with anyone - not even his wife. Oscar Hammerstein once called him the most objective play reviewer he knew. Most of us jump on when the band wagon has started. Most of us march after the parade has formed. It is a heroic quality to be willing to be among the first, to choose to be in the van-guard of life rather than the rearguard.

Paul reminded us that the aim of the Christian life is not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. (Romans 12:2) Salute the boxer who carries the fight to his opponent, but reserve your loudest cheers for the soul that refuses to be intimidated by hidden powers or public pressures.

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St. Paul was well aware of the Isthmian games that were staged in Corinth every two years. Out of his familiarity with those contests he wrote: "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable."

Resilliance, Stamina, Courage, Inspiration, Initiative -- these and their like are the heroic qualities of life. On such the cameras of heaven are trained. They are self-rewarding; yet they carry with them the promise of our Lord's, "Well done." And best of all, God gives us the power to become what he wants us to be.

## CLOSING PRAYER

We bless Thy name, O God, for the call  
to excellence that belongs to the gospel;  
And for the good example of those --  
living and dead -- who embodied the bench  
marks of the new humanity.  
Help us more seriously to pursue our calling  
as the sons of God,  
Relying on Thy grace  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

### FOOTNOTES:

1. Lewis, Wilmarth Sheldon, One Man's Education,  
p. 141, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1967
2. Karsh, Yousuf, In Search of Greatness, p. 121,  
Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1962
3. Fuller, John G., Trade Winds, "Saturday Review,"  
p. 10, December 13, 1963

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