

“GO FOR THE GOLD (#2): CONDITIONING REQUIRED”

(1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

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[PROPS NEEDED: Series Intro Video]

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 8-4-24]

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1. **[WATCH "GO FOR THE GOLD" STAFF VIDEO ("The Sport of Croquet" -- 2:00)].**
2. Last week we began a new series called “Go For The Gold”, looking at a few *"lessons for the Christian life" from the Summer Olympics.*

A--These were first observed by the apostle Paul as he watched the predecessor of the Olympic games back in his day and time,¹ and later shared with Christians around the Roman Empire in several of his letters/Epistles.

B--His insights remind us that Christian faith and life is first and foremost a commitment to a process/journey of growth & development (a "race") over the course of a lifetime.

C--And in today's scripture, Paul focuses his readers' attention on something that he considered to be absolutely essential in both an athletic competition & in Christian life.

D--Listen to how he puts this in his words from 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (CEB),...

24 Don't you know that all the runners in the stadium run, but only one gets the prize? So run to win. 25 Everyone who competes practices self-discipline in everything. The runners do this to get a crown of leaves that shrivel up and die, but we do it to receive a crown that never dies. 26 So now this is how I run -- not without a clear goal in sight. I fight like a boxer in the ring, not like someone who is shadowboxing. 27 Rather, I'm landing punches on my own body and subduing it like a slave. I do this to be sure that I myself won't be disqualified after preaching to others.

3. Did you hear what it is that Paul says is needed in order to "win" and "get the prize"? It's the practice of ***self-discipline*** (some translations say "discipline"; or in the case of the Christian life... "***spiritual discipline***").

A--In Olympic sport competition, there are at least three key disciplines that every athlete has to practice in order to compete successfully.

B--And I want us to use these three to talk about how the spiritual parallels of these can help us to grow and maintain a healthy and dynamic faith and relationship with God.

--II--

4. First, successful athletes practice the "discipline" known as "**CONDITIONING**" -- that is: maintaining and becoming *more efficient* with the fitness that we *already have*.

A--The older I (or any of us) get, the more I/we realize the need to do various things to maintain and keep our health and stamina strong.

1--While I certainly have plenty of room for improvement, as forms of "conditioning," not only do I try to do outdoor walking around my neighborhood, but in order to get more steps and walk more, whenever I go to visit folks in the hospital, I try to park farther away from the entrance, and take the stairs instead of the elevator to get to my visit floors.

2--And if you're ever up at the church during a weekday, you may even see me walking around the Sanctuary, the hallways, or even outside in the parking lot doing business phone calls instead of doing those calls sitting at the desk in my office -- its just healthier, and ever little step can help.

3--I get weekly chiropractor adjustments, and also have exercises and stretches I do at home to maintain my back, shoulder and sciatica muscles.

4--And when I don't do those things -- when I get lazy and "out of habit" -- I begin to gain weight, and it becomes increasingly difficult to do things I want to do.

B--Well, if the purpose of "conditioning" in the human body is to maintain and be efficient in what we *currently* have, then doesn't that at least to some degree describe the function/role of the spiritual discipline of "**PRAYER**" in the Christian life & faith?

1--Prayer, you see, is the "*breath*" of our spiritual lives, and just as our *physical* body can't do without *breathing*, so our spiritual body (our "soul") can't do without prayer.

2--Do me a favor... take a deep breath right now by breathing in [**take deep breath in**]... & then breath out [**exhale deep breath out**]. Do it again... [**Repeat**]

3--Did that feel good? Well, just as breathing has that effect on our *physical* body, prayer has the same kind of "conditioning" effect on our *spiritual* body.

C--It helps us not only to get in touch with God, but also helps us maintain our relationship with Him.

1--We see this in Verse 27 of today's scripture, where Paul says (CEB) "*I'm landing punches on my own body and subduing it like a slave.*"

2--Now, he's not referring here to asceticism that *harms* the body, but to a rigorous *discipline* that keeps the body in tip-top shape (i.e., "*conditioning*") -- so, the practice of "conditioning" reminds us of our Christian need for Prayer. ²

5. A 2nd practice that all successful athletes engage in is "**TRAINING**", which essentially involves *improving upon what we already have*; OR, intentionally stretching our bodies *beyond* who we current *are* in order to grow and develop into something *more*.

A--We find this explicitly talked about in Verse 25 of today's scripture, where Paul says that... "*Everyone who competes practices self-discipline in everything*" (in the Greek language, "*self-discipline*" is another word for "*training*") -- in fact, the MESSAGE translation of this verse explicitly says "*All good athletes train hard*." ³

B--You know, when I first started doing walks, stretches and work-outs (or when I'd go back to doing these after neglecting them for a while), at the end of the workout time, I'd feel tired and out of breath, making me realize how out of shape I'd gotten.

1--But the more regularly I exercise, the easier it would get, so that over time I wasn't huffing and puffing at the end of my workout anymore.

2--And while the workouts *I do* are not nearly as strenuous as what Olympic athletes do, this practice of repetitive workout is a kind of "*training*," pushing and stretching my body to go *beyond* what it was used to in order to *improve* health and stamina.

C--Again thinking of the Christian life and faith, this *physical* stretching in many ways describes one purpose of our reading and study of **HOLY SCRIPTURE** (the Bible).

1--In fact, 2 Timothy 3:16 actually says (CEB) "*Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character...*" -- so there it is in black and white.

2--You see, as challenging as it can sometimes be, when you & I take time to study & learn more about God's word, we grow actually and develop to reach newer, higher levels of faith & maturity. So, Bible reading/study is a kind of "*training*"

3--And that's why I think it's so important that every church member be involved with some kind of intentional Bible study like "Disciple" (that we are recruiting for Fall classes now!) or for study that take place in a Sunday School class.

6. Finally, though, consider that most successful athletes "discipline" themselves by having a "coach/personal trainer" to help them along -- in other words, they practice "**ACCOUNTABILITY**" by having others lovingly motivate and challenge them to be more *intentional* about doing what they knew they need to do.

A--We find this idea in Verse 26 of today's scripture, where Paul says, (CEB) "*This is how I run -- not without a clear goal in sight. I fight like a boxer in the ring, not like someone who is shadowboxing*" -- all referring to *intentionality* in his workouts, no doubt helped along by others!

1--Now, I don't know about you, but I can certainly relate to this in terms of physical exercise or even with the PT I've recently had to do on my shoulder.

2--I try to do my stretches/exercises on my own, but often find it difficult to do so unless my physical therapist is holding me accountable!

B--Well, I believe that the same can be said about the purpose, role and benefit of the **CHURCH** (God's community of faith) in the life of a follower of Jesus.

1--It's NOT that we *can't* pray, or read the Bible, or have a relationship with God all *alone & by ourselves*, but that we tend NOT to do so *without* encouragement and motivation from/with *others*.

2--And that's why churches (including ours) offer things like weekly worship services, Sunday School classes, Bible studies, and mission opportunities that make a difference in the lives of others.

3--Our church and fellow Christians, you see, are really the "personal trainers" for our spiritual lives -- encouraging, motivating and helping us do the things we know we *need* to do to stay and grow in relationship to God, but things we're *not* usually disciplined enough to do alone and by ourselves.

4--Hebrews 10:24-25 says (CEB) "*Let's... think about how to motivate each other to show love and to do good works. Don't stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other*"

5--*That's* accountability, you see, and it's why its not enough for Christians to simply have their name on a church role, but instead to allow their Church family to lovingly encourage and motivate them to do what God calls us to do.

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7. Of course, there are other "*spiritual disciplines*" that help us both to maintain & grow our relationship with God. ⁴ But these three -- **Prayer, Reading/Study of Scripture, and Accountability through God's Church** -- are all keys to each of us successfully running the "race" of faith.

A--Just as the successful practice of a athletic sport requires attention to the *physical* health and fitness of our *bodies*, so the successful practice of the Christian life requires attention to the *spiritual* health and fitness of our *souls*.

B--In other words, for us to stay spiritually fit and grow, as with our bodies (in the words of today's title), "*Conditioning [, Training and Accountability] Is Required*."

C--So, here's the question: Are you in spiritual shape? How's YOUR "exercise in the Spirit" going?

8. [PRAYER]

9. [**HOLY COMMUNION** -- regular participation in the Lord's Supper as yet another "spiritual discipline" that helps us maintain and grow a healthy relationship with God...]

ENDNOTES:

¹ The predecessor sports competition of today's Olympic Games was something called the "Panhellenic Games" held in Greece, and it was known throughout the Roman Empire to be the premier sporting competition of that region in its day and time.

² In THE MESSAGE translation, Paul says plainly "*I'm staying alert and in top condition.*" -- here "*conditioning*" is mentioned in black & white, with prayer being one key way to "*stay alert.*"

³ Read also 1 Timothy 4:7b-8.

⁴ For example: helping the poor (missions); participation in the Sacraments (Baptism and Holy Communion); Fasting; Christian fellowship; etc. These are what the founder of Methodist Christianity (John Wesley) called the "means of grace."