

I.N.I.

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany  
January 28, 2018  
I Corinthians 9:24-27

In Christ Jesus, who is the Object of our faith, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

It is hard to believe another winter Olympics is upon us. Four years sure goes by quickly. How different the Olympics of today are from those of yesteryear, those of Paul's day. Today's Olympics are world-wide affairs. It is big business, costing millions of dollars to put on, and millions more to televise so that it can be watched by people all over the world. And not only is the goal a gold medal but also all of the millions of dollars in endorsements and commercials that go along with gold medal champions.

It wasn't quite that way in Paul's day. They too had an Olympics of sorts, it was called the Isthmian games. Second in popularity only to the ancient Olympics. These events were held every other year in Corinth between athletes from Athens, Sparta and Corinth. Paul had spent 3 years in Corinth and no doubt heard of these games, or maybe even attended them.

One of the things that remains similar to today's Olympics and that of the past is the cost in training. Athletes start young and train and train and train for hours a day, seven days a week. In our text Paul draws the comparison between the extended training process of these athletes in their devotion to one cause—victory—and the need for self-discipline in our spiritual training for our race for one cause—eternal life.

The winter Olympics are a few days away, but our question this morning is this—

**ARE WE READY FOR THE REAL OLYMPICS?**

What are the "real Olympics?" The real race for Life! The race, the contest for an eternal prize! As we said earlier Olympic athletes dedicate their whole life to this one cause—being the best in whatever sport they are competing—downhill skiing, speed skating, ski jumping. Six to eight hours a day, everyday, week in and week out to be the best, to reach the pinnacle of excellence that no one has ever achieved before. All for what?

In Paul's day it was a wreath of laurel or wild olive leaves placed on the winner's head and also the fame and glory of being first and best. Today it is for the gold medal around the neck and the fame and glory and sometimes job security that comes with advertising endorsements. But even if it is a gold medal or a 5 million dollar Wheaties contract, it is a crown that will not last; it is perishable.

When the Olympic athletes of the past died, their gold medals and their riches passed on to someone else—dispersed among their heirs or donated to some museum or hall of fame. On Judgment Day all of the gold medals as well as all of the riches will be destroyed.

But for the child of God, the believer in Jesus, who takes part in the spiritual Olympics; in the race for eternal life the crown is imperishable—it lasts into eternity. It is the Crown of righteousness; that Crown of eternal life which Jesus already won for us and will give to all of those who trust in Him as their Lord and Savior. Peter wrote: **WHEN THE CHIEF SHEPHERD APPEARS, YOU WILL RECEIVE THE CROWN OF GLORY THAT DOES NOT FADE AWAY.** In Revelation the Lord Jesus says to each of us: **BE FAITHFUL UNTIL DEATH, AND I WILL GIVE YOU THE CROWN OF LIFE.** With that important a prize, we had better be ready to run; for it is not just a matter of winning or losing; being first or last; but it is a matter of eternal life or death; of being in heaven or hell.

That's Paul's first point:

**I: THIS IS A CONTEST FOR AN ETERNAL PRIZE—THE CROWN OF LIFE!**

Paul's second point is this:

**II: THIS IS A CONTEST WHICH REQUIRES CONTINUAL SPIRITUAL TRAINING.**

Paul writes in our text: **AND EVERYONE WHO COMPETES FOR THE PRIZE IS TEMPERATE IN ALL THINGS.** Another translation puts it this way: **EVERYONE WHO COMPETES IN THE GAMES GOES INTO STRICT TRAINING.** The word for "temperate" or "strict training" literally means "self-control, struggling with one's self-discipline."

In an athlete's case that is extremely important. Their diets need to be carefully watched. Their sleep habits need to be carefully supervised. Their practice sessions need to be timed. They push themselves to the limit yet not beyond that limit so they do not hurt themselves. In short—their entire lives are run by one rule: the rule of self-discipline. Eating, drinking, sleeping, exercising, free-time—everything is carefully disciplined. This is done so that nothing will stop them in their quest to be the best.

One indeed has to admire these young athletes who spend hour after hour on the slopes, on the skating rink or in the weight room. These athletes spend the majority of their growing up teen years in rigorous routine exercises and continuous boring drills over and over again. The self-discipline, energy, courage, dedication, determination and time that it takes is very rare in this world. And that is exactly Paul's point!

It may be rare in this world, but not in these athletes who run, swim, skate or ski to victory and they know that only one of them will win; and what they win will not last. So Paul says “we strive for a crown that lasts forever and everyone who finishes the race will win.” There won't be just one winner and all of the rest losers. In this race for life, everyone who finishes the course wins.

Paul writes in II Tim. 4:6-8: **FOR I AM ALREADY BEING Poured OUT AS A DRINK OFFERING, AND THE TIME OF MY DEPARTURE IS AT HAND. I HAVE FOUGHT THE GOOD FIGHT, I HAVE FINISHED THE RACE, I HAVE KEPT THE FAITH. FINALLY, THERE IS LAID UP FOR ME THE CROWN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, WHICH THE LORD, THE RIGHTEOUS JUDGE, WILL GIVE TO ME ON THAT DAY, AND NOT TO ME ONLY BUT ALSO TO ALL WHO HAVE LOVED HIS APPEARING. ...Phil. 3:14: I PRESS TOWARD THE GOAL FOR THE PRIZE OF THE UPWARD CALL OF GOD IN CHRIST JESUS.**

This crown of righteousness, crown of glory, crown of life is ours by Christ's perfect life and substitutionary death on the cross. It has been earned for us by Jesus and it will be given to us by Him personally when our race is run, when our course is done.

Remember that Paul is speaking to the Corinthian Christians who had temptations all around them and some who had fallen into the belief that as long as they confessed Jesus Christ as Savior it didn't really matter that much how they lived their lives. They felt quite at home holding hands with immorality and idolatry as long as the other hand was holding to Christ. In other words many of them were walking on both sides of the road—confessing a good profession of faith in Christ, but living like the unbelievers of this world.

And it is so easy for us to fall into the same trap, to convince ourselves that it is too hard to walk down the straight and narrow way of God's Word; it is too hard to run the race with God's Word directing the way. It is far easier to choose our own path, to walk the way most of the people of the world are walking. It is so easy for us to get distracted by the goals of this life, by the cares, pleasures, concerns and aims of this world; so that we run aimlessly—to and fro—or box the air swinging wildly and don't get anywhere.

Paul's solution to the way of self-control and self-discipline is this: **BEAT YOURSELF! Yes, beat yourself!** Paul says in vs. 26-27: **THEREFORE I RUN THUS: NOT WITH UNCERTAINTY—AIMLESSLY. THUS I FIGHT: NOT AS ONE WHO BEATS THE AIR. BUT I DISCIPLINE MY BODY AND BRING IT INTO SUBJECTION, LEST, WHEN I HAVE PREACHED TO OTHERS, I MYSELF SHOULD BECOME DISQUALIFIED.**

The word for “discipline” literally means “to smack someone in the face and give him a black eye, to beat someone.” Paul says, **I BEAT MY BODY AND MAKE IT MY SLAVE...** And no Paul was not a masochist, for he is not talking about physically beating himself, as Luther did in the monastery. He is talking about bringing his sinful flesh into subjection.

Every one of us has a heart filled with sin. We are completely infected with sins of thought, word and deed. Sinful desires arise in our hearts and our bodies carry them out. Sinful desires lead us away from God, away from our goal of life, leading us to ski off the track, run aimlessly and lose our way.

Paul says, “Discipline yourself, beat up your sinful flesh.” We do this by repenting of our sins and looking to Jesus for the strength to resist the temptation---like

to talk like the people of this world; to gossip, curse, swear, lie, slander and defame others—  
to live like the world lives: running after worldly goals, physical pleasures and material things,  
giving in to sexual lusts, arguing and fighting with our parents or those in authority; cheating at  
school or on our taxes, gambling away our goods; despising God's Word. Paul writes in Romans  
8:13 **FOR IF YOU LIVE ACCORDING TO THE FLESH YOU WILL DIE; BUT IF BY THE  
SPIRIT YOU PUT TO DEATH THE DEEDS OF THE BODY, YOU WILL LIVE.** Resist and  
repent!

We read in Hebrews 12:1-2: **THEREFORE WE ALSO, SINCE WE ARE SURROUNDED  
BY SO GREAT A CLOUD OF WITNESSES, LET US LAY ASIDE EVERY WEIGHT, AND  
THE SIN WHICH SO EASILY ENSNARES US, AND LET US RUN WITH ENDURANCE  
THE RACE THAT IS SET BEFORE US, LOOKING UNTO JESUS, THE AUTHOR AND  
FINISHER OF OUR FAITH, WHO FOR THE JOY THAT WAS SET BEFORE HIM  
ENDURED THE CROSS, DESPISING THE SHAME, AND HAS SAT DOWN AT THE  
RIGHT HAND OF THE THRONE OF GOD.**

As we said Olympic athletes have restricted and well balanced diets—they eat what is best for  
them in their sport. Well we also are encouraged to eat and drink a well balanced diet that will give  
us the strength to run our race for life. Jesus says, “I AM the Bread of Life; eat of Me by inwardly  
digesting My Word. I give to you the Water of Life. Drink from My Word and you will have the  
stamina, the desire, the spiritual courage; the self-discipline; the love and faithfulness to be able to  
run that race till the end, till you reach that goal, that finish line.”

One man wrote: **“Holy fear of ourselves and not proud confidence in ourselves is the best  
security against falling away.”** True indeed! A holy fear of ourselves, of our own sinful flesh and  
sinful heart will lead us daily to turn away from ourselves and look in repentant faith to our real  
power—to Jesus and His Word. Here we are assured of full forgiveness in and through Christ. Here  
we are led to loving service, a spirit-led prayer life; a willing obedience to God's commandments;  
a joy-filled worship of our Savior;  
and a spiritual self-discipline and spiritual training that keeps our eyes focused on the goal of eternal  
life. We will say as two believers of the past confessed: **“God, be merciful to me a sinner... Lord,  
I believe, help my unbelief.”**

We will also have confidence, not in ourselves, but in the One who redeemed us with His blood  
and sanctified us with His Spirit to live for Him. Paul writes: **FOR BY GRACE YOU HAVE  
BEEN SAVED THROUGH FAITH, AND THAT NOT OF YOURSELVES; IT IS THE GIFT  
OF GOD, NOT OF WORKS, LEST ANYONE SHOULD BOAST. FOR WE ARE HIS  
WORKMANSHIP, CREATED IN CHRIST JESUS FOR GOOD WORKS, WHICH GOD  
PREPARED BEFOREHAND THAT WE SHOULD WALK IN THEM.**

How is your race going? Have you been training? Are you ready, are you prepared for the **REAL  
OLYMPICS**; the **REAL RACE** for Life? Indifference to the Gospel message of salvation  
unfortunately is the norm, is the commonplace reaction for most people. But God's saving love  
revealed in Jesus' sacrifice for us will move us and motivate us to be serious about our training;  
serious, sincere, devoted and dedicated to our daily spiritual running program in our race of faith  
with the single-minded goal of eternal life with our Trine God.

Then we will be able to sing with the hymnist:

My course is run. Praise God, my course is run, my Jesus welcomes me. Farewell, my friends, my  
work on earth is done, the heav'nly goal I see. My dear Redeemer's praises voicing; I leave this  
world with great rejoicing. My course is run. My course is run.

My course is run. My Jesus took for me upon Himself my guilt. Upon the cross, the bitter, shameful  
tree, for me His blood He spilt, thus by His death and grace abounding for me a refuge surely  
founding. My course is run.

Freed from all trouble and repining, I see the open heaven shining. My course is run. My course is  
run. Hymn 599 vs. 1-2, 4

Amen.

