

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Running the Race

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When I was in college, I was a member of our school's track and field team. I performed best in the sprints, and occasionally the quarter mile. One of my favorite races was the mile relay. Of all the races we ran, the one I remember best is one we didn't win.

The race started wonderfully--our first runner ran such a great opening quarter-mile leg that as he passed the baton to me, we were tied for the lead. I ran as hard as I could, and as I passed the baton to our third runner, we were in first place. I thought we had an excellent chance to win--our fourth runner was especially fast.

Our third runner took off like lightning around the first curve and down the back stretch. And then the unthinkable happened. He stopped suddenly, walked off the track, and sat down on the grass. I ran over to him, thinking he must have pulled a muscle. When I reached him, he didn't look like he was in pain, so I asked what was wrong. I'll never forget his reply. All he said was, "I don't know--I just didn't feel like running today."

Sadly, many people are like that runner. Somewhere along the way they stopped pursuing a deep, loving relationship with Christ, walked off His path of righteousness, and sat down to rest in their own self-righteousness and the ease of worldly pleasures. But allegiance and love to Christ demand a lifelong commitment. As our Lord Himself said, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62).

The apostle Paul understood that priority. His relationship to Christ was the passion of his life: "that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from among the dead" (Phil. 3:10-11). But he was under no illusion that he had achieved anything, and he compared his own pursuit of Christ to that of a runner in a race (vv. 12-16). Your spiritual race must have that same sense of dissatisfaction--without it there's no reason to even run. In fact, there are several principles you need to apply as you pursue Him.

Maximum Effort

Considering who Christ is and what He has done for you, your effort should not be less than Paul's: "I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus" (v. 12). The Greek word translated "press on" was used of a sprinter who ran aggressively. That was the kind of effort Paul exerted--he ran toward Christ with all his might, straining every spiritual muscle to win the prize (cf. 1 Cor. 9:24-27). That ought to be your mindset. There's only one race you ought to be running--and it takes maximum effort using the means of grace God has provided.

No one is going to put forth that kind of effort, however, unless there is some reward at the end. For Paul, and us as well, it is "that for which I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12). Paul's prize, and ours, is the very purpose God had in saving us: "Whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29). God saved us so that we might become like Christ, and as a result, that should be our lifelong pursuit.

Focused Concentration

If an athlete competing in a race stands any possibility of winning, he must focus on the finish and ignore the distractions along the track, the other competitors, and even the crowd. Likewise, you must concentrate on attaining the goal of Christlikeness and not get distracted by worldly attractions and temptations. Paul was well aware of those dangers. That's why he said, "I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do; forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead" (Phil. 3:13).

How do you avoid the distractions of the world?

By developing these two attitudes:

First, forget your past. As a runner approaches the starting line, his past performances have no bearing on the race he is preparing to run. The same thing is true when we run the spiritual race in pursuit of Christ--the past is completely irrelevant. Your successes and failures in the past are insignificant to the present, let alone the future. You can't evaluate your usefulness by your former virtuous deeds and achievements in ministry; neither should you be debilitated by past sins and failures.

Second, reach for the goal. Instead of looking back, a good runner is always "reaching forward to what lies ahead" (Phil. 3:13). The Greek word for "reaching forward" refers to an intense stretching to the limit of one's capacity. To run like that, you must forget the past and concentrate only on the goal ahead. Do you have that kind of concentration in your desire to become like Christ? To effectively pursue Christ, you must focus all your concentration on becoming like Him.

Spiritual Motivation

Paul was highly motivated in his pursuit of Christ: "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (v. 14). He was motivated by spiritual matters; he was not caught up in material comforts and worldly pursuits. His goal was to be like Christ, and he would receive his reward when God's upward call came. Christlikeness is both the goal and the prize we pursue.

Remember, this pursuit is objective, not subjective. It is not a mystical experience, but an exposure to the truth about Christ revealed in the Bible. Scripture is the mirror that reflects His glory. And when you gaze at it intently, you become like Him (2 Cor. 3:18).

Divine Assistance

Every believer ought to have the attitude that he or she is not perfect (Phil. 3:15). Those who have that perspective regarding their spirituality will be ready to respond positively to God's correction. But if you have the wrong attitude about your spirituality, if you're content with the current level of your spiritual growth, then God will reveal your true condition. He might do so through chastening (Heb. 12:5-11) or through trials (James 1:2, 4) to build and strengthen your faith and trust in Him.

Consistent Effort

No one can win a race with intermittent effort. Christlikeness cannot be reached with that kind of effort either--it is an ongoing pursuit. So Paul says, "Let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained" (Phil. 3:16). The Greek verb translated "keep living" refers to walking in line. Just as a runner must stay in his lane and keep up the same effort until he reaches the finish, you must stay in line spiritually and keep moving forward toward the goal of Christlikeness.

One summer while visiting Europe, I came across a famous gravestone at the foot of one of those majestic mountains in the Alps. Underneath the individual's name the epitaph reads, "He died climbing." That ought to be your attitude as you pursue Christ. When it's time for the Lord to call you home, you ought to be pursuing Him.

Adapted from First Love by John MacArthur.

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