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Athletic Metaphors for the Christian Life

Sports is a language that is spoken by people around the world. It was certainly a familiar subject to Roman citizens in the first century. Athletes were the iconic figures of the ancient world, the heroes of young boys, and the craze of the culture. Drawing on this popularity, the New Testament writers chose to convey many important aspects of the Christian life through athletic metaphors. They used sporting events to depict important truths related to our sanctification. Here are some specific aspects they teach us about our pursuit of holiness.

First, strict training. An athlete is required to submit himself to rigorous training in order to compete at the highest level. He works out strenuously to develop his muscles, enlarge his lungs, and expand his stamina. An out-of-shape, flabby athlete will never gain the prize. Only those physically fit will win. In like manner, Paul writes that believers must do the same: *“Train yourself for godliness”* (1 Timothy 4:7). *“Train”* (Greek *gymnazō*) literally means *“to exercise naked”* and enters the English language as *gymnasium*. An ancient gym was a place where athletes stripped down so that nothing would restrict their physical movements in training. Likewise, every Christian must remove all hindrances that will impede his spiritual growth. He then must work out diligently in the Scriptures. He must discipline himself in prayer. He must strengthen his heart for God in personal and corporate worship.

Second, steadfast obedience. An athlete has to compete according to the rules. No participant can invent his own set of regulations. The rules are already established and are enforced by the umpire, and breaking them will result in a penalty or disqualification. Similarly, every believer must live in obedience to the Scriptures. Paul writes, *“An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules”* (2 Timothy 2:5). Obedience to the commands of the Bible is required for everyone who runs the race of faith. Obedience pleases God and leans into His will. Obedience is an evidence of true saving faith, brings assurance of salvation, and is necessary for Christlikeness.

Third, self-control. An athlete is required to exercise mastery over his body during his training. If he is to win, it is incumbent on him that he limit his freedoms. It is necessary that he abstain from unwholesome foods for weight control. He needs to monitor his sleep to preserve his strength. Likewise, this same self-control is required in the Christian life. Paul writes, *“Every athlete exercises self-control in all things”* (1 Corinthians 9:25). *“Self-control”* means *“self-restraint, self-government.”* As believers, we must guard what we allow to enter our minds and hearts. We must refuse to consume the toxic junk food of this world that is poisoned with its secular ideologies. Instead, we must choose to be *“trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine”* (1 Timothy 4:6). This requires daily feasting on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4).



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Fourth, strenuous effort. An athlete has to exert maximum effort in order to win his event. Half-hearted efforts will never capture the crown. Lax joggers who merely shuffle their feet will lose the race. The wreath belongs to the one who expends every ounce of energy in his competition. Likewise, Paul says we must “toil” (1 Timothy 4:10) if we will win the prize. “Labor” (Greek *kopiaō*) means “to toil to the point of exhaustion.” In the pursuit of holiness, we must give ourselves until we have nothing left to give. Again using the athletic metaphor, Paul writes, “I press on” (Philippians 3:12), employing a word (Greek *diokō*) meaning “to move rapidly and decisively after an object.” Paul states that he was running after the knowledge of Christ as fast as his spiritual legs would propel him. The Bible says, “Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1). This “race” (Greek *agōn*) was the excruciating long-distance event that involved agony and agonizing. We must be expending ourselves in running the lifelong race set before us.

Fifth, strategic aim. In the ancient world, a boxer entered the ring to fight his opponent. His aim was to land direct blows that would pummel his foe until he was bloodied and broken. An ancient boxer could not afford to wear himself out by throwing wild punches that never connected. He had only so much strength to expend. Every punch had to be on target. In the same way, the Apostle Paul saw himself like a boxer: “I do not box as one beating the air” (1 Corinthians 9:26). In his spiritual life, he was not shadowboxing and jabbing at thin air. The Apostle clarifies, “I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (v. 27). “Discipline” (Greek *hupopiazō*) literally means “to bruise, to beat black and blue.” The Apostle says that he must beat down his formidable foe until he bleeds. Ironically, this opponent is his own sinful flesh.

Sixth, singular focus. Every athlete has to remain riveted on the goal. He must maintain an intense concentration on the prize. It is this myopic focus that propels him forward with bursts of renewed energy. Looking elsewhere at the other runners or in the stadium will slow him down and lead to his defeat. Similarly, Christians must be “looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). Our singular focus must remain on Christ, who generates the strength we need to run with endurance. Keeping our gaze on Christ produces the stamina required to win the imperishable crown. As he ran his race in life, Paul wrote that he was “forgetting what lies behind” (Philippians 3:13). He could not win the crown if he was looking back over his shoulder at his past failures or victories. He had to keep looking to Jesus Christ.

If you are to “run that you may obtain” the prize (1 Corinthians 9:24), you must compete like a fully committed athlete in the Christian life. Sanctified sweat is required. But it will be worth it to receive the imperishable wreath from the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. ~ **Dr. Steven J. Lawson - President and founder of OnePassion Ministries**



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How Do We Become Spiritually Mature?

We don't want to remain spiritual children, perpetually stuck in infancy. We don't want to be weak, vulnerable, and immature. Nor do we want to be ignorant about God's truth, because we want to fully glorify Him for everything He has done. We want to appreciate Him in all His fullness, knowing and loving Him thoroughly. If that's the goal, then how do we get there? How do we respond to the Word in a way that drives that progress?

I see **three** definitive steps in the biblical pattern of sanctification. The **first** is *cognition*. John 17:17 gives our Lord's prayer: "*Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.*" We have to understand what the Bible says and what it means if it is going to produce growth in us. Sanctification begins with spiritually renewing the mind, that is, changing how we think. We need "*the mind of Christ*" (1 Corinthians 2:16). There is no premium on ignorance or naivete in sanctification. The discipline of putting the truth constantly at the forefront of our minds is crucial.

If we lack spiritual maturity, we must read everything we can that faithfully and accurately explains the Word of God to us. We must study the Bible and memorize it; we must read commentaries from biblical scholars, listen to sermons from faithful expositors, and read the biographies of godly saints whose lives display the kind of maturity we want to see in our own lives. We must soak our minds in the Scriptures, fueling the Spirit's sanctifying work.

That seems like an obvious first step, but it's one that many believers fail to take. They can't fathom why they keep succumbing to the same temptations and why their love for the Lord has cooled and their interest in His church has plateaued. They fail to understand that the absence of biblical knowledge retards spiritual thinking and slows spiritual growth.

Don't confuse childlike faith with childish thinking. Legalism won't lead us to holiness and spiritual maturity. Mysticism and sacramentalism won't get us there, either. Pragmatism will likely lead us in the wrong direction, and it invites us to pursue quick fixes and worldly wisdom instead of grounding us in the truth of God's Word. The only activity that catalyzes the ongoing sanctifying process is taking in the truth of Scripture. Cognition—knowing and understanding the truth—is the first step in pursuing spiritual growth through the Word of God.

After cognition comes *conviction*. As we learn the truth of Scripture, we must begin to develop beliefs into convictions. Our lives are controlled by our convictions. As the truth of God's Word begins to occupy our minds and shape our thoughts, it will produce principles that we desire not to violate. This is what sanctification is about—being inwardly compelled to obedience.

The Apostle Paul suffered many things during his ministry—imprisonment, severe beatings, shipwrecks, and a constant stream of unfounded accusations from false teachers.

In 2 Corinthians 4, he describes the difficulties of his life: "*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed*" (vv. 8–9). In verse 11, he continues, "*For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake.*" Every day, he understood that any one of the several plots against him could come to fruition. At any moment, he could be dead. Everywhere he went, he offended people.



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He was constantly being thrown out of synagogues and into prison. He lived in a perpetual cycle of opposition and oppression.

What made him keep going in spite of all the hardship he faced? In verse 13, he quotes the Psalms, saying, *“I believed, therefore I spoke.”* That is conviction. Paul might as well say: *“What else do you want me to do? There is no alternative for me. This is my conviction from the Word of God.”*

That conviction shaped Paul’s life and ministry. Earlier in 2 Corinthians, he testified, *“For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you”* (1:12). Paul was true to the wisdom of God, and his conscience did not accuse him, regardless of the accusations against him. In Acts 23:1, he says, *“Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day,”* and in Acts 24:16, *“I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men.”* Paul’s firm convictions, rooted in Scripture, helped him live a righteous life, with nothing to be ashamed of.

John Bunyan, the great Puritan preacher and author of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, remained in jail for twelve years, but it wasn’t the prison bars that held him there. He could have walked free if he would simply promise to stop preaching. Facing that option, Bunyan wrote, *“If nothing will do, unless I make of my conscience a continual butchery and slaughter-shop, unless putting out my own eyes I commit me to the blind to lead me, I have determined, the Almighty God being my help and shield, yet to suffer, if frail life might continue so long, even till the moss shall grow on mine eyebrows rather than thus to violate my faith and principles.”* That is conviction. When we read the Bible, we are learning the Word of God in order to develop convictions that will rule our lives and hold our consciences captive, activating them when we start to violate God’s righteous standard. Biblical truth establishes cognition in the mind and develops restraint in the conscience.

The **third** feature is affection. The love of God’s truth is a consistent theme throughout Scripture, and particularly in the Psalms. Psalm 119 is an exhaustive account of the psalmist’s love for the truth and his delight in the law. We’ve already looked at Psalm 19, where David says that God’s Word is *“more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb”* (v. 10). Or look at Psalm 1, which describes the great blessing for the one whose *“delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night”* (v. 2). As we expose ourselves to the Word, we begin to understand what it says. It begins to form our convictions, and then it becomes our sincere affection.

How strong should that affection be? Peter put it this way: *“Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation”* (1 Peter 2:2). Spiritual growth comes when we know the Word, when it shapes our convictions, and when we learn to long for the sustenance it alone can provide.

Psalm 42:1 says, *“As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God.”* The psalmist is not referring to the way some people read the Bible as a curiosity or as ancient literature. He’s not talking about perusing the Bible for intellectual stimulation or gathering ammunition to win an argument. This is studying Scripture eagerly and earnestly, hungry to extract all of the nourishment we so desperately need out of the Word.



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The Word of God is our spiritual sustenance. May we have the same solitary longing for it that a baby has for milk—because by it, we are conformed to the image of Christ, who sanctified Himself for us. The Word reveals Christ to us, and the Word transforms us into His likeness. We are reminded of what our Savior repeated three times in the upper room—that He would send us the Holy Spirit. We know that sanctification is a divine work through the Word by the Spirit of truth. So, we must plead with the Spirit that He would mold and shape us into the image of Christ, through the truth, from one level of glory to the next. As the Apostle Paul explains, “*But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit*” (2 Corinthians 3:18). ~ **Dr. John McArthur**

Eliminating Unrealistic Expectations

Sometimes we all feel as if our prayers lack the power to penetrate our ceilings. It seems as though our petitions fall on deaf ears and God remains unmoved or unconcerned about our passionate pleading. Why do these feelings haunt us?

There are several reasons why we are sometimes frustrated in prayer. One is that our expectations are unrealistic. This, perhaps more than any other factor, leads to a frustration in prayer. We make the common mistake of taking statements of Jesus in isolation from other biblical aspects of teaching in prayer, and we blow these few statements out of proportion.

We hear Jesus say that if two Christians agree on anything and ask, it shall be given to them. Jesus made that statement to men who had been deeply trained in the art of prayer, men who already knew the qualifications of this generalization. Yet in a simplistic way we interpret the statement absolutely. We assume the promise covers every conceivable petition without reservation or qualification. Think of it. Would it be difficult to find two Christians who would agree that to end all wars and human conflict would be a good idea? Obviously not. Yet if two Christians agreed to pray for the cessation of war and conflict, would God grant their petition? Not unless He planned to revise the New Testament and its teaching about the future of human conflict.

Prayer is not magic. God is not a celestial bellhop at our beck and call to satisfy our every whim. In some cases, our prayers must involve the travail of the soul and agony of heart, such as Jesus experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane. Sometimes young Christians have been bitterly disappointed in “unanswered” prayers, not because God failed to keep His promises, but because well-meaning Christians made promises “for” God that God never authorized. ~ **Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.**



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Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner - July 2019

Birthdays

*Luke W. (4)
Sadie H. (13)
Elijah D. (16)
Jubilee H. (18)
Teresa H. (21)
Cristina W. (23)*

Anniversary

*David and Jennifer A. (4)
Les and Jessica T. (17)*

God's Choice of the Poor

Wealth and poverty are not necessarily spiritual issues. Many wealthy people are godly Christians and many poor people are unbelievers. But generally speaking, God has chosen poor people to populate His kingdom. Jesus said, *"It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God"* (Matthew 19:23-24). That's because rich people tend to be bound to this world and have a false sense of security. Many of them not only reject Christ, but also persecute believers (cf. James 2:6-7).

Regardless of your financial status, if you love God, you are rich in faith and an heir of His kingdom (James 2:5). That means you're saved and will inherit the fullness of your salvation and the richness of God's eternal blessing. That's a marvelous truth!

Don't let riches cloud your good judgment. God expects Christians to honor and care for their poorer brothers and sisters in Christ. You can't do that if you're showing partiality to the rich. ~ **Dr. John McArthur**



**West Suffolk Baptist Church
Leadership**

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