

## “Eyes on the Prize”

I Cor. 9:24-27 *“Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.”*

I suspect most of us here are familiar with the phrase, “No pain, no gain!” It is a reference to the fact that when it comes to exercising and building up muscles, one must work until you “feel the burn.” One must put in the hours on the treadmill, the hours on the weight machines, the hours exercising to achieve the desired goal. It won’t happen by accident or all by itself.

Wishing won’t make it come true. The only path to building a strong body is through a disciplined diet, healthy eating and disciplined working out.

Paul makes the very same point about developing one’s spiritual muscles. This too will not happen by accident or by wishing it were true. It comes about through disciplined “self-control” and as Paul puts it “punishing the body.”

Now I would like to think that Paul is exaggerating a little bit when he speaks of “punishing the body.” Such texts have been used to promote severe asceticism that literally punishes the body through extreme fasting or even physical punishment of the body. One of the controversial aspects of the popular Da Vinci Code book was that the assassin is a murderous monk named Silas, a member of Opus Dei, a very powerful conservative Catholic organization. He wears what Dan Brown calls a *cilice*, which is described as a spiked cord wrapped around his thigh, which he tightens periodically till it digs into the flesh, causing it to bleed. With this tightening, Dan Brown’s character says, that his “soul sang with satisfaction of service to the Lord.

Pain is good.” It sounds very medieval to us today, to say the least! The Catholic Church was not pleased at having to assure people that their monks did not do such things today.

Christianity is not the only religion that has been prone from time to time to encourage such gruesome disciplines. Every year many Shiite Muslim men parade down the street flagellating themselves and cutting themselves until the blood runs down their bodies. They do this in memory of the murder of their leader some 14 centuries ago in Iraq.

Siddhartha Gotama, the founder of Buddhism is said to have sought to discipline his body so severely before his enlightenment through fasting that you could touch his stomach and feel his backbone! Eventually, he decided this was a totally unproductive way to achieve spiritual enlightenment and he ate a simple meal before sitting under the Bodhi tree and reaching full enlightenment. He would later propose what he called the “Middle Path” between extreme asceticism on the one hand and extreme materialism, you only go around once in life so grab all the gusto you can, attitude. His Eightfold path would propose a different kind of discipline, a discipline that included eight aspects: Right Speech; Right Action; Right Livelihood; Right Effort; Right Mindfulness; Right Concentration; Right Thought and Right and Right Understanding. Buddha called for constantly examining these aspects of our lives. He called for continuing those things that aided us in living out the Eightfold Path and discontinuing those things that hindered our living out the Eightfold Path. Flagellating the body or fasting to the point of death pales in comparison to these disciplines! It is not easy to follow the Eightfold Path. It is not meant to be. There are few things in life worth having come easy. Most things worth having take commitment and discipline to achieve, maintain and improve upon. In spite of this Buddha

would say it does little good to beat oneself over the head with past mistakes, sins and shortcomings. This is nonproductive. He would say learn from them and move on to new choices.

Jesus takes essentially the same approach in the sense that past sins do not have to determine present actions. Grace allows us to begin anew and make new choices, kingdom choices that reflect God's will for us and our world. Who we were yesterday or the day before does not have to determine who we will be tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, for by the grace and power of God we can be a new creation in Christ Jesus.

In sports any good coach will tell you that fear of losing is NOT the best motivator nor will it help you win. In fact it can get in the way of winning! If you step on the playing field or court afraid to lose you will play tight. You will play conservative. You will play in a way that totally inhibits creativity and true passion for the game.

It is not even enough to play for the money and fame. This can carry you only so far. The greatest players play for something of a far different nature. As you know I enjoyed watching the Australian Open Tennis matches. Roger Federer, who is currently the greatest male tennis player in the world, won the final against an up and coming youngster from Cyprus. He collected a check for about a million dollars. This was his 7<sup>th</sup> grand slam trophy and he will win many more before he is done. When he stood on that podium and collected the check and the trophy he was literally speechless and he cried tears of joy. Former tennis great Rod Laver handed him the trophy and gave him a hug. Rod Laver is the only person in the history of tennis to win all four of the grand slam tournaments in one year, not once but twice! The stadium that the tournament was held in bears his name. Roger was overcome to be part of tennis history, to have this great player

hand him the trophy and hug him. Roger Federer plays for the love of the game. He wants to be the best he can be, to promote the game of tennis and to be part of tennis history like past greats. The money and fame is nice but it is at best secondary. This is what drives him to discipline his body, mind and spirit.

So it is that the Apostle Paul says, **“Do you not know that in race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it.”** Like any good athlete Paul is calling on us to keep our eye on the prize. Only thus will we find motivation for proper discipline in our spiritual lives.

Paul would seem to be introducing the idea of competition in religion. There is a kind of competition that seeks to dominate ones opponents, to crush ones opponents, to humiliate ones opponents, to win at all costs over ones opponents. In religion that can be a dangerous attitude. At worst it can lead to vicious crusades to destroy one’s self-identified opponents or at best it can lead to taking satisfaction at an opponents weaknesses, shortcomings, or setbacks.

Like many I have been horrified at the reaction of some radical fundamentalist Muslims over the Danish cartoons. The cartoons were no doubt offensive to Muslims, although the reaction of those who are rioting, burning embassies, etc. would seem to somewhat justify the cartoon’s point. Religion that does not keep its eyes on the proper prize will soon find itself missing the point of religion.

The Muslim Quran has an interesting passage where someone is asking God why God created so many different religions, when, being God, God could have created just one religion. The answer is fascinating. Basically God says that the different religions are on earth to “outdo one another in

doing ‘good works.’” Isn’t that marvelous? The different religions are not to compete on the field of what is the right theology or belief. They are not to compete on who can convert the most followers. They are not to compete on who can say the most prayers, spend the most hours in worship, put the most in the offering basket, or build the biggest places of worship. No, they are to compete in doing good deeds in the world, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those in prison, caring for the sick, helping a neighbor, etc.

Having said this, the passage in the Quran says that when we all die and stand before God, God will explain the rest of the story about why God created so many different religions. Isn’t that marvelous?!

Paul tells us to keep our eyes on the prize. The prize has great value Paul says, because the prize we are to keep our eyes on is an “imperishable one.” Paul says don’t focus on the secondary, the short term, the worldly, the temporal; rather focus on the eternal, on what lasts, what really counts.

One of the great songs to come out of the Civil Rights movement was “Eyes on the Prize,” written by, among others, Guy and Candie Carawan. It goes, “Paul and Silas were bound in jail, had not money to go their bail. Keep your eye on the prize, hold on! Keep your eye on the prize, hold on! ... Well the only chains that we can stand Are the chains of hand in hand, Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on! Got my hand on the freedom plow ... Wouldn’t take nothing for my journey now, Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on!”

Guy and Candie have been teaching songs and conducting workshops for over 40 years. They taught at the famous Highlander Folk School in the 1960’s, where they continue to teach today. Their hands are still on the freedom plow! They seek to empower people to struggle and work on the

most pressing social and economic issues facing the south. They still believe that singing can be powerful unifying force in the world.

Soon we will be entering the season of Lent. As we prepare for Lent it is a time for self examination. Are we seeking to grow in the faith and in our living out of the faith? Are we seeking to discipline ourselves to make this possible? Are our eyes on the prize? These are important questions. They are important for us personally and for our community and world. Amen.