

Forget the Victory Lap!

Running to Victory:

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

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Since the presidential campaign began two years ago, have you heard charges of sexism? I must admit that occasionally I've held a sexist attitude, which has brought me embarrassment. I knew my daughters were growing older, but I didn't think they could out-sprint me. I think some mention of my weight or stomach had come up, and so I was motivated to show them that despite their growth (and my girth) I could outrun them. I thought I'd whip them so easy. My male ego inflated and expanded with every self-congratulatory thought. While camping at a state park, I found a paved hiking trail wide enough for Sarah, Debbie and me to run side-by-side, although I was certain it wouldn't be long before just those two would be left sprinting side-by-side. Fifty yards would do. Ready, set, go! I couldn't believe it. They both were pulling ahead. In fact, I was a distant third. "You've gotten fast," I congratulated them, "but I can take you in a longer run." I was certain I had more stamina. Off we went... Soon, they disappeared ahead of me. I did not see them again until the finish. I didn't think the race was fun, although they were smiling.

As I review the race, I'm convinced there is one primary reason why I lost. It is not our gender, and age is secondary. True, I don't want to admit age is a factor, and it probably

contributed; however, I know the larger factor was my focus. My daughters were in athletics and physical education. In contrast, I walked weekly from my desk to the pulpit. Imperceptibly, I was getting slower, and they were growing faster. I was walking a path to defeat. They were running a course to victory.

Every day, you and I take steps in words, deeds and thoughts. These steps not only move our lives down a path. They also shape us. They grow or weaken us in our task. Perhaps, this is why St. Paul likened his mission on earth to a race. Where he lived, who he saw, what he said and did was all about his mission. In an emotional and final farewell, the apostle said:

I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace. (Acts 20:24, NIV)

Paul saw himself as a child of God, who was reconciled to his heavenly Father through faith in Jesus. He now was on a lifelong mission of helping God's lost children be reconciled and restore to fellowship with their Father. At one point he went to Jerusalem to consult with some disciples of Jesus. He wrote about consulting with leaders in Jerusalem:

I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain. (Galatians 2:2-3, NIV)

Paul wanted to make certain that he was teaching and living in concert with Jesus' words and works. This was his race, and it is ours. Are we speaking, acting and thinking in line with the truth of our salvation. Are we growing stronger, more purposeful, and more fruitful in our redemptive mission? At one point, Paul rebuked some believers. He asked:

You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? (Galatians 5:7-8, NIV)

These believers were running a good race. Their speech, deeds and thoughts were revealing a redeeming God. The race was not merely for Paul, it also belonged to them. The race is for all

believers. We all are a part of God's redemptive mission; but the Galatian believers lost their focus. They talked now of being good or bad, of meeting God's rules. They lost sight of God's Spirit who was present redeeming and purifying people through faith. Do you see God reaching out to you? Do you witness God working in you? Do you feel the pleasure of God? Are you focused on a relationship with God rather than being good or bad? Are you focused on helping people with their relationship to God rather than whether they are being good or bad?

Our life journey with God is not a short sprint. The writer of Hebrews declared: *"Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us"* (Hebrews 12:1, NIV).

I use to watch cross country races when my daughter competed. Participants would run a course marked out for them. Some of the courses had notorious hills. I remember the golf course in Canby and another one in Redwood Falls. The race included killer hills that could quickly separate runners if they had not practiced attacking them. Long before these athletes stepped onto these courses, they began training. Miles and hours were logged, but unless they were vastly superior runners, the terrain could get them.

I've seen the hills discourage many believers in our life-race. We think it is going to be an easy thing to relate and walk with God. We forget the competition is fierce. Real forces interfere with you and God. We think it is going to be easy to do God's work. We forget the price Jesus paid in obedience and what he warned his followers. We think success will come just because we are sincere. We forget that conquerors must battle. They must grow in the attitudes and actions of successful combat.

The Apostle Paul gave us three pieces of advice.

First, run to win. Don't worry about your past. Don't worry about your failures. Paul wrote:

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize... (Philippians 3:13-14, NIV)

Don't let failures or circumstance deter you. If you believe and press ahead, God will grow an intimate relationship with you and produce fruit through you that reveals Jesus is working on earth. If you believe and press ahead, you will win. You'll grow to the full measure of Jesus' stature. God promises this to you. Don't just participate. Run to win. Don't just confess faith and do a few faith activities. Devote yourself to live as Jesus' companion and Jesus' disciple.

Second, train to win. The best training isn't private, where you work out in isolation. Good training makes use of knowledge from people who know more than you do. The best training isn't comfortable. It stretches you. It makes you do things you've never done before. Generally, runners train in packs and race in packs. They encourage one another and watch out for one another. As their abilities increase, they pace themselves with quicker people. Who are you hanging with? If you hang with the doubters, you'll fill your mind and heart with doubt. You'll drop out when it gets hard. Are you hanging with believers? Are you learning with believers? Do you get wise counsel? Are you more intimate with God today than a year ago? Are you more certain of your mission today than a year ago? Are you becoming more fruitful?

As I followed my daughter's high school career, I saw a second thing separate runners in a race: injuries and illness. Athletes had to learn how to prevent them, work with them and heal from them. One runner had not lost a race all year until the state championship. Somehow her constitution was weakened. In her final race she dropped behind many she had beaten earlier. For her, there was another year. She didn't give up. She continued to train, and the next year she won pulling away.

In our life-race we sustain injuries. We also become spiritually ill. We get infected with fear, pride, greed, lust, unbelief. In response, we become withdrawn, competitive, manipulative, deceitful or discouraged, but Jesus, an amazing physician and trainer, intervenes in your life. The next few Sundays, he'll be teaching you and me how to win when we are dogged by fear, tough opposition, hindering expectations, and confidence-robbing failures. It is important that we all submit to our physician and listen to our trainer. With him we'll win. Without him we'll fail.

Third, keep your winning focus. Runners learn to focus. They must focus their movement, and they must focus their attention. If the arms flail about and the stride drifts from side to side, there must be correction. Everything must work toward the goal. Movements must become compact and purposeful. Is that true of your life? Is your family life, work life, leisure helping you live like Christ? Are your movements purposeful and focused? Even if you get your body focused, you must also keep the mind focused. You must not become preoccupied with your competition. You must not be put off by the hills and valleys. You must not allow the side aches or fatigue to distract you. You are in a long race. Don't complain. Get counsel. Christ is a counselor in the Holy Spirit. You are running the course marked out for you. Find out from God how to run it. Pray until you have the answers. God talks to you and also send messengers. Expect answers.

We are in a life-race, so forget the victory lap for now. Instead, understand that you are being groomed to win. Believe it and act accordingly.