

“RUNNING TO WIN IN THE RACE OF LIFE”

(I Corinthians 9:24-27)

The Christian life is far more active and aggressive than most Christians have realized. According to this text, the Christian life is not a spectator sport, but a “game” calling for diligent participation from each believer. However, it must be sadly conceded that most Christians today never seem to get out of the spectator mode.

Alonzo Stagg is renowned as the founder of the American game of football. As a coach, he was known for his “coaching on the bench” while a game was in progress on the field. On one occasion, the game clock was winding down when Stagg turned to his third-team quarterback, who had only been on the field for a few plays all year. The coach posed to the young quarterback this situation: “There are eighteen seconds left on the game clock. We are behind by six points, but we have the ball on the opponent’s twelve-yard line. It is fourth down, with two yards to go for a first down, and twelve yards to go for a game-winning touchdown. What would you do?” The uncomfortable young quarterback quickly answered, “Coach, I think I would move down to the other end of the bench to get a better view of the play!” Tragically, the most participation which many Christians have in “the big game of life” is to jockey for a position on the bench as they see *someone else* running the plays. Christian, don’t spend all your time in the locker room, listening to “chalk-talks” by a smart coach, or in the huddle discussing the plays. *Go to the line of scrimmage and get the “feel” of the game.* You may get bruised by a few hard hits here and there, but you will like the feel of victory when the game is won!

Some years ago, cartoonist Al Capp caricatured our society in a comic strip called *Li'l Abner*. The comic strip was a combination of political and social satire. One of the characters in the comic strip was an odd-looking character called the “shmoo.” The shmoo was shaped like an exaggerated pear. Its head was small and round, blending into a big, round body. The shmoo was intended to be a commentary (indeed, a satire) of the trend of the times in our society. The idea was that, if our society continued in the direction it had taken, soon all Americans would have small brains, big bodies, and even bigger bottoms! In other words, it was a critique of the “spectator syndrome” of our society. Tragically, most Christians are caught in this syndrome. In fact, it never seems to occur to most Christians that there is another possibility except the “survival routine” of going to church, being a good person, reading the Bible, praying, and going to church again. Friends, the Christian life is far grander and greater than that! When properly lived, it offers a great gamut for risk-taking and winning and losing. It offers a challenge that makes great demands and offers great rewards. In short, it can be as adventurous as any life man has ever known.

Our text is one of over fifty references to athletics in the New Testament, most of them appearing in the letters of the Apostle Paul. One cannot read such a passage as this with any degree of understanding without realizing that Paul must have been a very

intelligent sports fan. He must have observed in person the athletic events he refers to in this text. There are at least ten specific references to sports personnel and sports events in this brief paragraph.

For example, he refers to the *runners* in a track and field event (verse 24).

Then he refers to the *race* itself. The word he uses for “race” in verse 24 is also the word from which we derive our English word “stadium,” but in Paul’s day it referred to the *distance* of a race (some 202 yards) rather than the *place* where the event occurred.

Also in verse 24, Paul refers to the *prize* which the winner receives in such a race. And he counsels each participant in the Christian race to run in a manner that will make a *winner* of him (verse 24c).

In verse 25, he mentions the *athlete* himself, referring to him as the “man who strives for the mastery.” Literally, that phrase speaks of the athlete “who agonizes in order to attain excellence.” The word “agonizes” refers to the *disciplines* and *conditioning* the athlete must practice in order to adequately compete in the field in which he participates.

Also in verse 25, Paul says that every athlete “who disciplines himself in order to attain excellence must be *temperate in all things*.” The word “temperate” means “self-controlled,” and the text says that the winning athlete’s self-control must extend to “all things” in his life. You see, a champion athlete will not only omit from his daily life all things that are bad for his performance, he will also eliminate many “good” things that will prevent full concentration or unhindered performance. Following this same athletic picture, Hebrews 12:1 says that the athlete will “lay aside every weight” that hinders his best performance, and not merely the obvious wickedness that will destroy his effectiveness.

In verse 25, our text also refers to the *trophy* or the award the winning athlete will receive at the judge’s stand when the race is over. He says that the winner in an earthly event may win a “corruptible crown” such as a wreath or a plaque or a trophy, but the Christian is running the true race in order to gain an “incorruptible crown.” Here, Paul points out the inconsistency of earthly athletes engaging in such rigorous training in order to gain only a temporal crown, while the Christian often will not pay any price to win an “incorruptible” (eternal) reward.

In verse 26, Paul moves from running to *fighting*. He says that he does not run or fight without a *goal* or without purpose. “I do not run as one who is uncertain of the course or the finish line,” and “I do not fight as one who aimlessly flails at the air.” The latter reference is to the common training practice used by a boxer known as “*shadow boxing*.”

Then, in verse 27, Paul leaves running and boxing and moves to *wrestling*. Note that the events mentioned have moved through a progression – from the individual

participation of separate performers (running) to more intense and more aggressive contact with other participants (boxing and wrestling). In verse 27, Paul says, “I keep my body under (that is, underneath me),” a picture of extreme discipline. The idea is that he controls his body in order to prevent his body from controlling him.

In verse 27, Paul refers to the *public address announcer* who officially starts the events and introduces the participants with each new event. He does this under the image of “preaching,” or heralding the events. Then, he closes with a warning that it is possible to run the Christian race, and then break a rule and lose the reward at the end of the race.

What a cosmopolitan picture given by a cosmopolitan Christian of the cosmopolitan life that is ours in Christ!

Some time ago, a college wrestling team was traveling to a neighboring college to compete in a wrestling match that evening. As they traveled, the coach warned them of the other team’s strategy. “They have perfected a certain hold and have been winning all of their recent matches,” he said to his team. “The particular maneuver that has been winning for them is called ‘the double reverse.’ Here is the way it works. Your opponent gets a hold on you, then he folds you up once, then he folds you up again, and while you are helpless, he throws you down and pins you, and before you know it the match is over.” However, it was obvious that his wrestlers did not think the “double reverse” would be a really serious threat, so they didn’t seem to take his warning seriously. He continued to exhort them, but they showed little interest in hearing of the “double reverse.”

The team arrived at the opponent’s gymnasium, preparations were made for the six matches on schedule for that evening, and the coach continued to warn his team. Every wrestler reassured the coach, and the matches began. However, in the very first match, the visiting wrestler was victimized by the “double reverse” and lost the match – as the coach groaned. The players immediately began to refer to the “dreaded double reverse,” taking it a bit more seriously than before. However, the second wrestler was also defeated after being thrown by the “dreaded double reverse.” The coach’s despair and anger intensified with each new match. His team went through five matches without solving the “dreaded double reverse,” losing all five matches. The coach was seething with anger as he said to his last wrestler, “Please don’t get caught as the others did; I would like to win at least one of these matches!” The match began, and within two minutes, the final wrestler on the visiting team was caught in the “dreaded double reverse.” The coach groaned and buried his head in his hands and refused to look at the inevitable outcome. The home stands were cheering wildly – but suddenly the cheering stopped, and the visitor’s bench erupted with cheers. The coach looked up just in time to see his wrestler pin his opponent and win the match! When the celebrations had finally ceased, the coach took his winning wrestler aside and exclaimed, “What happened? When I last looked, you were locked in the double reverse and there seemed no way out. How did you get out of his hold and win the match?” His wrestler replied, “Well, coach, when he got that hold on me, I was so twisted up I could hardly move. But when I opened my eyes, all I could see inches away from my nose was a big toe. So I did the

only thing I could think of to do; I opened my mouth and bit down on that toe as hard as I could bite – *and coach, it is absolutely amazing what a man can do when he bites off his own big toe!*”

The story explains the radical difference between *extrinsic* motivation (illustrated by the counsel of the coach) and *intrinsic* motivation (illustrated by the athlete biting off his own big toe). The motivation of the athlete may be casual when he is hearing instructions from some other person, but it becomes very intense when damage (or delight) is being experienced by him personally. One of the great problems among Christians is that we have depended far too much upon the imposition of extrinsic motivation and not nearly enough upon the individualizing of intrinsic motivation.

What kind of life is the Christian life? Just how are we supposed to live it? The text supplies an excellent commentary on the nature and method of the Christian life. Let me point out several features of that life as it is presented in this text.

I. CITIZENSHIP

The first requirement for living the Christian life is *citizenship* in the kingdom or the family of God. The background of this text is the famed Isthmian Games which were played periodically in the city of Corinth. The city was located on a narrow ribbon of land which connected the bulbous Peloponnesian Peninsula of southern Greece with the mainland of northern Greece. Athletic contests were held near the city which rivaled the famous Olympic Games. Paul uses these games as the background for his great picture of the Christian life.

In order for an athlete to compete in the Isthmian Games, he first had to be a born citizen of Greece. He had to be Greek by birth and by blood. No athlete who was not a Greek citizen could participate. Even so, before any human being can participate in the Christian race, the “race of life,” he must be a born citizen of the Kingdom of God, a born member of the Family of God. Jesus said, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.” The word translated “again” is the Greek word *anōthen*, which means “from above.” You see, your first birth was “from beneath”. You were born in sin, and your birth created momentum in a sinful, downward direction. If that direction and momentum are to be changed, you must be born “from above,” “of God,” and that birth will give you an upward direction toward God.

A physiologist once said, “The immense energies of an individual human life are rooted in the moments of conception and birth.” Even so, the immense spiritual energies of the Christian life are rooted in the miraculous moment of the new birth. If a human being is going to run in the “race of life” pictured in our text, he must be a citizen of the Kingdom of God. He must be “born again.” Have you been born again?

II. CHOICE

Second, the believer's participation in the "race of life" is dependent upon his *choice*. Many citizens of Greece never participated in the Isthmian Games because they were not chosen. And, even when a citizen-athlete was invited to participate, he had to agree to participate by his responsive choice.

If you are a born-again person, if you have been saved, you should pause at this moment and remind yourself, "I have been recruited by the greatest of all Coaches to participate in the greatest of all games, the game of spiritual life. I have been chosen to 'run with patience the race that God has set before His people.'" However, you must remind yourself, too, that not only are you chosen, but you also must choose. There is nothing automatic at any time about the running of this race.

One of my all-time favorite movies is the award-winning *Chariots of Fire*, the story of the Christian missionary to China, Eric Liddell. The movie is largely set in Liddell's college days and features the competition between Eric Liddell as a record-setting runner and Harold Abrahams, a man struggling to find his own value. On the occasion of a race between the two, Liddell had just beaten Abrahams in a 100 yard dash and Abrahams was sitting sulking in the empty stands. His girl friend slipped into a seat beside him and chided him for his attitude. Abrahams said dejectedly, Sybil, if I can't win, I won't run!" She replied gently, "Harold, if you don't *run*, you can't *win*!" Many believers need to respond to Jesus' choice of *them* by choosing to run for *Him* "the race He has set before them" (and running it on His terms, not their own).

Years ago, a great linebacker played for the UCLA football team. His name was Don Moomaw, and in the days of freshman eligibility, Don Moomaw did the impossible – he made the All-America football team all four years of his college eligibility. When Moomaw came to school for his senior season, he had accepted the challenge to provide "senior leadership" for the lower classmen on the team. After arriving ahead of the rest of the team and beginning practice early, the seniors welcomed the rest of the team. One evening, Moomaw came back to his dorm room, "dragging" from an exhausting workout. When he entered the dorm suite, one of his freshman roommates was sitting with another freshman in the lounge, each holding and reading a black-bound New Testament. "What are you guys reading?" Moomaw asked. "Oh, it's just a book," one answered. "Is it any good?" Moomaw asked. "*Is it any good?*" one answered with enthusiasm. "It's just the best!" "A good plot?" Moomaw asked. "A good *plot*?" the freshman answered. "You wouldn't believe it!" "Any good characters?" "Man, the main character is incredible!" said the freshman. "Why don't you read it and see for yourself?" Don Moomaw took the New Testament, began to read it a short time later, and *sat up all night* that night reading the New Testament. Jim Murray, the great syndicated sports columnist for the Los Angeles Times, when telling Moomaw's story later, said, "When the sun came up the next morning, Don Moomaw *changed coaches*." Moomaw had realized what an incredible honor and blessing it was to be chosen and recruited by Jesus Christ, the greatest of all Coaches, and he signed his name to the Letter of Relationship. The last time I traced Don Moomaw, he was the pastor of the Bellaire Presbyterian Church in the

Los Angeles area. The choice of God was matched by the choice of the believer, and Moomaw began to play on God's side in the game of life. Playing the game of life requires choice on the part of each believer.

III. COACHABLE

Third, not only must each "player" in the game of life be a citizen of the Kingdom of God, not only must he make a choice to fully participate in the game; he must also be *coachable*, or teachable. A good athlete must respectfully surrender his will, his schedule, and his ability to the coach. In the Christian life, this involves a settlement in the heart of the individual Christian concerning the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In the terms of our text, the Lordship of Christ means that Jesus, the greatest of all coaches, calls all the shots for those who play on His team. In fact, Jesus is not merely a "bench-warmer" who smugly calls the plays from the comfort of the bench. He is a "playing coach," who joins us in the heat of the battle. In His incarnational participation on the playing field, He received the full onslaught of the opponent and his team, was apparently overrun at His position, but then showed the resiliency of the resurrection for His "second-half run" at victory. What an unbelievable honor and pleasure it is to be coached by Jesus Christ!

However, it is in the nature of the beast, the performing athlete, to elevate his ability and his instinct for the game above the decisions of the coach. There is not a sports field in the entire wide gamut of athletics that does not have its uncoachable athlete. Many a gifted young athlete has arrived on the practice field with great expectations, great public attention, and great media accolades, only to "bomb out" and become a disappointing failure – because he refused to be coachable. Paul wrote to Timothy in II Timothy 2:5, "If an athlete competes to win in athletic contests, yet he will not win the trophy, unless he competes according to the rules." Every good coach knows the importance of training rules, and he knows that he must not tolerate flagrant violations of those rules by any member of the team. The daily newspapers seem to carry many notices of athlete's dismissals from certain teams "because they violated certain unspecified team rules." The reprisal for this streak of disrespect and rebellion may vary from rebuke to suspension, or to dismissal from the team altogether. The athlete must be coachable, and this means that he must do everything necessary to keep the rules and follow the "game-plan" of the coach. In the greater game, every Christian must carefully maintain his obedience to Jesus as Lord. He has proven His worth and capability again and again, and He calls for our loyalty and surrender at every "turn" of the game.

If you saw the great athletic movie, *Hoosiers*, a movie about Indiana basketball, you will recall that a new coach arrived at a basketball-mad Indiana town to teach in the local high school and to coach the boys' basketball team. "Armchair coaches" were everywhere in this town, and in their own "correct" opinion, they all knew more than the coach about how to run the team. You will remember the great showdown, the great stand-off, between the coach (played by Gene Hackman) and several athletes on his team, as well as several loud and ardent citizens of the town. Finally, through the coach's demand that his rules be honored, coupled with the athletes' desire to excel and win, the coach was able to blend his players into an excellent team, and they even won the state

championship against a team which “on paper” seemed to have every advantage over them. The movie revealed that it was the difficult choice of the players and the citizens to honor the coach’s control that won for the team. The same is true in being a Christian. Our coach’s strategy is sound. He needs no “correction,” no “alternate game-plans,” no “sideline quarterbacks.” We must hang on His words and follow His game-plan. We must be sensitive to His leading and knowledgeable of His strategy, then we must obey with our very lives.

Every baseball fan is familiar with the name of Reggie Jackson, the “Mr. October” of baseball fame who became renowned for getting big hits, especially home runs, at crucial play-off moments in the baseball play-off month of October. Jackson closed out a remarkable career playing with the Baltimore Orioles under a managerial wizard named Earl Weaver. One year, the Orioles were in the thick of a pennant race, and every game was crucial in deciding the winner. In one particular game, the two pitchers were outstanding and the score was tied in the fourth inning. Reggie Jackson led off the inning as the first hitter for his team in that inning. Reggie stroked a line drive into right field for a leadoff single. The opposing pitcher was renowned for his control, the mixture of the speed of his pitches (keeping opposing hitters off balance), and his curve ball. He was not known as a pitcher with an overpowering fastball. As Reggie stood on first base, he rehearsed all these facts in his mind. He calculated the pitcher’s slow delivery to the plate – and decided that he could easily steal second base against this pitcher. However, Earl Weaver had established the clubhouse rule that nobody could steal a base this late in the season without a direct signal from the manager himself. Reggie glanced at Weaver on the bench, but the manager turned his head and refused to look at the base runner. So Reggie made a decision on his own; he knew he could steal second base and get into scoring position. So he carefully took a long lead from first base, calculated the delivery of the pitcher, and broke for second at the pitch. He was right in his calculations. He slid into second ahead of the catcher’s throw and the second baseman’s tag, and waited with a sense of satisfaction over his triumph. The fans clapped and shouted their approval of the advance of the base runner and the possibility of scoring a run.

When the game was over, a fuming Earl Weaver manager called Reggie Jackson into his office. The manager said to his player, “Reggie, you might be the best player who has ever played this game, but you have played your last game for me if you do not quickly relearn one basic lesson – *the game of baseball is not played from the perspective of the fans in the stands, or the perspective of the player on the field. It is played exclusively from the perspective of the manager in the dugout.* Let me tell you what you did by stealing second base. First, you took the bat out of the hands of our best power hitter, Lee May. They walked him, putting him on the base you had just left. Because we had two runners on, I was forced to use my best pinch hitter early in the game. We did not score, and probably lost the game – and possibly the pennant – because you stole second base. The decision looked good at the moment, but it was actually insubordination against the manager and a disservice to the entire team.” What a perfect example of the importance of listening to our Manager, the Lord Jesus Christ, Who views the entire game from His elevated and infallible managerial perspective in heaven!

Remember that He is not only “the Lord of the harvest,” He is also “the Lord of the harvesters,” and He must direct our moves on the field if we are to win in the manner He desires. Our part is simply that we must be coachable.

IV. COMPETITION

The fourth characteristic of those who would have victory in the game of life as Paul reveals it is a strong sense of *competitiveness*. Many people dislike this word as a definitive word for Christians, but I think their dislike is based upon a misconception. The idea here is not that of building self-aggrandizing performance, self-serving effort, but that of necessary competition with the forces that oppose the Christian walk.

As I write these words, the National Basketball Association has reached its final annual playoff competition. The Los Angeles Lakers are again playing for the world championship. The Lakers are anchored by a giant of a man who plays center on the team, Shaquille O’Neal. His play is a “dishing out” of punishment to those who play near him, and a receiving of punishment from them. Suppose “Shaq” went to his coach before an important showdown game and said, “Coach, go over to the other bench and tell those guys who are guarding me to ease up a little. They keep attacking me, and they’re destroying my enjoyment of the game. Every time I get the ball, several of them swarm over me to take it away from me. Every time I try to shoot, they bump me and push me to throw me off balance. Coach, I could do a whole lot better if they would just leave me alone.” No, that would be laughable and ludicrous. The coach might reply, “Sir, this organization doesn’t pay you megamillions of dollars annually for the other team to leave you alone. The fans come to see you fight your way through all those obstacles you mentioned to lead this team to victory.” A part of Shaq’s satisfaction in participating in the game is in overcoming the obstacles that the other teams throw at him, and a part of the fan’s pleasure is in seeing him accomplish that. In the same way, *opposition and competition are necessary for the participant in the game of life.*

Earlier, I mentioned the forces that oppose the Christian walk and the Christian’s service for Christ. There are three such forces – two *objective* forces, the *devil* and the *world*, and one *subjective* force – the “*flesh*,” or the lower drives of the self-life. The devil is the *infernal* foe against whom every Christian must compete, the world is the *external* foe against which every Christian must compete, and the flesh is the *internal* foe against which every Christian must compete. The devil is the *spiritual* enemy of every Christian, the world is the *social* enemy of every Christian, and the flesh is the *sensual* and *selfish* enemy of every Christian. Christian, you will face-off with all three of these foes today. And the competition is fierce. All three of these enemies are competitively bent upon destroying the Christian, and he must learn how to engage each in real battle if he is to win in this game.

The Apostle Paul vividly identifies the competition in our text. His first illustration may be a reference to the enmity of the *flesh*. In verse 27, he said, “I keep my body under, and bring it into subjection.” This is a wrestling figure, which pictures the

Christian as a wrestler who “pins” his own body lest it throw and defeat him. This text sounds similar to the counsel of Romans 12:1, which charges the Christian to “present your (his) body a living sacrifice.” Actually, the figure in our text also contains a reference to boxing, with the strange twist that the opponent is one’s own body. One translation says, “I hit myself under the eye, giving myself a black eye.” Another sounds almost brutal when it says, “I beat myself black and blue.” This is certainly not a masochistic idea, but a simple acknowledgement that I must discipline myself with whatever discipline is necessary to keep myself under the control of Christ.

Evangelist Mike Gilchrist recounts a relaxed Saturday evening in a city away from home as he awaited the closing services on Sunday in a church in that city. A church member took him to see a game where a colorful African-American press box announcer commented on the game plays from the booth, broadcasting his comments over the field on the public address system as the plays were occurring on the field. Mike said that in the third quarter, a running back broke into the open field and was apparently on his way to a score when he stumbled over his own foot. He tried to regain his balance, running for several yards off balance, then sprawling headlong to the turf, still some fifteen yards from the goal line. The announcer, trying to explain the play, said, “He’s away for a touchdown! No, no! He’s stumbling! He’s stumbling! And now, he’s down..., he’s down..., he’s down – by *self-tackle-ization!*” Self-tackle-ization – what a vivid word in describing the reason for many falls and failures in many Christian’s lives! The undisciplined, unchecked flesh causes them to stumble in their spiritual walk.

A boy showed up from school one day with a black eye. His mother saw it and exclaimed, “Who gave you that?” He replied, “Mom, nobody *gives* you one of these; you have to *fight* for it. Many Christians need to shift their thinking from passive ease to an intense military mentality. We must again see ourselves as competitors in this great game. We must maintain a healthy sense of true competition if we are to win.

The *world* is also a formidable enemy for the Christian. The inference of the test is that a worthy athlete must renounce the glitter and glamor of the world system and stay focused on his goals and purposes to “win,” to succeed in the athletic field in which he participates.

A teacher asked her young class, “What is the hardest thing you ever tried to do?” The answers were fairly predictable until she came to young Jimmy. In answer to her question, Jimmy replied, “The hardest thing I ever did was to pull up a cornstalk by the roots.” The class hooted and jeered at Jimmy’s answer, but the teacher wanted further information. “Jimmy, why was that so hard?” she asked. “It was so hard because, while I was pulling on one end of that cornstalk, *the whole world was pulling on the other end.*” Even so, the godless social system of this world is pulling against us as we seek to win for Christ, and we must ignore its allurements and keep our eyes on our coach and our goals.

The last enemy in the competition against us is the *devil*. The devil is deadly and deceitful, and often gains the upper hand before we know he has entered the field. Jesus

said, "The thief comes not except to steal, kill and destroy" (John 10:10). Note Satan's three weapons: dispossession, death and destruction. That is, he works to steal the things of greatest value from the Christian – such things as his character, his testimony, his joy, his participation in the game, etc. Also, death is his "stock-in-trade," and he is always working to advance his product. He knows that "to be carnally-minded is death" (Romans 8:6), and so he labors tirelessly to make every Christian as carnally-minded (self-centered in thought, word, deed and purpose) as possible. And it is Satan's design to leave every field strewn with carnage and destruction. What a vicious, consistent, hateful competitor he is! If we are to win, he must be treated by us with the same regard with which he approaches us. He hates us, and we must return the favor. He strives to stop our advance in his territory, and we must strive to stop his advance in our (His) territory.

It is an old axiom in sports as well as in other fields that "a good offense is the best defense." A team that scores at every opportunity is going to lose very few games. Christians must stop merely playing defense, always protecting themselves against the assaults of the enemy, and venture into the enemy's strongholds to deal him some hard and heavy blows. The "race" involves individual *production*, not just individual *protection*. Our text is about *production*, not mere *participation*. Take a moment and reread the preceding verses, especially verses 19-23. A sense of valiant effort and victorious effect prevails in what I call "the greatest picture of cosmopolitan Christianity ever written." Ponder the key words again: "I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the Gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you." These are the words of a man who has mastered the strategy of the Christian battle – and has every intention of winning for Christ's sake.

In the days of the Miami Dolphins National Football League dynasty, the days of Dolphin glory under Coach Don Shula, the Dolphins had a great linebacker named Mike Kolen, who was nicknamed "Captain Crunch" because of his fierce defensive tackles. Kolen, a former Auburn University All-American, played on three Dolphin teams which won Super Bowl championships. When he retired from NFL play, Kolen was asked by his old coach, "Shug" Jordan of Auburn, to become a part of his coaching staff. He asked Kolen to head Auburn's annual recruiting effort to convince the best athletes to play for Jordan and Auburn. When Kolen arrived on campus, he went to Jordan's office. "What kind of players do we want to recruit, Coach?" "Well, Mike, you know the guy who gets knocked down and gets up . . . ?" "We don't want that guy, do we, Coach?" "No, we don't," Jordan replied. "You know the guy who gets knocked and gets up, gets knocked down and gets up, gets knocked down and gets up?" "We don't really want that guy either, do we, Coach?" "No, we don't," Coach Jordan replied. "You know the guy who gets knocked down and gets up, gets knocked down and gets up, knocked down, gets up, knocked down, gets up, knocked down, gets up, knocked down, gets up, knocked down, gets up, knocked down, gets up, knocked down, gets up, knocked down, gets up, knocked down, gets up . . . ?" Jordan's voice faded as if he was continuing the idea. Mike Kolen said, "Coach, that's the one we want, isn't it?" "No, Mike, it's not," Jordan replied firmly, "*We want that guy who is knocking all those other people down!*" Jesus Christ is looking for the strategic Christian who will establish beachheads in enemy territory, drive the enemy back, and begin to build strong, militant Christians for Him in all these territories. For this tactical mission, well-trained, loving competitors are required.

V. CONCENTRATION

The fifth characteristic of the Christian who would participate in the contest suggested in the text is *concentration*. That is, his life must be focused and not fragmented. Paul suggests this characteristic in verse 26, when he says, “I run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one who beats the air.” Before verse 26, the Apostle has been writing to others and about others, but here, he speaks personally about himself. It is as if he said, “I can’t decide for anyone else. I can’t determine the destiny of others. But *for myself*, I know what I will do.” Here is a wonderful picture of determination, consolidation of attention, focus of mind, heart and will – in short, complete concentration on the crucial thing.

Can you imagine a sprinter in a track meet devoting his attention to the other runners as he runs the race, or focusing on the crowd in the stands, or localizing his attention upon his girl friend in a certain seat, or even looking at his own feet? No, every runner knows that he must focus on the goal and be careful to run in his lane. Every boxer knows that he must concentrate upon his opponent, and the same is true of a wrestler. To allow his concentration to be interrupted will likely be fatal to any of these performers.

Paul was following this analogy when he wrote in Philippians 3:13-14, “This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” Here is a man with a splendid concentration upon the Person and purpose of Christ.

The first heralded “Miracle Mile” was run on August 7, 1954, between Roger Bannister, a 25-year-old British medical student, and John Landy, a 24-year-old Australian. Both had already cracked the much-sought four-minute mile. When the big race began, Landy led almost the entire race, but he didn’t know how long a lead he had near the end. Curiosity conquered him and he looked back to locate his opponent. Bannister had enough “kick” to put on a burst of speed in the last few yards, passing Landy at the last second, and winning at the finish line. What beat Landy, putting Roger Bannister’s name in the record books instead of his? *The lack of concentration in the last ten yards of the race*. Perhaps a number of Christians reading these words need to take a few minutes with God just now and ask Him to fully focus your attention upon Himself and His purpose – lest you fail to “receive the prize” because of attention that is either *divided* or totally *distracted*. The Christian life requires full and undivided concentration upon its Object, Jesus, and upon its objective, His purpose.

The Bible often reminds us to maintain focus upon Jesus and the assignment He has given us. The personal assignment is to cooperate with Him in our own transformation into Christ-likeness. The universal assignment is world impact by “turning people into disciples” (Matthew 28:19). To see this assignment discussed in much more complete detail, consult my book, *Tally Ho the Fox*.

At this point, let me say that many Christians seem to have other focal points for their lives – self-piety, faithfulness in institutional church activities, etc. – and have apparently omitted *His* assignment from their lives. Christians and groups that have no vision of world-wide outreach, no strategy for multiplying themselves, are in danger of catching the disease someone has called “koinonitis” – an overdose of fellowship! And they may be shocked when they arrive in heaven charged with too much introspection, too much introversion, too much implosion. *Nature shows that inbreeding within the same family will produce deformity, and the same is true in the spiritual realm.* I repeat: the Christian life requires full and undivided concentration upon its Object, Jesus, and upon its objective, His personal and universal assignments for us.

V. CAUTION

The sixth characteristic of those who would successfully “compete to win” in this race is *caution*. Paul indicates that it is possible to enter the race, recruit others to participate, and yet finally be a “castaway” (verse 27). He indicates that a believer may focus on “others” (minor emphasis in the text), and yet “he himself” (major emphasis in the text) “be a castaway.”

Much attention has been focused by a variety of commentators representing many viewpoints on the word “castaway.” Of course, there are those who say that this indicates that a person who has been saved can lose his salvation. However, Paul has already clearly settled that matter in I Corinthians 3 when he indicates that a believer may have built “wood, hay, and stubble” into the superstructure (his life) that he is building upon the one foundation (Jesus Christ, I Cor. 3:11). However, when that believer stands at the Judgment Seat of Christ (where only believers will stand; unsaved people will appear before the Great White Throne of Revelation 20:11-15), though his fleshly works or sins will be “burned up,” “he himself will be saved, as if through fire.” The fire of judgment will consume the dross of his fleshly works and his sins, but he himself will be saved. So Paul is not talking about salvation here.

Let me give an illustration that will show the necessity of balancing competition, concentration, and caution in the service a Christian renders. In the annals of sports, the 1984 Olympics will be remembered for a tragic event. The women’s 3000 meter run was given incredible media build-up because of the focus on two great runners, Mary Decker of the United States and Zola Budd of South Africa (though Budd actually ran for Great Britain). The race lived up to its hype. Midway in the race, the runners had matched each other stride for stride and were running even. It appeared that the race would be decided by a “photo finish.” But suddenly, Zola Budd allowed herself to be slightly distracted, moved too close to Mary Decker, and slightly clipped Decker’s foot. Decker fell to the track as if she had been shot. The fall injured her so badly that she could not finish the race. Not only did the mishap cost her an opportunity to win that race, but she also did not run competitively for a long period of time. It cost her many opportunities and many victories. Zola Budd, on the other hand, was disgraced by the mishap and never fully recovered her status and the appreciation of the sports world. She was a

temporary “castaway” in the sports world. Competition must be seasoned with concentration and caution, and caution and concentration must be exercised even in the most heated competition.

Remember that the essential background qualification for participation in the Isthmian Games was that the participant had to be a Greek citizen. The qualification for the Christian life is that the prospect must be born again. He must be a citizen of the Kingdom of God, a member of the Family of God. Many different things can happen in the life after birth, but a born person simply cannot be unborn! The disqualified Greek athlete did not lose his citizenship, only his opportunity to win a prize.

Furthermore, Paul is talking about his own apostolic service here, and he isolates himself in the text. In verse 26, he said, “I (and the word ‘I’ bears major emphasis in the text) so run.” The race represents the life he lives and the service he renders *after* he is saved, and he indicates that he does not want to serve *others* (an emphatic word in verse 27) and then have his service disapproved so he wins no award at the end of the race. The suggestion here is that a believer must be sure to keep himself right before God, and must not become so involved with others that he fails to keep his own life in order. So the issue here is one of reward, not salvation. However, this does not reduce the caution of the passage. A Christian’s holy fear of himself is one of his best guards against failure. Every believer should be very cautious lest he become so busily absorbed in serving others that he fails to keep his own fences repaired.

In interpreting the word “castaway,” I do not want to minimize the warning of Paul’s statement. He is talking about the Christian servant being “put on the shelf” as far as his service is concerned. I recently found a great paragraph by Glyn Evans which I want to share with you. Evans wrote, “God’s way is, ‘If the people don’t respond to My call to serve, I will get others.’ Personally, I have often been guilty of ‘the sin of indispensability.’ I have treated some leaders and some friends as indispensable. However, in God’s eyes there are no indispensable servants. All are expendable in His service. I cannot claim such a privileged position with God that He cannot afford to bypass me in the ongoing of His work. I must never abandon the conditions on which fruitful servanthood rests, and never give myself the luxury of feeling that God’s work will die when I die. God abhors that kind of a vacuum, and He will quickly fill it with someone else. Isaiah 42:4 says, ‘He will not fail or be discouraged until He brings justice to victory.’” Every servant of Christ must hear and heed these wise words of caution.

Let us remind ourselves again of Paul’s words to Timothy, “If a man competes to win in an athletic contest, yet he will not win the trophy unless he competes according to the rules.” An athlete needs a deep-set sense of personal integrity, and he needs to be reminded of the importance of that integrity.

Just recently, I read the announcement of the coming retirement from NBA basketball of 7’ 2” David Robinson of the San Antonio Spurs. At 36 years of age, Robinson has played for thirteen years in the intense competition of the professional National Basketball Association, where nerves are easily frayed and tempers easily flair.

But David Robinson has been faithful to his convictions as a firm believer in Jesus Christ, and has gained the respect of teams and players around the league. He has also shown a remarkable self-control which likely has developed from the daily disciplines of his Christian life. In the news article that announced Robinson's coming retirement at the end of next year's NBA season, Los Angeles Lakers' center Shaquille O'Neal was quoted as saying, "David Robinson is a class act, a legend, still my idol. I can't say anything bad about a guy like that." I'm sure that the inner character of David Robinson is a mix of positive faith in Jesus Christ and negative caution that he not fail His Lord. I'm sure, too, that some other players who have faced him on the court admire his integrity but do not have the firmness of character to maintain such integrity themselves. Wholesome caution is necessary.

Examples of failure to maintain such caution abound in the field of athletics. For example, in 1912, a young American Indian athlete named Jim Thorpe won the decathlon and the pentathlon at the Olympic Games in Stockholm, Sweden. He was presented to the king of Sweden, who said to him, "You, sir, are the greatest athlete in the world today." But a short time later he had to return the gold medals he had won because it was discovered that he had played professional baseball in 1911, earning \$5 a week. He had won the events but had broken the rules, so he lost the prizes he had won. It was not until 1984 at the Olympic Games in Los Angeles that the Olympic Committee reversed the long-standing decision and restored his awards. But Jim Thorpe's great athletic achievement was forever stained by the fact that he broke the rules. There are many more examples, most much more flagrant and arrogant than Jim Thorpe's, of athletes who have thrown caution to the winds in self-favor and self-indulgence. I am glad to be able to remind myself of the need of caution through a testimony that now hardly seems worth mentioning, but I would prefer not to cite some of the more abusive failures. I mention just one to show the possibility of radical failure in an undisciplined life.

My home city, Memphis, Tennessee, has just hosted a heavyweight championship boxing match between world champion Lennox Lewis and challenger Mike Tyson. Everyone with any sports interest has been dismayed again and again by the antics and pathetic display of selfish and sinful indulgence shown by Mike Tyson. Tyson provides the classic current example of the need for character and caution in the world of sports. The Christian life also has great possibilities of success and failure, and caution is one of the necessary monitors to check failure and to promote success.

Colossians 3:15 says, "Let the peace of God rule in your hearts." Hidden in this verse, there is another great athletic picture. The word translated "rule" is the Greek word for an "umpire" or an "arbiter." An umpire at an athletic event is the official who announces and enforces the rules, calls all close plays, and maintains the integrity of the game. The peace of God is the Christian's inner umpire. The Christian should always consult the peace of God in determining the "close calls" in his life. If that peace is missing, something needs to be corrected in his life. Never under any circumstance should the old athletic cry, "Kill the ump!", ever condition a Christian's attitude toward God's inner peace. Again, great caution is necessary.

VI. COMPENSATION

Finally, every Christian who “competes to win” in the disciple’s “race” must be mindful that a time of full *compensation* is coming. There is a “prize” to be received, and each believer should “run that he may obtain it” (verse 24). That prize is identified in verse 25 as “an incorruptible crown.” This is one of the five “crowns” identified in the New Testament in picturing the possible rewards of faithful participation in the Christian race.

I Corinthians 4:5 says, “So then (in the day of final reckoning before the Lord) every believer shall have praise of God.” I believe that this verse presents God’s intention, God’s ideal, for each of His children. It is His intention to reward and “praise” each of His children. However, the rewards and the praise will be measured out according to the participation of the believer in the Christian life *on God’s terms*.

Let me close this study by inviting your attention to a very suggestive text which presents some wonderful concepts about the faithful believer’s rewards. On the occasion of the death of the first Christian martyr, Stephen (whose name means “crown”), Acts 7 gives a vivid account of the closing minutes of his life. Verse 58 says that he was “cast out of the city, and stoned.” Verses 55 and 56 tell us that Stephen, “being full of the Holy Spirit, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus *standing* on the right hand of God.” This is the only time recorded in the New Testament when Jesus is seen *standing* at God’s right hand in heaven. He is normally pictured in a seated posture, but here he is standing. Verse 59 says that Stephen spoke to the standing Christ as he was dying, saying, “Lord Jesus, *receive* my spirit.” The word “receive” means “to give access to oneself.” What a combination of devotional riches! When Stephen faced death, Jesus stood in heaven, as if to say, “I stand in his honor and for his welcome.” It is almost as if Jesus refused to remain seated when such a man as this came home to heaven. Stephen's story reveals the greatest reward a believer can receive in heaven. The greatest reward is not a crown, or a throne, or a special allotment. *The greatest reward is that Jesus opens His arms in welcome and appreciation – and gives us full access to Himself!* A great old Christian hymn declares, “It will be worth it all when we see Jesus.” How true! But can you imagine what it would be like to see Him standing to welcome you, as if He cannot give you enough honor and attention!!!! While some people live “with their eyes on the clock,” the Christian should live with His eye on The Coming, and on The Compensation. And whatever that means, and however faithful he has been in the race of life, and whatever rewards He may receive, *He will recognize that every blessing has come because of the grace of God and he will finally and happily give all glory to God.*