

Running & the Christian Life

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever” – 1 Cor. 9:24-25.

As a child, I had some grand ideas about adulthood. I was sure that all the adventurous pastimes I couldn't do then would *fill* my free time.

Running never made that list. It wasn't even at the very bottom.

Had you suggested I would try recreational running, I would have laughed. I lacked the height, the stride, and the capacity for speed.

Yet here I am, sweating and happy after a four-mile run. *Amazing*.

I started running for practical reasons. Spending my days at a desk, I need exercise. Bicycling was my first choice, but it started taking too long to get a good workout. Running burned more calories in less time. And my wife had started to run. (It's hard on a man's pride when his wife can easily outrun him!)

So I tried running, too. Surprisingly, I soon was looking forward to each run.

I love the rush of the wind in my face on a gravel road. I love the satisfied ache that testifies that I gave it my best. I love the opportunity to think and pray without interruption. I love to watch the fields change with the seasons.

It recently occurred to me that running offers many lessons about the Christian life – as evidenced how often the Apostle Paul used running as an illustration. And *that* led me to think about the lessons I've learned – the things I've come to see more clearly through this activity I unexpectedly adopted.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” – Heb. 12:1.

The first lesson is to start with what you have.

If you want to start running, you don't need to go to spend hundreds of dollars on equipment. You just need shorts, a pair of sneakers, and desire.

But you have to *start*. That's the key. You have to get out there and do it.

Likewise the Christian life. Many claim to follow Christ. But how many of them lace up their sneakers, take up their cross and follow? How many *truly* seek to *show* their love for the Lord with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind, and with all their strength? How many who profess to follow Christ get to know their neighbor well enough to show Christ-like love to them?

If you want to do it, you have to start where you are, with what you have – today. Just like running. Drop the remote control and go meet your neighbor. Forego the sports event and volunteer at Union Gospel Mission. *Make a start*.

And do the same thing next time – “lacing up your sneakers,” day after day.

One of the biggest difficulties of running is starting *again*. There's always something else to do, someone else to call, some other place to be. Your muscles are still sore from last time. It's raining. It's windy. It's cold. It's hot.

Runners learn to shrug at challenges. “It's hot out today.” <shrug> “I won't get frostbite!” Or: “It's pretty windy.” <shrug> “Should be easy coming back!”

So too with the Christian life. There's always something seeking to distract us; something that would convince us to *not* do what Christ calls us to do.

We need to learn to shrug. “People will think I'm strange if I say that in public.” <shrug> “God won't.” Or: “Joe's not very loveable.” <shrug> “Then again, neither am I – but God loves me anyway. I should invite Joe for supper.”

“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ... Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” – Php. 3:12-14.

Since starting to run, I've also found that I'm quite competitive – even if I do resemble the tortoise, rather than the hare.

Rather than enter races, I race against myself. If I made it to the top of a hill in 2 minutes last time, I shoot for 1:50 this time. I'll try to cut 30 seconds per mile off a four-mile run. I set goals beyond what I know I can do. Unless I challenge myself, I won't grow stronger – nor will I get as much satisfaction.

Again, that has parallels to the Christian life.

Jesus doesn't want us to stick with what's *comfortable*. He wants us to try difficult things. He wants us debating pagan philosophers with Paul; following Philip into the desert to explain Scripture to foreign officials; and rebuilding fallen walls with Nehemiah. He wants us to *stretch* ourselves – pushing beyond the limits we think we have, in service to the Lord.

That said, we need to not be shy about taking time off for refreshment.

I don't run every day. My body appreciates a day of rest between runs. On occasion, it needs the better part of a week to rest and heal. And I find that, at the end of such a rest, I can't wait to hit the road.

That's another image of the Christian life. The Lord doesn't call us to do big things *continually*. He calls us to use the gifts and opportunities He provides, over the long haul. He doesn't want us to get so overloaded that we resent Him.

Whether mentoring at the Alpha Center, serving at The Banquet, or leading as an office-bearer, we need to take breaks. We need to relax and recharge. And soon we'll find that we miss our service and are eager to return to it!

“You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?” – Gal. 5:7.

When running, one must be vigilant – because there is danger *everywhere*.

External dangers are obvious. The runner who doesn't develop the habit of looking over his shoulder can become roadkill. You learn to watch for dogs that appear with no warning, and potholes, and storm clouds.

But running (or any exercise) also has hidden dangers for Christians. Why are you running? Running to care for your body or to vent frustration is healthy. Running to feed vanity or pride is sinful. Where does running fit among your priorities? If it starts to outrank God or one's family, it becomes a false god.

No part of life lacks danger – especially the *hidden* dangers. Preaching can lead souls to Christ – and it can also feed a preacher's soul-destroying pride. Serving at a homeless shelter can show the love of Christ to the lost – or it can become a substitute for trusting in the merits of Christ alone.

We need to develop the habit of inspecting our souls for hidden dangers like pride, idolatry, and misplaced priorities. Satan strives to lead us astray – so we must develop the habit of “looking over our shoulders” for Satan's attacks.

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” – 2 Tim. 4:7-8.

Running is an activity that brings me joy. If I didn't find satisfaction in it, I wouldn't do it. Nor would I do it if it conflicted with my calling to serve the Lord.

That should be the case in every aspect of the Christian life. Whether studying the Bible, attending worship, distributing Bibles with the Gideons, or befriending a neighbor – our service should bring joy to us and glory to God.

After all, we're using the gifts and opportunities God has provided. We're showing the love of Christ. We're exercising Christ's lordship over life. We're praising God for His gifts. These purposes lie at the heart of the reason for which we exist – and when we engage in them, we should find great joy.

So we mustn't let our service – or any part of life – become merely a chore. God has given us the privilege of serving Him in every aspect of life, for every moment that we live. Let us do it all in service to Him, for His glory – with joy.

And when He returns, Christ will give to us a crown of righteousness, commending us for the service we've done in His name.

Knowing that, how can we run our race with anything *less* than joy?