

## Maturity in Christ (Are we 'Fun-runners' or 'Olympic champions'?)

### Introduction

### Philippians 3:12-16

*12*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. *13*Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, *14*I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

*15*All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. *16*Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

The London Marathon is the world's biggest marathon attracting around 32,000 people every year. The people who really stand out in the race are the fun-runners who are there to raise some money and have a bit of a laugh, and also the world-class athletes who are in it to win it!

Now this passage describes the Christian life as a race – our goal is our devotion to God. This relationship that was made possible by the death of His son Jesus Christ. We see Paul writing to an audience in Greece and so he is relating Christian principles to things that the people are familiar with from their everyday lives. The Greeks, as you know, were very keen on their athletics (after all they founded the ancient Olympics nearly 3,000 years ago) and so this analogy would have resonated with his audience. The people reading this would only have been too aware of the peak physical condition and dedication of the athletes and would have understood Paul's encouragement to them to persevere in their walk with Christ.

So, today we are going to look at becoming mature as a Christian in this context. How we can run the race more effectively. We can either choose to run the race for a bit of fun or we can choose to be serious. Paul certainly doesn't mention any silly costumes in his passage and so I think it is safe to assume that he was not exhorting his readers to adopt this approach. Far from it! In ancient Greece there was no second or third place. If you didn't win you didn't get a mention – certainly not a medal! It is interesting to note that in his first letter to the Corinthians Paul writes:

#### 1 Corinthians 9:24 (NIV)

*24*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.

And so Paul is encouraging us to run at our utmost. To spare no effort. To be utterly devoted to God and passionate in following Him.

So, I shall proceed on the basis that we are all serious about following Christ and so we shall look at how we can be an Olympic athlete rather than a fun-runner on a bit of a jaunt.

The first thing that we need to grasp is that athletes train hard. Really hard. As someone who has been involved on the margins of athletics (well I've watched some on the TV to be precise) this is something that I am acutely aware of!

Florence Griffith Joyner, or 'Flo-Jo' as she was popularly known, the triple gold medallist at the 1988 Seoul Olympics, knew all about this level of training and owed her remarkable success on the track to her dedication to her sport. It was quite common for her to do up to 5,000 sit-ups a day as part of her training regime though she would have her lazy days and only do 1,000. Well, we all have days like that, don't we?

So how can we train? What can we do to improve our performance? How can we mature as Christians?

Well, we could discuss this all day, in fact, we shall continue to discover this throughout our whole life, but as a start we can consider 3 areas.

1. Training the mind
2. Perseverance
3. A healthy diet

1. Training the mind – stay focused!

2 Corinthians 10:4-6 (NIV)

*4The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. 5We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. 6And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.*

Taking captive every thought is incredibly important and such a powerful defence against the influence of the enemy in our lives. Have you noticed how the devil never says 'Hey you! Do this bad thing!' He always dresses temptation up as something, well, tempting. As James writes:

James 1:13-16 (New International Version)

*13When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; 14but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. 15Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. 16Don't be deceived, my dear brothers.*

And so we can not let these little seeds of a thought entice us.

I was once told this true story by a chap who used to work in a glass warehouse where they kept hundreds and hundreds of sheet glass in a rack ready to be fitted in shop windows and the like. One day he was at work in this facility which, rather injudiciously as it turned out, was located next door to a cattle market. Anyway, that particular day the bulls were being auctioned and unfortunately one of the bulls escaped. Well, sadly his freedom was short-lived. He obviously headed for what he perceived to be the nearest refuge and became unwittingly the proverbial bull in a china shop. This fellow described the mayhem and absolute carnage that ensued as the rack of plate glass about 12 feet thick was demolished. As you can imagine the bull became increasingly distressed and the scene deteriorated catastrophically. In the end the bull was cut to ribbons and this chap and his colleagues had to sweep all the shards of broken glass and remains of the bull out of the warehouse.

So, a scene of complete and utter devastation. And that is what will happen to us, spiritually, if we entertain these germs of ideas planted in our minds by the enemy. They will progress from desire to sin and from sin to death.

Now just imagine if there had been a cowboy at the entrance to that warehouse... OK, so there are not many cowboys in Bath, but just imagine. He could have stopped the bull as soon as it approached the entrance to the shop floor and could have prevented any of that damage from occurring.

Likewise we need to take captive any sinful thoughts as soon as they occur. It is no good saying to yourself, 'Oh well, just a little bit of back-biting and juicy gossip and then I'll stop!' or 'I'll just be bitter and hate-filled, consumed by a blind, snarling rage for 3 minutes and then I'll be angelic again!' just to name two examples.

Come on. That is not an option. We need to stay focused on the race. We need to stay focused on God. When Linford Christie, for example, used to run what do you think he was thinking about just before and during the race?

Maybe, 'I wonder if I remembered to turn the gas off when I left the house this morning...' or perhaps, 'Did I take that DVD back to Blockbusters last night...' or even 'My running shoes are so much nicer than Ben Johnson's.'

What do you reckon? Who knows, but I doubt it. I am sure that he was thinking about the race at hand, how he wanted to win the prize that was before him and had dedicated himself to that. We need to dedicate our minds to God. We cannot be distracted by what is going on around us if we want to mature as Christians.

The Parable of sower describes the effects of distraction in our lives— Luke 8:14-15

*14The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. 15But the seed on*

*good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.*

So, as soon as one of those thoughts or temptations comes into our minds we need to recognise it for what it is. We need to identify the threat and then we need to take it captive straight away. We need to ask God to cleanse our hearts and minds. We need to ask him to help us, give us His strength to withstand the enemy's attack. If we have entertained any thoughts of a temptation then we need to repent of this. We need to bring it before the Lord and again ask Him to cleanse us. We need to submit ourselves once again to God. If we surrender to Him then we are giving up our independence of Him. We need to realise that we cannot live independently of God. We need to be wholly dependent on Him. If we do this, if we align our hearts, our minds, our lives with Him then we shall be living wholly within His will. And this is possible, as James writes.

James 4:6-8 (NIV)

*6But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:*

*"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."*

*7Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.*

But, we need to remember that our Christian life is not just an intellectual exercise. After all have you ever heard an athlete interviewed who said, 'Oh yes, but of course I only compete on an intellectual level.'? NO, of course not! These guys are passionate about what they are doing. And we need to be passionate about our life as Christians. After all, we are followers of Christ! We are loved by God and we love Him.

## 2. We need to persevere

When you watch an athlete running a race you see that they are continually focused on what they are doing... for the whole race. You don't see them, if they're running the marathon for example, starting well and then after a few miles stopping and walking, chatting with the crowds and then carrying on when they feel like it. They keep going. And perseverance is also a key theme in this passage from Philippians. Let's look at verses 12-14 again:

*12Not 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. 13Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

So Paul, of all people, is writing here that he has not already obtained all this, that he has not taken hold of the prize. He is not complacent. He is continually pushing on, pushing himself to the limit.

Let's look at a baby's development. Providing they are reasonably healthy, they continually progress. Eventually they become adult and mature human beings. Likewise as Christians we should become mature and 'complete' in Christ.

Now baby's don't regress. Once they start talking they don't stop! Once they start walking, they start learning to run! They don't suddenly stop and go backwards to crawling. Why then do we sometimes go backwards as Christians? That sort of situation when a person just seems to be going round and round in circles... Making the same old mistakes over and over and over again...

As Christians, we are swimming against the current. If we look around us at the world we can see that we are living as 'aliens', or foreigners, here. We need to live in the world and yet not be 'of it'. We need to keep living lives that are different as ones set apart by God. We cannot conform anymore to what is going on around us. If we don't keep going against this current then we shall be swept backwards by it. Please understand that the Christian life is not easy. It is not a 'walk in the park'. I was interested to read that the word 'athletics' is derived from the Greek meaning to struggle or suffer for a prize. So, we need to expend some effort – it won't happen automatically. We shall need to stick at it, to persevere. In his letter, James writes:

James 1:2-4

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

Notice that Paul writes that he 'strains' and 'presses on'. He is no fun-runner! Have you ever seen those people out running, or in the gym, with a t-shirt saying 'no pain, no gain'? I did once and a friend with me said, 'Yeah, no pain, no gain and no brain!'

But seriously, although it is a cliché there is an element of truth there. If you take part in sports and you want to progress then there will be times when your body is sore as you use muscles you didn't even know you had!

Likewise, as Christians, being a disciple of Jesus is costly. Sometimes we will need to leave our comfort-zones behind as we 'strain ahead' and 'press on' towards the goal. But it is worth it – the prize more than compensates for our efforts.

3. We need a healthy diet - be careful about what you consume!

Colossians 3:1-3 (NIV)

*1 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. 3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.*

We all know that a healthy diet is important if we are to have a healthy body. If we take our example of an athlete you can bet your boots that Linford Christie is not the type of chap to tuck into last night's takeaway for breakfast. I have him down as a sugar-free Alpen man, myself.

The point is that we need to eat a healthy diet spiritually. Imagine if I watch TV soap-operas all day, and I read all sorts of trashy books and so on. What will my mind be feeding on? How will my attitude to life be shaped? Given time, it is likely that my worldview would be shaped by these influences and I would come to view these things as increasingly acceptable and, eventually, my behaviour would be shaped by what I was taking in.

On the other hand, if I set my mind on 'things above' then my attitudes will follow. Peter encourages his readers in his first letter to, 'crave spiritual milk' like newborn babies, 'so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.'

In the letter to the Hebrews the writer exhorts his readers to progress to eating meat as they mature. Baby's milk is very easy to digest (it takes 2 hours apparently) and it is delivered right to their mouths. What a struggle it is for us adults to fix our own food and to actually have to chew it! But actually, there is a natural progression. As babies' bodies change they need more substantial food to develop further and they gain the means to consume this. It would be bizarre, wouldn't it, if Benjamin and I were to swap our diets. We could try cramming some substantial food into Benjamin's mouth and I could drink endless bottles of milk! However, I don't think either of us would profit from this scheme. Yet the writer to the Hebrews is quite scathing of his audience, saying that they should be eating meat by now but are not and he encourages them, in no uncertain terms, to progress.

So, we need to set our minds on things above. Bruce stressed the importance of personal quiet times with God a few weeks ago and Alberto spoke on the importance of regular private meditation on the Bible a few weeks before that. Of course these are the main and obvious ways that we can focus on God. But what about the wider implications of this scripture. Do we need to start thinking about our lifestyles? The books or magazines we read. I have a real 'bee in my bonnet' at the glut of magazines there are in this country which seem to just fawn over celebrities. This is something that Cathy and I noticed really seemed to increase while we were away in Brazil. It really baffles me how much devotion is given to these people who externally might seem to have a lot and yet internally, it seems to me at any rate, are lacking so much. And they are cited as role models for us. And yet that really influences so many people. You see it all around. Lots of people want to be a 'celebrity'. Not through any particular achievement. They just want to be a celebrity. Why? Is it just me but I just think the world is going bonkers.

So, we need to root out these negative influences. Now don't worry. I am not going to say that Christians shouldn't read novels, or we shouldn't read magazines – Christian magazines are fine, of course. And I am not saying that television is of the devil or anything like that. It is just that we need to be selective about what we read, what we watch, and the music we listen to. Let's be sensible and wise about this and take in things that edify us, which build us up.

## Conclusion

So, throughout this talk we have referred back to the analogy of the honed athletes reaching for the prize and yet, whenever I read this passage I always think of another type of athlete.

Have you ever seen really little kids racing? I mean the really tiny ones, say 2 or 3 years old – sometimes they have races for the little brothers and sisters at school sports days. Well, they did when I was little anyway! Now, these kids don't really know what they are doing and so their mums (or dads) stand at the end of the track and call them by name, encouraging them with outstretched arms and a loving smile, cheering them on. And suddenly the children know what to do... they need to run to their parent as quickly as they can. The only prize that matters to them is being gathered up in the arms that are waiting for them. They don't even notice the other kids racing. All they are aware of is their parent encouraging them, 'Come on. You can do it! Come on. You're nearly there!' And they run with huge smiles on their faces. Maybe they fall over, but they pick themselves up again, catch sight of their mum again and carry on.

They put the past behind them and they carry on with undiminished enthusiasm. And this is the attitude we need to adopt. We need to put our past behind us – both the failures and the successes. We don't need to feel ashamed by the past – Jesus died to set us free from the past – but it is also dangerous if we feel proud of our successes. We need to remain focused on God and we need to keep going in the race. God is calling us on, He is waiting for us at the finish line with outstretched arms, encouraging us and beckoning to us to finish the race.

So how enthusiastically are you going to run?