

“Spiritual Athletes”

Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2

A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden

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Did any of you watch the TV coverage of the *Tour de France*? I watched quite a bit of it. I watched because I admire those athletes ...their discipline, their determination, their endurance, and their sheer grit. I watched also to take in the magnificent scenery as they rode through the French countryside and mountain regions. I watched hoping to see my sister, who lives in France, standing on the side of the road waving her pathetically small South African flag! I didn't see her, but almost immediately she sent a picture from her Blackberry to prove that she was there!

I also watched to see how Lance Armstrong would do this year. A contemporary example of perseverance can be seen in Armstrong's struggle as an athlete. In October 1996 he was forced off his bicycle in excruciating pain. He was diagnosed with testicular cancer that had spread to his lungs and brain. After three consecutive surgeries, Armstrong's chances for recovery were 50/50. Then he began the most aggressive form of chemotherapy available, and it weakened him beyond anything he had ever experienced. Through the support of medical people, family, and friends, he struggled to recover. Only five months after his diagnosis, Armstrong began training to race again, although his future in the sport remained uncertain. His strength of spirit was revealed when he came back in 1999 to win seven consecutive *Tour de France* cycle races. Unfortunately, he did not win this year. According to Armstrong he used to ride his bike to make a living. Now he just wants to live so that he can ride his bike.

I am no athlete. Never have been! I think that's pretty obvious! There's not much chance now, is there, that I ever will be? Okay, so you're being polite to me today! I have never physically run a marathon, and have no intention of doing so. However, like many of you, I have faced many other marathons – mental and emotional, relational and vocational marathons.

A race or marathon is a metaphor used for the Christian life by the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews and by the apostle Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians and the Letter to the Philippians. The writer of Hebrews first draws up a descriptive list of Old Testament heroes

who exemplified faith in God, and then goes on to say: *Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin that so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith.*

The challenge for those of us who call ourselves Christian disciples is to be spiritual athletes – to keep our souls fit, to flex our spiritual muscles daily, to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, and to persevere in the face of difficulties and hardships to the end. Being a Christian is not just a short sprint on Sunday. The writer of Hebrews does not compare the Christian life to a wind sprint, but to a marathon. In a wind sprint one runs as fast as one can for a short distance. Speed is the critical factor in any sprint. But in a marathon, endurance is the critical factor. Being a Christian can feel like a long haul ...like a marathon. The message of today's epistle lesson is: "Hang in there! When the going in your Christian life gets tough ...hang in there!"

In a marathon, when the pain sets in – and things get difficult – it is tough to keep going. However, an experienced runner will know that if one keeps on running, one gets what is called a second wind. One has to dig deep down and hang in there. And there is inspiration for the spiritual athlete. I mentioned that in the earlier part of Hebrews chapter 11, the writer reminds his readers of the great people of faith in the Old Testament . . . people who persevered to the end. And he begins chapter twelve by saying, "THEREFORE, let us run with endurance the race set before us." In other words, let our forbears be an encouragement when we feel like quitting. If they held on, we can, too! There is not a Christian who has not had reverses in life ...when things have gone wrong ...when he or she has felt like giving up. We can be inspired not to give up by those who have gone before us.

The writer describes the saints that have gone before us as a "cloud of witnesses." Notice that they are witnesses in the sense of being examples, not mere onlookers. They have proved by their lives that the life of faith is the only life to live. The same God who was their God is our God. The God of yesterday is the God of today and tomorrow. They are not merely observing what we are doing, but rather they are witnessing to us that God can see us through. We are all in need of inspiration. We need a reason for tackling challenging tasks and then we need encouragement while we are doing them.

The epistle lesson reminds us that one of our greatest inspirations and comforts as we run our race are all the believers from the past who have gone before us. Heaven applauds for us. Heaven wants us to finish and win. Who do you see seated in the heavenly grandstands to encourage you to keep running? Who is part of that great unseen cloud of witnesses who is spurring you on? As I gaze imaginatively at the seats around the arena where we run this race, I see saints . . . I see witnesses . . . yes, I recognize loved ones who are rooting for me . . . Granny Becky, Hugh, Ernie, Tom, Rita, Reg, Helen, Allen, and as recently as yesterday, Jean. Surely you have your list of witnesses who are cheering for you.

As important as these witnesses are, who have run the race before us, we know that we cannot win the race by looking back at them. The athlete who keeps looking back will lose ground, stumble, or fall. She must turn back to the race. With the crowds as his example, the athlete strains to glimpse the finish line. Finishing the race requires discipline and focus . . . it requires passion and determination . . . perseverance and endurance. According to the writer of Hebrews, the concentration of the Christian athlete narrows to one image: the model of the consummate runner, Jesus, the one who forged the pathway, finished the race, and now assures the final victory. Jesus endured for the sake of the joy of God's future, and so can we.

Quitters aren't much of an inspiration, but people who stay with a commitment even though the going gets tough are sources of great inspiration to all. People who start the Christian life . . . who profess faith in Christ . . . who join a Christian church . . . and then quit when the going gets tough, become objects of ridicule to some and sources of discouragement to others. They really do the cause of Christianity no good at all. That is why this epistle lesson is so important today.

Yes, this is a marathon, not a 100 yard dash. It is a long distance race, and we all are spiritual athletes. There is no room for quitting, but we can expect to get weary in the race, but not of the race. This weariness may come from the difficulties of the course. The racetrack is not always through green pastures or beside still waters. It is often bleak, rugged, and mountainous. This weariness may come from the lack of apparent progress. There may seem to be little or no advancement in the race. This weariness may come from a false or exaggerated estimate of the value of feeling in the Christian life. However, the race is not run by feelings but by faith. That is why we look to Jesus, the author and the finisher of our faith.

In June of 1955, Winston Churchill, who was near the end of his life, was asked to deliver the Commencement address of a university in Britain. Mr. Churchill was so weak at the time that he had to be helped to the podium. He stood with both hands clinging to the podium and his head down for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, he lifted his head, and the voice that, years before had called Britain back from the brink of destruction, spoke publicly for the last time. Though he only spoke nine words, those words must still ring in the memory of those who heard them. Mr. Churchill said, “Never give up. Never give up. Never give up.”

Let us run with endurance the race set before us . . .

We can and will finish our race if we look to Jesus. He has gone before us, and he waits for us at the finish line. Jesus himself realized the value of looking ahead. Jesus knew that there was one primary difference between a winner and a loser. A loser focuses on what he is going *through*, but a winner focuses on where she is going *to*. In spite of the horrific pain of the cross, Jesus kept his eyes on the prize. Having won his race, he stands at the finish line cheering for us.

The Kisi people of Liberia in West Africa have a saying: “When a man steps into the center of the circle to dance and no one claps, he will soon tire and sit down; but if everyone claps, he will dance all night.” So it is with our race set before us. It is difficult to persevere running alone. But with the great cloud of witnesses, and Jesus as our model, we are assured of completing the race.

As spiritual athletes who are committed to Christian disciplines and a faith fixed on Jesus Christ, we, too, can and will finish the race. We can and will find courage and strength to live boldly into God’s future. This is true for us as individuals and as a church. Surrounded by witnesses who have demonstrated the way before us, inspired by the supreme example of Jesus, and encouraged by those who model perseverance among us, let us continue the race we have already started. Let us find the courage to follow Jesus to the end.

In his sermon, *The Heavenly Footman*, the great 17th century Puritan writer and preacher, John Bunyan – perhaps best known for his classic work, *Pilgrim’s Progress* – expanded the analogy drawn in Hebrews 11 and 12 between the Christian life and running a race. Bunyan declared that there is a “doctrine” which is proclaimed throughout the Bible, namely, “They that will have heaven must run for it!” Of course, those precise words are not found in the

scriptures, but Bunyan was right to remind his hearers of the similarity between the Christian and an athlete who both run the race with perseverance to win the prize.

Let those of us that will have heaven keep running with our eyes turned and fixed on Jesus. Let's finish the course to a thunderous applause of the saints in glory and to hear the words of our Lord, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.