

Running The Walk

1st Corinthians 9:24-27

Long distance running is arguably one of the most challenging sports of all.

A long distance runner faces many adversaries.

Heat or wind or rain, for example, can seriously impair a long distance runner's performance.

Frank Shorter, the gold medal winner of the marathon in the 1972 Munich Olympics was beaten by Valdomar Cierpinski in the 1976 Montreal Olympics because of a light mist which added a few ounces of weight to his clothing and shoes and impaired his running style.

The long distance runner contends with physical pain, exhaustion, the clock, and, of course, other runners.

His chief adversary, however, is his own body: he is always straining against its physical limitations.

The most dramatic example of this is the infamous "wall" which the marathon runner faces about 19 miles into his run.

At that point, he has used up—that is, metabolized—all the nutrients he can take into his body before the race, and he begins to metabolize or "cannibalize" his own flesh.

This is physically painful and it takes great determination and competitive drive to run through the wall

Not all runners can do it, but those who do derive great satisfaction from completing the marathon.

But as challenging as marathon running is, there is something that is even more challenging called ultramarathon running.

Ultramarathons consist of running distances of 50 and even 100 miles.

We had a world class ultramarathon runner here at Hope whose name was Mark Godale—the son of Marge and Chuck Godale.

Mark, who passed away last June, ran and won several ultramarathons.

He also ran the “daddy” of all ultramarathons: the 24 hour run.

In 24 hours, Mark ran 162.4 miles, setting a new American record for the 24-hour run, a record which stood for several years.

At his funeral which was held here last July, the church was packed with over 150 of the thinnest people you've ever seen.

In today's Epistle lesson which is taken from Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, Paul uses running as a model for how believers should train themselves to live their Christian lives.

The Corinthians had invented the Olympics and the marathon was the premier event.

It is very possible that Paul attended them since it is known that he was in Corinth during the time the games were held in 51 A.D.

In any event, he found them useful for teaching purposes and in his letter he urges the Corinthians to dedicate themselves to living their Christian lives with the same focus and intensity as runners dedicate themselves to their sport.

At first glance, Paul's use of running as an analogy for the Christian life is a little puzzling.

Running is an intensely competitive sport that requires enormous willpower and self-discipline.

As Paul says, *“Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training.”*

But the Bible describes sanctification or Christian living more in terms of what God does for the believer than in terms of what the believer does by himself.

Paul wrote to the members of the church at Philippi: *“...work out your salvation with fear and trembling, **for it is God who works in you both to will and to work according to his good pleasure.**”* (Phil. 2:12-13)

In the second place, the point of competitive running is to win, to exalt yourself over others.

But Jesus admonished his disciples to serve others, not to exalt themselves over them.

So what could be Christian about winning?

In order to understand what Paul means, we first have to understand who he regarded as his opponent.

If we don't know who our opponent is, we train without knowledge, "...*beating the air.*"

Now when we Christians think of our opponents or adversaries, what usually comes to mind are people who mock or attack our faith.

But these are not the adversaries we need to worry about.

God will deal with them.

Our adversary is the same as the runner's chief adversary: ourselves—or part of ourselves.

That part is our sin nature.

We were born with it and we won't be rid of it until we die.

As David said, "*Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.*" (Psalm 51:5)

But we also know that when we were born again at our baptism, God sent His Holy Spirit to live in us and to help us subdue our sin nature.

And we desperately need that help, because our sin nature is the source of all our sins: our selfish desires, our anger, our jealousy, our envy, our lust, our greed, our deceitfulness.

And our sin nature cannot be reformed; it can only be mortified or killed.

And that is what Christian living is all about: mortifying your sin nature and striving to obey the Holy Spirit with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.

That's why Luther called Christian theology a theology of the cross.

It's why Jesus said that if we want to follow him we must deny ourselves, take up our cross and subdue our sinful natures in order to find true life.

We *must mortify or kill part of ourselves—our sin nature—in order to come to life.*

But ever since Christ walked the earth Christians have fought tooth and nail against the idea that we have to die in order to live.

We find the idea so offensive that we are sometimes tempted to replace the God of the Bible with one who requires less of us.

A god who is bemused by our sins rather than enraged by them.

A god who gives us good things now and REALLY good things later.

A god who likes us pretty much the way we are and only needs to supply a few finishing touches to make us perfect.

But to this concept of religion the Bible sounds a thundering **NO!**

Christian living isn't a trip to Disneyworld, it's a journey to the cross.

And now the impact of Paul's words takes hold: *"I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave...."*

Just as a runner's adversary is his own body, a Christian's adversary is his own sinful nature.

In order for the new man to rise up, the old man has to be crucified.

And while there is no harder struggle for the believer than this one, there is no worthier goal: to die with Christ so that we may come to life in Him.

Paul writes: *"Don't you know that when we were baptized we were baptized into Christ's death? We were buried with him through baptism so that just as he was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may walk in newness of life?" (Romans 6:4)*

Now this is not just abstract theology; this has a powerful application to our lives.

Can you imagine a marriage in which both husband and wife have committed themselves to renouncing their own selfish desires in order to live for each other?

To count each other's needs as more important than their own?

Not in some hypothetical grand gesture, like stepping in front of your spouse to take a bullet, but in striving every day to quench your selfish desires in order to put your partner first.

To refuse to rehearse in your memory the times you feel your partner has abused you.

To renounce self pity.

To refuse to justify yourself at the expense of the other: to insist on always being right.

In other words, to refuse to hearken to the demands of your sin nature.

Can you conceive of the benefits that would flow from becoming deaf to your sin nature?

Can you imagine the new life that would spring up in your marriage from its grave?

Somebody once said that we would be astonished at what we could accomplish if we didn't care who got the credit.

If we could rid ourselves of vanity, if we could die to our pride, what a blessed freedom that would be!

Think of all the opinions you've developed over the years and hold with such fierce conviction.

What are they worth?

Just ask yourself how interested you are in other people's opinions and you'll have a good indication of how interested other people are in yours.

Wouldn't it be a blessing to shed them all so that we could start again with a fresh perspective—like a child does?

And how about the cynical and skeptical demeanor that we wear in order to seem mature and sophisticated?

"Been there, done that." "Nothing new under the sun."

Expressions like this have no place on the lips of a Christian!

We are bound for glory!

Wouldn't it be wonderful to get rid of the useless baggage that keeps our faith from shining through?

Let your light shine before men! Don't hide it under a bushel!

There's a lot to be gained by dying.

We're not attracted to the idea, of course.

We like to think of Christian living in terms of continuous quality improvement—getting to be better and better people as we persevere in our faith-lives.

But Luther put it best when he said toward the end of his life that sanctification had consisted not so much in his having become a better person as it did in his having become increasingly aware of what a sinful person he was, and therefore how much he needed a Savior.

We die in order to live.

We shed self-confidence so that we can acquire "Christ-confidence."

That's Christian living.

That is running the walk.

It's the ultra-ultramarathon.

And God will help you run it.

Amen