

## THE BETTER PART

The Academy Award winning movie, *Chariots of Fire*, tells the true story of two famous track stars, Harold Abrahams and Eric Liddell, who won gold medals for England in the 1924 Paris Olympics. Both men were slated to run the 100 meter dash, but when Liddell, a deeply committed Christian, found out upon arriving in Paris that the race had been scheduled for Sunday, he refused to run since it was the Sabbath. Even the Prince of Wales could not change his mind. Instead, he entered the 400 meter race a few days later and won. He spent the rest of his life as a Christian missionary in China where he ultimately died a martyr's death. Harold Abrahams was a fierce competitor who scorned the idea that athletic competition was for amateurs only, and proceeded to scandalize the faculty and administration of Cambridge by hiring a professional trainer to help him prepare for the Olympics. When he was challenged by the headmaster himself on the propriety of such "professionalism," he responded in words which proved to be prophetic: *"Gentlemen, you yearn for victory just as I do, but achieved, apparently, with the effortlessness of gods. Yours are the archaic values of the prep school playground. But I believe in the pursuit of excellence. And I'll carry the future with me."*

How right he was. Harold Abrahams was describing a goal which would sweep the future: the goal of excellent performance. In our day there are few things we value more highly than excellent performance. We evaluate athletes, businessmen, entertainers, automobiles and golf balls by their performance. And we, in turn, are evaluated in terms of our job performance and receive salary increases and promotions (or lack of the same) based upon those evaluations

There is much that is good about this. Our free enterprise economic system, which rewards good performance in products and services, has produced more wealth than any society in the history of the world—wealth that has benefited all levels of society in one way or another. It has also benefited the rest of the world. No other society in the world has dedicated more of its financial resources to helping people beyond its own borders than America has. This is something to be proud of and it has been made possible by an economic system that rewards high performance. And there are other benefits that have flowed from rewarding good performance. America has led the world in scientific and technological progress, not only in areas like space exploration, electronics and information science, but in the medical sciences as well. All of these accomplishments stem from rewarding good performance and they have brought substantial blessings to mankind.

There is, however, a dark side to our fascination with good performance, and that dark side becomes evident when you look at sectors of our society where performance has become the only thing that matters. Consider the field of professional sports where performance is everything. When Mark McGwire, the man who broke Roger Maris' record for the total number of home runs hit in a single season, turned down a salary increase with the St. Louis Cardinals because he thought \$9 million dollars a year was enough—he was roundly criticized by his fellow players. When an action like that makes someone an object of scorn among his peers, there is something wrong in Mudville. One sports commentator recently observed that in the world of professional basketball, teamwork

has taken a back seat to the performance of superstars. Just recently, when asked by a reporter what was wrong with the Cavs, LeBron James responded by saying that what they lacked was a “playmaker.”

And then there’s the megalomania of today’s superstars. Whatever Ted Williams may have thought of his own abilities, you never heard him brag about turning in a batting average of 406 in 1941 and you never heard Joe Louis, who has one of the greatest heavyweight boxers in history, shout, “*I am the greatest!*”

And then there’s the entertainment industry where performance *is* the product and where Hollywood stars use their talents to glorify immorality both on the screen and in their private lives. What makes this especially horrendous is that these people are among the most famous people in the world and have enormous influence—especially on the young. As the Psalmist wrote, “*The wicked strut about on every side when vileness is exalted among the sons of men.*” (Psalm 12:8)

It’s really just another case of power corrupting those who possess it. Where performance is idolized, the performers who benefit from the idolatry tend to feel entitled to abandon moral constraints and do whatever they want to do—with no sense of shame or guilt. As people learn to depend more and more upon their own performance, they depend less and less upon God’s. There are three people in today’s Scripture readings who fall into this category: Abraham, Sarah and Martha.

Abraham was a man of great faith—a model for us all according to Paul. When God summoned Abraham out of the land of the Chaldees and told him to go to a land He would show him, Abraham immediately obeyed. He didn’t ask God where the land was or how long it would take to get there, he just got up and went because he trusted in God’s promise. Later, God promised Abraham an heir, and Abraham trusted in that promise too. But, being human, as he and Sarah got older and older and no child came, they began to doubt God’s promise. Sarah, we are told, “*...laughed to herself as she thought, ‘After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?’*” And Abraham “*...laughed and said to himself, ‘Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?’*” Abraham and Sarah began to doubt God’s promise because they doubted their ability to bring a child into the world. ***They began to think that what God could do was limited by what they could do.***

Then there was Martha, who got so caught up with performing her household duties that they became more important to her than listening to the Son of God. Not only that—she wanted Jesus to agree with her and send her sister Mary out of His presence so that she could help her with them. Concern for her job performance became more important to her than her relationship with her Savior. And I’ll bet there isn’t a person here today who can’t identify with Martha—who doesn’t let the “business at hand” get in the way of their relationship with the Lord on a regular basis.

Now all this is not to say that we should neglect the work the Lord has given us to do in our daily lives—that it’s OK to be lazy and bad to be industrious. Christian living is not a matter of taking a lifelong nap and letting God to do all the work. We are called to labor in the vineyard, not have a picnic in it. But it is to say that sin, which never leaves us alone, is continually trying to infect and corrupt our best impulses and turn our strengths into weaknesses. When we begin to depend more upon our ability to perform than we do upon God’s, we have a problem.

The good news is that God has an answer for all this. It's pretty simple really: He just allows us to fail. He allows some of our best-laid plans to blow up in our faces. Seeing where they will lead us if they succeed, God sabotages them before they take us there. When this happens, of course, we weep and wail and gripe about an uncaring, whimsical God who punishes those who care enough about the future to actually formulate goals and then work to achieve them. The poet A.E. Housman perfectly captured the emotions people feel at such moments:

*We of a certainty are not the first  
Have sat in taverns while the tempest hurled  
Our fondest hopes to nothingness, and cursed  
Whatever brute or blackguard made the world.*

Our problem begins when we start to trust our plans more than we trust God. We can't see what He has in mind but we know what we have in mind and it's tempting for us to trust our plans more than His promises. King Ahaz of Judea was offered a miraculous deliverance from his enemies by God and he rejected it in favor of a plan he had come up with on his own—a plan which led to disaster for his country. And so from time to time God blows up our plans and we sulk about it, forgetting that God can work divine blessings out of human disasters. When a great persecution broke out against the infant church in Jerusalem and the Apostles were driven out into Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth, I'm pretty sure it seemed to them like an unmitigated disaster. All of their carefully laid plans for church growth had just gone right out the window! But God knew what He was doing: by scattering His disciples like one might scatter sparks from a campfire, He kindled faith in converts throughout the Mideast, Asia Minor and as far as Greece and Rome. Having commissioned them to make disciples of all nations, He was simply helping them to carry out their commission. God always delivers on his promises and He has promised good to those who love Him and who trust Him. The Old Testament church of Israel and the New Testament church of Jesus Christ were both born in the midst of violence and persecution. **God works divine blessings out of human catastrophes!** We can't see the future; we can only know it by faith. But God knows it and that is all we need to know.

One man who seemed to get it right was Martin Luther. By any standard, Luther was a high performer. He wrote over fifty books, translated the Bible from Greek and Hebrew into German, pastored a church, taught in a seminary and led the Reformation—all while he suffered with serious health problems and lived under the sentence of death by the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. He worked harder than all of us, yet he never forgot that the outcome of each and every day's efforts depended entirely upon God. He once wrote in his diary: *"I have so much to do tomorrow I'll have to spend an extra hour in prayer."* Is that the thought that crosses your mind on the evening before a particularly busy day? At the end of his life he wrote, *"All I did was speak the Word and the Holy Spirit did everything else. Everything."*

Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams were both great athletes. One gave all glory to God and the other carried the future. Where are you in that spectrum? Maybe the best we can do is to follow Luther's advice, *"Work,"* he said, *"as if everything depended upon you. But understand that it all depends upon God."*

Amen.

## **Genesis 17:15-17 & 18:10-15 Isaac's Birth Promised**

<sup>15</sup> And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. <sup>16</sup> I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” <sup>17</sup> Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”...

<sup>10</sup> The LORD said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. <sup>11</sup> Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. <sup>12</sup> So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?” <sup>13</sup> The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ <sup>14</sup> Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.” <sup>15</sup> But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “No, but you did laugh.”

## **Luke 10:38-42 Martha and Mary**

<sup>38</sup> Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. <sup>39</sup> And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. <sup>40</sup> But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” <sup>41</sup> But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, <sup>42</sup> but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.”