

“Are Eyes on the Prize?”

I Corinthians 9:24-27; II Timothy 4:1-8

Sermon Series: Stoked Week 3 Spread the Fire

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Lee Rodríguez-Espada was in a panic. While her mother Brendalee parked the car, the 12-year-old girl sprinted over to the starting line of the Wegman’s Family 5K race in Rochester, New York. A man told her she could jump in with a group of runners so off she went. Things went well until Lee passed the 5K mark with no finish line in sight. She asked a runner how long this race is. “Thirteen miles,” she replied. “And that’s when it struck me I was in the half marathon instead of the 5k,” Lee said.

Waiting at the finish line her mother grew frightened when there was no sign of her daughter among the 5K racers. For nearly two hours she and the police searched for the 12-year-old. Finally a police officer reunited Lee with her mother who broke down in tears. When mom stopped hugging her she noticed something around the girl’s neck: a medal. Lee finished the half marathon in two hours and forty minutes. “She just wanted to finish the race,” Mom said. “I don’t even know how she did it. I’m so proud of her.” A twelve-year-old, who only started running two months before, simply put one foot in front of the other and kept her eyes on the prize.¹

Sometimes, like Lee, you may want to say, “I didn’t sign up for this race.” This run called “life” is turning out to be harder than you expect. You have to work faster to get all your tasks done, get stronger so you can handle the kids, the clients, the competition. And when you complete a school project, close an important deal or successfully drive the kids to soccer, gymnastics, music lessons, church and home again you don’t just want a pat on the back. You want to hear the national anthem, stand on the top platform and have the judges put a gold medal around your neck. But instead you simply fall into bed exhausted and start the whole thing over again.

At some point on your marathon run through life, you may even get sidetracked, distracted or exhausted. Brazil’s Vanderlei de Lima was in the lead in the marathon at the 2004 Athens Olympics. With only three miles to go, a man known for disrupting sporting events, jumped onto the course and pushed him into the crowd. De Lima got back in the race but fell behind a mile later and had to settle for the bronze medal. What’s in your way? Debt? Drink? Drugs? Divorce? Desire? Disease? Death? From out of nowhere they jump in front of you and try to pull you down.

Maybe you stop and wonder, “How did I get here? Where am I going? What’s the prize?” The goal keeps changing. Originally the prize was a high school diploma or a college degree, then a job, a better job, a spouse, children, a house, a car, a bigger car or house, a vacation home, a good retirement. Then you wish you were back in college again. What prize are you chasing?

¹ AnneClaire Stapleton, "Girl, 12, Accidentally Runs Half Marathon" CNN.com (4-27-16)

When I visited Greece I learned there were four big competitions. In addition to the Olympic games, there were games at Corinth, Delphi and Nemea. They each awarded different prizes to the winners. At Olympia you received a crown of olive branches, at Delphi laurel branches, a Corinth pine branches and at Nemea a bunch of celery. Sometimes when you finally win the prize you wonder, “Is that all there is?”

The Apostle Paul was a fan of track and field. Three times he describes the Christian life as a race. In his letter to the church in Philippi he writes,
One thing I do: 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. Philippians 3:14-15

What is his prize? To know Jesus and to make Jesus known.

What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection... Philippians 3:8, 10

That may not sound like much compared to a gold medal, your name in the record book or a lucrative contract with Nike. But consider this: every record will be broken, every advertiser will find a new spokesperson and every gold medal will melt when this earth passes away. Only one thing endures forever: salvation through Jesus Christ. Paul writes to the Corinthians,

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. I Corinthians 9:25

Abundant life with Jesus is the only prize on earth that lasts forever. At the finish line of your life it will not matter one bit if your name is written in the world record books. But it will make all the difference in the world if your name is written in God’s Book of Life. Keep your eyes on the only prize that matters: Knowing Jesus and Making Jesus Known.

The more you get to know Jesus, the deeper you grow in your relationship with Him, the more His love, joy and peace fill your soul. Keeping your eyes on the prize of Jesus will help you deal with all the challenges and obstacles on the road of your life. And the more you make Him known to others, the more you invite others to join you on the journey, the more you will see them come alive with His love, joy and peace.

All this takes training. Like all athletes, you and I need spiritual training. To keep our eyes on the prize of Jesus, we need **Practice**. Paul writes,
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. Therefore 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 so that after I have

preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. I Corinthians 9:25-27

When I was in high school my parents were in a running club. They trained their way up to half and full marathons. As I hit the snooze button they were already out on the road before sunrise. They ran specific distances each day to condition themselves for the grueling 26 miles. While I consumed all sorts of fatty, salty, sugary foods, they ate proper diets for racers. Their bodies were finely tuned and in fit condition. They told me they actually felt, “The Runner’s High.” I didn’t believe them, but they said it was true.

If you want more love, joy, peace and contentment in your life, try God’s exercise program. It will put you in fit spiritual shape. Starting next week we will follow the Apostle Paul’s exercise program in our fall message series “SHARE.” On Sunday we will see how Paul shared joy, hope, love, grace, power, truth and how we can do the same. To get the full benefit, do a daily reading, join a Growth Group or a Microchurch.

Now I guarantee you, friends, your body will tell you don’t need to do it. ‘Stay in bed instead of pray, read Scripture or worship.’ ‘Stay home and watch TV instead of join a Growth Group.’ ‘Sit back and let someone else serve.’ ‘Keep quiet and don’t share your faith.’ It takes practice to overcome what your body tells you. Paul says, ‘Don’t let anything distract you from the blessings of this prize.’

Second, keeping your eyes on the prize requires **Patience**. Near the end of his life, sitting in a dank, dark Roman jail, Paul wrote this final instruction to Timothy:
I give you this charge: Preach the Word, be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction. 2 Timothy 4:2

It takes a tremendous ocean of patience and endurance to be an athlete. The 1912 Greco-Roman wrestling match in Stockholm between Alfred Asikainen of Finland and Russian Martin Klein lasted more than 11 hours. Klein won but he was too exhausted to participate in the championship match so he took the silver.

You may have to wrestle with a lot of questions about Jesus from your children, neighbors, spouse or parents. People may call you a hypocrite or holier-than-thou. Someone you love may reject or leave the faith. There may even be times in your run with Jesus that doubts and discouragement cause you to sit on the sidelines. Be patient. Stay in the race. He will not leave you. He is always running in front of you. So pray and patiently explain, guide and encourage them until they receive the prize.

And finally, to keep your eyes on the prize, you need Practice, Patience and to **Pass the Baton**. Paul warns Timothy,
For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. 2 Timothy 4:3-5

The baton passed from Paul to Timothy. And for two thousand years, it has been passed from believer to believer and from generation to generation. That hand off is crucial. The U.S. watched in horror at the 2004 Olympics as American Marion Jones botched the hand off to teammate Lauryn Williams in the 4x100m relay. That mistake disqualified the U.S. team. Now they only lost a race. We might lose a loved one, a family or a whole generation if we botch the baton pass. There are friends, neighbors, family members, coworkers, your spouse, your parents, your children who need you to pass the baton of faith to them. The world will not teach them the Good News about Jesus. The culture will sell them whatever myths, lies and half-truths their itching ears want to hear. It is so essential that you and I pass on the baton to Sunday school kids, youth group kids, Adventure Club kids, Preschool kids, small groups, and all those people who'd never set foot inside a church. They won't listen to me. But they will listen to you. Invite them to attend worship with you. Invite them to your Growth Group. Listen to them and then share your faith with them.

Some of you are called to go farther. Instead of inviting them to church, you are eager to take church to them, to start church with them, among them. It's not a secret that many today like Jesus, are interested in God, but want nothing to do with the institutional church. For Paul and Timothy, there was no institutional church. So they started tiny churches in houses, lecture halls, by river banks all over the Roman Empire. Their goal was not to add disciples to an institution but to multiply disciples throughout a region. We call these microchurches – gatherings of four to six believers who read the Word and live the Word out in the world. Once they reach beyond six they launch a new group. When this happens again and again and again it spreads the Gospel to places no institutional church can reach. Microchurches are the way Paul, Timothy and others passed on the faith in the face of persecution. Starting a microchurch may not be for you. But if you are intrigued, interested or inspired by the idea, come see me and I'll tell you more. With the help of the Spirit, we can all Practice, have Patience and then Pass the Baton.

Paul went through a lot of twists and turns, trials and travails on his race toward the finish line of life. Most scholars believe Paul's earthly finish line is a horrible dungeon in Rome. He is all alone. Some of his helpers are off on missions. Some of his friends betrayed and deserted him. Timothy is in Turkey. Only Luke remains by his side. Bent and weary, gray and arthritic, scarred by numerous beatings, stoning, shipwreck, chaffed by his chains, he looks pitiful. But inside this old husk of a body is a spirit still burning with the fire of Jesus. Even now, as the execution's shadow draws near to his cell, he writes to Timothy

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. 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 Timothy 4:6-8

One day, soldiers take the feeble little prisoner, the troublemaker who turned the Roman world upside down, out to a spot beyond the walls of the city by the side of the road. Grim faced, they tie his hands behind his back and force him to his knees. Head bowed, neck bared, the grim soldiers cannot see the gentle, peaceful smile on the prisoner's face. The axe blade rises up, flashes briefly in the sunlight and swings home.

Paul doesn't feel the blade. Nor does he feel the scars and wounds, nor the weariness and pain. He opens his eyes and doesn't even see the soldiers or the city. Behind him is the finish line and before him stands his beloved Master, the One who called his name on the road to Damascus, cheered for him and stayed by him the entire race. Jesus' glorious appearance is almost unbearable to see and yet so unbearably beautiful it breaks your heart. "Well done, Paul," Jesus says with a voice that rolls like mighty waters and soothes like a gentle breeze. Then the Lord places a wreath on his head and says, "Come on in, everyone is waiting for you." And as the two walk through the gates of the Kingdom, all the saints through all the ages give out a deafening roar.

That will be the greatest prize of all. Don't miss it.