

Question: I'm looking forward to the upcoming Rio Olympics from Brazil. Are there not some life-lessons that we can learn from the commitment and efforts of these young athletes?

Looking forward to the beginning of the Rio Olympics this week, it seemed appropriate to revisit what I wrote at the time of the 2012 London Olympics with some adaptations. Many of us have watched with fascination as the finest athletes from almost every nation have gathered to compete in the 2016 Summer Olympics. Performing with dedication, courage and grace, these young athletes can certainly teach us some powerful lessons for all of life. To gain the victory they set their sights on the goal, train vigorously, exercise great discipline and maintain intense concentration during their performances. Some amazing stories of overcoming difficulties always seem to come from the Olympics. As we watch them this year, we will again experience “the thrill of victory and agony of defeat.”

I believe Jesus would encourage us to learn some valuable lessons from the Olympians. In fact, the Bible compares the Christian life to the struggle of an Olympic contest. In an allusion to the ancient Greek games, the apostle Paul wrote: “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. Everyone who competes in the game 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” (1 Corinthians 9:24-25 NIV).

In a similar way, Christians are in a spiritual race; but our race is not one focused on a temporary earthly reward. The eyes of a Christian should be upon the crown of eternal life (Revelation 2:10). This victory will be won by those who also make the necessary sacrifices to train and who endure hardships, but they do it in the name of Jesus our Lord. Even with our best efforts, we as Christians know that we are dependent on God's grace to enable us to join in what Paul wrote near the end of his life: “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” (2Tim. 4:8 NIV).

However, Jesus would also point to the biblical statement that “physical training is of some value, but

godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come” (1 Timothy 4:8). To be fast, strong, or physically beautiful is good; but that is not enough. Because God is more concerned about character, he looks for holiness in the heart. As the years pass, few people will remember what the Olympic athletes have done. Unless our Lord returns to end this present world before then, other Olympic contests will soon preempt the present one. The glory and gold of this world will fade, but the rewards of righteousness through faith in Jesus will never fade.

In addition, Jesus would point out that only a few receive the Olympic gold medal; but the eternal glory of God is available to all who trust in him. The thrill and wonder of Rio cannot compare with what God has in mind for his children of faith. The faithful Christian can declare, “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

There is nothing unholy about the Olympic contests. I hope we will enjoy this year’s Olympics. We can learn much from the commitment and perseverance of these young athletes. But above all, may we remember that every day each and every one of us is competing in an even greater contest in life. We need to ask ourselves if the goal in life is the gold of this world or the eternal glory of God?

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