

## Like an Athlete

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The 2024 Olympics have started. Every four years, nations from around the world send their best athletes to compete in the ancient games. Whether as a competitor or spectator, competition is captivating. Speed, skill, and sportsmanship highlight the better parts of the human spirit.

Athletic competition was a common part of the first century Greco-Roman world. While the apostle Paul was never depicted as a sportsman, he frequently compared Christians to athletes. Not only that, but the broader Biblical text uses athletic metaphors to encourage faithfulness.

### Like Athletes, Christians...

**1). Play by the rules.** There are rules and regulations that govern athletic competition. In wrestling, there are weight classes. If the wrestler is over the weight limit, he cannot compete. Basketball has a shot clock to time ball possession. Track runners must stay in their lane to avoid disqualification.

Paul wrote, “An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules” (1 Tim. 2:5). This statement was made to convey how Christians were to behave. The Gospel establishes boundaries. When we live within the moral and ethical framework of the Gospel, we will grow and have a fulfilling life. If we move outside the lines of the Gospel, we will be harmed by sin. Just like athletes, Christians must play by the rules.

**2). Trains & practices.** Athletes exercise their bodies to increase stamina. They work to improve their skills on the court. They spend countless hours training without fanfare. They do this to equip themselves for competition and beat their opponent.

Some athletes, though, do not like practice. They do not put in the time and effort to prepare themselves for competition. Their lack of readiness gets exposed at game time. As Christians, we must train to keep our skills sharp. If we do not practice, we will be defeated by our opponent.

The Bible describes some Christians who did not like to train and practice. Their skills were not sharp but had become dull. Their laziness was rebuked: “...you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:11-14).

As Christians, training involves reading the Bible and thinking about how its teaching can be implemented in our daily lives. Also, we can seek guidance from God in prayer. God will give us wisdom for navigating the world if we seek it (Jas. 1:5). And, we can consult more experienced Christians for help. If we practice like this, we will be victorious.

**3). Respect their opponent.** Athletes have an opponent. To adequately prepare, they must respect their opponent. This will help them study their opponent. They will learn how their opponent operates.

The apostle Paul had studied the opponent. He knew how Satan worked. Through deception, Satan tried(s) to cause division. Sin had caused division within the church at Corinth. Also, their relationship with Paul had been strained. To overcome the tactics of Satan, Paul urges forgiveness and reconciliation. If these strategies were not implemented, Satan would win: “Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs” (2 Cor. 2:10-11).

**4). Are not intimidated.** Athletic competition is fierce. Competitors look for any possible advantage over their opponents. If an athlete senses the slightest bit of intimidation in their opponent, they can exploit it and defeat them.

As Christians, our adversary must be respected. However, he must not be feared. Fear does not come from God. God gives us power, love, and self-control (2 Tim. 1:7). Solomon wrote, “If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small” (Prov. 24:10). Strength is not found by avoiding adversity, but by pushing through it.

Similarly, David wrote, “He made my feet like the feet of a deer and set me secure on the heights” (Psa. 18:33). God empowered David to fearlessly climb the steepest of mountains. This is what God can do for us if we trust Him. We are not alone, either.

As Christians, we can face trials fearlessly together: “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents” (Phil. 1:27-28).

**5). Never quit.** Some of the greatest sports stories are not about winners or losers. They are about athletes who against all odds never gave up. Like athletes, Christians must never quit. No matter what obstacles may come, we must never give up on God.

Paul wrote, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do

not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:24-27). Victory has already been won by God through the resurrection of Christ. We must finish the race.

### **Conclusion**

As the Olympics play out over the next two weeks, let us be reminded of how the Bible compares Christians to disciplined, mentally tough athletes. When we reach the end of our race, may we have the same satisfaction that Paul had: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up 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 loved his appearing” (2 Tim. 4:7-8).