

Once upon a time I met a man that told me he was training for the Winter Olympics. He was a speed skater. He planned on getting the gold medal. Curious, I asked him some questions. I asked him if he trained at the Petite Ice Arena, near Milwaukee. He said he had never heard of it. I asked him if he knew Eric Heiden or Bonnie Blair, two of America's most famous speed skaters. He was ignorant of them. I asked how many hours he spent training. He explained that he spent one hour every Sunday morning on speed skating. He watched a training video he rented from the library.

In disbelief, I asked him if he really expected to win the gold medal. He assured me that he was planning on winning. I inquired as to what he spent most of his time doing since he wasn't training for the Olympics. Bursting with enthusiasm, he told me that he loved flying model airplanes. He spent about 80 hours every week building, repairing and flying them. I told him there was no way he was ever going to win a gold medal because he obviously didn't want to win. He retorted that I should mind my own business. He left me in a huff.

We all know that there is something seriously wrong with this "athlete". The person who wins Olympic gold spends at least 4 years of his life doing nothing but thinking about and training for the games. My "friend" showed by how he lived, that he did not love winning Olympic gold but flying model airplanes.

The apostle Paul knows that how a person lives reveals what a person loves. And so he uses the analogy of Olympic athletes to describe the Christian life. "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way so as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last. 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 from the prize." (1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

I want to think about the phrase, "They do it to get a crown... We do it to get a crown..." Paul is not saying that you can work your way to heaven. The reason that Olympic athletes endure their training regimen is because they long to get the prize. If Christ is a treasure to you, if you truly love heaven, then you will live in a manner that corresponds to what you say you love. Saying that you are going to heaven but spending your time living as though earth is your home simply makes no sense. It is no different than what my imaginary friend was doing.

We need to honestly ask ourselves a very hard question. What does what I think about, what I am excited about, what I spend my time on, tell me about what I want to get? All of us will recognize that there are large tracts of our lives that do not exhibit a life lived with heaven in view. So we must acknowledge to God our sin but then cry out to him for mercy. We need him to give us a desire to "get" the prize of eternal life. Then we need to live in light of what we believe, just like the athlete. Some days, training is a joy and some days it's not. The reason we persevere is because the "prize" is so valuable to us.

Running to win,

This is true for all of us. How we invest our lives reveals what we believe we must have in order to be happy.