

THE MESSAGE

May 23, 2010

1 Peter 1:13-21

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The Rules of Love

Our son, Simon (a first grader), is participating in the Youth Track & Field at the ELCO High School. The track team introduces our youth (grades 1 through 6) in the ELCO school district to running, jumping, and throwing. Simon loves it.

The other week at the end of practice the coach called all the youth over to run the mile. Simon came running over to me at the sideline and said, "Dad, come run the mile with me. The coach said it's ok. I asked her."

We headed to the starting line and off we went running with some 60 other children. We rounded the first turn, then the second, as we headed down the back stretch, I looked over at my son running beside me and a wild thought ran through my mind. I wondered if he will ever make it to the Olympics. (He didn't know what I was thinking and I didn't say anything to him and yet...). I was brought back to reality when he stopped running just then and said, "Dad, I have to stop. I'm tired." I guess I will have to adjust my sights a little. We ran and walked and ran and walked around the track four times completing the mile in just under 17 minutes.

We left track practice that day and I looked around at all the athletes and I wondered if any of them will ever make it to the Olympics? It is possible. Anything is possible.

The Olympics! Being a sports guy I loved watching the Winter Olympics held in Vancouver, Canada this past February. I enjoy the Olympics for two reasons. **First:** it is one of the few traditions we still observe today that reaches all the way back to Jesus' day. Many of our traditions don't go back that far. **Second:** there is an energizing spirit when the Olympic athletes are together. I want to be part of that energizing spirit even if it's just by watching them on TV.

People from all over the world gathered to be their very best in sports like curling, skiing, ice skating, hockey, and the forever dangerous bobsledding. Each sport is different but the athletes have many things in common:

- They all are competing for the ultimate prize.
- They all must discipline themselves, and prepare mentally and physically.
- They all must avoid distractions and forgo less important agendas.
- They all must push their gifts and talents to be their very best, often suffering trials and setbacks along the way.

The image of the Olympic Games can help us understand what Peter is saying to the people of faith in his day. The year was 64 A.D., a fire had destroyed much of Rome. The emperor, Nero, needed a scapegoat so he blamed the fire on the Christians. (Some historians believe Nero set the fire himself.) Persecuting Christians broke out all over the Roman Empire, and Christianity spread out from Jerusalem. Instead of destroying Christianity it had the complete opposite affect. This persecution eventually took both Peter and Paul's lives, along

with many other martyrs. In the middle of this all suffering and persecution Peter writes a letter to the churches all over the region. That region today is called modern Turkey. Turn with me now to our reading from 1 Peter 1:13-21. (*Read the text*).

Peter's list for the Christians is very similar to the list for the Olympic athletes. Peter says:

- *Prepare your minds for action.*
- *Discipline yourself.*
- *Set your hope on the grace of Christ Jesus.*
- *As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.*
- *Be holy in all you do.*
- *Live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.*

Peter is telling us that **focus and discipline** are necessary for life in the church. If we want to be successful in our God-given work in the world, we need focus and discipline in other words, faithfulness.

Peter's list differs from the athletes' list in at least three ways: the motivation, the goal, and the power for living.

First, the motivation. Why do you do what you do?

There is always a reason why we do what we do. Is it to gain perishable things like silver or gold – trophies in the form of stuff? Or does it have something to do with our relationships?

For me it's all about relationships. I want to be my best self in my relationship with God, and family, and church - in that order. Sorry you are in third place. If my relationship with God isn't right then my relationship with my wife will not be right. If my relationship with my wife isn't right then my relationship with the church will not be right. And if my and my relationship with the church isn't right then I need to get right with God. See how that works?

Peter suggests we ought to be motivated by the inheritance that's ours in Christ Jesus, an inheritance that will never perish, or spoil, or fade. An inheritance motivated by God's love and grace for us a life that never ends. Peter says we are to be motivated by the life we share in Christ within the faith community.

Participation in the faith community is important then. It's a life motivated not by evil desires or by the way of fear but by faith – a life of faith. We are motivated to be holy then, set apart and living for God everyday, being our best self for God.

You might say, "Sounds great pastor, but how, how do I ever get the ability and power to actually live my life in a holy way?" Answer, "We don't. Not on our own." We need the Holy Spirit within us and all around us to guide, forgive, and empower us -- to help us face the trials and challenges of living in this hurting and hostile world so that we don't add to the hurt and the hostility.

Today we celebrate Pentecost. We celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit to breathe life into the community of faith. I hope that we are open to the energizing spirit of the Holy Spirit motivating us to do good works. Doing our part to make this church and the world the best that it can be.

Second, the goal of the church. What is the goal of the church?

The goal for the Olympic athlete is to win the race to take the gold. For us as spiritual athletes our goal is to win the world for Jesus. It isn't about taking the gold or winning some race, it's about trusting God and living a new life offered through the cross of Christ -- living in a right relationship with God and one another.

The other day I heard a song on the radio, "We've Got To Live Like We Were Dying" by Kris Allen. I wondered all day after hearing that song, what if we lived everyday as if it were our last. Become someday it will be. I found myself thinking differently, being differently, treating people differently.

The goal of the church is to help people live differently to treat one another differently because of our relationship with Christ Jesus. It really isn't hard to when you are in the habit of doing so but it does take focus and discipline.

Third, our power for living comes from the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is given not to the world but to the spiritual athletes called to be on Jesus' team.

Folk's we're all on the same team, Jesus' team. If there is conflict, or animosity, or negativity on this team – (I'm not saying there is. I'm saying *if there is...*) – then we need the Holy Spirit to help us set those things aside because the Holy Spirit is our advocate and guide.

An **advocate** is someone who speaks on behalf of another, especially in a legal context. To use a sports metaphor the Holy Spirit is the official at the games of life representing God. The Holy Spirit speaks God's law of love into our lives so that we play by the rules of love. And when we do, when we play by the rules of love, we find that we can work through the conflict, the animosity, and the negativity in our lives. We can find peace, real peace for real life.

The world says you can find peace in your stuff just work harder to get more trophies. Peter says peace is yours already in Christ Jesus our Lord. We are motivated to live out the goal of the church as guided by the Holy Spirit. So as they say at the Olympics, "Let the games begin..." or in our case "let the new life in Christ begin as we play by the rules of love." Live everyday as if you were dying. Amen.