

Service to God

Friends from other Christian traditions have voiced a common complaint that churches are drifting from sound doctrine to the idea that all of us are God's children, no matter



**Michael
Olmsted**

what we believe, so we should just get along. Paul takes a different tack, understanding that the gospel of Jesus Christ is unique in its promises and expectations. The result of sound biblical faith pushes far beyond the guarantee of heaven to the way you live now.

Paul lays down the solid foundation of who you are and how you should live: "Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is — what is good and pleasing and mature" (Romans 12:2, CEB). These words are built on "God's righteousness" (Romans 1:11 and 3:21), not the world's philosophy.

To further cement the vital importance of living according to God's Word and Jesus' example, Paul "encourages you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God... your appropriate priestly service" (Romans 12:1, CEB). I much prefer the NASV translation that your daily living is your "spiritual worship." For Paul, you have entered a new age that began with the coming of Christ. For Paul, this is no time for lethargy, fuzzy faith or casual moral standards as we wait for the Second Coming. Every day we live is a day of worship as we faithfully serve God.

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul uses an athletic metaphor to urge us on to faithfulness and excellence in our living. The Corinthians were very familiar with athletic competitions because the Panathenaic Games were held in Athens every four years and the Isthmian Games were held every two years near Corinth. The winners

of these competitions were idolized like our Olympians or other sports heroes today.

Those ancient competitions featured events connected with warfare, and our modern sports, such as football, are often described by the commentators as a battle between armies. Paul often portrayed Christian living as a battle against the forces of darkness for which Christians must be physically, mentally and spiritually prepared (see 2 Corinthians 6:7 and 1 Thessalonians 5:8).

If an athletic image is used, then you can't escape the ideas of diet, exercise and focused training. Pay attention to TV advertising and the number of fitness centers in your city and you quickly realize fitness is part of our culture.

So why are Christians so often casual about beliefs and living as consistent followers of Jesus? Paul points out that athletes who "practice self discipline in everything"...do it "to get a crown of leaves that shrivel up and die" (1 Corinthians 9:25). Our reward from God for living faithfully is "a crown that never dies" (v. 25). If an athlete focuses on eating right, exercising and training for specific events, does it not follow that every Christian should be learning and growing in the knowledge of the Bible, as well as practicing faith every day in the challenges of this world?

Paul uses himself as an example — not his successes or rewards, but his hard work. He runs with "a clear goal in sight" (v. 26). A runner improves his performance when he visualizes the finish line and determines nothing will stand in his way, whether it is discomfort, exhaustion or physical obstacles.

Christ waits at the goal line for us all! Paul goes on to say he is not "shadow boxing," that this is the real event and he will endure the "punches" even if he feels "like a slave," overwhelmed with the injustices of life! The language is strong and personal. My high school cross-country coach used to say to

Formations

October 18, 2015

Scripture: Romans 12:1-3;

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

me, "How much you want to win will decide how your race ends!" How clear is that?

In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (NASV) Paul reminds you that "your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit... you have been bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your body."

Our world settles for superficial goals and dreams. Any worthwhile goal requires discipline and determination. You can float through life and be satisfied with just getting by, but that pretty well pushes joy and satisfaction to the side. God desires for you a sense of purpose, an understanding that there is more to living than taking up space and the possibilities of blessing for you and those your life touches. You can sit around and wait for something important to cross your path or for a blinding vision in the sky, or you can live out the grace of God, be an encourager to someone, offer faith as an alternative to hopelessness or disappointment.

The love of Christ in your life should flow out to those around you. Ministry is more relationship than a profession or impressive event. I have found wondrous joy, when, after years had passed, someone wrote a note or texted me to say how much my words or kindness made a difference when they were struggling. God gives you a life built on his love and forgiveness. Study the Bible, pray, worship, get involved in doing for others, stretch yourself. Serve God with your spirit, mind and body.

As Paul says, "I discipline myself so that what I preach will not be denied or disqualified by what I do" (my paraphrase).

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.