

It's interesting to me that in the story of Paul's journey to Rome, recorded in Acts 28, nonbelievers consistently showed kindness to Paul, and in this case to his shipmates as well. Paul's guard, Julius, was kind to Paul again and again, even saving Paul's life. The people of Malta showed extraordinary kindness to Paul and the others on the ship. The chief official of the island, named Publius, showed great hospitality to those who had been stranded. This kind treatment of Paul by non-Christians brings to mind several passages in Romans that point us toward Paul's view of Gentiles who did not know Christ yet lived as though they did. In Romans 1:20, Paul notes that God's power and divine nature are clearly seen in creation, so that all people have access to some knowledge of God. This knowledge is written on our hearts, so all of us—believers and nonbelievers—have at least a basic sense of right and wrong. This is why Paul says, “*I have become all things to all people (Jews, Gentiles, those who are weak) so that by all possible means I might save some*” (9:22).

Through this statement Paul highlights his *freedom* in Christ, yet Paul considers himself a *slave* of Christ. I was a college student when the 1976 US Hockey Team beat the Soviet Union at Lake Placid, New York. I don't remember the Jamaican bobsled team at Calgary, but many other names and faces of the Winter Olympics still come to mind—Peggy Fleming, Katarina Witt, Brian Boitano, Torville and Dean, Eddie Wilson, Bonnie Blair, Jean Claude Killy—the years and places get mixed up—Salt Lake City, Nagano, Lillehammer and Albertville—but young men and women who were well-trained in their various sports were in the world's spotlight for a week, giving their all to win a gold or silver or bronze medal, and become an Olympic champion.

When these various cities prepare to host the Olympic games, there are usually a stack of logistical problems that need worked out before the games begin. No one living in Pyeongchang, Rio, Socchi, London, Vancouver or Beijing over the last 10 years would be unaware of the Olympic games. Nor would anyone living in ancient Corinth be oblivious to the great games that took place there every four years.

In ancient Greece, there were four major athletic games that took place in successive years. The most famous and prestigious were the Olympic Games which took place in Olympia. Next were the Pythian Games in Delphi, the Isthmian games at Corinth and the Nemean games at Nemea. Each had a crown awarded the victor—at Olympia, wild olive; at Delphi, laurel; at Nemea, wild celery; and at the Isthmian games, pine. Athletes would be in constant training since each year there would be another of these major games plus the smaller regional events leading up to them. At Olympia, the athletes would swear to Zeus that they had trained for ten months leading up to the contest. Zeus was the protector at Olympia, Apollo at Delphi and Poseidon, the god of the sea, at Corinth.

By the accounting of one historian, “the foot races were always in multiples of 200 meters the length of the track and the longest was twelve laps. In races longer than a single length, runners had to make a sharp turn around a post in the middle of the finishing line. Strength and good elbows were almost as important as speed. Boxers' hands were bound with soft leather, both to protect the knuckles and to avoid cutting

the opponent's face." At Isthmia the sanctuary and racetrack were the only permanent structures. Corinth had to provide tents for all the visitors and this is where Paul comes in.

According to Acts 18, Paul left Athens for Corinth to work as a tentmaker with Priscilla and Aquila. Because we know when the games were played, we can date this letter to just after A.D. 51. Priscilla and Aquila and Paul would have been busy for months before and after the games making tents for the visitors. Likely they would have been at Isthmia during the time of the games—when crafts-persons were sent out during the games to make repairs as they became necessary. Paul would have seen the athletes training and perhaps witnessed the races and the boxing events themselves. He refers to a perishable crown or wreath in chapter 9, because in addition to the medals, the athletes received a crown of olive leaves. When the games were over the crowns would dry and wither; the victory would be remembered and recorded but then eventually the event would fade; the athletes aged and died and were forgotten.

Paul would use the metaphor of these athletic contests for the Christian life, as a race to be run, a fight to be fought—the Greek word he uses is *agon* from which we get agony—and the goal an *imperishable* crown of everlasting life.

What is also very interesting in this Scripture is what the sports metaphor would have meant to his readers. It's really a radical departure from everything we read in biblical literature and shows just how radical Paul was in relating the gospel to his culture. In antiquity, athletes performed nude. Women were forbidden to watch the contests for this reason. In fact the word "gymnasium" refers to the nudity of those in training. Because of this, sporting activities were rejected by religious Jews. The construction of a gymnasium in Jerusalem was considered an abomination. In 1 Maccabees we read "Some of the people eagerly went to the king who authorized them to observe the ordinances of the Gentiles. So they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem according to Gentile custom, and removed the marks of circumcision and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the Gentiles."

Paul grew up as a traditional, observant Jew. He wrote to the Galatians, "*I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers*" (1:14). He went on to say in Galatians, "*But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles...*"

Paul was a Pharisee of the Pharisees, a zealous Jew, who met Jesus and it completely changed his life. It changed his message too—now he would go into a very different world with the message of God's grace for all people. Paul would set aside the customs of his tradition for the sake of winning new people for Christ, namely, these Greeks who ran races and boxed and thought the most beautiful body was the one pummeled and strengthened and trained in the gymnasium. The words in our passage "*I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave*" are really descriptions of hard training to be fit and strong and ready for the arena or stadium. Paul was not only thinking outside the box but he had left the old religious box behind.

Jim Keigel says, “I once read most of a book entitled, *Why Men Hate Going to Church*. It opens with the story of Cliff. Cliff is a man’s man. On the job he’s known as a go-getter and a very hard worker. He’s a good provider who loves his wife and kids. He’s well-respected by his neighbors. Cliff drives a four-wheel drive pickup. He loves the outdoors and takes every opportunity for a little hunting and fishing. He enjoys a cold beer and a dirty joke. He doesn’t go to church.

Asked why he doesn’t go to church, he’ll offer up words like boring, irrelevant and hypocritical but the real reason is that he’s already practicing another religion. His religion is masculinity. His work, his hobbies, his entertainment, his follies, his addictions, everything he does, is designed to prove that he’s a real man. His religion also demands that he avoid anything that might call his manhood into question. This includes church because Cliff believes deep in his heart that church is something for women and children, not for men. In the 1800s, Charles Spurgeon said, “ ‘There has [surfaced] this notion, somehow, that if you become a Christian you must sink your manliness and turn milksop.’ No man really wants to be nice—strong, good, even holy perhaps—but not safe or nice. I sometimes wonder if men, young men especially, aren’t the Greek Gentiles of today’s world” (© 2006, James D. Keigel).

Paul is not afraid to speak to men using images that only men could understand. He’s talking about playing in the Super Bowl of the ancient world; running a race and coming in first; being a fighter not a shadow boxer. He is not offering comfort and consolation and relationship here but challenge and winning. He is not talking about safety but *risk*, not of stability but *change*, not preservation but *expansion*, *adversity* not predictability. Is there anything here that is sweet or sentimental or nice? I don’t hear it.

Don’t get me wrong. There were female competitors in the ancient games as there are of course fierce female competitors in the Olympics today. In the ancient games women could drive horse teams and some are recorded as receiving the victor’s crown. There will be many a woman with a gold or silver or bronze medal around her neck at next year’s Olympics in Tokyo—fierce competitors who have trained hard to win.

But what I am arguing for is that the message of Christ and his life-transforming work is also for young men, for an athlete who maybe parties too much; had an unconventional background in the wilds of New Hampshire; does not ski according to accepted conventions; and he occasionally gets into trouble with the authorities. There is such a man. His name is Bode Miller, World Cup Alpine skier and gold medalist. Last week I read that he and his wife are expecting twins, one year after their one-year-old daughter tragically drowned in a pool. The gospel is for him too. Maybe, especially for him.

Do you know who goes to church today? The majority of folks are women and older adults age fifty and up, but not a large percentage of young men or women 18 to 29. Who did Jesus call to drop their fishing nets? Who could stand the rigors of becoming disciples and apostles for the Lord? Young adults.

Jesus calls us all to new challenges. It’s not easy being a Christian—it can be compared to training for the Olympics. Reaching out to others today and proclaiming the name of Jesus to people of all ages is not easy. It never was.

But we have a worthy and wonderful goal, as did Paul, to win an imperishable victor's crown that will last forever. Amen.