

The Winter Olympics in Vancouver are only a couple of weeks away. There will be a variety of events that the nations are participating in with the results being a Gold, Silver or Bronze Medals. Most will not win medals, but will go home having participated in the Winter Games, which only a few from each nation can say.

I still have fresh in my mind the Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, in 1980, where the U.S. Hockey team won the Gold Medal, and it was termed the Miracle on Ice. This was where the U.S. Hockey team – a group of amateur hockey players, beat the team from the Soviet Union, who were considered the best in the world.

They had lost badly to them in an exhibition game a few weeks before the Olympics, but their coach was very optimistic about their chances in the Olympics. He was definitely not a pessimist about their chances.

You know the difference between an optimist and a pessimist. An optimist looks at a glass of water — and says it is half full — while a pessimist looks at the same glass and says it is half empty. Winston Churchill said: “A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity... An optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”
(REPEAT)

I would have to say that all the athletes go into the Olympic games as optimists – thinking that they are going to win the Gold Medal.

And that is way that we should look at our Christian lives. The Bible describes our lives as Christians as a race and that is we see in our Epistle lesson for today — turn with me, if you will, to 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (READ).

We see here that the Apostle Paul uses the metaphor of a race to illustrate the race that is our Christian lives. But there is a big difference between a regular race — and the race of our Christian lives. A regular race – such as in the Olympics – only has one winner — but when we think about it, in our Christian lives — we all win. He tells us that the prize that we run for is “*an imperishable crown.*” Now, obviously he is talking about that which we receive when we end this earthly journey and we go onto glory.

But, as we are, running this race — he tells us that it takes effort... it takes determination... it takes perseverance... it takes sacrifice — but as we do this — we run towards the finish line and as I said we all win — because as Christians we all have “*an imperishable crown*” waiting for us.

Those familiar with sports — and it can be any sport — know that the best players are those, not only with ability — that has to begin there — but those who exert much effort, determination, commitment and sacrifice. The New York Jets, with a rookie quarterback came very close to going to the Super Bowl, because of their effort, determination, commitment and sacrifice.

These are athletes who have a singleminded focus on being the best. In a couple of weeks the football season will end — to the joy of many wives — and theoretically it won't begin again until June or July. Two things we know – only one will get the ultimate prize – winning the Super Bowl.

We also know that after about a month or so off, many of the better players will already begin preparing for next season — they will be working out... practicing — all to make themselves better. The level of play is such, that only those who do this are the ones who will continue to succeed and excel — again, we see what it takes — effort, sacrifice, discipline and determination.

And when we think about it, they are only doing this so that they can win some “*perishable crown*” — such as that which is talked about in our passage.

You see, the winner of the earthly race that Paul is talking about here — Bible scholars say that they probable are the Isthmian games, well known by the Corinthians — would receive a laurel wreath if they were victorious. This laurel wreath, something cut from a living tree — would eventually dry out and wither away — it is perishable... it is temporary.

The Pittsburgh Steelers won the Super Bowl last year, with all the rave reviews about their offense and defense — and of course, the Super Bowl trophy — and they were not even in the playoffs this year. It really is a perishable crown, to say the least.

But the crown... the prize that we strive for is imperishable — and, as noted, is not easily obtained. Now, if those who are striving for an perishable crown do what they do — what should we be doing in our Christian lives?? — we should be running our race with effort, determination, sacrifice and commitment, with a singleminded focus on running our race.

Now, I must pause here to state that we are not talking about salvation by works — that is, we are not talking about earning our salvation. The scriptures teach clearly in many places that our salvation is by faith through the grace of God.

Ephesians 2:8,9 says: “*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.*” Titus 3:5 says: “*not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit...*”

But, once we are saved — as a result of our salvation — we are then to labor for the Lord... we are to dedicate our lives to Him. The next verse after Ephesians 2:8, 9, verse 10 teaches us this truth clearly: “*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.*”

We are told to walk worthy of the calling we have received... we are told by our Savior that our Christian lives will be difficult... that it will take effort... determination... sacrifice... commitment — AND all we have to do is look to the life of our Savior to see this.

Our Savior ran the race that was set before him — which included going to Jerusalem to die. We read in Luke 9:51 these words: “*Now it came to pass, when the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem...*” He knew why he was going to Jerusalem... and he knew what would happen once he got there — but he was committed to fulfilling the reason that he came... he was determined — in short, he sacrificed himself for us.

In Hebrews 12:1,2 we are told: “*Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*”

The cloud of witnesses are those saints written about in Hebrews 11 and for us, all Christians who have gone before us... all those who have gone before us and run their race to end — regardless of the difficulty — All those who have extended the effort... the sacrifice... the discipline... the commitment.

And just as the athlete who wants to win the race... or win the Super Bowl, Stanley Cup, World Series — whatever sport — knows that it takes effort and sacrifice — so also will our Christian lives. And in our own Christian lives we find ourselves in the same situation — having a race to run. We have the race of our individual lives — and that of our church.

The race in our individual lives can be summarized again — as we have seen so often — in those very familiar words of the Great Commandment — *“to love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. and to love your neighbor as yourself.”* As we do this... as we strive to do this — to love the Lord with all of our heart, soul and mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves — it will take effort... it will take commitment... it will take determination... and it will take sacrifice.

It is not easy to follow the Lord when the world around is against you... it certainly is not easy to follow the Lord when people say: “you don’t really believe that fairy tale or myth that they call the Bible...” It is not easy to follow the Lord when there are so many other tempting options that are out there. Think of the ridicule that Brit Hume faced when he said that Tiger Woods should embrace the Christian faith, because it has something that Buddhism doesn’t offer – forgiveness of sins.

And of course, it is not easy to love our neighbor as ourselves... sometimes we think it is downright impossible — but this is what we are called to do... this is part of the race that is set before us... as we saw last week. Again, effort, determination and commitment.

A couple of years ago a number of us went to see the movie “Amazing Grace” – the story of William Wilberforce who labored for years to have slavery outlawed in England. Year after year he was defeated – but finally, after 26 years of hard work, and by the grace of God, slave trading was outlawed. It took another 26 years for slavery to be outlawed all together – and he died 3 days after the law was passed outlawing slavery. But it took his effort, dedication, commitment, perseverance and sacrifice as he ran his Christian race.

You might be familiar with the story of a man named Theodor Geisel who wrote a book... a children’s book. He went to a publisher, knocked on their door — and they said NO, we don’t want your book. He went to another publisher and they also said NO. This continued for a while — in fact 23 publishers rejected his book — they all said NO. The 24th one said yes and published his book.

His first book sold 6 million copies and he wrote 50 others. We know Theodor Geisel as Dr. Seuss. He didn’t give in — even though it would have been very easy — especially after so many rejections. The world, in general, is thankful for “Horton hears a Who,” “How the Grinch Stole Christmas,” “Green Eggs and Ham” and a multitude of other books — Effort, determination, commitment, sacrifice, perseverance... especially in the face in difficulty and rejection.

In our Christian lives there can be no spectators... no bystanders — only those participating in the race. And so we can say, the way of the race is before us — let us run it. Let us run for the “*imperishable crown*” — *and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us looking unto Jesus.*