UNDERSTANDING AN ANALOGY

2 Timothy 2:7 Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.

Review

2 Timothy 2:3&4 Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer.

Competing as an Athlete

2 Timothy 2:5 Similarly, anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor’s crown except by competing according to the rules.

“Competes as an athlete” translates *“athleo,”* “to engage in a contest…to contend in public games.” (Vine’s) The English word athlete comes from this Greek word.

Galatians 2:1&2 Then after fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation and, meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain.

Galatians 5:7 You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?

(If you remain faithful) Philippians 2:16b And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain.

2 Timothy 4:7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Hebrews 12:1&2a Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

I Corinthians 9:24-27 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who goes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer 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 for the prize.

Some Observations

Paul frequently, and the author of Hebrews in Hebrews 12:1, compares the Christian life to an athletic contest, most frequently to running a race. We are to run to win, to get a crown that will last forever. Athletes don’t win without strict training; Christians don’t run their race well without self-discipline. Self-indulgence (lack of self-control) leads to failure.

The Christian race is a marathon, not a sprint; finishing and finishing well are critically important.

As in running a race, there are rules that must be followed if you are to be declared the winner:

 You can’t win if you cut in on someone. You will be disqualified for the prize.

 You usually won’t win if you are carrying extra weight (entangled in civilian affairs) or wearing clothes that get your legs all tangled up (allowing unrepentant sin to continue in your life).

 You have to stay on the racecourse (“the race marked out for us” Hebrews 12:1).

 You must finish.

Insight into the Analogy – Competing According to the Rules

We should all want to be winners; we should all want to hear the words of Matthew 25:21&23. “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!”

None of us should want to hear the words of Matthew 25:26 “You wicked, lazy servant!”

But, as in a race, or any athletic contest, there are rules that must be followed and even if you “win,” you will be disqualified.

Hindering someone else in their race disqualifies you from being a winner. The Judaizers in Galatia were hindering the believers in their race. There were those in Ephesus who were destroying the faith of some (2 Timothy 2:16-18).

Luke 17:1&2 Jesus said to his disciples: “Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come. It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck that to cause one of these little ones to stumble.”

Shoving someone else out of the way so you can be the one who comes across the line first and gets the praise disqualifies you for the prize. 3 John 9, I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us.

A racecourse is usually well marked out, especially a marathon. There may be a way to get to the finish line, the desired objective, that looks shorter and quicker, but taking a shortcut disqualifies you from the prize.

I Timothy 3:14&15 Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.

Paul is writing to Timothy about how to “do church,” especially in I Timothy. There are always ways to do things that seem to promise better results than simply doing exactly what the Scriptures say, but long term they end in failure, as the empirical evidence of long-term church growth patterns shows. Churches that compromise Biblical truth to appear more loving or relevant or non-discriminatory usually, but not always, go into decline rather quickly, but decline is inevitable.

Churches that focus on pointing out the problems and failures of other churches usually have the same fate.

Things to Remember

Scripture compares the Christian life to an athletic contest, especially running a race, and says many of the same principles apply.

Individually we should try to do our best to advance the Kingdom of God and doing that requires self-discipline and persistence. There are eternal rewards for those who are faithful in this.

As in athletic contests, certain things will disqualify a person from “winning,” especially getting ahead by slowing others down, drifting off the racecourse and, of course, not finishing.

In context, the analogy seems mostly addressed to church leaders doing things the way the Word of God says they should be done: 2 Timothy 1:13&14(NASB), Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you.

God has not only told us what to believe, but how to “do church,” especially in 1&2 Timothy and Titus. We may apparently appear to get better results, at least temporarily, by ignoring God’s Word for what looks like it will work better, but long term it will not only not work well, but those who do so disqualify themselves from the heavenly rewards they could have had.