

## “LIVING IN THE LIGHT: Run to Win!”

A sermon preached by  
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**Mark 1:40-45**<sup>a</sup> <sup>40</sup> And a leper comes toward him, calling him for help, and saying to him that, “You can make me clean, if you're willing.” <sup>41</sup> And having felt gut-wrenching compassion, and having reached out his hand, he touched him and says, “I will. Be made clean!” <sup>42</sup> And immediately the leprosy left him and he was made clean. <sup>43</sup> And having warned him sternly, immediately he threw him out, <sup>44</sup> and he says to him, “See that you say nothing to no one, but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your purification what Moses commanded into testimony<sup>b</sup> to them. <sup>45</sup> But having gone out, he began to proclaim a lot and spread the word widely so that he was no longer able to enter a city publicly, but was outside the desert places, and they were coming toward him from all directions.

**1 Corinthians 9:24-27**<sup>c</sup> <sup>24</sup> Don't you all know that in a stadium, all runners run, but one takes the prize? So run to win! <sup>25</sup> Every contender exercises self-control in everything – they to take a perishable prize, but we an imperishable. <sup>26</sup> So I don't run as without a definite goal. I box this way: not as though beating air, <sup>27</sup> but I punch<sup>d</sup> and enslave my body so that having preached to others, I'm not somehow disqualified myself.

When I was in seventh grade, my Dad made me run track. He ran track when he was younger, so I guess he thought I'd like it too. I was more into music and wanted to be in band. So, we struck a deal – I would do athletics for a year, and if I still wanted to be in band, I could start the next year. We practiced football in the fall, but I didn't go out for the team. We practiced basketball in the winter, but I didn't go out for the team. But in the spring, I went out for the track team.

I took track very seriously. Dad took me and bought me a new pair of running shoes, a new pair of shorts, new socks, and a new shirt to match the school colors. I studied track. I analyzed it with my mind. I watched ABC's Wide World of Sports faithfully every Sunday afternoon. I learned about legendary runners like Jim Ryun and Bruce Jenner. I read Jesse Owens' biography. I learned about how he overcame so many obstacles to become a track hero.

I knew you had to do more than read if you wanted to run track, and I did. On the days when we did weights, if coach said, “Do twenty,” I did twenty-five. At home, I raced my brother, Brice. I beat him every time. I'm sure it didn't help that I'm two years older than him.

Then, one crisp morning in late February, Coach Ellington took us out onto the track to run. Every morning we ran. We ran and ran and ran. Coach would say, “Seven laps!” Believe me, I tried to run eight. I would run 'til I couldn't anymore, walk a little, run until I couldn't anymore, and walk some more. Since I was such an outstanding long-distance runner, coach put me in the 880 – that's ½ a mile, just twice around the track. Maybe it was because Coach Ellington had faith in me. Maybe it was because he thought if I kept on practicing I would build up my endurance and I'd be able to run all 880 yards. It was really because *everybody* ran the 880!

The day came for the first track meet. I put on my new uniform and mom and dad drove me over to the track at Pine Bluff High School. “Ready. Set...” The gun fired and we started running. Immediately, dudes started passing me. By the first half of the first lap, everyone had

left me behind. By the first quarter of the second lap, the crowd cheered as the winner crossed the finish line. By the first half of the second lap, everyone – that is everyone *but me* – had crossed the finish line. I gave up. I walked into the grass in the middle of the track to my teammates. There was no way for me to win or even place in the race.

You ever feel like that, like you just want to give up? The deck is stacked against you. It hurts too much to keep going. It's too hard. The mountain's too tall and the river's too wide. We've all been there before.

Some of us are there right now. Some of us are dealing with grief. Some of us are dealing with addiction and temptation. Some of us are afraid of what's happening in our country and in our town. Some of us are worried about our money. Some of us are worried about our health. Some of us are worried about our church.

I love Paul's letters to the church in Corinth. The reason I love them so much is that *they were just like us*. Some of them were hurting. Some of them were dealing with moral issues. One dude was shacking up with his stepmother. They were struggling to follow Christ in a hostile environment. Some of them were grieving. They couldn't understand how God would allow their loved ones to suffer.

To make matters worse, they did what we do when we're stressed: they started fighting each other. They started gossiping. They started nitpicking. They started jumping on Paul and the other preachers. They started acting up in worship. Some of them just started sinning like crazy. They decided that if God loved them unconditionally, then why not have a good time? They were even fighting about how to get new people in church. Who would want to join a church like that? Nobody.

That's what upset Paul so much. Paul had dedicated his life to spreading the good news. Listen to what he says he endured for that: "Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked." This is my favorite part: "And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches." With churches like the one in Corinth, I would imagine so!

Paul endured all that to spread the gospel to new people in new places. The way the Corinthians were behaving was *driving people away*. Listen again to what he said. "Don't you all know that in a stadium, all runners run, but only one takes the prize? So run to win!"

Run to win. This paragraph follows last week's scripture reading. Do you remember what Paul was talking about winning? Verse 19: "...though I'm free from all, I enslaved myself to all that I might win many." He's talking about winning new disciples. Now he says the church needs to – *we* need to – run the race to win new disciples. To put it another way, we Christians need to live in such a way that outsiders want to know more about Jesus.

To do that, Paul says we need to do four things. First of all, we need to **focus**. Say that with me: **we need to focus**. We've got to get rid of all our distractions and focus on the prize of winning new disciples. We have said that we are *a church spreading God's extraordinary love through ordinary people*. That's God's vision of our church, and that is the focus of our ministry.

Paul would tell us that we need to cut out the things that distract us from that focus. He would ask, "What's keeping you ordinary people from spreading God's extraordinary love?"

What about those grudges? What about that gossip? What about that doom and gloom attitude? What about that prejudice? What about that habit you got? What about that anger? What about that jealousy? What about that fear? Well, stop it!” You know, distractions can be good things too. Anything that we do that doesn’t spread God’s love needs to be cut out or changed.

To do that, Paul says we need **discipline**. Say that with me: **we need discipline**. We need to practice not what we preach and not even what Bro. Hammett preaches. We need to practice what Jesus preached (hopefully the preacher preaches what Jesus preached). That takes discipline. If you want to be great in any sport or if you want to excel at a musical instrument, you have to practice. Why do we think it’s any different with discipleship? If you want to be a great disciple, you have to practice. Practice unconditional love. Practice joy. Practice peace. Practice patience. Practice kindness. Practice generosity. Practice faith. Practice gentleness. Practice self-control. What does Paul call those things? The fruits of the spirit. They don’t come easy. Those are not innate abilities. It takes preparation, prayer, and practice to develop them.

Third, Paul says we need to be **goal-oriented**. Say that with me: **we need to be goal-oriented**. The goal is to love God and neighbor as Jesus first loved us. What did John Wesley call that? Christian perfection. Don’t get Wesley wrong. It’s not Christian *perfectionism*. It’s what Paul talks about in Philippians 3 when he writes, “Not that I have...already been made perfect, but even so *I press on to win because I have been won by Christ*. Brothers and sisters, I don’t consider myself to have won, but one thing I do: forgetting what’s behind and straining for what’s ahead, I press on toward the goal to the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” Are you there yet? Do you love God and neighbor as Jesus first loved you? Press on toward that goal.

Finally, Paul says we need **purpose**. Say that with me: **we need purpose**. Having a purpose gives us direction and motivation. Purpose gives us a sense of meaning when things go wrong and when we’re hurting. As United Methodist Christians, our purpose, our *mission* is what? To make disciples of Jesus Christ. The reason we exist is to make disciples. That’s why we’re here. We help committed disciples grow into mature disciples. You know what mature disciples do? They make new disciples.

That’s what our mission statement is all about. “We are building God’s Kingdom in Fordyce and beyond by growing as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, caring for all in a community of love and acceptance, sharing God’s love, and serving our neighbor in need.” That’s our purpose. The next time you’re in Sunday school or UMW or UMYF, talk about that. How are you building God’s kingdom? How are you growing as disciples? How are you caring not only for the people in your group but outsiders? How are you sharing God’s love? How are you serving your neighbor? If you’re not doing any of those things, how will you start? That’s why we’re here.

Some folks might say it’s a lost cause. Our community is declining. Folks are moving away. I, for one, don’t believe for a second that God’s Church is a lost cause. We’re a cause for the lost. Now is no time for handwringing or hopelessness. Now is the time for faithfulness.

The second track meet was two weeks after the first. I was determined not to come in last. I worked twice as hard in the weight room to get my legs stronger. I learned to pace myself, to keep my breathing steady. The day came. “Ready. Set.” The gun fired, and we started running. I stayed with the pack for almost the whole first lap, but then, slowly, people started passing me. Soon, everyone had left me behind. When the next-to-last person crossed the finish line, I started walking. I looked at the grass in the middle of the track. It was so tempting. I knew I

had lost, but somehow a feeling of determination came up on me—I was going to finish this race.

I started walking faster, then jogging, and then as I approached the stands, something happened. It was like one of those cheesy 80s movies. Someone started clapping. At first, I thought it was a cruel joke—they were making fun of me, but then the applause started spreading. As it did, I started running faster, and as I did, people started to stand up and clap louder, and when I finally crossed the finish line, the crowd broke out in cheers and shouts. I finished the race. I took early retirement and the next fall I signed up for band.

If you're ready to give up on this church or if you're ready to give up on this community or if you're ready to give up on yourself, or even if you're ready to give up on God, take it from someone who's been there before. You run as hard and fast as you can. When you can't run, walk. When you can't walk, hobble. When you can't hobble, crawl. When you can't crawl, let the church surround you with love and carry you. If the time comes when the church can't carry you any further, God will. God has promised to see us all across the finish line. With God at our side, we cannot fail to win this race. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>a</sup> Translation, Hammett N. Evans, 2009.

<sup>b</sup> Or *witness*; Greek: *martyrion*.

<sup>c</sup> Translation, Hammett N. Evans, 2009.

<sup>d</sup> Literally, *strike under the eye*.