

“Going For The Gold”

Acts 20:1-38

Book of Acts [#24]

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Introduction

The 2008 Beijing Olympics begin on Friday. This is a huge event. Teams from 205 countries will be represented. Approximately 10,500 athletes will compete in 302 events in 28 different sports. Canada is sending a team of about 330 athletes.

The goal is to *win gold*, which is a daunting task. Canada won 3 gold medals in each of the last three Summer Olympics. Compare that to the U.S. which averaged close to 40, or Russia with 28 and China with just over 25 gold medals in each of the last three summer games.

Many people, athletes and non-athletes, dream of being in the Olympics, but very few are and, of course, far fewer win gold. For perspective: less than one out of 100,000 Canadians made our Olympic team this year. And, based on the last three Summer Olympics, less than 1 out of 10 million Canadians will win a gold medal. That is a very small, elite group.

The Bible tells us that every Christian competes like an athlete. In 1 Corinthians chapter 9 Paul wrote,

“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.”

(24-27)

Then, in 2 Timothy 2 as he writes about our Christian service he tells us, “Also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules.” (5)

There are some similarities between our service for Christ and competing in sports, but there also are important differences.

- First, all of us, every Christian is on the team.
- Then, we don’t compete against each other.
- As well, everyone of us can win the gold, can be rewarded by Christ.
- And, the rewards Christ gives will last forever.

As we look at chapter 20 in our ongoing march through the book of Acts, we can learn some important lessons about “*Going For The Gold*” in our lives and service for God from the Apostle Paul.

The Playing Field.

As in athletics, the playing field for Christian service is neither constant nor level. There are times when the conditions are great. Paul experienced this frequently. We see this here in chapter 20 in the week he and his team spent with the believers in Troas, on the northwest coast of Asia Minor.

- The fellowship and conversation were great.
- They all enjoyed it so much that Paul prolonged his Sunday sermon until midnight, *with no signs of complaint*.
- And when young Eutychus nodded off in the upper balcony, fell to the floor and “was picked up dead,” God was gracious and brought him back to life through Paul.
- They continued to talk until daybreak. When Paul left they all were encouraged and comforted.

We see it again in Paul’s final visit with the Elders from the church in Ephesus. Remember, Paul had spent three years there. The relationship was close and deep. They reviewed their ministry together. He encouraged them, charged them with their responsibility, and warned them about the dangers they would face. When the time came for Paul to go, Luke tells us in verse 36,

“When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship.” (36-38)

These were special, wonderful, golden moments.

But Paul also faced terrible conditions as he served Christ. Let’s look at an example in this chapter. Verse 3,

“And there [Greece] he spent three months, and when a plot was formed against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia.”

Then later, as he met with the Elders from the church in Ephesus, he reminded them that while he was “serving the Lord with all humility and with tears” there were “trials which came upon [him] through the plots of the Jews.”

Take a brief look at some of the terrible conditions he faced.

- Right after he came to faith in Christ the Jews plotted to kill him and the disciples were afraid of him.
- On his first missionary journey:
 - The false prophet-magician Elymas opposed him.
 - The Jews in Galatia opposed him. They instigated a persecution against him and drove him out of the region.
 - At Iconium the Jews stirred up the Gentiles against him and attempted to stone him.
 - Paul fled to Lystra. But Jews from Antioch and Iconium followed. Paul was stoned and left for dead.
 - And when he returned to Antioch in Syria, some Jews from the church in Jerusalem came and falsely taught that the Gentiles had to become Jewish to be saved.
- On his second missionary journey:
 - He was nagged by a demon in a slave girl. After he cast the demon out, her owners had him beaten and jailed.
 - At Thessalonica Jews instigated an uproar so that Paul and Silas had to leave.
 - Then at Berea, Jews from Thessalonica came, agitated and stirred up the crowds so Paul again had to leave.
 - At Corinth the Jews resisted and blasphemed and hauled him before the pro-consul.
- On his third missionary journey:
 - At Ephesus many of the Jews were hardened against him and the gospel, spoke evil of the faith and believers. False Jewish exorcists were trying to profit on what they saw as his power.
 - And then there was the great city-wide riot stirred up by the silversmiths.

“*Going For The Gold*,” serving Christ, involves giving our best on all kinds of *playing fields*—when conditions are great and when they are terrible.

The Pursuit.

How should we pursue *the gold*? The Bible gives us a great deal of instruction on this. Overall, we are to live like Jesus, to allow the Holy Spirit to develop Christ’s character in us.

Then there is Paul's description of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 6. Here in Acts 20 there are a few things that are essential for us as we pursue the gold.

We begin with the quality of genuine caring and humility. You may have heard it said that God is more concerned about our character than our abilities. That is true because our character determines the real quality of what we say and do. It is true because it is God's power and ability that performs His work through us, not our own. And so, here we are starting with character, specifically with genuine caring and humility.

To look at genuine humility, drop down to verse 18.

“... ‘You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews.’” [18-19]

Paul describes genuine humility in Romans 12:3 as he tells us we are “... not to think more highly of [ourselves] than [we] ought to think.” The apostle Peter underscores the importance of humility as he tells us, “...clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1 Peter 5:5).

It has been said, “No one can bear witness for Christ and to himself at the same time. No one can at the same time give the impression that he is clever and that Christ is mighty to save.”

The second aspect of character here is genuine caring. Go back to verse 19. Paul said he was “serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon [him] through the plots of the Jews.” Now go to verse 31. “Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.” Those tears were not for himself, but for the new believers and the lost.

Look at two other expressions of his caring. In 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8 Paul wrote,

“But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us.”

Then, in Romans 9, Paul revealed his care for the Jewish people who were rejecting Jesus.

“... my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.” (1b-3)

God used Paul greatly because Paul allowed God to build the character of Christ in him, character overflowing with genuine humility and caring.

The next mark of a godly pursuit of the gold is bold and thorough proclamation of God's truth. In verse 20 Paul reminds the Elders from Ephesus that he

“... did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” (20-21)

Then in verse 27 he said, “... I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.”

He was just as bold in teaching the difficult and uncomfortable things as he was in the easy and comfortable. He was bold and thorough.

And, yes, boldness and humility go together. Paul was not bold because he was bright, well-educated, self-confident and an apostle. Paul told the Corinthian church that the ministry of righteousness with God is filled with glory that will remain forever and so, “...we use great boldness in our speech...” (2 Corinthians 3:12b). To the believers at Ephesus he wrote that it was *in Christ* that we “... have boldness...” (3:11b-12).

This boldness is not the same thing as loudness. It certainly is not the same thing as arrogance. This boldness is confidence in the gospel, confidence in Christ.

- In Christ, who created, is before and holds all things together (Colossians 1:16-17);
- Christ, to whom all things are subject (1 Cor. 15:27-28)
- Christ, who strengthens us so we can do all things (Philippians 4:13);
- confidence in Christ, in whom we overwhelmingly conquer in all things (Romans 8:37);
- Christ, who causes all things to work together for good and freely gives us all things (Romans 8:28, 32);
- Christ, in whom all things will be summed up (Ephesians 1:10).

If you and I are really going for the gold, we will be boldly and thoroughly proclaiming God's truth. Not all of us are gifted and called to be pastors/teachers. All of us *are* called to live and speak of God so others will know of Him, and so that other believers will be encouraged and strengthened.

Think about the *Why Jesus?* outreach Ron & Liz Morgan have developed and we will be using during the Fringe. Is it *bold* to stand, sit, be ready to respond? *Yes!* Willing and ready to witness to all who come by, to ...

- the ones who try not to make eye contact;
- the ones who are curious;
- the ones who are furious.

Is it *thorough*? Yes! Being thorough does not mean covering every detail on a subject at each opportunity. If that were the case, this morning's message would be longer than Paul's here in Acts 20. It means to cover the essential points, what is needed for the text, for the time, for the people.

And, finally, in *pursuit of the gold*, we need to have clear vision and a pure heart. Clear vision means having the ability to see ourselves, others, things and situations as they are. Consider Paul. Go to the middle of verse 18,

“You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews.”

That is *clear vision*. It is, it reflects wisdom and discernment from God, which He gives generously as we ask and rely on Him. We see more of this here in chapter 20. Verse 22,

“And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.” (22-24)

Paul saw himself—his ministry and all of his life—clearly. He *was* a bondservant of Jesus Christ. Both the joys of fruitful ministry and the bonds and afflictions were part of his being Christ's servant. When Christ saved him and called him to ministry, chapter 9 tells us, He told Paul that he would suffer greatly. And, as we have followed the sketch of his ministry here in Acts, we have seen that.

Along with clear vision there must be a pure heart. We see one specific example here from Paul. Verse 33,

“I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”
(33-35)

He was talking about money, support, and the things money buys. He told them and us, “I have been an open book. I've never been in it for the money.” He did not get sidetracked or seduced by *success*. His motives remained pure.

We know there are *show-boaters* and *hucksters* who *minister* with impure motives. At times those motives may not be easy to see. At other times we see more than we care to see.

Pure motives are essential in every area of life to serve God.

The Prize.

There are a number of different aspects of the prize of God's "Well done, good and faithful servant" which are noted in Scripture. We see two of them here in chapter 20. The first one is personal. It is here and now. It is having a clear conscience. Because Paul was faithful when the conditions were great and terrible, because his pursuit of the gold was godly, he had a clear conscience.

Drop down to verse 26. "...I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God" (26-27). As he looked back over his ministry with the people in Ephesus, and all the others who crossed his path, he had a clear conscience.

A clear conscience. We want it. We *need it!* We can't buy it with money or good works. Doing the right things doesn't in itself bring it. It goes back to character—genuine humility and caring for others; pure hearts.

You don't have to have a perfect past or present to have a clear conscience. Paul certainly was a good example of this. A truly clear conscience is God's gift of grace to those who seek, know and follow Him. Hebrews 10:22, "let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."

The second aspect of the prize in the present, right here and now, which we see here in chapter 20 is a collective one—having close relationships. The relationship and ties of Paul and the believers at Ephesus were close, deep and solid. Look at verse 36 again.

"When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship." (36-38)

Now go up to verse 16. "... Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost." If verse 16 were all Luke recorded about Paul starting back to Jerusalem, you might wonder if he really did care for the Ephesians. Reading the entire account reveals that Paul knew if he went to Ephesus it would be difficult for him to leave when he needed to because of their close ties.

In our busy, often hectic world, it can be difficult to establish close ties with people. We all want and need them. Truly close ties with others in God's family are His gracious gift as we faithfully pursue Him and His service.

Conclusion.

When the 2008 Beijing Olympics close on August 24, gold medals will have been awarded in each of the 302 events. But that's not the end of "*Going For Gold*" in China. Manufacturers, developers and retailers are looking to the world's largest nation as a great, *golden* growth market. In the retail sector alone, it is estimated that 300 malls will come on line in the next 3-5 years in China. Upscale Tiffany & Co. is opening its eighth location in China. There are also five Wal-Mart-anchored shopping centers currently under construction. Yet, even with the huge market, the growing economy and huge investments, not everyone will get the gold.

You and I can receive the gold of God's blessing. It is not beyond any believer. Reflect on this with God. Are you ...

- Ready and engaging the contest on every playing field, whether the conditions be great or terrible?
- Are you moving forward in faith, allowing God to keep on building, developing the character of Christ in you?
- Think of the evidences of His blessing including, but not limited to a clear conscience and close ties with others. Thank Him for His grace to you.

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