

The Profile of a Spiritual Champion

2 Tim. 4:7-8

Good morning! I'm so glad the sun is out and God has allowed us to enjoy today's worship and fellowship. It's so nice to see you all and I'm so blessed you're here.

We're starting a new series today that will go through the months of July and August. It's entitled, "God's Spiritual Champion". You see the five rings there? Obviously, that stands for the Summer Olympics which starts in Tokyo on July 23, about two weeks from now. But we're starting this today because according to ESPN, this weekend is called the weekend of Champions. Yesterday was the Wimbledon Women's Final, last night was the ESPY where they recognized major sports achievements last year, then last night, too, was the UFC rematch between McGregor and Poirier then this morning is the Wimbledon Men's Final and this afternoon is the UEFA Euro Final and tonight, the NBA Finals. The weekend is extended to tomorrow because the Home Run Derby will be held tomorrow night. So, a lot of championships going on this weekend.

There's a lot we can learn from these champions, you know, and those who will emerge as champions in the Tokyo Olympics. We can learn about grit, courage, determination, focus, fitness, and all excellent things that are needed to become a champion. But, more than anything, as Christians, we would like to excel not only on earthly things but on spiritual things as well. In fact, it's better to become a spiritual champion than an earthly champion. I'm not saying we don't pursue earthly achievements, but they all fade, you see. What doesn't fade and what really counts for eternity is the championship on a spiritual level. That's why the blurb there that says, "An 8-Part Message Series on How to Triumph over Troubles",

that should be on “An 8-Part Message Series on HOW to Pursue Excellence”. I just wasn’t able to change that slide. So, this series is more about doing all things excellently and how to do all things excellently for God’s glory.

Now, as you can see, inside those rings are crowns. They stand for the five crowns that are mentioned in the Bible. Crowns that are rewarded to Christians as we pursue excellence in this world and beyond. What are these crowns? These are the Crown of Righteousness, the Incorruptible Crown, the Crown of Life, the Crown of Rejoicing, and the Crown of Glory. In the first five messages in this series, we’ll tackle each of these crowns. What each crown means and how we are awarded this crown. And then, the last three messages are sort of extras that will help us to pursue excellence in our Christian walk.

Probably, at this point, the question on your mind is, “Are these crowns literal or are they metaphorical?” That’s the question on my mind, too. It seems literal because we will receive them after Christ’s return as some Bible teachers assert. But it seems metaphorical, too, because Paul’s imagery of a race which Christians are running is metaphorical and, therefore, the prize is metaphorical as well which some Bible teachers contend. As for me, I don’t know. But it doesn’t matter. I won’t go into any debate about it’s nature. I’ll know when Jesus comes. What’s important is what each crown represents and why we need to pursue it, whether it’s literal or not.

This morning I’d like us to look at what it takes to be God’s Spiritual Champion. I’ve entitled this message, “A Profile in Courage”. We’re going to look at the profile of someone who has remain courageous in his Christian walk from the beginning till the end. How I wish we could all walk like him. In fact, that was his wish as well. I’m talking about Paul the Apostle. He says in **1 Cor. 11:1**, **“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.”**

Now, I want us to read together our text for today from 2 Timothy 4:7-8. *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”*

From this verse, we look at three characteristics of a spiritual champion.

First,

1. A Spiritual Champion is a Fighter.

That’s how Paul described himself. He fought a good fight. Everybody loves a good fight, right? That’s why many of us are waiting for Manny Pacquiao to fight Errol Spence this coming August. It should be a good fight. And Pacquiao is also fighting some politicians in the Philippines. That is a really good fight though I would hate to be in his shoes.

Now, Paul had always been a fighter all his life. The Bible says he was the no. 1 persecutor of Christians before he came to know Christ. He fought them. He dragged them and killed them everywhere he saw them. Then, he became a Christian and his fight continued. But this time it was a good fight. Because it was a fight for his faith, for the truth, for Jesus.

Actually, just after his conversion, he already had a fight with other Christians, rather some Christians fought him, because they couldn’t believe that he really became a Christian. Some accused him of faking it so he could capture more of them. In time, they accepted him. And that’s when real trouble began in his life. The persecutor became the persecuted as those he was in cahoots with before chased him and followed him and wanted to kill him.

What do we see here? We see that someone who follows Jesus must be ready for a fight. Are you ready to fight?

Of course, we're not talking about quarreling with people, getting involved in a shouting match, gossiping, and even becoming violent. I remember this Christian guy who I heard talking about his experience in the office where someone was saying bad words about Christians. This Christian guy said that he didn't like what the other guy said and so he approached the guy and said, "Hey, if you don't stop talking like that, I'll smack you in the face." Well, fortunately, the guy stopped and left. Otherwise, there would be a headline that said, "Christian Punches Guy Who Insulted His Faith". That would give Christians a black eye instead, right?

So, as Christians we know that the world is fighting us. They are throwing everything at us, including the kitchen sink. They are trying to wear us down and tear us down. What should we do? Should we take this sitting down? No, we should take this kneeling down, first of all. Meaning, we should have the courage to pray. Rhoda, you're right. Being courageous is having the courage to pray. She sent me a passage about that last night. What I mean is that in times when we are tested like our patience is really tested, we do need to pray, even just a short prayer for God to keep our mouths shut. If he can do that with lions, he can do that with us, right? Because some of us when we become angry, we become lions or tigers. And we regret it. We can't erase the words we say.

The early Christians resorted to prayer first before doing anything. Sometimes they don't do anything. They let God do the doing after praying. Like the time when Peter was arrested and put in jail. Did his fellow Christians go out to the streets and raised placards saying "Release Peter!" "Justice for Peter!" "Don't Jail the Innocent!" No, they prayed. In Acts 12:5, it says, "So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him." Then, what happened one night while he was in prison? "Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him

up. ‘Quick, get up!’ he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists.” (Acts 12:7) And he walked out to his freedom.

Now, it doesn’t mean I don’t believe in peaceful protests or fighting for Christian values in Congress. I do. I wholeheartedly support all efforts by Christian politicians to fight for us. I think it’s a good fight. Actually, I used to think it was wrong to go out and make your voice known. I thought we should just pray and pray. To pray is essential and primary. But we need to take action as well. God wants us to fight the good fight. The reason slavery was abolished here in the States and in Great Britain was due to the labors of godly men like Abraham Lincoln and William Wilberforce.

But, you know why the early Christians didn’t protest actively and demonstrated on the streets? Because it was prohibited. You cannot do it. You’d be an easy target for persecution and even be killed by the Pharisees and religious leaders. It’s like the situation in China today or North Korea or Saudi Arabia. You cannot protest peacefully. So, you just pray and let God take action. That’s why we must value our freedom here. Let’s fight the good fight in this country while we can. Amen? Godlessness and liberalism are taking over. We must put back God in this country. Pray first, then take peaceful action. Paul was like that. When arrested, he prayed, of course. Then he asked for an audience with the Roman governor to protest his arrest and make his case known.

A Spiritual Champion is a fighter. He is also a

2. Finisher.

Paul says, “I have finished the race”. As I said, Paul uses race as a metaphor for life. Actually, he is referring to the Olympics which was very popular in his day. The Olympic games go back to ancient times, to Biblical times, even pre-New Testament times. The Apostle Paul had seen those games. He preached in those stadiums. He had watched those races that had been run.

Paul mentioned that because when he talked about running a race for Christ, being a champion for Christ and winning the race for Christ, those who read his letter knew exactly what he was talking about. And immediately their minds went to the Olympic games and the races because they were mesmerized by sports then just as we are today.

Paul says we are in a race. And he says every Christian has his own race to run. Now a battle is fought for victory, a race is run for reward, maybe that gold medal or that silver medal, that reward that comes at the end of the race. And every spiritual champion has his own race to run. The difference is that the Christian life is a marathon, not a 100-yard dash. It is not just who is the fastest for a short period of time, it is not who is just the flashiest, who shines the brightest, but the spiritual champion is the one who endures to the end of the race and finishes the will of God for his life, finishes that course that God has given him to run.

I have known so many people who started out well, but they didn't finish. They gave up. They turned back, they quit. The reason Paul is our example is – as he said - I have finished the race. He wrote these words a short time before his death. He said, “I have completed the course; I have completed the race that God has given me”.

Have you ever noticed in those marathons that they televise, you will see so many people at the beginning of the race and then when they show the end, the crowd has shrunk down? That is why Jesus said the way to eternal life is narrow and only a few find it. It is not just those who start, it is those who finish that count. Those are the spiritual champions.

Why do some people don't finish well? **There are three main reasons.** First is

a. Distractions

It can come in many forms. Like money, sex, and wine. Those are the three biggies.

There are people who forget who they are or what they stand for once one of these things get in their way. We've heard of politicians, celebrities, and even religious leaders who have taken a tumble due to their being careless in any of these three biggies.

I heard the story of four pastors who met for a friendly gathering. During the conversation one pastor said, "Our people come to us and pour out their hearts, confess certain sins and needs. Let's do the same. Confession is good for the soul." In due time all agreed. One confessed he liked to drink and would sneak off when away from his church. The second confessed he liked to smoke cigars and the third one confessed he liked to play cards. When it came to the fourth one, he wouldn't confess. The others pressed him saying, "Come now, we confessed ours. What is your secret or vice?" Finally, he answered, "It's gossiping, and I can hardly wait to get out of here."

You see, if you're a runner, a distraction can cause you to lag behind or even lose the race. I remember a race in the Olympics wherein while approaching the finish line, the frontrunner made a quick glance to his right to see who was catching up which was a big mistake. Because that momentary movement of his head cost him to lose the race by just a fraction of a second.

So, don't get distracted either by money, sex, or wine. They will ruin your life and affect even those around you, especially those you love the most.

The Bible says, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and by craving it, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains." (1 Tim. 6:10 ISV)

Then, in Proverbs 5:5, "For the lips of the adulterous woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave."

And in Proverbs 23:31-32, “Do not gaze at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly! In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper.”

b. Disturbances

These are things that suddenly jolts you because they come with sudden force on your life. Like when the doctor says to you that you have cancer. Or when your daughter reveals she is pregnant. Or when you discover that your husband has an affair. Or when you have a life-threatening accident. Or when you lose your job. When life throws you a curveball, it could really be a source of great distress and could plunge you to depression.

Recently, we heard in the news about some bicyclists competing in the Tour de France who crashed against each other because of a spectator who was holding a sign and stepped into the road. It was a massive crash. Some bicyclists got injured and did not continue the race. But some did even though they were bloodied.

Folks, life is like that. Disturbances can come anytime and hit us. We need to be prepared for such.

c. Discouragements

All of us need a good word every now and then. In fact, a study said that every person needs at least 7 compliments in a day. Let's try that. Look at the person next to you and say, “You look good without your facemask on”. How did that make you feel? Still feel safe? My point is, we need people to cheer us on, not to put us down. Truth is, we can easily get disheartened when we receive insulting or mean words from others. Sometimes, they don't even have to say a word. Just by their looks or attitude, you know when they don't like or reject you. That's particularly hard for people who are too sensitive.

I remember the story I read about Carlos P. Romulo, a Filipino diplomat who became the President of the UN General Assembly in the 1940's. Romulo was diminutive, perhaps shorter than me but he had huge confidence in himself. At one gathering of diplomats from around the world, one person said to him, "How do you feel being so short among tall people?" He replied, "I feel like a dime among pennies". Another story I like is this:

At the third UN General Assembly, held in Paris in 1948, the USSR's deputy foreign minister, Andrei Vishinsky, sneered at Rómulo and challenged his credentials: "You are just a little man from a little country." "It is the duty of the little Davids of this world," cried Rómulo, "to fling the pebbles of truth in the eyes of the blustering Goliaths and force them to behave!"

Such a courageous man! I wish I was like him. But many of us don't have the wit or intelligence or courage of Romulo. What we DO have is the grace and power of God working in our lives. God says, "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." (Isaiah 41:10) And Paul says, "I can do all this through him who gives me strength". (Phil 4:13)

Folks, call on to the Lord when distractions, disturbances, and discouragements come to your life. He will surely be alongside you to help you finish the race.

A Spiritual Champion is a Fighter, a Finisher, and finally,

3. A Faith-Keeper.

Paul says, "I have kept the faith". He is saying that he has remained faithful to God, to his Word, and to the principles of the Christian faith. When we read the Bible, we see that Paul was a very focused man. In fact, he is considered to be the very person who has singlehandedly caused the growth and development of Christianity during his time.

His writings were profound and formed the basis of much of Christian theology. Nothing or no one deterred him from his mission. His mission was to preach Christ wherever he went. That was his life's calling and he determined to fulfill it to the hilt. Without Paul, as scholars say, Christianity wouldn't have flourished as it did even after Paul was gone.

But we know that even as Paul was faithful, God was even more faithful. It was God who gave him the power and strength to keep his faith. Without God, Paul was nothing. He knew this. He knew that God was the real Faith-Keeper. That's why he declares in 2 Cor. 4:7-9, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed."

Those are the words of someone who knew where his faith lies and how his faith is sustained.

It is my fervent wish and prayer that I will be like Paul in the years ahead. And that is my wish and prayer for each of us. Nothing is more important in this world than to make the name of Jesus known. Nothing is more important than being true and faithful to the One who has given his life to us and kept our faith.

Now, Paul says that because he was a fighter, a finisher, and a faith-keeper, there is a reward waiting for him. In verse 8, right after he mentions those three traits, he says that "there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day". For Paul that is the standard of righteousness. One who fights the good fight, who finishes the race, and keeps the faith.

Now, the word for crown there is the word "stephanos". It comes from the Olympic games. It was the gold medal of their time. It was a crown made of laurel leaves which is also called a wreath.

So when a runner had won the race, he would come and stand before the judges' platform out on the field. And he would hear the commendation of the judge and they would place the wreath upon his head.

Today they give the gold medal, the crowd stands, and they sing the National Anthem of that individual's country. One day, Paul said, I am going to stand before that judgment seat and Jesus Himself with His own nail-pierced hands is going to place the crown on my head. And all of heaven's choir is going to stand up and sing "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me". Paul said that can be not for me only but it is for every Christian who will be a spiritual champion, every Christian who is expecting the coming of Jesus.

So, the crown must be literal after all?

Folks, listen, aren't you looking forward to that day when you stand before Jesus? Don't you want to live on the level that you can look forward and anticipate that glorious moment when you have run the race, when you have completed the course? There are trials and disappointments ahead of us, but remember God is faithful to keep you and will reward on the day of his coming.