

AVOIDING THE PITFALLS 1 Corinthians 9:25

Good morning! We're continuing our series on "God's Spiritual Champion". In this series, we're talking about how we can pursue excellence, how we can become spiritual champions in the eyes of God. So, we're looking at and learning some principles in the Bible that will help us to obtain the price that awaits those who will finish the race. The Apostle Paul says, "Run in such a way as to get the prize." (1 Cor. 9:24) The price comes in the way of crowns and the Bible mentions 5 crowns that will be awarded to followers of God when they finish the race.

Last week, we talked about the profile of a Spiritual Champion using Paul as an example and in the end, we saw that Paul expected to receive the Crown of Righteousness as he neared the end of his life. This Crown of Righteousness is awarded to those who long to see Jesus because they believe it was the finished work of Jesus that saved them and not their good works.

Today, we'll look at the Incorruptible Crown or Imperishable Crown. How does one receive this? Look at what the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 9:25, "Everyone who competes 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."

Some versions say, "incorruptible", "imperishable", "will never fade away", or similar wording. They all say the same thing. This crown is going to last forever!

In a marathon many, many people begin the race with enthusiasm and with real purpose, with their eye on the goal but when you look at the end of the race, the number has diminished a great deal. And that is because there are pitfalls in the race of life. There are pitfalls in any race and so there are pitfalls in the race of life.

We heard the news about Bradley Beal, a Wizards player, who had to drop out of Team USA because he was diagnosed with covid. Playing basketball in the Olympics and going for the gold was his childhood dream. But his dream had to be put on hold because of something beyond his control. And there was this Ugandan weightlifter who wouldn't compete as well. According to the news, he went missing in the athlete's village soon as his team arrived. They looked for him and according to sources, he left and mixed with the Tokyo crowd because he wanted to stay and work in Japan to escape the hardships of life in Uganda.

Folks, there are pitfalls in life. Life is full of dangers and difficulties. Some of these are unavoidable and some are avoidable. This morning I'd like to share with you some of these pitfalls and how to avoid them. That's why this message is entitled, "Avoiding the Pitfalls". If you want to be a spiritual champion, you need to know about some of these pitfalls that would keep you from finishing the race that God has given you to run.

What are some of the pitfalls? There's a lot for sure but let me just talk about three of them. Three things that Jesus himself mentioned in one of his stories. These are "the worries of life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things". (Mark 4:19) Jesus says that if you stumble due to any of these, you will not grow as a person because God's Word will not take root in your life. So, let's look quickly at each of them. **The pitfalls of life.**

1. **Worries of life.**

Many of us have made worrying a habit. It has become a favorite pastime. I know you've come here this morning to worship God but in the back of your minds, there's something that pulls your attention every now and then from what's going on in here to what's going on in your life. Are you worried about your finances, your health or a loved one's health, your children, your job, your future?

The word 'worry' is derived from an Old Anglo-Saxon word meaning to strangle or to choke. That's exactly how you feel when you worry too much. Many people worry because they try to take the responsibility that was designed for God to handle. Someone said, "For peace of mind, resign as general manager of the universe." There is only one General Manager of the universe and that is God.

You see

, worry is a waste of time. Worrying puts the focus on something that's not worth thinking about. A woman said, "I worried about a lot of things, many of which did not happen." When you worry, your faith turns to fear. It shows lack of trust in God. And unbelief, of course, is sin. Instead of focusing on God and what he can do, you focus on your problem and what it will do to you. Worse, you lose your focus. You get distracted. You become unbalanced and you lose sight of your goal. That's what worry does.

Another pitfall is

2. The deceitfulness of wealth

We're talking here about believing the lie that money and possessions can make you win in life. That being wealthy can solve all your problems. Nothing wrong about being wealthy but when it becomes the focus of your life that's when it becomes wrong.

I read a story about this charity office which noticed that their town's most successful lawyer had never given any of his hundreds of thousands of dollars to the charity. One of the charity reps called the lawyer to persuade him to contribute.

"Our research shows that, despite your wealth, you haven't given a cent to charity," said the charity rep. "Wouldn't you like to make at least a small donation?"

"Did you research also tell you that my mother is dying of cancer?" replied

the lawyer.

"No," answered the charity rep.

"And did it tell you that my brother lost an eye and a leg in the war?"

"Th-that's awful!"

"And did it tell you that my sister's husband died and left her and their two children homeless?"

"I'm sorry I ever bothered you!"

"So if I didn't donate to them, why should I donate to you?"

Jesus says, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." (Luke 12:15) Jesus is saying, "Be careful about your priorities in life. There's more to life than acquiring possessions." You see, you cannot bring your possessions to the grave. Have you ever seen a funeral car being followed by a U-Haul truck? Wealth caused by greed can be a distraction because it will take your eyes off the most important things in life like serving others and making a difference in people's lives.

The third pitfall is

3. The desires for other things

Jesus is talking about our evil desires, our inclination toward sin. Many are looking for sin. They put themselves in situations where they can fulfill their evil desires. Like spending time on the internet in order to gratify their lust, or buying lotto tickets to win that jackpot money, or wanting to hear the latest news about somebody in order to tell others about that somebody. All of these are works of the flesh and there are others more as the Bible says in Galatians 5:19-21, "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you

before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

So, if we think we’re running the race and yet trip up because of any of these, then we might find ourselves not finishing the race. In short, perhaps, we’re not really a follower of Christ. Have we really repented? Have we really turned against all our evil desires? It’s easy to say, “I repent” but it’s hard to put it in practice, isn’t it? But, thankfully, the Holy Spirit can help us if he truly is in us.

So, those are the pitfalls. **How to avoid them?** Let me show the ways.

1. REMOVE EVERY DISTRACTION

That’s the first obvious thing to do. Paul said everyone who competes 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. And you know as I look at this passage of Scripture I see several things. I see, first of all, that if we are going to finish the race God has given us, we must remove every distraction. Worries, wealth, evil desires, they’re all distractions. There’s a saying that goes like this: **“Obstacles are what you see when you take your eyes off the goal.”**

You see, one of the reasons people fall down on the race of life and fall out on the race of life is because they take their eyes off the goal. Paul says that the goal of every Olympian is to win the prize and that’s why they train hard and go into strict discipline. They keep their eyes on the goal of having the laurel wreath or the crown placed on their head. But that crown is temporary, it will become brittle and break. It will never last. Paul says the Christian’s goal is to win the prize that will never fade away, a prize that will last forever, a prize that will be eternal in glory. So, he says, remove all distractions from your life.

The Bible says in **Hebrews 12:1**, **“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.”**

What distractions do you have in your life? Do you worry too much? Are you busy amassing wealth? Do you easily give in to temptations? If these are pitfalls in your life, you better throw them away. You might miss out on the prize. Now, notice the phrase “the race marked out for us”. You know, God has given you a race to run that is not mine. He has given me a course to run that is not yours. He has given every one of us a particular race, a particular function, a specific will for our life. And if we take our eyes off that goal, if we take our eyes off that plan, if we forget what we are in the race to do, then we are going to be hindered in the race and we will become distracted and we will not make the goal or the finish line.

So, remove every distraction. Then,

2. REMEMBER THE REASON AND THE REWARD

Remember the reason that you are running. Look at what Paul says, everyone who competes 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. Just remember what the race is all about. The race is not run for man, the race is run for God. That is why Hebrews 12:2a says, “Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.” If we were in it for man, we would quit, we would give up, we would just say it is not worth it. But the crown for which we run is worth any sacrifice. And there is no success without sacrifice.

Mark Spitz, the famous Olympian swimmer, was asked, “What is the key to your success?” He said, “The key to my success is simple, for 8 years I swam 8 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.”

My friend, the Christian life is not a life you just live on Sundays, the Christian life is a life you live every day, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day, 365 days a

year.

And you do it because your mind is not on a gold medal that will not last, but it is on that crown that Jesus Himself is going to give you one day. Remember the reason and remember the reward.

2 Corinthians 5:10 says, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” What a motivation to run the race!

You see, there are two kinds of motivation - internal motivation or self-motivation. This is the kind wherein people are motivated by a drive within them, there’s a fire in the belly, a desire to excel, a desire to achieve, a desire to succeed. And the Spirit of God will give a Christian that internal desire and that is wonderful.

Then there is external motivation. This is the kind wherein certain people challenge you, or certain books that inspire you or anything outside of you that challenge you.

Now, both internal and external motivations are good and helpful.

But I want to tell you; the greatest motivation is eternal motivation, the motivation to see Jesus at the end of the race. He is worthy to run the race for. Why is that? Because he sacrificed his life for us. He himself finished his race when he was on earth. God gave him the goal of dying for our sins and he did just that. The Bible says that he willingly went to the cross for our sakes. Earlier, I said that we have evil desires and all we want to do is evil. That’s what the Bible says in Romans 3:10-12, “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” We can see that everywhere. That’s why this world is in a mess. People generally just look

out for themselves when God is not in their lives.

The result is death and eternal separation from God. The Bible says, “For the wages of sin is death.” (Rom. 6:23)

But God loves us so much and wants us to get out this mess we’ve created. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” So, Jesus gave his own life for us on the cross in order to save us. He shed his blood because that’s the requirement in order for us to be forgiven of our sins as the Bible says. Then, he was buried to indicate that he truly died but on the third day he rose again from the dead. This time to indicate that he has conquered sin and death forever. Those who believe what Jesus has done for them, they will be saved. All it takes is trusting Jesus for your salvation. Not on your good works, not on your religion, not on your connections, but in Jesus only. Later on, I’ll give you an opportunity to receive Jesus in your heart as your Lord and Savior.

So, to avoid the pitfalls, remove the distractions, remember the reason and the reward, and thirdly,

3. RENEW YOUR STRENGTH

Renew your strength daily. Look at what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:16, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” Jesus taught us to pray “give us this day our daily bread” because we need daily renewal. We need that daily restoration that comes. The psalmist put his hope in the Lord and trusted in the Lord because he knew only the Lord can renew his strength. He says in Psalm 23:1-3, “The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.”

Do you know why you need to be here today? You need to be renewed.

You need your battery recharged. You need the fire rekindled.

You need those embers that are alive and glowing stoked with the fire of God's Holy Spirit. You need a time like that every day!

Folks, you can always count on God to renew you. Just remember the past performance of God in your life. He's got a great track record, won't you say? You ought to remember how God has helped you in the past. You need to remember how God picked you up at your lowest moment. You must remember how God came through when things looked hopeless, when things looked bad, when things looked absolutely dark. Folks, God is always faithful.

1 Peter 5:10 says, "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast."

4. RESIST DISCOURAGEMENT

I think the devil's greatest tool is to discourage the people of God. And he will do everything he can to discourage you from becoming a spiritual champion. Look at Galatians 6:9, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." The most well-worn tool in the devil's bag of tools is the tool of discouragement because he can use it to pry open the heart of a Christian. And once he gets in your heart, then he can get control of your will and your life.

Look at Hebrews 10:36, "You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised." Many have the notion that if you're pursuing God's will then things will be easy, that you will have this sense of peace, and everything will be ok. Nothing can be further from the truth. Feelings and circumstances don't determine whether you're in God's will or not. God reveals his will for you through his unchanging Word. That's why it is important to

be firmly established on God's Word.

It is your guide that will never go wrong or lead you astray.

Now, when doing God's will, sometimes you will encounter hardships and trials. Things that will truly test your faith. God allows those things to happen in order for us to grow. In order for us to know who we really are and what we're going to do amid difficult circumstances. That's why we need to persevere and not get discouraged. And God's reward is waiting. It will surely come. That's his promise.

As God says in **Habakkuk 2:3** says, "For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay." Just be patient. Don't quit. God is on your side.

When the British Army was still the the most powerful army in the world, General Wellington was asked what was the secret of the success of the British army. He said the success is simple; the British army is able to fight five minutes longer than any enemy. That is the key to being a spiritual champion. It is not always the most talented, the most affluent, the most gifted, it is that person who will not give up, who will not give in to discouragement, who keeps on keeping on.

Finally, to avoid the pitfalls,

5. RELY ON GOD'S POWER

Paul says in **Colossians 1:29**, "To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me." The Bible is filled with stories of people who were weak or powerless but were able to overcome great difficulties because of God's power in their lives. People like Moses, Joshua, Gideon, David, Joseph, Nehemiah, and several more including Paul. So, don't rely on yourself; don't even think it is hopeless because you are weak. When you are weak God

becomes strong.

Now, if you're doubting whether you'll ever make it, look at **Philippians 1:6**, **"He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."** So listen, I want to tell you something, you may give up on yourself, but God will never ever give up on you.

There is a tremendous story from the 1992 Olympics and I think you are going to be reminded of it when you watch the Olympics this year on television. In 1992 Derek Redmond, a runner from Britain, tore a hamstring in the 400 meter race. It was in the semi-final race. He was so close to winning that gold medal. Derek pulled a hamstring and immediately just collapsed on the track in great agony and pain.

Let's watch the video of this story.

VIDEO – DEREK REDMOND

My friend I want to tell you, that reminds me of the times when I have stumbled and I have fallen, I have been humiliated and I have been disappointed and my heart has been broken, but my heavenly Father has never failed to come out of the stands and come where I am and put His arm around me and say, "Son, we are going to make it."

Friend, your heavenly Father will never give up on you. He will see to it that you finish the race and you become a spiritual champion.