Running the Christian Race

One of the great teaching techniques of Bible teachers, including the Apostle Paul and the Lord Jesus, is to use an analogy or metaphor to show a spiritual truth. Farmers (Matthew 13:1-23), fishermen (Matthew 4:18-19), soldiers (Ephesians 6:10-18), travelers (Mark 13:34), merchants (Matthew 13:45-46) and many other vocations are used in the Bible to teach spiritual lessons. The image of the athlete training to race is one of the more famous analogies to the Christian life that can be found in the Bible.

What follows is a series of verses that chronologically follow the Christian experience.

Getting on the Right Track

Getting into an Olympic event requires a runner to participate in a qualifying event. In sports, this means you prove that you are strong enough or fast enough but with the Christian life, salvation comes by being disqualified first. Only sinners can be saved; the bad people can be forgiven; the undeserving made rich; grace is for the unworthy, not the super-elite.

Romans 3:23-24 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 7:13-14

(13) "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.

(14) For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

Getting on the right track is the most important step of all. The Christian life starts the moment one trusts Christ to save him/her from his/her sin. Following any other path will lead to destruction.

The way to enter the narrow gate is to have Christ. He took the punishment for your sins at the cross. Through His death you can begin the Christian life.

1 John 5:12 Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

John 3:36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

John 1:11-13 (11) He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. (12) But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, (13) who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Qualifying (or disqualifying)

Romans 9:16 So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

Romans 3:23-24 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Hurdles of Legalism

Galatians 5:7 You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?

3:3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? 2:21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

Romans 11:6 But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

The Christians in Galatia started well by receiving salvation by faith, but through bad influence from certain Jews they reverted to the mindset that obedience to the Law will preserve a believer’s salvation. This attitude was becoming a hindrance to those who weren’t saved yet. Instead of trusting in Christ, many were trying to perform good deeds to gain salvation.

Even today, many people assume that being religious, doing good works, praying, being baptized and attending church is how you get to heaven. These wonderful things won’t save you, but should be a natural result of being forgiven. Works are not the plan of salvation, but the proof of salvation. If you miss Christ because you are trusting in works, you are still on the wrong road to eternity!

Get on with the Race! The Goal & Prize

Once a person is on the narrow road by putting faith in Christ, the rest of the verses in the New Testament about training and running the race apply. Paul’s most famous and most extensive commentary on the subject of the Christian race shows that the race is about starting with Christ, followed by spiritual growth, more appreciation for Christ and living in the power of His resurrection.

Philippians 3:8-14 (8) Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.
Paul refers to his experience of salvation first. In order to receive Christ, Paul had to reject his heritage, obedience to the Law, religion and personal attainments. Counting all of his success as rubbish severed all ties to his hopes for saving himself. Likely he was rejected by his friends, disinherited by his family and was persecuted by his fellow Jewish teachers.

Being found “in him” (v9) is the position of every saved person. No longer is the person in Adam, or in his sin, but enjoying the same favor with God that the Lord Jesus has.

“Not having a righteousness of my own” shows the great contrast of resting in Christ and the ineffective route of working and struggling to obtain salvation through works. Don’t teach your class that running the Christian race is how a person obtains heaven. The “righteousness from God” is a gift that is not earned but imputed from Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21).

“Know him” (v10) is the natural outcome of spiritual growth and maturity. A Christian lives the rest of his life imitating his savior even through sufferings. Eventually the Christian ends the race participating in the resurrection in a future day.

“Press on” (v12) is the phrase that defines this passage. The race toward becoming more like Christ is the metaphor that describes the goal of a believer. Just as a sprinter sees the goal and lets nothing distract him, the Christian makes it his focus to imitate Christ, suffer injustice without complaint, develop Christ’s personality and live for eternity instead of time. Nobody, not even Paul, has ever obtained the goal of becoming 100% like Christ. However, the perfect likeness to Christ that we will experience in Heaven is the ideal that we strive for here on earth.

“One thing” (v13) shows us that the Christian race to be like Christ is a single goal just as the medal is the one thing on the mind of an athlete. Yesterday’s success will not carry you to tomorrow’s victory. Focus on the future.

“The goal” (v14) is to be as much like Christ now in this world. “The prize” (v14) is being perfectly like Christ in heaven. See verses 20-21 and 1 John 3:1-2.

The Heroes of Faith

Every athlete has his role models. Previous generations of Olympians leave a legacy, world records and reputation to imitate. The great heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 are a great cloud of witnesses that are now watching from the stands as we run the course.

Hebrews 12:1-3

(1) Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

(2) looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (3) Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

The ultimate example of the race is Christ, the only perfect role model. He endured the cross knowing that a greater glory was to follow.

Training with certainty

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

(24) Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.

(25) Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

(26) So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air.

(27) But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

Can any athlete win his goal without denying himself? Deserts, junk food and laziness are counter-productive to his goal. The Christian has to deny himself both sinful habits and legitimate luxuries if he wants to achieve his goal of being like Christ.
The Relay Handoff

2 Timothy 2:2
And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.

The Rivalry or Good Sportsmanship

Philippians 2:3  Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

The Finish Line

2 Timothy 4:6-8
(6) For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.
(7) I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up 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 loved his appearing.

Paul was able to look back as he neared the end of his race. Before he refused to look back (1 Corinthians 9). He sees a life without regrets. He was ready (v6) because he was saved. He was not regretful (v7) because he had been an obedient Christian. He was rewarded (v8) in the future by the Righteous Judge who would give him the crown. This crown and Judge are both righteous in that there are no bribes, mistakes, missed points, bad eyesight or family favorites. He judges without partiality (1 Corinthians 3:11-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Matthew 25:14-30).

How to use this lesson

1. Print the entire document.
2. Use the first three pages as teacher notes and commentary for the various passages.
3. Tape the posters to your classroom wall or bulletin board.
4. Use the quiz to review each of the verses about the Christian race.

About this lesson

This lesson is the creative work of Shad Sluiter and retains all copyrights. Permission is granted to print and use this document for educational, non-profit use. This lesson and hundreds of others can be downloaded from www.GospelHall.org.
Running the Christian Race

Getting on the Right Track (Matt 7:13-14)
1. Where does the Christian race begin?
2. Which track has more people, the narrow or the broad?
3. What does a person have if he has Christ?

Qualifying (or disqualifying) Romans 9:16
1. What type of people are eligible for salvation, good or bad?
2. How many people have fallen short of the glory of God?

Hurdles of Legalism (Galatians 5:7)
1. Why can’t works and grace function together?
2. If salvation were obtained through works, then what purpose would there be for Christ’s death on the cross?
3. If a Christian is saved by grace, is his salvation secured for the rest of his life by works or by grace?

Getting on with the Race! (Philippians 3:8-14)
1. How did Paul view his religious accomplishments compared with salvation in Christ?
2. What kind of righteousness does a saved person possess, from himself or from God?
3. What goal does God have in mind for the Christian?

The Heroes of Faith (Hebrews 12:1-3)
1. Name three of the heroes of the faith that are round in Hebrews 11.
2. What did Christ know that helped him endure the sufferings of the cross?
3. What kinds of weights do you think a Christian needs to lay aside in order to participate in the race to be more like Christ?

Training with certainty (1 Cor 9:24-27)
1. What kinds of things does an athlete have to leave alone in order to compete well?
2. What is the difference between the reward that an athlete receives compared with the Christian runner?

The Handoff (2 Timothy 2:2)
1. What should an older Christian be handing off to the next generation?
2. What happens if one generation doesn’t pass along the truth of God?

The Rivalry (Philippians 2:3)
1. What difference is there between Christian competition and a normal athletic contest?

The Finish Line (2 Timothy 4:6-8)
1. What did Paul mean that he had finished the race?
2. How does a person get ready to depart from this world—live right or trust in Christ?
3. What waits for a believer after a faithful life?

Running the Christian Race

Getting on the Right Track (Matt 7:13-14)
1. Where does the Christian race begin?
2. Which track has more people, the narrow or the broad?
3. What does a person have if he has Christ?

Qualifying (or disqualifying) Romans 9:16
1. What type of people are eligible for salvation, good or bad?
2. How many people have fallen short of the glory of God?

Hurdles of Legalism (Galatians 5:7)
1. Why can’t works and grace function together?
2. If salvation were obtained through works, then what purpose would there be for Christ’s death on the cross?
3. If a Christian is saved by grace, is his salvation secured for the rest of his life by works or by grace?

Getting on with the Race! (Philippians 3:8-14)
1. How did Paul view his religious accomplishments compared with salvation in Christ?
2. What kind of righteousness does a saved person possess, from himself or from God?
3. What goal does God have in mind for the Christian?

The Heroes of Faith (Hebrews 12:1-3)
1. Name three of the heroes of the faith that are round in Hebrews 11.
2. What did Christ know that helped him endure the sufferings of the cross?
3. What kinds of weights do you think a Christian needs to lay aside in order to participate in the race to be more like Christ?

Training with certainty (1 Cor 9:24-27)
1. What kinds of things does an athlete have to leave alone in order to compete well?
2. What is the difference between the reward that an athlete receives compared with the Christian runner?

The Handoff (2 Timothy 2:2)
1. What should an older Christian be handing off to the next generation?
2. What happens if one generation doesn’t pass along the truth of God?

The Rivalry (Philippians 2:3)
1. What difference is there between Christian competition and a normal athletic contest?

The Finish Line (2 Timothy 4:6-8)
1. What did Paul mean that he had finished the race?
2. How does a person get ready to depart from this world—live right or trust in Christ?
3. What waits for a believer after a faithful life?
Running the Christian Race

Getting on the Right Track (Matt 7:13-14)
1. Where does the Christian race begin?
   The narrow road, the door or in Christ.
2. Which track has more people, the narrow or the broad? The broad road has many, the narrow has few.
3. What does a person have if he has Christ? Eternal life

Qualifying (or disqualifying) Romans 9:16
1. What type of people are eligible for salvation, good or bad? Only bad people can be saved (Mark 2:17; Romans 5:6-8)
2. How many people have fallen short of the glory of God? All

Hurdles of Legalism (Galatians 5:7)
1. Why can’t works and grace function together? Grace is for the undeserving. Works deserve wages.
2. If salvation were obtained through works, then what purpose would there be for Christ’s death on the cross? The cross would have no purpose.
3. If a Christian is saved by grace, is his salvation secured for the rest of his life by works or by grace? The entire Christian life is lived by grace.

Get on with the Race! (Philippians 3:8-14)
1. How did Paul view his religious accomplishments compared with salvation in Christ? They were like garbage / counted like loss.
2. What kind of righteousness does a saved person possess, from himself or from God? Righteousness that saves comes from God and not ourselves.
3. What goal does God have in mind for the Christian? The Christian should become more like Christ.

The Heroes of Faith (Hebrews 12:1-3)
1. Name three of the heroes of the faith that are round in Hebrews 11. Pick any three names from ch 11
2. What did Christ know that helped him endure the sufferings of the cross? He could see the glory that awaited him.
3. What kinds of weights do you think a Christian needs to lay aside in order to participate in the race to be more like Christ? Any sin will hinder us in our quest to become more like Christ.

Training with certainty (1 Cor 9:24-27)
1. What kinds of things does an athlete have to leave alone in order to compete well? Deserts, junk food, TV time etc.
2. What is the difference between the reward that an athlete receives compared with the Christian runner? Only one person can win athletic competitions.

The Handoff (2 Timothy 2:2)
1. What should an older Christian be handing off to the next generation? Older Christians should be teaching the Bible.
2. What happens if one generation doesn’t pass along the truth of God? The baton drops and the race is lost.

The Rivalry (Philippians 2:3)
1. What difference is there between Christian competition and a normal athletic contest? Christians shouldn’t have rivals.

The Finish Line (2 Timothy 4:6-8)
1. What did Paul mean that he had finished the race? He was about to die.
2. How does a person get ready to depart from this world—live right or trust in Christ? Trust in Christ will make you ready to die. A good life will gain a reward only if you are first saved.
The Race to become like Christ
Get on the Right Track

Matthew 7:13-14

(13) "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. (14) For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."
(Dis) Qualifying

Romans 9:16  So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.
Romans 3:23  for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.
Galatians 5:7  You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? 3:3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? 2:21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.
Philippians 3:8-14

(8) Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ (9) and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— (10) that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, (11) that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (12) Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. (13) Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, (14) I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.
Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

The Spectators

Hebrews 12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,
The Veteran Role Model

Hebrews 12:2 ...looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God
Hebrews 12:3 …Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.
The Trainer

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (24) Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. (25) Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. (26) So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. (27) But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.
The Relay Handoff

2 Timothy 2:2 and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.
The Rivalry

Philippians 2:3  Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.
2 Timothy 4:6-8 (6) For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.
(7) I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up 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 loved his appearing.
2 Timothy 4:7-8 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up 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 loved his appearing.