

# I Am An Athlete

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, for a wee while tonight I'd like us to turn to the passages that we read, although we're going to look at various sections of scripture this evening, all under the theme of the Christian's identity, which is our evening series at the moment.

Let's read again in 1 Corinthians chapter 9. We are doing this series with the aim of studying some of the concepts and terms used in the Bible to describe our identity as followers of Jesus.

And I want us to look at one of the great emphasis has been made in these verses, where Paul writes, 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. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly. I do not box as one beating the air, but I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified.

Our title for this evening, our topic is, I am an athlete. And as you'll know by now, I'm sure we're using this throughout this series, we're using a diagram to help us understand this whole question of our identity.

[ 1 : 20 ] It's made up of three parts highlighted the fact that our identity consists primarily of what God thinks of us and what God thinks of us needs to shape what we think of ourselves and what other people think of us. And all of this makes perfect theological sense. God is our creator.

God is our savior. He is the one who defines who we are. And for that reason, what he thinks and says and does needs to be the controlling influence in our understanding of our identity.

But far too often, that's not what happens. And as we've been saying all the time, very, very often the arrows go the wrong way, whereby what we think of ourselves can then shape what we think of God. So I think a very easy example of that is that if you feel disappointed with yourself, you will think that God is also disappointed with you.

And likewise, what other people think can shape our identity. And again, that can shape what we think of God, particularly if we're treated badly by others, if people don't particularly like us, or if people judge us, we will think that God behaves in the same way. And it's all, we're all keeping, keep coming back to the same emphasis. You'll be sick of me saying it by now that the arrows have got to point the right way. We want to be shaped by what God thinks.

And as we do that, we're using the three parts of our diagram to ask three questions. What does God think? What should you think? What do we want others to think? But this week, I want to save these questions to the very end. And we're going to answer each one briefly in our conclusion.

[ 3 : 15 ] Prior to that, I want us to think a little bit more and look a little bit more about what the New Testament says in regard to this whole idea of our identity as Christians being described in terms of athletes. And what I want us to notice is that there's actually seven, it was probably more, but I want to highlight seven key lessons that the New Testament teaches us in this area. We'll just go through them one by one. So number one, the New Testament reminds us that an athlete has a goal. And that's very, very obvious. And you see that in the passage that we read from 1 Corinthians 9, 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. Every athlete exercises self-control and all things.

They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly. I do not box as one beating the air. Now, the word that's translated athlete is a fascinating word. We're going to say a little bit more about it later on. But it basically means, it basically describes somebody who's competing for a prize. In other words, it conveys the idea of having a goal. And it's, it's reminding us of the fact that our lives as Christians, as Christians, our lives have a goal. We have a focus. We have a target. We're striving towards something. In other words, we're not

aimless. And you've got that, that really vivid description from Paul of, of, you know, someone aimlessly boxing, just going all over the place, wasting their energy, lacking focus and direction. You see, that's not what we're like. We have a very, very clear focus. We are aiming for something. And so what is it that we're aiming for? Well, the great emphasis of the New Testament is that at the very center of our goal and our focus is Jesus Christ. That's what the words we read at the start of the service conveys so powerfully. In Hebrews 12, one to two, since we're surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, sin which clings so closely, let us run with endurance, the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith. Hoover 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. And all of this is pointing us towards the fact that there is an ultimate goal for us as Christians that we are looking towards.

And, and when you think about that language of athletics, it corresponds to so much of what Jesus gives us in the gospel. If you think about, you know, wanting to win whether you're participating or whether you're a supporter, you are longing for victory. We said that in the morning, victory in sport is such a good feeling. You're longing for the joy that that would bring the sense of satisfaction and achievement and even the sense of relief that you've made it and done what you actually tried to do. And all of these are given to us in the gospel. The only difference is that they're a million times better. And so the victory that Jesus gives us is, is victory over death and sin forever. You think of how many times death has hit us and dealt a blow towards us, where we have lost people that we love and where we have felt confronted with fear.

Jesus wins victory over that eternal victory. You think of the joy that that that victory and success gives us. That is a glimpse of the joy that Jesus has for us. And that's so, so important to remember that the eternity, the eternity that Jesus promises to his people is not an eternity of misery or boredom or seriousness. It is an eternity of joy, indescribable, thrilling joy.

[ 7 : 49 ] That is what Jesus wants us to have. He wants to fill out hearts with satisfaction so that we're not left craving more. But we're just enjoying the fullness of what he's done. Every single sports supporter here knows that victory is wonderful, but it doesn't last.

Because you win, you get success and you think, oh, that was so good. But the following year, you just want it again and again and again. And the sense of relief when you, when you try to do something, you try to accomplish something. Well, again, Jesus promises us eternal relief.

Or we can just, we can just relax and rest and enjoy being with him and with one another.

That is the great goal of the gospel. That's what Jesus is promising all of us. And theologians use a term to describe it. The great goal of the new creation when we will be with Jesus, it's described by this term, the beatific vision. And you may have heard that phrase, you may not. Don't worry if you've never heard of it, but it's the kind of historical term used to describe the fact that for everyone who trusts in Jesus, when we get to heaven, we will see Jesus face to face.

And in looking at Jesus, we will see all the glory and beauty of God. And every, every experience of beauty that we have just now is a glimpse of that. Now today was an amazing example. I went out for a walk this afternoon. I'm sure many of you did. It was just stunning. And then the sun started setting over the lock and it was just stunning. And all that magnificence of the creation is a glimpse of the beauty of the creator. You're going to see that if you trust in Jesus.

[ 10 : 03 ] But what I didn't know until very recently is that that term beatific vision, it describes seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. That's the great goal where we will see him and worship him and delight in him. But what I didn't know is what that term actually means is the vision that makes you happy. That's what beatific means, the vision that makes you happy.

How cool is that? That is just describing what the gospel offers. That's our goal. That's our goal. Eternal happiness together, gazing and enjoying and rejoicing in the beauty and majesty of God. As Christian athletes, we have something so amazing to aim for. And Paul reminds us that that is an imperishable wreath. Every other prize, every other success will not last. But this one does. It lasts forever. So as Christian athletes, we have a goal. Number two, as Christian athletes, we need to go. An athlete needs to go. That's obvious. Anyone participating in a sport, any kind of athletic event, whether it's in terms of training or actually participating, you get nothing if you sit still. You have got to go. And that's such an important thing to remember. And you've got a great emphasis of that in 1 Timothy 6.11 where Paul speaks to Timothy and he says, you, man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made good

confession, the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I love the commands you have in these verses. Pursue, fight, take hold. That's such brilliant athletic language. It's just reminding us that as Christians, we don't stand still. We go for it. And that's why the Christian life is one that's one of action and energy and activity. We're constantly wanting to learn and to grow in our faith. We want to study the Bible.

We want to sit at Bible studies together. We want to come together for the preaching. We want to come together and actively sing and pray in terms of our worship. We want to serve in the church. And we want to fight in a good way, not in the wrong way. Christians have fought in the wrong way. I don't want to go down that rabbit hole, but you know exactly what I'm talking about, but to fight in a good way, to strive and to serve and to be active and ready and energized in our desire to follow Jesus. Our life as following Jesus is one of action. It's one where we want to just go for it. An athlete needs to go. But the third thing I want to say is that an athlete needs to stop. So yes, an athlete needs to go, but an athlete also needs to go. Yes, there's loads of things that they think about the life of an elite athlete. Yes, there's loads of things that they do, but there's a whole ton of things that they have to avoid doing.

So they've got so much of what makes them elite is what they don't do. So they're really careful about their diet. There's tons of stuff they don't eat. They're careful about their lifestyle. They make sure that they don't stay up too late, that they don't deprive themselves of sleep. They make sure that they don't engage in habits that are going to be unhealthy and detrimental for them.

[13:47] And they make sure that they don't allow themselves to develop an attitude that's going to hinder them and spoil their efforts as an athlete. And the Bible speaks in exactly the same way.

And it does so in the language of self-control. We saw that in the passage that all read, every athlete exercises self-control in all things. Now, self-control is such a fascinating topic because it is one of the most counter-cultural expectations that the gospel gives. If you look in our culture, I've said this before over the years, but if you look in our culture around us, it will say to be yourself, to fulfill yourself, to satisfy yourself, to listen to yourself, to follow yourself. The Bible says, control yourself.

You've got to control yourself. And you only have to think for two or three minutes, two or three seconds to see that that makes perfect sense. If you look at all the awful crimes and awful behaviour traits that we see in the world around us, or maybe we even see in our own lives, so, so often it comes from a lack of self-control. Sometimes our weaknesses lie in areas where we feel that we just can't do it. So sometimes you think, you know, I want to do this, but I just, I just can't do it. You know, you don't feel capable of doing it, whatever that might be.

You think, oh, I can't do it. But there's just as much a weakness in terms of the areas where we can't stop doing it. Where there's stuff that we keep on doing that we should avoid.

And that can happen in loads of different ways. For some, it might be a struggle to control their temper. Things just flare up too quickly. They say things and react in a way that they shouldn't.

[16:01] For some people, it might be their use of something like social media, just scrolling endlessly or just struggling not to constantly check things or view things or whatever it may be. For some, it might be, you know, it might be that you just find that you just can't stop worrying about stuff.

Now, we all worry to a different degree, but sometimes that can just completely take over our lives, whereby we just can't stop worrying. Sometimes it might be stewing where something's gone wrong and we're just letting it go over and over and over in our minds and the seeds of bitterness are taking root in our hearts. It can happen in all these ways and in many, many others. And in all of them, we need to get our minds back onto Jesus. And that's really the key for developing self-control to fill our minds with Jesus, with who he is, with what he's done for us, and to find all our dependence in him. An athlete has to stop. Fourth thing is that an athlete needs to adapt. Paul speaks about this in such a brilliant passage that they'll read for us from 1 Corinthians 9.

Again, verse 19, he says, Though I'm free from all, I've made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews, I became as a Jew in order to win Jews. To those under the law, I became as one under the law, though not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak, I've become all things to all people, that by all means, I might save some. This is reminding us that for an athlete, an unwillingness to adapt is going to be a big

hindrance. And you see that, you know, you can look at all sorts of different sports and you'll see that that's the case. An unwillingness to adapt will hold people back. That's why you can sometimes see athletes who are very successful at one part of their career, not so successful further on, because they've struggled to adapt to the changes that are always happening in every sport. And exactly the same principle applies to us. You know, you've got this magnificent description of Paul here, ready to adapt depending on who he was trying to reach. And that's a very important principle for us to remember, that we are living in a world that is constantly changing and new challenges are arising and new opportunities are available. We've always got to adapt.

An amazing example of that is what Mary shared tonight. You think about the Gaelic language just now. There is a massive opportunity for the Gospel now because so many children are going through Gaelic medium education. There's an opportunity there that wasn't there before, and so the Scottish Bible Society adapts and thinks, here's an opportunity for us. Let's pursue this.

And there are many, many more examples. An unwillingness to adapt will hinder us. It'll hinder us as individual Christians. It'll hinder us as a church. Now, when we say that, like any athlete, we're not changing our sport in the sense that we're not changing our Gospel, but we are definitely adapting to the conditions that we find ourselves in. That's the pattern that we have in Paul. It's also the pattern that we have in Jesus. He spoke differently, very differently.

[ 19 : 58 ] He communicated differently depending on who he was dealing with. And that readiness to adapt is very important in our lives as athlete Christians. Number five, an athlete needs to endure.

That's spoken of again in the passage in Hebrews 12, speaking of running the race with endurance. Let me ask you a question or a few questions. Do you sometimes find it hard to be a Christian? Whether you're a professing Christian or whether you are a Christian, but you've struggled to maybe share that with other people yet, do you sometimes find it hard? Do you sometimes feel low on energy?

Do you sometimes feel like you're stretched? Do you sometimes feel like you can't keep it up? Do you sometimes feel like you're stumbling?

What are all these feelings the experience of? Who experiences all of these feelings? A failure? No. These are the feelings of an athlete.

[ 21 : 31 ] Every athlete finds it hard. Every athlete feels low on energy at times. Every athlete thinks, I don't know if I can make it. Every athlete stumbles.

And the only way to avoid those feelings in athletics is if you do what's called DNS, did not start. But if you actually step out on the road of discipleship and follow Jesus, then you're absolutely going to have to endure at times.

And there are times when it will be difficult. That makes you normal and it confirms that you really are an athlete. And this is where we come back to the word that's translated athlete in the various passages that we've used.

I want to tell you what the word is because it's a really fascinating Greek word. It's the Greek word, agonisomai.

I'll write that in English letters underneath. Agonisomai. It's just a verb. Don't worry about the omai bit at the end. It just means that it's a verb. So we get an English word from that, but it's not the English word athlete.

[ 22 : 55 ] It's the English word, agony. Think, oh, that sounds depressing. What does it tell you? It tells you of the striving and the effort and the energy and the commitment that we show.

It tells you at times it's not going to be easy. At times we're going to stumble and at times that journey towards the prize is a journey that will stretch us.

That's why endurance is so important. But the key thing we have to remember about endurance is that, you know, the last word in regard to endurance is not the times when you feel weak and when you're stumbling.

And it's not about, you know, being strong enough in that moment. The last word on this whole question of endurance is actually when you get to the finish line.

When you can stop agonising and you can rest and you look back and you think, boy, that was tough at times, but it was so worth it.

[ 24 : 21 ] An athlete needs to endure. Number six, an athlete needs other people. And that's so incredibly important. That's so obvious in athletics.

Even in people who compete in individual sports, they can never, ever do that without the help and support of other people. And we have a beautiful emphasis on this here because it's the same word coming up again.

Here in Colossians one, we speak of Paul struggling and toiling for the gospel.

We speak, it speaks here of him fighting the good fight of faith. Again, the same kind of agonising and effort. Then here in Colossians 4:12, Paul describes a pathos agonising on behalf of others in his prayers.

And I think that's so beautiful. It's the same word that's been used all the time. And you have this beautiful picture of a pathos as an athlete striving for his fellow believers through prayer.

[ 25 : 36 ] And it's all part of the fact that we're all competing for the same prize. Paul speaks in these verses here of how he became weak, to the weak he became weak, adapted to all these situations.

Why did he do all that? Why did he become all things to all people so that he might save some and that he would share with them in the blessings of the gospel? The Christian life is always a race, but it's never a competition.

We're never trying to outdo each other, but we are sharing in this journey together side by side. And that points to another crucial aspect, the fact that we as athletes need one another and we go along this journey together one another.

It's so crucial because at times Christians get injured. Just like it happens in sport, people get injured.

At times where dealt blows and things happen and we feel in our faith like we are broken, like we're injured, like we're not where we want to be.

[ 26 : 55 ] In those moments, what do they do? What does a professional football team do when a player is injured?

Abandon them, of course not. They get them better and they support them as they rehabilitate and they recover. And that's exactly what we do as Christians together. We're athletes together.

And at times some of us will be strong, at the same time others will be weak. We stick together, we support one another. The Christian life is always a race. It's never a competition.

So here are six things we've said. An athlete has a goal. An athlete needs to go. An athlete needs to stop. An athlete needs to adapt. An athlete needs to endure. An athlete needs others.

Number seven, an athlete needs to rest. And again, if you think about it, that's so obvious.

Somebody who competes at the most elite level, one of the things that they have got to do is rest regularly.

[ 28 : 03 ] And that's why Sundays are just so amazing. And God's provision of one day a week to rest is such a helpful thing.

And we want to remember that. And especially want to highlight this just now because we're about to enter into a busy season for everyone. Christmas, the run-up to Christmas is just busy and chaotic and exhausting.

So please just take time to rest and don't feel guilty about that. When you stop and rest, what are you doing? You're being an athlete. You're actually being very, very wise.

And it's a principle that God has set out from the very, very beginning. Resting is so, so important. And we want to get that balance right.

So there's seven things that the New Testament teaches us in relation to our lives as Christians. As we conclude, I just want to ask our three questions in conclusion.

[ 29 : 13 ] What does God think? What should you think? What do we want others to think? I've got two word answers for all of these. What does God think of you? Well, he thinks this.

You're in. Have you ever been, did you ever apply for the team in school and you didn't get in? Or you were waiting to play football? It's all football at the stations I have because that was what I played when I was wee.

And everyone else gets picked except you. Well, with God, he is saying to you, you are in. In other words, you're picked, you're selected, you are an athlete. It's not some Christians are athletes, all Christians are.

You're in and God has, has work for you to do. He has a role for you. Second question, what should we think? We should think I'm on.

In other words, you're playing, you're participating, you're on the track, you're on the pitch, you're on the start line. You're on, you're not a spectator, you're not a substitute, you're on.

[ 30 : 19 ] And God is doing and will continue to do wonderful things through you. So I want you to think of that this week. You're going to work or to school or in your family or in your community, whatever you're doing, God is working through you.

And he is doing wonderful things through you. You're on. And then what do we want other people to think? We want them to think this.

I wish. We look at athletes, we look at sports stars, we look at the things they do and we think, oh man, I wish that was me.

We want to live our lives as Christians, as individuals and for the life of our church family to continue to be such that people look on and think, I wish that was me.

I wish I was part of that too. And maybe that's what some of you are thinking.

[ 31 : 29 ] Maybe in here or maybe watching at home, you're thinking, I wish that was me. Well, if that's you, God has got one thing to say to you.

He's just saying, let's do it.

Amen.