**I’m Telling You There’s a Chance**

Show clip from Dumb and Dumber, “*So you’re telling me there’s a chance!*”

Country House might have said that when he was entered in the Kentucky Derby, a 65-1 longshot went on to win after finishing second when Maximum Security was disqualified. If someone bet $100 he would have received $6,600.

·         Or maybe the St. Louis Blues about half way through the NHL season when they were in last place. Scott Berry bet $400 that the St. Louis Blues would win the Stanley Cup. The odds were 250-1. Berry received $100,400 because the Blues defeated the Boston Bruins.

·         The Toronto Raptors of the NBA were considered +400 underdogs, which means if someone bet $100 he would win $400 if the Raptors won. Against the odds the Raptors won their first ever NBA Championship.

·         Last weekend Gary Woodland won the U.S. Open Golf Championship. He was a 66-1 underdog.

We all know that if you’re in the contest you have a chance to win, and if you have an opponent in the contest, you could lose. Nobody was surprised that the New England Patriots won the Super Bowl but few predicted County House, the St. Louis Blues, the Toronto Raptors, or Gary Woodland would come out on top.

That’s why they actually play the games. Extensive computer analytics can’t account for the emotions and desire of individual competitors.

So how does a team like the Seattle Mariners, who have never even been to the World Series, become World Champions? The odds are heavily against them.

It helps to have some of the best players in the game. They don’t, but as we know, if they’re in the league, they have a chance.

Assuming that to be true I would suggest they need to do two things in order to win. One is they need to train and practice. Even the best players can’t win on their good looks and reputations. Natural talent will only take them so far. Winners train and practice.

The second thing they need to do is eliminate the things that interfere with winning. The 2018 Cubs didn’t live up to expectations based on the makeup of their team. Manager Joe Maddon said a big issue was that the players were staying up late at night and drinking a lot. They weren’t ready to play every day. Maddon said he’s cracking down on that behavior this year.

Last week we talked about how the New Testament writers used athletic metaphor to describe the Christian life. Christian living is like being in a contest or a race. We’re always going to have to struggle to win. That’s the consequence of original sin. Winning means becoming and being mature disciples of Christ and for which the prize is eternity in heaven.

The odds are truly against any of us winning -- except that God loves us and He wants us to win, so He provides a wild card. In the words of that cultural philosopher Lloyd Christmas…*you’re telling me there’s a chance!*

Yes, **I’m telling you there’s a chance**. In fact I’m telling you we can win this contest. We have the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said,

*If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Counselor to be with you forever, the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He lives with you and will be in you.* John 14:15-17

“*If you love me, you will obey what I command”*is about Christian living. Christian living isn’t left to our own ability. We have the Holy Spirit to help us. He helps us understand sin and righteousness and judgment so we can avoid sin (John 16:8), and He helps us know truth so we can live truth (John 16:13).

Like an athlete can’t win only on his/her natural talent, a Christian can’t win only on the presence of the Holy Spirit. We have responsibility in this contest or race. We have an opponent who wants us to lose, so as we saw last week we’re encouraged to “*compete to win*”, “*fight for our faith*”, “*battle against our foe*”, “*fight the good fight*”.

We have the Holy Spirit to help us win so we have a chance, but in order to win we have to compete. **God will do what you can’t, but He won’t do what you won’t.**

This morning we’ll look at two texts in which we’re encouraged to do the same two things that winning athletes do: train and practice to win, and eliminate the things that interfere with winning.

We’ll start with 1 Corinthians 9:25. Staying with athletic metaphor Paul wrote,

*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training in all things. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.*

If you intend to get the crown that lasts forever (certainly you understand that refers to your salvation) this should describe your life:

·          you fight and complete against sin and your natural worldly tendencies

·          you train and discipline yourself for it

That's what it takes to enjoy a victorious Christian life. In fact, Paul used another athletic word when writing to Timothy...*train (*γυμναζω*) yourself to be godly*. 1 Timothy 4:7 We looked at that word several weeks ago. Γυμναζω means to train with vigorous exercise.

Most of us know that exercise is good for us. That's why we work out vigorously. I’m part of a work out group, many from our church. Our workouts can be described as vigorous, strenuous, stressful, painful, and sometimes tortuous.

They’re not easy. They’re carefully prepared and well-rounded. We jokingly complain the whole time we do them, but we keep coming back for more because we know the benefits. *Train yourself to be godly,* He wrote. *Keep coming back for more!*

He went on, *Physical training (γυμναζια) is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.* 1 Timothy 4:8

There are many benefits to physical training. It...

·         adds to our endurance

·         helps keep us more mentally alert

·         helps keep us more emotionally stable

But those are only benefits here on earth. On the other hand, spiritual training is good for all eternity.

Here's a question:

*If we really believe that, if we really believe in eternity and that spiritual training benefits for eternity, doesn't it make sense that we would be more disciplined in spiritual matters than we are in physical things?*

We watch what we eat, work out, take vitamins and supplements, and generally take care of our physical health. We should ask ourselves if our spiritual training is at all like that.

Remember what I said last week, people are reluctant to break away from their established behaviors and habits. If we're going to win this contest, becoming and being mature disciples of Christ, true followers of Jesus, it'll require training and practice.

A second text comes from Hebrews. In chapter 11 is a lengthy list of people who have struggled and won: Noah, Abraham, Joseph (the one of the amazing technicolor dream coat), Moses, Daniel, as well as unnamed men and women who were brutally tortured and murdered because they believed God.

After this list of people who have fought the good fight and won, he wrote:

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses,*we have all these examples of people who have been there, *let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race (*αγων*) marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.*Hebrews 12:1f

The Christian life is like being in a race or contest. We know it can be won, we have examples of people who faced incredible opposition yet prevailed. The author suggests three actions we can take to assure winning.

1. Throw off everything that hinders or every weight, anything that impedes becoming and being a mature disciple of Christ.

When I play basketball I don’t wear blue jeans. I take them off and put on shorts. I'm not all that fast to begin with, I'm even slower wearing jeans. I don't want anything interfering with being marvelous.

Guys tend to play better when we don’t get too heavy, When we gained weight we get lazy and don't play as hard.

The advice from the Bible is to take off whatever interferes with being disciplined in our spiritual lives; anything that keeps us from worship, from service, and from being Bible students.

What is it in your life that weighs you down or entangles you? Laziness? Busyness?

·         Is there other stuff that matters more to you?

·         Is it fatigue after you spend all your energy doing things that benefit you here on earth but not necessarily in eternity?

The Bible says, get rid of that stuff

Does sin keep you from developing a strong spiritual life. Does immorality, impurity, sensuality, bad feelings toward another, strife, jealousy, anger, fighting, dissensions, division, envy, drunkenness, partying?

·         Do you have habits that pull you away from spiritual things?

·         Do you watch programs that fill your mind with foul language and suggestive humor?

·         Are you going to web sites that you wouldn’t want put on this screen?

·         Are you working so many hours to pay for all your stuff that you don’t have time for spiritual matters?

·         Do you watch too much TV, play too many video games, go hunting of fishing too much?

·         Do these things cause you to neglect your prayer life, your Bible reading, worship?

The Bible says, get rid of that stuff so that you can run.

You’ll have to decide for yourself what you should get rid of, or maybe you could get counsel from one of our church leaders, but don’t ignore this advice. Throw off everything that impedes becoming and being a mature disciple of Christ, a true follower of Jesus.

2. The second action we can take - run the race God set before us.

τρεχω means to run fast or rush into battle. Do you remember the scenes in Braveheart in which, with his face painted blue and broad sword held high, William Wallace led a hoard of foot soldiers rushing into the enemy lines? That's τρεχω.

Run the race, but, don't just run, because you might be running the wrong way. Run the race God set before us.

In athletics, the field or court is marked out for the competitors. A baseball diamond, a soccer field, a volleyball court, a marathon, even a horse race. The course is laid out.

I hear this a lot, *I think religion is a personal thing*. By that they mean that…*religion is whatever I want it to be. You do your thing, I’ll do mine*.

That sounds noble and fair, but it's not what God thinks. He has laid out the course. He has a will and a way for us. It's His game and if we play His way we'll enjoy benefits on earth as well as in heaven. If we try to play our own way, or if we don't play at all because of the things we allow to interfere - well, you can draw your own conclusion.

3. The third action we can take is to keep our eyes on Jesus.

The most difficult time in my spiritual life happened in my freshman year of college when someone from my home youth group who I looked up to committed a serious moral failure. I was disillusioned and struggled with the idea of staying in Bible College.

It wasn't that the College was bad. The problem was that I had taken my eyes off Jesus and focused on a person. She wasn't the perfect Christian I thought she was. Of course, I know now that nobody but Jesus is perfect. I should have kept my eyes on Jesus because I know that Jesus will never let me down.

I still believe in having role models, people we can copy to be like Christ. Paul encouraged the Corinthians to...*Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.*1 Corinthians 11:1 It's important to remember that even the most mature Christian will fail. That's why the Bible tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus.

We need to wrap this up so let me make three suggestions.

1. Make whatever changes are necessary in order to be victorious in the contest with the world so that you win the crown. In this race there is no second place. You either win or you lose.

In The Road Less Travelled Scott Peck wrote,

*I spent much of my ninth summer on a bicycle. About a mile from our house the road went down a steep hill and turned sharply at the bottom.*

*Coasting down the hill one morning, I felt my gathering speed to be ecstatic. To give up this ecstasy by applying the brakes seemed an absurd self-punishment. So I resolved to simultaneously retain my speed and negotiate the corner.*

*My ecstasy ended seconds later when I was propelled a dozen feet off the road into the woods. I was badly scratched and bleeding, and the front wheel of my new bike was twisted beyond use from its impact against a tree. I had been unwilling to suffer the pain of giving up my ecstatic speed in the interest of maintaining my balance around the corner.*

Peck said he learned that it's ultimately more painful to continue the fun of speed than it would have been to give up his fun and safely make the corner.

Nobody wants to give up all the fun things that we're doing even if they interfere with our spiritual lives.

·         We don't want to turn the TV off.

·         We don't want to take the time to be in a Bible study.

·         We don't want to spend our energy on other people.

If we don't we'll eventually miss the corner and run into a tree. Get rid of the things that interfere with truly following Jesus.

2. My second suggestion, work hard at whatever God has called you to.

Think about the verbs we looked at last week and today: fight, strive, agonize, train, run. Whatever it takes to do your thing, do it. Ben and I don't just get up and talk. Writing sermons takes time. We can't just spackle words on a page in the shape of a sermon. And we don’t want to brown and serve Tim Keller sermons.

·         We study the Bible so that what we’re saying is God's teaching.

·         Then we have to find a way to say that it everyone can understand - and we have great variety of education and experience listening.

No one ever won a fight or contest being lazy. And we won't win the contest of Christian living without hard work.

3.    My third suggestion is take advantage of opportunities the church provides. Don’t try to do it alone. Use the activities of the church to help yourself move beyond what you're all about right now to become a mature follower of Jesus.

I saw a poster that really struck me:

**Today I will do**

**What others won’t,**

**So that tomorrow I can do**

**What other can’t!**

Becoming and being a mature disciple of Christ, a true follower of Jesus, requires that we do what others won’t, so that we can be what others aren’t.

Becoming and being a mature disciple of Christ is like a race we run our whole lives. We can’t win it on our own, but with God’s help we can. So I’m telling you there’s a chance.