

“Are Eyes on the Prize?”
I Corinthians 9:24-27; II Timothy 4:1-8
Sermon Series: BELIEVE
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LeeAdianez Rodríguez-Espada was in a panic. While her mother Brendalee parked the car, the 12-year-old girl sprinted over to the starting line of the Wegman’s Family 5K race in Rochester, New York. A man told her she could jump in with a group of runners so off she went. Things went well until Lee passed the 5K mark with no finish line in sight. She asked a runner how long this race is. “Thirteen miles,” she replied. “And that’s when it struck me I was in the half marathon instead of the 5k,” Lee said.

Waiting at the finish line her mother grew frightened when there was no sign of her daughter among the 5K racers. For nearly two hours she and the police searched for the 12-year-old. Finally a police officer reunited Lee with her mother who broke down in tears. When mom stopped hugging her she noticed something around the girl’s neck: a medal. Lee finished the half marathon in two hours and forty minutes. “She just wanted to finish the race,” Espada said. “I don’t even know how she did it. I’m so proud of her.” So a twelve-year-old, who only started running two months before, simply put one foot in front of the other and kept her eyes on the prize.¹

As you finish one year and start another, you may feel, like LeeAdianez Rodriguez, you didn’t sign up for this race. This run called “life” is turning out to be harder than you expected. You have to work faster to get all your tasks done, reach higher for a better salary, get stronger so you can handle the clients, the competition or the kids. And when you complete a school project, close an important deal, cook a great dinner or successfully drive the kids to soccer, gymnastics, music lessons, church and home again you don’t just want a pat on the back. You want to hear the national anthem, stand on the top platform and have the judges put a gold medal around your neck. But instead you simply fall into bed exhausted and start the whole thing over again.

At some point on your marathon run through life, you may even get sidetracked, tripped up, distracted or exhausted. Brazil’s Vanderlei de Lima was in the lead in the marathon at the 2004 Athens Olympics. He had only three miles to go. Then a man known for disrupting sporting events jumped onto the course, grabbed the leader and pushed him into the crowd. De Lima managed to get back in the race but he eventually fell behind a mile later and won the bronze medal. What’s in your way? Debt? Drink? Drugs? Divorce? Desire? Disease? Death? From out of nowhere they jump in front of you and try to pull you down.

Maybe the turning of the year makes you stop and wonder, “How did I get here? Where am I going? What’s the prize I’m racing towards?” The toughest part about this

¹ AnneClaire Stapleton, "Girl, 12, Accidentally Runs Half Marathon" CNN.com (4-27-16)

race is the finish line keeps moving farther away. Like LeeAdianez Rodriguez, it's longer than you first thought. Originally the prize was a high school diploma or a college degree, then a job, another job, a spouse, children, a house, a car, a bigger car or house, a vacation home, a better job, a good retirement and then the wish that you were back in college again. What prize are you chasing?

The Apostle Paul set his eyes on a different prize. Paul was certainly a fan of track and field. Three times he describes the Christian life as a race, a long distance run. In his letter to the church in Philippi he writes,

One thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:14-15).

What is his prize? To know Jesus and to make Jesus known.

I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord for whose sake I have lost all things. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3:8, 10-11).

That may not sound like much compared to a gold medal, your name in the record book or a lucrative contract with Nike. But consider this: every record will be broken, every advertiser will find a new spokesperson and every gold medal will one day be melted down when this earth passes away. But there is one thing which endures forever: a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Paul writes to the Corinthians,

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 (I Corinthians 9:25).

A saving relationship with Jesus Christ is the only eternal prize on this earth. At the finish line of everyone's life it will not matter one bit if your name is written in the world record books. But it will make all the difference in the world if your name is written in God's Book of Life. Keep your eyes on the only prize that matters: Knowing Jesus.

In the Olympics, a gold medal is often the last crowning achievement of a stellar sports career. But Jesus offers His prize freely to everyone at the beginning of the marathon. So what do you do the rest of the race? Receive the blessings. The more you come to know Jesus, the deeper you grow in your relationship with Him, the more His love, joy and peace fill your soul. Keeping your eyes on the prize of Jesus will help you deal with all the other challenges and obstacles on the road of your life. And the more you give away the Good News about Jesus, the more you make Him known to others, the more you receive back. Paul told the Corinthians, "I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (I Corinthians 9:23).

We spent the first part of BELIEVE learning to think like Jesus, getting to know Jesus. We learned about God, Salvation, the Bible, Identity in Christ, the Church and Eternity. Now we enter the second phase of BELIEVE – acting like Jesus. These are the exercises, the spiritual training, which help us grow in our relationship with Jesus. Like athletes, we all need training. Nobody ever ran a 5K by lying on a couch. You need training. And part of training also requires us to unlearn bad habits. In the 1928 Amsterdam summer games, 6 of the 8 runners in the women’s 800-meter race collapsed at the finish line in such an exhausted state that the event was cancelled and not renewed until 1960. The problem? Poor training methods.

To keep our eyes on the prize of Jesus, we need **Practice**. Paul writes,

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. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize (I Corinthians 9:25-27).

When I was in high school my parents were in a running club. They ran short distances and worked their way up to half and full marathons. As I turned over and hit the snooze button they were already out on the road before sunrise. They ran specific distances each day to condition themselves for the grueling 26 miles. While I consumed all sorts of fatty, salty, sugary foods, they carefully ate proper diets for racers. Their bodies were finely tuned and in fit condition. And they told me they actually felt what many call, “The Runner’s High.” I didn’t believe them, but they said it was true.

To receive more of God’s blessings in your life, you must follow His training plan. We discover how to worship and pray, the importance of fellowship with other Christians, how to read Scripture and use your spiritual gifts, how to share the Good News with those outside the church – that’s God’s exercise program to put you in fit spiritual shape. Join us for each week of BELIEVE on Sunday and, to get the full benefit, join a Growth Group so you may be fully trained for this race. Sometimes members of Woodside say to me, “I want to go deeper. Maybe I should take courses in seminary.” Friends, I’ve been to two seminaries. I have no objections to seminary. But seminary will not help you go deeper. Why? Because it’s just more information. You don’t need more information. You have all the information you need. What you need is application that leads to transformation. You need to actually do the things you learned. You need to get into training. There is no other way. BELIEVE can help do that.

Now I guarantee you, friends, your body will tell you don’t need to do it. ‘Stay in bed instead of pray, read Scripture or worship.’ ‘Stay home and watch TV instead of join a Growth Group.’ ‘Sit back and let someone else serve.’ ‘Keep quiet and don’t share your faith.’ It takes practice to overcome what your body tells you. Paul says, ‘Don’t let anything distract you from the blessings of this prize.’

Second, keeping your eyes on the prize requires **Patience**. Near the end of his life, sitting in a dank, dark Roman jail, Paul wrote this final instruction to his faithful assistant Timothy: “I give you this charge: Preach the Word, be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Timothy 4:1-2). It takes a tremendous reservoir of patience and endurance to be an athlete. The 1912 Greco-Roman wrestling match in Stockholm between Alfred Asikainen of Finland and Russian Martin Klein lasted more than 11 hours. Klein won but he was too exhausted to participate in the championship match so he took the silver.

You may have to wrestle with a lot of questions about Jesus from your children, neighbors, spouse or parents. People may call you a hypocrite or holier-than-thou. Someone you love may reject or leave the faith. There may even be times in your own walk with Jesus that doubts and discouragement cause you to sit on the sidelines. Be patient. He will not leave you. He is always running right in front of you. So pray and keep patiently explaining, correcting and encouraging them until they receive the prize.

And finally, to keep your eyes on the prize, you not only need Practice and Patience but also to **Pass the Baton**. Paul warns Timothy,

For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. (2 Timothy 4:3-5).

The baton passed from Paul to Timothy. And for two thousand years, it has been passed from believer to believer and from generation to generation. That hand off is crucial. The U.S. watched in horror at the 2004 Olympics as American Marion Jones botched the hand off to teammate Lauryn Williams in the 4x100m relay. That mistake disqualified the U.S. team. They simply lost a race. But we might lose a loved one, a family or a whole generation if we botch the baton pass. There are friends, neighbors, family members, coworkers, your spouse, your parents, your children who need you to pass the baton of faith to them. The world will not teach them the Good News about Jesus. The culture will sell them whatever myths, lies and half-truths their itching ears want to hear. It is so essential that you and I pass on the baton to Sunday school kids, youth group kids, Adventure Club kids, Preschool kids, small groups, and all those people who'd never set foot inside a church. They won't listen to me. But they will listen to you. Invite them to attend worship with you. Invite them to your Growth Group. Listen to them and then share your faith with them. With the help of the Spirit, all this takes is Practice, Patience and then Pass the Baton.

Paul went through a lot of twists and turns, trials and travails on his race toward the finish line of life. Most scholars believe Paul's earthly finish line was a horrible dungeon in Rome. He is all alone. Some of his helpers are off on missions. Some of his

friends betrayed and deserted him. Timothy is in far off Turkey. Only Luke remains by his side. Bent and weary, gray and arthritic, scarred by numerous beatings, stoning, shipwreck, chafed by his chains, he looks pitiful. But inside this old husk of body is a spirit still burning with the fire of Jesus. Even now, as the execution's shadow draws near to his cell, he writes to Timothy

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. 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 (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

One day, soldiers took the feeble little prisoner, the troublemaker who turned the Roman world upside down, out to a spot beyond the walls of the city by the side of the road. Grim faced, they tied his hands behind his back and forced him to his knees. Head bowed, neck bared, the grim soldiers could not see the gentle, peaceful smile on the prisoner's face. The axe blade rose up, flashed briefly in the sunlight and swung home.

Paul didn't feel the blade. Nor did he feel the scars and wounds, nor the weariness and pain. He opened his eyes and didn't even see the soldiers or the city. Behind him was the finish line and before him stood his beloved Master, the One who called his name on the road to Damascus, cheered for him and stayed by him the entire race. Jesus' glorious appearance was almost unbearable to see and yet so unbearably beautiful it almost broke your heart. "Well done, Paul," Jesus said with a voice that rolled like mighty waters and soothed like a gentle breeze. Then the Lord placed a wreath on his head and said, "Come on in, everyone's waiting for you." And as the two walked into the gates of the Kingdom, all the saints through all the ages gave out a deafening roar.

That will be the greatest prize of all. Don't miss it.