

Paul's example of training

Paul uses an athletic metaphor to describe his life as a follower of Jesus, not just once, but twice.

... but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of me... I press on toward the goal to win the prize... (Php 3:12, 14).

The phrase, *I press on* refers to what was a familiar image to the Philippian readers. Philippi was a Roman city where people loved all things Roman, including running in races. The *prize* of which Paul speaks was at least a “stephanos,” a leafy wreath placed on the head of the victorious winner of the race. Paul writes a similar thing to another city down the coast line from Philippi.

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 (1 Cor 9:25).

He writes of *strict training*, which is another way of saying, “To be an athlete you need discipline. You need to train your body. You need to work hard to train for the race you're going to compete in.” So it is for the follower of Jesus. We need training in godliness. Paul refers to this training in the verses we've read, and again he does so two times.

**Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you... (3:17).
Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you (4:9).**

Again, Paul says something similar to the church down the coastline from Philippi.

Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ (1 Cor 11:1).

What was Paul's example? He did the very same sort of training as did Jesus. After his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, what do we hear about him? We hear that he is fasting – neither eating nor drinking for three days straight – and praying (find that in Acts 9). After a while, according to his own report, Paul went off to the desert in Arabia where he specifically says he “*did not consult any man*” but instead spent time in solitude (find that in Galatians 1). It was only after spending an extended period of time there that he returned to Damascus. In this letter to the Philippians he reminds us that he was a very strict Pharisee, used to doing the sorts of things the Pharisee in the parable did: tithing, fasting, praying; and when he became a follower of Jesus, he did not give up such practices. We know just from the letters he wrote that Paul often took time to pray for the churches he founded.

When we hiked the West Coast Trail last summer we began a pattern that continued from day three onward. It was tough going by then, and so we began to

chant a group cheer to start our day. The athletic company known as “Nike” has a slogan that we used every time we started the day. Nike is actually from a Greek word, “Victory,” and their slogan is, “Just do it!” We needed to encourage each other. So I want to encourage each of us this morning as we get ourselves into training.

Paul, too, has a slogan. It is simple.

But one thing [Php 3:13].

The one thing is: taking hold of Christ! Christ started the process, Paul observes. He grabbed hold of us. Now we need turn to him and grab hold of him! The phrase is similar to a psalm.

**One thing I ask of the LORD,
this is what I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to seek him in his temple** [Ps 27:4].

Jesus says we don't need a temple any longer to see the beauty of the LORD. We can seek him anywhere, any time. This is the purpose of the training: to seek and find him! If we do these things just to engage in another “Christian activity,” we have missed out on the purpose of them: to become like Jesus. Paul's example is to be followed because he followed the example of Christ.