

LENT NOTES 2012 FROM THE LEPROSY MISSION

Transformation through sport

All quotations from NIV translation unless specified

Preparation

You might want to look at the *More Than Gold* website – www.morethangold.org.uk It's about how churches can get involved in the 2012 Olympics

Introduction

I'm not sure if you've heard, but the Olympics are coming to the UK in 2012! The world of sport can provide good opportunities to inspire and help us in our Christian lives, and to witness to our faith and help others. It also provides some great metaphors! Here's one from the Apostle Paul:

"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" 1 Corinthians 9:26-27

There are other examples, mainly from Paul, in Galatians 2:2; 5:7; Philippians 2:16; 3:14; 2 Timothy 2:5; 4:7; Hebrews 12:1. (We'll look at these later). The New Testament writers obviously thought that sport was a good illustration of the Christian life. Maybe there's something we can learn?

The Olympic Games have an interesting history. It is generally agreed that the ancient Greek Olympic games started in 776 BC at Olympia. They united the city-states which took part; bringing a sense of unity and co-operation. They gradually declined in importance when Rome gained power and influence in Greece, and stopped altogether by the 5th century AD. It's believed that the Christian Emperor Theodosius banned them in 393 AD because of the element of cruelty they contained and their pagan origin.

The modern International Olympic Committee (IOC) was founded by Baron Pierre de Coubertin at the end of the 19th century and the first Olympic Games under its auspices took place in Athens in 1896. Since then the Olympic Movement has evolved through the 20th and 21st centuries, and today includes the Winter Games, the Paralympic Games and, most recently, the Youth Games.

The power of sport to transform

Activity Read Philippians 3:12-14.

- What draws so many people so powerfully to be involved in sport? Why is it such an appropriate metaphor to apply to our Christian lives?
- One archbishop wrote recently that for many people sport 'not only determines a sense of identity and belonging, but also the meaning of life itself.'/ What are some of the good things we can get from being involved in sport? And what are some of the dangers?
- In Philippians 3:12-14, what is the Apostle Paul's main message to us? What does this tell us about some of the experiences we are likely to have in living our Christian lives?

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Transformation through perseverance

Activity Read Isaiah 40:28-31; Hebrews 12:1-3

Some Christian athletes claim they do long-distance running not only for health and recreation, but to receive God's grace and strength in doing their sport, and open themselves to his insights. Here are some of the transformational benefits of running according to some anonymous quotes from famous Christian athletes:

It teaches daily discipline and wise training, for "there are no shortcuts to quicker legs, stronger arms, and ever more efficient lungs." From these lessons in patience and perseverance grew lifelong habits of "showing up on time, following through on a commitment, and diligently finishing projects to the best of one's ability."

Long-distance running provides opportunities for self-reflection. Many runners remember specific runs that "conjured up novel insights about themselves, their spouses, parents, or friends. Learning about who I am as an individual lets me relate more fully to others and to fulfil my role as wife, friend, sister, and daughter."

Training for competition opens "a window to our character, or the lack thereof." We see courage, strength of will, and honesty of commitments.'

- Can you explain why sustained physical activity changes our character and even gives us new insights? Has your life been shaped for the better by participation in sport?
- In Hebrews 12:1-3 the writer tells us to 'throw off everything that hinders', like an athlete approaching the start-line throwing off his tracksuit. What can hinder us in running the Christian race, and how can we throw it off?
- What encouragements are there in these verses to keep on running (at least three, one in each verse)? There's a fourth encouragement in 2 Timothy 4:7-8. What is it exactly?

Transforming sport through mission

Sport, physical exercise, and recreational activity contribute to our development as spiritual beings composed of body and soul. They can enrich the social dimension of our lives, helping us to live and work with others, and show us the importance and benefits of contributing to a group effort. They can teach important life lessons about respecting honesty, integrity, and fair play, and develop skills for dealing with adversity. Habits of discipline and sacrifice for a greater good also grow. So sport has many benefits. Yet, like all human activities and organisations, sport and sport events need redemption. They need a Christian presence and witness. As one Christian athlete put it, 'Christian athletes can be role models of sportsmanship, fair play, discipline, and integrity.'

- What are some of the ways that sport needs to be 'redeemed'?
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- How can you use the power and attraction of sport as an opportunity to share God's good news, either as an individual or as a church or group of churches?
- For one way to be involved as a Christian with the 2012 Olympics, go to the More Than Gold website – morethangold.org.uk. You might like to check it out

Blocking transformation

Lastly, there are a couple of uses of sport metaphors in the New Testament that we haven't mentioned. They speak about some of the things that can hinder us as we run our Christian race, and they are worth highlighting.

Activity Read Galatians 5:7 and 2 Timothy 2:5

- What warning can we take from the Galatians verse? What people or situations might 'cut in' on us and spoil our race? What can do to avoid these dangers?
- What are the 'rules' Paul is referring to that we have to follow if we want to receive a 'victor's crown'?

Conclusion

Pray this prayer together, with one person leading and the rest making the response:

Leader: God, we cannot race through this journey alone.

Response: *We need you and we need each other*

Leader: God, we cannot sustain ourselves throughout this race.

Response *We need you and we need each other*

Leader: God, we cannot finish this race on our own.

Response: *We need you and we need each other*

Then finish with this prayer:

Father, thank you for the ability you have given us to be involved in sport and to enjoy it. Thank you for the good effect it can have in all our lives. Help us to use it as an opportunity to live and share the gospel. And help us to be good athletes of the spirit, to win the gold medal of eternal life that awaits us at the end of our race. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.