

# Series Title

## *Sermon Title*

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Scripture: Assorted

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I'm sure that many of you have already heard, but the Summer Olympics start in Paris in less than two weeks. Now, I know I've told you before, but I love the Olympics, and the summer games are actually my favorite. I am fascinated and captivated by the physical and mental ability of these athletes. They do things that seem humanly impossible. It's always hard for me to comprehend that they trained for four years for this one moment, this one opportunity.

According to a study that they did before the 2012 London Olympics, some athletes responded that they had put in 10,000 hours of practice for this one event. I like to do math in my head, and so I was thinking 10,000 hours. What does that look like? And that would mean that you are training or practicing 20 hours a week for 10 years, or if you doubled that, it would be 40 hours a week for five years for this one moment.

You see, making it to the Olympics to represent your country in a specific event doesn't happen by accident. There's not a single person that is there who shows up to the trials and decides, "You know what? Today I'm going to compete for this," right? That's just not the way that it works. These individuals that represent our countries and these events can't just love their sport or their event. They must live it day in and day out.

There are no breaks. They must eat the right things, do the right stretches, complete the right exercises. They must push themselves the exact perfect amount so that they peak at the perfect time. They usually have a team of coaches, not just one, that closely monitor everything that they do. And even if they do everything right leading up to this moment in the Olympics, they have one chance to perform.

If they mess up, it's all over. They could do it right hundreds of times in practice. But if they don't do it when it counts, it doesn't mean anything. This is why these athletes push themselves beyond most of our limits and practice so hard. They want it to become second nature. They want to be able to perform their thing, whatever they do, without even thinking about it.

They want it to become like blinking or breathing to them. You see, these athletes sacrifice a lot for what they do. They cannot be like normal people. They don't get to enjoy candy and snacks and ice cream like you and I. The women athletes can't start a family as that would mess with their training and potentially take them out of the Olympics. They often have to live in a specific location where training is possible.

There's no way that they can have normal full-time jobs with all of the training that needs to take place. And I have to imagine that their training and their regimen that they do has to put huge stress on all of their relationships. The discipline, commitment, intention, and dedication of these athletes are amazing. And they do all of this for a medal and a reputation that won't last.

Eventually, the medal that they receive will be given to someone else. They'll either hand it down to the next generation or somebody in their family, and somebody is going to come along after them and do better than they did. The apostle Paul says it this way in 1 Corinthians chapter 9, "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.

For 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 someone who runs aimlessly. I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

The apostle Paul encourages us to run our lives in such a way as to get the prize. Someone told me the fan was right above his hands. I didn't see that first service. So he's holding up the fan today, all right? Paul encourages us, don't just wander through life only to finish the race and recognize you lost. Be intentional with your finish line.

I'm amazed at how many people just kind of go through life and they don't have any goal or agenda or thing that they're trying to reach or accomplish. And so this morning, I'm going to ask all of us, whether you're here watching in person or listening on the radio, what is your goal? What is your intention? What are you racing towards? What's your destination? Where do you want to end up? And then Paul would say to us, "Go all out.

Don't do it halfway. Give it all you have. But just be careful what you choose." Being in this position, I can't tell you how disheartening it is, how many times I find myself in a situation where somebody is nearing the end of their life. And I watched these people arrive at the finish line only to discover that they were running in the wrong direction.

They get to the end of their lives and they say, "Pastor, everything that I was striving towards is worth nothing now." So what really matters? And how do we get there? This is what I want to talk about today. So let me pray and then we'll jump in. Heavenly Father, every single one of us has an end to this earthly life that we are given, that we are blessed with.

My prayer is that that end, that finish line, would be something that lasts forever. Father, give us the endurance. Give us the self-discipline to reach the goal of pleasing you, as we will talk about here. Thank you for blessing us. It's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

So what is the finish line you want to cross? I'm amazed when I talk to individuals. Again, how many people don't have a goal or don't even think about it. Whether it's a high school student that maybe is just graduating, that makes sense. They're still trying to figure out life and what they're going to do. Are they going to go to college? Are they going to do a trade? And so they're still trying to figure it out. But then I talk to people that are in their 30s and you know they've kind of started a family and they just go to their job every day and they don't think about it.

And then people reach their 40s. And we have this phrase in our culture that we call the midlife crisis. This is when we wake up one day and we think, "What am I doing? What is my goal? I've been doing something, and I'm not sure that it's really going towards the direction of life that I want to go." We begin to recognize we have only one life, only one chance to do this. And so I asked you this morning, what is your ultimate goal in life?

What is your finish line? What is most important to you? Now, as I have asked myself this question many times, my answer is always the same. When I think about my finish line for my life, what is it that I want to accomplish more than anything else? It is this.

When I stand before my Heavenly Father, I want to hear Him say to me, "Well done, good and faithful servant, come and share in your master's happiness." This is the ultimate finish line for me. Nothing else compares to this in my life. This is my ultimate goal. And what I need to do to reach that line is completely different than what I would need to do to reach a different finish line.

For instance, if my finish line were to gain as much wealth as I could and become a billionaire, I would make different decisions. If my goal was to be an Olympic gold medalist, which there's no way I could in anything except maybe badminton, I might have a chance in that. My life would look different. I would have to do different things. If my goal in life were to become popular or famous or to have some status, I would be making different decisions.

If my goal was to be powerful or to have power in this world, I would make different decisions or to be a professional athlete. Now, I will tell you, it is possible to attain multiple goals at the same time. It is possible to gain

wealth and still hear from your Heavenly Father. Well done, good and faithful servant. But it is important for you and I to determine what our number one goal is. What is our number one finish line?

Because there will be decisions that you will make that will go in one direction or the other, and your ultimate goal will determine the choice you make. So this is the first question that you and I have to answer. What is our goal? What is our finish line? And of course, as you make that choice, I implore you as a pastor, of course, here on a Sunday morning, whether you're listening on the radio or watching.

Of course, I want you to remember the words of Paul, who encourages us to pursue the crown that will last forever instead of the one that fades. Don't be like that person who gets to the end of their life and finds out they were running in the wrong direction. So after we've determined our goal, our destination, we have to come up with steps on how we are going to go in that direction. How are we going to reach that finish line?

We have to make a plan to get there. You don't accidentally reach the finish line in first place. As I talk to individuals, I have recognized that you don't accidentally have a great marriage. I've never had somebody come in my office and say, "Pastor, it was an accident. I don't know, but we get along so great. Life is perfect. I've never had somebody come into my office or have a conversation with me and say, I don't know how it happened. It was an accident, but our family is debt-free.

We don't owe anybody anything. You have to make a conscious decision about these things. I've never had somebody tell me, "You know, it was an accident. I automatically got healthy. I don't know what happened. I didn't change anything in my life, but I started losing weight, and I can run really fast and jump really high. I just woke up one day." That's not what happens. It takes a commitment. It takes effort. It takes self-discipline. You know what else doesn't accidentally happen? Having joy in life.

Joy is a choice. It's a decision that you make regardless of the circumstances. Now, granted, there certainly can be seasons that your joy may be a little less because of your situation, but you still choose joy. You know what else you don't accidentally have happen? You don't accidentally get to the end of your life and hear your Heavenly Father say, "Well done, good and faithful servant, come and share in your master's happiness." That doesn't happen by accident.

You need to make a conscious decision. And then you need to run your race in such a way as to get the prize. And that is a prize that will last forever. You see, just as there is discipline and practice and effort that is necessary and goes into the training for the Olympic Games, there is also discipline and practice and effort to grow in your relationship with Jesus.

You will not accidentally have a great relationship with Jesus. You must be intentional. Therefore, in Christianity, we have a list of what is often referred to as the best practices, but in the spiritual world, have become known as the spiritual disciplines. Now, even just saying that word, I know some of you cringe. Just a little inside. You say disciplines. I don't really like that. What do you mean spiritual disciplines?

Well, this list of disciplines are acts that call us to move beyond the surface and move into the depths of a relationship with Jesus. You need to know they're not difficult, that this list is not meant to be given to you so that it will make your life more boring. It's not meant to kill the joy in your lives. Instead, these spiritual disciplines are meant to give you more joy and to know Jesus more.

Now, I need to make very clear before we move any further in this series that in no way am I saying that by doing this list you earn your salvation. Please hear me loud and clear. Salvation is a free gift that God gives to us. The apostle Paul says, "For I have been saved by grace through faith, not by works, so that no one can boast." These disciplines that I am talking about are decisions that you and I make to be more connected with our Savior.

And in reality, they are the natural steps that you will take if you want to grow. If I've given my life to Christ and I proclaim Him as my Lord and Savior, these are things I will want to do. They won't be things that someone makes me do. So let's talk about these disciplines. These disciplines can be divided into many different factors or ways or

categories. But the one that I most appreciate or at least speaks to me most was done by Richard Foster in his book, *Celebration of Discipline*.

Some of you may be familiar with that book. It's been a very famous and popular book in the Christian world for a while. And he divides these disciplines into three different groups. Inward disciplines, outward disciplines, and corporate disciplines. So we're going to spend one week on each of these categories leading up to the Olympics. And so today, we're going to very briefly jump into some of these inward disciplines.

Now, please remember, as we go through these disciplines, they are for our good. We're not doing them to earn our salvation. They are not meant to be like the law of the Old Testament that brought death. That's not the goal. They are meant to bring life. So let's talk about the first one. The first inward discipline is meditation. Meditation.

Now, I know some of you already in your minds are thinking, "Pastor's lost it, okay?" This meditation, you think about this weird Eastern meditation where people sit with their legs crossed and they have their fingers up and they're saying, "Hum, hum." That's not the meditation I'm talking about, all right? There's a huge difference between that maybe Eastern meditation and what I'm talking about, which is Christian meditation. In Eastern meditation, the goal is to clear your mind or empty your mind.

In Christian meditation, the goal is to fill your mind with Christ. A complete different idea. Christian meditation really is the ability to hear God's voice and obey His word. It's not that weird chanting sitting in a funny position. It's filling your mind, not emptying it. And meditation is scriptural. It is in the Bible.

In Genesis 24:63, as Isaac is pursuing his wife and trying to figure out what to do, Genesis chapter 24:63 says, "Isaac went out into the field one evening to meditate." And as he looked up, he saw the camels approaching and the scene, of course, unfolds. Psalm 63:6, the psalmist says, "On my bed, I remember you. I think of you through the watches of the night." Reading this from the Psalmist just reminds me a lot of my own life.

I don't know how many of you are like me that when you lay in bed, you can't turn your mind off. You're just thinking about what you're going to do the next day in your to-do list or things that have happened on that day, maybe things that you said that you wish you didn't say or conversations that you've had and you can't turn your mind off and you can't fall asleep. In those moments, I have tried this practice of meditation and I say, "Okay, I'm going to try to clear my mind and fill it with Christ." And so I will spend time praying or talking with God or trying to listen to him.

And I can't tell you how many times I wake up the next morning and go, "I don't even remember falling asleep." Can I tell you right now it is okay to fall asleep praying to God, all right? Don't feel guilty if you wake up in the morning. I believe that that is a gift that He gives to us. It is okay to spend time praying and then wake up and go, "Oh, that was awesome.

Thank you for that peace." David in Psalm chapter 1 verses 1 and 2 says, "Blessed is the one who does not walk and step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but instead in those whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who meditates on His law day and night.

When we meditate on Christ, you and I are creating the emotional and spiritual space necessary for Christ to come into us and build an inner sanctuary in our hearts. Think about that. That's what meditation is. You are clearing out the garbage so that Christ can come in and build His house in our hearts. So let me give you some tips for meditation because you might think, "Okay, Pastor, I maybe would give it a try, but I don't even know where to start.

Let me just give you some easy tips. Number one, pick a specific time that you want to do this. Create a time for inward silence. Now, this is probably the most difficult of all of the steps. It's the first step. Create time for inward silence. That means no phones, no TV, no interruptions. And I know the moms are thinking, "Well, pastor, that

doesn't happen. I have kids," right? I tell my kids, "Don't bother me. I'm doing my quiet time. Don't bother me. I'm trying to spend time with God.

And inevitably, you know in a matter of a couple of minutes, someone's knocking on the door and saying, "Mom, someone hit me." you know I understand that. So maybe for you, your time needs to be when the kids are sleeping, when they can't interrupt you, or they shouldn't interrupt you, or you have a better chance that they won't interrupt you, right? But choose a specific time. The next thing that I would tell you is find a place, a quiet place. I know some people that have prayer closets or rooms that say, "This is my prayer room. This is where I spend time with God.

That's great." For me, it is much better if I'm in creation. To find a beautiful place where I can look over creation, over a lovely landscape, and I can just think about God's creation. For me, that is good. But for you, just find a place and make it the same place every time. Again, same time, same place. It's all about creating routines, creating habits. Let me tell you, there's no specific posture, all right? You don't need to sit with your legs crossed. You don't need to lay down.

You don't need to stand up. You can do whatever you want. Whatever is comfortable for you. If you want to sit in a chair, that's great. Unless you fall asleep all the time in that chair, then you should choose somewhere else, right? Maybe you want to walk while you're doing it. That's fine. You can walk while you meditate. It's okay. There's no specific posture. But the essence of meditation centers on internalizing and personalizing the Scriptures, making them personal. Don't rush through a story.

Don't open up the Bible and go, "Okay, I'm going to read through three chapters today." And you get it done, you check off the list and feel good about yourself. I've done that in my life. And then someone will say, "Well, how are your devotions today?" And I'll think, "I don't even remember what I read, but I checked off my list," right? You have to take time. Invest in it. Make it personal. Don't rush through it. And the best way for me to do this is to put myself in the story. I have to literally put myself in the story of what's taking place. I'm not even a very creative person. I don't like to read a lot of books that are fictional and whatever else.

So I don't have a creative mind, but even I can do this. So if I can, you can. Put yourself in the story. Think about what do you see if you were sitting there? What do you hear? How has what Jesus just said landed in your ears? Was it shocking? Are you confused? Did it bring up some kind of emotion in you? What did you just hear him say? You put yourself in the story.

I told you for me, sometimes it's not just through Scripture that God will speak to me, but it's through creation as well. He sometimes will just bring something to my heart and to my mind. And I was thinking about this as I was preparing the message for today, and I was reminded of a mission trip that I went on in 2006 to Mexico. Anna, I think you were there, weren't you? Or were you in 2008? You don't remember? Okay. 2006. So that's 18 years ago. So my memory is a little different now than what it was.

But in 2006, one of our fun days on that mission trip was going to, I think, Mayan ruins or something like that in Mexico. And so I remember going and we were looking at all these old ruins. And part of that day, though, was to take time and spend some time in meditation, spend some time doing a devotion, a quiet time with God. And so we got to that point of the day. And I remember climbing up on one of the ruins and just sitting up there and looking over the lush landscape and everything that was around us in Mexico.

And I was just trying to hear from God, and I was looking out over the landscape, and I saw this beautiful butterfly. And I love insects and animals and things like that. So it caught my attention. And I remember watching that butterfly, and it was a decently windy day. I was up kind of high, so it was a little more windy up there. And I recognized that this butterfly was not strong enough to go against the wind. It had to just go wherever the wind was directing. It had to use that wind to go in that direction.

And I remember God not speaking to me in an audible voice, but me hearing and thinking to myself, "God, would you make me like that butterfly so that I cannot fight against your will? That I have to go in the direction that you are pushing me to go, and I'm not strong enough to fight against that direction, but I have to go with you." Now, I didn't realize 18 years ago how dangerous of a prayer that was. Because really, I was praying, "God, make me so weak that I can't fight against your will." But it is a good prayer.

It was a good visual for me to say, "God, make me like that, that I have to go where you are leading because it's how I'm created. It's how you have made me." And so in those moments of meditation and those moments of time with God, He may reveal something to you that helps you better understand Him. Let's move into the next one just real quickly. The next discipline is prayer. I will tell you of all the spiritual disciplines, prayer is the most central because it ushers us into perpetual communion with the Father.

And so because of that, in my own personal life, I find that the enemy doesn't attack anywhere else more than he attacks my prayer life. That's where I get attacked. Even after years of being a pastor, even after years of having a relationship with God, prayer is still the most difficult part of my spiritual life. But prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us. As we look in Scripture, prayer is something that was a part of the life of Jesus.

In Mark 1:35, we read very early in the morning, while it was still dark, because he had the disciples that would bother him all the time, so he had to get away, right? Jesus got up. He left the house, and he went off to a solitary place where he prayed. If it was important enough for him to do that, it's something that I also need to do. So let me give you some quick tips, and then we'll be done. Tip number one, don't be discouraged at first.

It is going to take time and effort, and you will get better at it as time goes on. Prayer is something that is learned. You might say, "Well, that doesn't make sense, Pastor." I've never heard that before. Well, do you remember when the disciples came up to Jesus and we have the Lord's Prayer? Do you know why He answered that way? It's because the disciples went to Him and said, "Jesus, will you teach us to pray?" It's something we have to learn. We have to develop. So here's some ways that we can encourage our prayer life or better our prayer life.

I encourage you to seek somebody out who has authority with prayer and ask them to teach you. Every Thursday morning here at the church, we have a prayer time in the Children's Sanctuary at 8:40. And we usually have the same people that show up to that. But one of the blessings of that time for me has been to hear the prayer languages of certain individuals. We all have prayer languages. We all have certain ways that we pray. And so I will listen as people lift their requests to God there corporately. And sometimes I'll hear something and I'll go, "I like that.

I need to include that in my prayer language. I need to include that." And so you can seek somebody out. That's a good way to learn. The next thing you can do is just learn to listen. Listening to the Lord is the most necessary part of any successful prayer life, and it's what I fail at the most. Listening. Again, I tell you, my mind runs a mile a minute, and so when I don't have something that's occupying my attention, my mind is running. And it's like I have a conversation with myself like, "Will you be quiet?

I'm trying to hear God." Right? Maybe it's just me. Maybe I'm crazy. But there's just this inward battle taking place. Learning to listen. We have to learn to listen. The next tip I would give for you is don't make prayer too complicated. Don't make it difficult. There's no special language you have to use or words. You don't have to address God in any certain way, some special way to get His attention. Maybe start off by just saying flash prayers, or some people call them popcorn prayers, maybe one-word prayer throughout the day.

Maybe it's a sentence here or there. But here is the truth. You and I must never wait until we feel like praying before we actually pray. Prayer is a choice. It is a decision that we make. Now, I know this has been a lot for one day as we kind of introduce the series and get into this. But what I want you to do is I want you to take one thing, and I want you to try it this week, whether it's meditation or prayer, and I just want you to say, "Okay, I'm going to

give this a try." And I don't want you just to do it once so you can check off the list and come next week and go, "Pastor, I did it." Yep.

I did it. I want you to try multiple times because, again, it's something that you learn, you develop. It's a process. And so spend some time doing it. Go into it knowing that it's going to take effort. It's going to take commitment. Just like you don't get off the couch and run a six-minute mile. You don't lose 50 pounds in a week. It is gradual. It's one step at a time. But I can tell you from personal experience that when you pursue these spiritual disciplines, the results are worth the effort.

As you grow in your understanding of who God is and how much He loves you, please again remember, you are not doing these disciplines to try to make God love you more because that's not possible. You cannot make God love you any more or any less. You are doing these to grow in your relationship with Him. So choose meditation or prayer. What do you want to focus on this week and spend some time trying to make that happen?

Let me close in prayer. Heavenly Father, I thank You that You allow us to get as close to You as we want to get. You don't push yourself on us, but you do pursue us. You don't force your way into our lives. You don't force your way into the doors of our hearts, but you do stand and knock. And so my prayer is that we would pursue you.

Would you give us the self-discipline, the commitment, the effort necessary to make that decision that our goal in life would be to hear well done, good and faithful servant come and share in your master's happiness? May we grow closer to you and take our next step. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.