

ACCORDING TO THE RULES

“If anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor’s crown unless he competes according to the rules” (2 Tim. 2:5)

Games and athletic contests date back to the beginning of time. In Paul’s day they were so popular that truces were declared in times of war so that athletes could travel to the Olympic games in safety. The first Olympics is traditionally dated at 776 B.C. They were held every four years until A.D. 393 when the emperor Theodosius suppressed the games in a campaign to impose Christianity as a state religion. The concern was that the Olympics were held in the honor of the pagan god Zeus whose statue was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Man’s desire to compete is so universal that it leads to the assumption that it was placed there by God. Children invariably play games and challenge one another to a race or wrestling match. Hunters who take pride in bringing home a trophy but express no satisfaction when killing a caged animal. Chess players grow bored when competing with an inferior opponent. Goliath was insulted when confronted by young shepherd boy with only a sling and a staff (1 Sam. 17:43). The field commander of the Assyrian army volunteered to give King Hezekiah 2,000 horses if he could put riders on them (Is 36:8). When the armies of Abner and Joab faced off at the pool of Gibeon they chose 12 men from each side to engage in deadly combat (2 Sam. 2:12 ff.) The soldiers at Calvary cast lots for the garments of Jesus (Jn. 19:23, 24). Games are so popular that they often become addictive.

Games, however, can only survive if they involve rules. The competition has to be consistent and fair. All runners, for example, must start at the same line. All throwing events, such as the hammer, discus, or javelin, must insure that no one cheats and steps over the line. Boxers are penalized for low blows and violators are disqualified in every event. To discard the rules is to destroy the game. Thus Paul taught Timothy to compete fairly and obey the rules. **“If anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor’s crown unless he competes according to the rules”** Our text, however, also has other analogies. Paul makes reference to a trilogy of soldiers, athletes, and farmers. Each example requires discipline. A soldier must follow instructions, an athlete must obey the rules, and a farmer must plow and plant at the proper time. Paul continued: **“Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this” (2 Tim. 2:7).**

Each of these three examples, soldiers, athletes, and farmers, however, involve only earthly rewards. We should therefore train ourselves to be godly for bodily exercise only profits for a little. Godliness, as you know, is profitable for all things (1 Tim. 4:7, 8). Consequently, Paul went into strict training, not for a corruptible crown, but for one that is incorruptible and eternal (1 Cor. 9:25).

The Hebrew letter reminds us that the race of life is run before a “great cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1). These witnesses apparently include not only earthly beings, but also thousands of angels, God, Jesus, and the spirits of righteous men made perfect (Heb. 12:22-24).

Judges and referees are authorized to immediately disqualify anyone who breaks the rules. Violations of doping, however, are sometimes not detected until after the medals have been awarded. Consequently, from October 1968 to February 2018 140 athletes have been stripped of their medals when their doping violations were detected. No wonder Paul insisted that Timothy compete according to the rules. Paul himself labored carefully so that he would not be disqualified (1 Cor. 9:27).

Paul set a good example for Timothy, and for everyone else. Just before his execution he wrote: **“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 Tim. 4:6-8)** **“God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.” (Heb. 6:10).** You cannot however, make up rules of your own, for the Lord, the “Righteous Judge” has already taken care of that!