



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

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✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

St. Paul is not the sort of fellow one might expect to bump into at the YMCA or the MAC – doing aerobics, stumbling around on a treadmill, or working out on one of those weird exercise machines. Still less would one expect to see him, clad in shorts and tank top, doing warming exercises up beside a running track.

Perhaps the reason many folks today find it hard to picture St. Paul working out at the Merritt Athletic Club is a matter of cultural conditioning. One sees from Paul's writings that he was, above all things, a scholar and an intellectual. And, these days, scholars and intellectuals are not generally expected to go in for strenuous exercise, and body contact sports. Theirs is a more cerebral calling.

Such things weren't always so. At one time, you needed not only good grades, but also a respectable athletic record to stand a chance of being accepted by a decent college. Strange though it might seem, prowess in a "manly" sport was considered an important qualification for the clergy – games like football, rugby, the track and boxing. Back then (40 years ago or so) educators subscribed to Juvenal's maxim: "*Orandum*

est ut sit mens sana in corpore sano" – "A sound mind in a sound body is a thing to be prayed for."

In fact, educators shared the belief with their Greek and Roman counterparts that a sound mind was actually the product of a sound body – that physical fitness was a precondition for optimum intellectual effort. When archaeologists unearthed the Lyceum, Aristotle's famous academy in Athens, their discovery was confirmed when they found its wrestling and gymnastics arena.

St. Paul was a highly educated man in both the Jewish and Greek traditions. While Jews didn't much esteem physical fitness as an educational tool, Greeks certainly did, and it is hard to imagine that St. Paul managed to avoid the physical side of his Greek education.

We don't know if he was a boxer or a wrestler (popular sports with the Greeks and Romans), but he certainly seems to have liked foot races because he often uses runners and races as metaphors.

In fact, sometimes he sounds just like a

veteran coach who understands the whole world in terms of a game of football – as in today's communion epistle. It is not an unduly complicated message: Paul says that if you want to win the prize, you've got to get in the race. Like the lottery: You can't hope to win if you haven't got a ticket.

Paul was speaking a language his audience understood. Greeks and Romans of all classes, even slaves, were avid sports fans. They worked out daily at the public baths (the equivalent of our health clubs and spas); they eagerly attended sporting events at their local stadium. And Corinth, like most large Graeco-Roman cities, had a magnificent public stadium, and often playing host to international competitions that attracted athletic stars and hopefuls from all over the Roman Empire.

Christianity, says to Paul, is like an athletics event. The spectators don't expect to win prizes at athletic events and nor can they expect to win prizes in Christianity. It might seem a bit strange to picture Christianity as a spectator sport. But, in fact, it's a very apt metaphor. Many people who consider themselves Christians, are, in reality, are merely spectators. They are as different from real Christians as the fan in the stands is from the quarterback throwing the passes.

The fan might speak football jargon as well as the quarterback; he might have an even better grasp of strategy and tactics. But when it comes down to it, it is the man out on the field who collects the accolades and the million-dollar paycheck. The football fan is basically merely a consumer of football.

The same is true of Christianity: Some churchgoers are not so much Christian as consumers of Christianity. As consumers they tend to be connoisseurs of religion: its liturgy, theology and preaching. They savor

the faith more for its style than its content; a triumph of style over substance.

Although they probably don't realize it, such folks are like football fans. They are watching from the stands, not playing on the field. As with Christianity as with football: When the game is over, the players get the medals and the money, while the spectators file out of the stadium with nothing more than a used ticket stub.

Like any sport, Christianity requires practice. You can't just walk in off the street, run out on the field and throw a winning pass. It takes years of hard physical and mental effort to become a passable quarter back. And the same goes for Christianity – except, of course, there is no such thing as an amateur Christian.

With Christianity, there are no half measures: Either you play the game full time, or you're back in the bleachers. Being a Christian takes constant effort. After all, it isn't easy to love your neighbor. It isn't easy to stay constant in prayer. It isn't easy to try to do as Jesus would do on a daily basis, let alone every waking second of one's life. In other words, Christianity is like athletics because it takes constant practice to stay on top of the game.

But the big difference between a sporting life and a Christian one lies in the division of the spoils, in the distribution of the prizes. In the world of sport, there are no second place winners. Only one athlete gets the gold. With Christianity, the odds are infinitely better: As today's Gospel -- the parable of the laborers in the vineyard – points out every one who finishes the race one wins first prize. With Christianity, unlike the world of sport, there are no second place winners. Jesus has made sure every faithful Christian is a winner. *AMEN*