

“Racing Into the Future”

“Don’t you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:24-27, NLT).

“I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection! But I keep working toward the day when I will finally be all that Christ Jesus saved me for and wants me to be. No, dear brothers and sisters, I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven” (Phil. 3:12-14, NLT).

Sometimes when I look at the calendar and I see the year I can hardly believe it. It’s true, it is 2013. I still can hardly believe it at times. It feels like *a race into the future* that keeps moving faster and faster every year.

If the flipping of the calendar pages is a race into the future then we ought to be about winning the race. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone who likes to lose. Have you? People like to win and people like winners. Our society as a whole attests to this. A winner can have shirts and shoes and all kinds of things named after them. Seldom do the losers have anything positive named after them. Paul told us to *run to win*.

Running is an old sport that has been around for thousands of years, even in Paul’s day. Running requires a lot of effort in many areas. Winning requires things like: excellence, energy, emptying, and expectancy. Knowing this, Paul likened living for Christ to running a race. Paul described to his readers how to win the race of the Christian life. If Paul were graded for running his race, he certainly received an “A”. What a testimony his life is for us to follow (1 Cor. 11:1). He ran to win and told us to do the same. In our day, the grading scale is usually A, B, C, D, and F. Sometimes we get an unofficial “E” for effort. This “E” grade definitely applies to running the race of life.

Jesus endured the race that was set before Him and has won the victory for us (Heb 12:1-3). We share in the victory He has won (Eph. 1:17-23). As we face the challenges of 2013 and trust Him, I believe He will enforce the victory He has won for us in our lives (Rom. 16:20). The grade “E” for effort can be seen here in our striving for Excellence, Energy, Emptying, and

Expectancy as we live from His strength within us. Let’s look at the text in Philippians and plan to put forth the effort to *win the race* that is before us while we still have the time.

EXCELLENCE. Different shoes work for different folks. For awhile, I found *New Balance* working well for me. I attained more *excellence* in my running when wearing this brand. Every successful runner strives for *excellence*. The words of Paul, “*I do not mean to say I have already achieved,*” speak volumes about his balanced character and his desire for excellence. He strived for excellence but maintained balance. Striving for excellence can lead us into legalism. Not striving for anything makes us unprofitable servants (Matt. 25:30). We need excellence with balance. Paul was sound and mature in Christ. He was in right relationship with Christ and quite satisfied with his union, but he would not allow himself to become content with his life call. He was spiritually fulfilled knowing Christ as His Savior and was at the same time divinely discontent over what he had yet to accomplish within the Kingdom of God. Years earlier the Psalmist expressed a similar sentiment of spiritual yearning (Ps. 42:1-2). We also ought to have the same attitude (Matt. 11:12). We must never allow ourselves to fall into the trap of being alive in name only (Rev. 3:1). We should, however, avoid extremes here. We strive for excellence but maintain balance. We must not see ourselves better than we really are (Rom. 12:3). Neither should we see ourselves worse than we really are (2 Cor. 5:17). Possessing an attitude of *excellence with balance* means living fully engaged in the present, appreciating past victories, and pressing forward toward the future triumphs we will accomplish through Christ our Lord (Rom. 8:37, Col. 1:27). Sometimes we need *new balance*. We are creatures of extremes. Perfection is maturity and there is no maturity without balance. Balance doesn’t mean accepting defeat. It means striving for *excellence* while trusting God. This is an absolute necessity for personal spiritual progress. Let’s make this kind of *excellence* our goal for 2013.

ENERGY. Runners need energy. I remember several years ago when they came out with all of the energy bars. While in the Army I sometimes would eat one before an important run to help me have more energy. We used to even have some honey before a run. Runners need *energy*. Energy needs *direction*. When we were young many of us had more energy than we knew what to do with. Someone has said, “When you are young you have the energy but no brains.” “When you are old you have the brains but no energy.” I don’t know about all of that, but I do believe that energy without direction seldom takes us to the place we want. We need energy but with

focus. The idea, *"I am focusing all my energies on this one thing"* clearly identifies Paul's devotion to a single cause. He is putting his energy toward "one thing." He had a clear goal in mind. He focused his energy and therefore accomplished more with it. Jesus was often found using what I call the "one thing" principle. I think of Him saying, *"one thing you lack"* to the rich young ruler and, *"one thing is needful"* to Martha. David said, *"one thing have I desired of the Lord, that will seek after"* (Ps. 27:4). A shotgun has power but little distance. The scatter blast of the shotgun never goes the distance as does the focused shot of the rifle. Let's win the race in 2013 by having our eyes single and our hearts devoted. Let's focus our energy on the target he has given us in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20).

EMPTYING. I have seen runners lose clothing as they run. They start peeling off clothes as they heat up. They want to be as light and cool as possible. We must do the same thing spiritually many times. It seems to be human nature for us to carry way more on our journey than we should. We can become overburdened and overheated. If we are walking it is one thing. But if we are running a race, we must lighten our load. Many times we need to strip off the layers of the past that weigh us down. The New Year can give us a new framework to begin again. The phrase, *"Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead,"* is an amazing exhortation coming from a prior murderer and former persecutor of Christians. If Paul would have dwelled on the past he would have never made the impact on the world of his day that God wanted him to make. The same is true for us in our day. God has purposed for you and I to be alive and where we are in 2013. He chose us for such a time as this (Est. 4:14). Forget the past. Lighten your load. The Bible meaning of the word *"forget"* is to, *"no longer be affected by."* We can press forward only by looking forward. We must strip off the past. Many keep looking back because they are still carrying the load of the past. The person who is constantly looking back never wins the race and risks stumbling over what is ahead of them. Effective runners must lighten the load as much as possible. Some runners strip to skimpy shorts in the dead of winter in order to win a race. Carrying past failures is a weight that will slow us down as we *race into the future*. We will run faster toward the goal God has put before us in 2013 when we lay aside every weight (Heb. 12:1). Make the decision today to act as if the forgiveness and release of past burdens He has promised is true for you and lay down the weight you have carried for too long (Matt. 11:28-30). Run into 2013 empty of the pains of the past and full of hope for the future.

EXPECTANCY. Along with hope for the future, we need faith. January is the month we celebrate a day devoted to the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He once said, *"Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."* We cannot approach the future and accomplish anything without true faith in God. But we need *true faith*. Seldom does one win a race without believing they can. Many accomplish great things in this life with what may be called *natural human faith*. When a runner believes they can win, something kicks-in inside of them that creates *expectation* and causes them to strain forward toward winning the race. Paul says, *"I strain to reach...the prize."* He strained because he *expected* to win. His *expectation* which caused him to strain to reach the prize went way beyond natural human faith. He had faith in God. True faith in God produces the kind of expectation that causes us to *win the race* Paul was talking about. This is the kind of faith we need to win the spiritual race we are running in 2013. This is the kind of faith Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was talking about. Paul could see with true faith what natural faith, being limited, could not see (2 Cor. 5:7). Paul could see the end of life. He saw the goal-line before he got to it. This is a powerful kind of expectation. It is the kind we need in 2013. Christians ought to be filled with more positive expectation than any other people on earth. Heaven is our ultimate goal (Rev. 22). We have a glorious eternity to look forward to that natural human faith alone cannot obtain (Heb. 11:10). This can be reached only by the gift of faith God gives to all who believe on Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:8-9). Most long distance runners will admit that the real battle is inside of them. After they've trained their bodies it then becomes a matter of pushing their minds. This is the natural process. We must be the same way about straining forward in our spiritual race (Rom. 12:1-2). God has promised us the victory in this life through a Biblical faith that is more than natural faith (1 Jn. 5:1). Therefore, we must press on when we are feeling like we are at our end (Luke 9:62). God is not going to do it all for us (Mk. 9:23). We must push forward with expectation in 2013 toward the goal He has put inside each of us and keep our eyes on the ultimate goal of heaven (Heb. 11:5). As we race into the future let's put some effort into obtaining our goals in Christ through exercising excellence with balance, focusing our energy on His call, emptying ourselves of past regrets and pains, and moving forward into 2013 with spiritual expectancy. Amen.

Prayer: Dear Father, help us all to focus on the race ahead looking unto Jesus, the originator and finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:2). Amen.