



Lesson 1: Self-Discipline

LESSON OBJECTIVE:

Students will understand the importance of self-discipline in a young Christian's life. They will learn practical ways of staying motivated and disciplined even when it is hard or they don't feel like it.

SUPPLIES:

- Large White Construction Paper (one piece per team) or one premade flag per team
- Assorted Markers
- A Silly Object to be Used as a Relay Race Baton
- Baseball or Whiffle Ball Bats (one per team)
- Ping Pong Balls (one per team)
- Large Spoons (one per team)
- Feathers; the kind used for arts and crafts (one per team)

OPENING ACTIVITY: The Opening Ceremonies

Divide students evenly into teams (ideally, each team should have at least five members). Give each team a large piece of white construction paper and markers. Allow teams about ten minutes to come up with a name for their team, a team cheer, and a design for their team flag. When students are finished, have a “Parade of Nations” where teams march together into the game area like the beginning of the Olympic Games. Have each team state their name and perform their cheer. Have a judge choose a first, second, and third place team based on their cheers and give prizes (candy) accordingly.

Time-Saving Tip: If you don't want to spend so much time on this activity, you can purchase a variety of flags to give to the teams. Then, they are only taking a few minutes to create a cheer.

OPENING GAME: The Pentathlon

This is a silly relay race in which each team will complete in a series of individual tasks relay race style. These events should be set up in a line so that the finish line for one event is the start of the next. Each team assigns one member to complete each task; this member stands at the start line for their event and waits for their turn. The first team to complete all of the tasks and get their baton (use something silly for the baton, a soup ladle or a feather boa) across the finish line is the winner. The tasks are:

- **Bat-Spin Run**
Place one baseball bat at the start line for each team. On go each team's participant stands the bat up on its fat end and puts their forehead to the knob at the other end. With baton in hand, players will spin around the bat ten times then attempt to run to the first finish line (about 30 feet away) where their teammate is waiting for them. When they reach the line, they pass the baton to the next player.
- **Ping Pong Ball Carry**
When this player receives the baton, they put a ping pong ball in a spoon, then put the spoon handle in their mouth. They may not touch the ball or the spoon with their hands and must run to their finish line (about 30 feet away) without dropping the ball. If they drop the ball, they must go back to their starting line and begin again. When they cross the finish line, they pass the baton to the next player.
- **Floating Feather Run**
When this student receives the baton, they take their feather and blow it up into the air using their mouth. They must keep their feather in the air using only their breath as they walk/run to the finish line (about 30 feet away). If their feather falls to the ground, they must go back to the start. When they cross the finish line, they pass the baton to the next player.
- **Crab Walk**
When this player receives the baton, they must crab walk to the finish line. When they cross the finish line, they pass the baton to the next player. You can make this leg longer than the others since it is relatively easy.
- **Somersault**
When this person receives the baton, they must do a series of somersaults to the finish line. The first team whose player crosses the finish line wins the Pentathlon Relay.

When the relay is over, hold a brief "medal ceremony" to give prizes to the winning team.

TEACH

The thrill of victory! The agony of defeat!

Watch this video compilation of sports bloopers:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrsTiR5bjdA>

And then watch this video compilation of sports highlights:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79bCw78h1pU>

What is the difference between the athletes in the first video and the ones in the second? Is it possible to “blooper-proof” your athletic performance? What does it take to do so?

Whether we are a serious athlete or have the athleticism of a Pop Tart, whether we are a die hard fan or couldn't care less, it's difficult to deny the importance of sports in our society. We have a way of turning everything into a competition. (Just think back to our opening games.) We all seem to have an inborn desire to compete, no matter how serious or silly the game might be.

Through the course of this four-week series, we will see what we can learn from the world of athletics that can be applied to our own faith journeys. The apostle Paul, in a recurring theme throughout many of his letters, compares being a Christian to being an athlete. He compares the Christian life to being a runner in a race and a boxer in a fight, just to mention a few. So let's begin by looking at what it takes to be an athlete.

Ask the following questions. Write down student responses on a whiteboard in the front of the room. Ask follow-up questions when appropriate.

- What does it take to be an athlete?
- What does it take to be a GREAT athlete? What separates the good from the great?
- How much time does an athlete need to devote to their sport to be good at it?
- What might an athlete need to give up/stay away from to be good at their sport?

A lot of young people want to be athletes. They want the uniform. They want to hear their name announced as part of the starting line-up. They dream of making the game-winning goal and hoisting the championship trophy over their heads while being cheered by an adoring crowd. But not everyone is willing to put in the effort and hard work it takes to get to that championship game. We want an easy fix, a cheat code so to speak. But it takes a lot more than daydreams and fantasies and cheat codes to get to that level of performance.

In order to be truly great at a sport, it takes a lot of time and - most importantly - self-discipline. Some sports experts say it takes ten thousand hours of disciplined training in order to master a

particular sport and be ready to compete at a professional level. Ten thousand hours! That is the equivalent of working out for eight hours a day for 1,250 days. That is eight hours a day, seven days a week, for nearly 3.5 years. That's 3.5 years of running laps, shooting free throws, or taking batting practice. That is serious dedication and discipline! It's no wonder that very few athletes are able to compete at such an elite level.

But being a great athlete is not just about spending all that time training and conditioning. It's also about self-denial and self-discipline. There are a lot of things an athlete must be willing to give up if they want to be great. They have to put their goals of athletic scholarships or Olympic medals or championship trophies above the temporary pleasures of life. Athletes have to watch what they eat. They might have to say no to desserts and fast food and have an extra serving of vegetables instead. They have to be sure to get a good night's sleep every night, which might mean no late night Netflix binges or lengthy video game missions. They often have to say no to going out with friends or other fun activities and instead hit the gym or the track. Being a top-tier athlete means serious dedication and, sometimes, serious sacrifice.

It's all a matter of priorities. It's a matter of making time for what is most important to you, putting those goals of greatness ahead of temporary pleasure. If something - like playing a sport or getting good grades in school - is really important to you, then you will make the time and make the sacrifices necessary to do it well. You'll choose an early morning workout instead of sleeping in on the weekend or you'll choose homework and studying instead of binge-watching television or liking your friends' posts on Facebook. There will be time for these other things but only after the workout or homework is done. But if something is not truly important to you, you will make excuses and find lots of reasons why you can't get it done. The difference between great and mediocre often lies in the number of excuses we make.

Now let's look at how all this talk of sports and training applies to our journey of faith. Read 1Corinthians 9: 24-27.

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. 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 running 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.

Before these verses, Paul talks about some of the freedoms he enjoys in Christ. The freedoms he talks about (fellowship with Gentiles and eating meat sacrificed to idols) are different than freedoms we might think of today. But the point is that because of Christ's death and resurrection, we - like Paul - are no longer bound by a long list of do's and don'ts. The Christian

life is not about restrictions and rules; it is about freedom and relationship with our maker. We are free to do pretty much whatever we want.

BUT... Paul says that we shouldn't abuse that freedom. Instead, we ought to discipline ourselves like an athlete in training. But what's the difference? Isn't self-discipline the same as following a bunch of rules?

On the surface, the two may look the same, but the difference lies in the motivation. Simply following the rules - some call this legalism - is motivated by fear. We're afraid of getting in trouble. We're afraid that God might get mad at us, that we might fall out of God's favor. But on the other hand, self-discipline comes from an understanding that we have higher goals. There is a higher purpose to our actions. We give up mediocre things in favor of great things. We give up temporary pleasures so that we might gain an eternal prize (more about that prize is in Lesson 4).

Now that we've considered the importance of self-discipline in sports, let's consider the similarities between athletics and our faith and see what we've learned that can apply to our faith.

Ask the following questions and write down students' answers for the group to see.

- How is the Christian life like a race? Is it more like a sprint or a marathon?
- What kind of "training" should a Christian do to grow in their faith?
- What does it mean to "run aimlessly" as a Christian? How do we avoid doing that?
- What sacrifices might a Christian have to make to grow in their faith?
- What is the "prize" that Paul mentions? How does this motivate us to be disciplined?

Just as an athlete must discipline himself and practice the skills necessary to compete well, so too we Christians must discipline ourselves and practice the skills necessary to live the Christian life well. These include reading our Bible, praying, meditating on God's word, fellowshiping with other believers, and serving those in need. We need to do these things daily in order to "win the prize" of a close relationship with Christ that will last into eternity. Like an athlete who sets aside time each day to train, we ought to discipline ourselves to do these things at a regular time each day.

Let's take a look at each of these things individually:

- Reading the Bible: God chose to communicate to us through His word, the Bible. It tells us how much God loves us and how we ought to show our love for Him in return. It gives us instructions and illustrations on how to live a life that is pleasing to God. If the Bible contains all that, do you think we should read it? Choose a time to read your Bible each day, maybe in the morning before school, or at night before bed. And start small; read for

five or ten minutes each day. (*Note to youth leader: some kids may not know where to begin reading. Recommend a book of the Bible that will pique their interest.*)

- Prayer: Prayer is how we talk to God. It is a way to thank Him for what He has done in your life, as well as a way to ask Him for help. Remember, like a good friend, nothing is too trivial to tell God. He wants to hear everything you have to say to Him. While it is important to pick a time each day to pray, don't limit yourself to that time. You can pray anytime and anywhere in the same way that you might text your friend throughout the day.
- Meditate on God's Word: When we talk about meditating on God's word, we're not talking about sitting in lotus position and achieving some altered state of consciousness. "Meditate" is a fancy way of saying "think about." After you read your Bible, spend time thinking about it during the day. What did the passage mean? What is God trying to tell you? Keeping a journal can be a good way to reflect and record your thoughts on God's word.
- Fellowship: We are not meant to live this life in isolation. We need each other (more on this in the next lesson). We need to make time to hang out with our Christian friends, to encourage each other, and to pray for each other.
- Service: The greatest commandment is to love God. The second greatest is to love others. In reality, we show our love for God by loving others. We love others by meeting their physical and material needs. Serving others needs to become part of our regular routines.

And like an athlete, we might need to sacrifice temporary pleasures for an eternal prize. It could mean not listening to certain music or watching certain television shows because these things fill your mind with thoughts that are not pleasing to God. It could mean hanging out with certain people less often because they are a bad influence on you. And it could mean staying home from the party that all the cool kids are going to. But remember, the prize you are racing toward is so much better!

Athletes want that medal or that trophy so badly that they are willing to give up just about anything to get it. They get rid of anything that would stand in their way. And this is for a prize that will eventually fade away and be forgotten. We, as Christians, are running after a much greater prize, one that will last forever, one that will never fade and never be forgotten. When put into this perspective, hopefully the thought of giving up things that are fun or pleasurable is a lot easier to swallow.

Sacrifice is hard, and rarely is it ever fun. But we need to remember why we make these sacrifices. It's not because God wants to take away our fun, and it's not because we should be scared of making God angry. Anything that we do and anything that we give up must be done with the right motivations. Think about all that Christ gave up for us (read Philippians 2: 5-8) and why He did that for us. He did it because He loves us and desperately wants a relationship

with us. This is what should motivate us in living a life of sacrifice and self-discipline. When we truly understand what Christ has done for us, our natural response should be to want to live a life that pleases Him, to “run the race in such a way as to win the prize.”

SMALL GROUPS

Have the students break into small groups and discuss the following questions/topics:

1. What Christian disciplines are you already practicing well?
2. What disciplines do you need to improve on?
3. What are ways you can improve in these areas? What times can you set aside for “training”?

TEACH CLOSE

They say it takes up to three weeks for a new habit to fully take hold and take root. Once a new habit - in this case reading your Bible or prayer - takes root, it will be much easier to do. It will be part of your daily routine and won't require so much effort. But until it takes root, it will require work and effort and self-discipline. It may mean adjusting your schedule to make time for these spiritual disciplines. It may mean making sacrifices.

But remember that, in the long run, all that work and discipline will pay off. It will be worth it. Keep your eye on the prize and keep pushing forward. You'll be glad you did.

Take time to pray for each other. Pray that your youth will stay strong and self-disciplined.