**Spiritual food and spiritual exercise** 11/8/24 dkm pm sg md

Read: 1Timothy 4, Hebrew 12:1-17

Text: 1Timothy 4:6-10

Psalms: 25:1-5 &8-10, 145:13-19, 36:5-9, 117

The Olympic games are over for another four years. We have seen athletes, male and female, from around the world competing for medals in so many sports. Gymnastics is an amazing sport, although we do not excel this like we do in swimming. The word ‘gymnastic’ comes from a Greek word; our word ‘gym’ comes from the same root word. There are gyms in every suburb and town these days. The Greeks invented gyms. They were men only places because they exercised and competed naked- the word actually means ‘exercise naked’. They did this to honour their god Zeus. The gymnasium, like the Olympics, goes back to the Greek era, the era of the NT church. The apostle Paul was familiar with the gym and with the games in which men competed for a wreath or crown.

During the recent Olympics we heard of men and women going on strict diets and doing strenuous exercise in order to get their bodies into peak physical condition. Behind every medal was four years of strict physical training. And now it is all over. Some have a medal to take home, but they are now asking, ‘What next?’ ‘Bodily exercise profits a little’ writes the apostle Paul (4:8). Bodily exercise is for now, for this world, but what about the future, about life beyond this world?

These words of the apostle Paul are just as important for us today as they were for the Greeks and their obsession with the body, as seen in gymnasiums and games. The Olympic games were stopped by a Christian Roman emperor because they were held in honour of pagan gods; only in recent times, around 2000AD, were they revived.

In this letter to Timothy, Paul’s concern was with false doctrines being taught in the church at Ephesus. He gives Timothy instructions for identifying and dealing false teachers. It was a spiritual battle. Satan was working through lies and deception in men who became ‘hypocritical liars’ (4:2). Celibacy and vegetarianism were not part of the gospel of grace. Timothy was to condemn anyone adding ascetic practices to the gospel of grace. Salvation is not about doing or not doing things; it is about believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel is positive, not negative. It is about grace, joy, and peace in the Triune God.

Paul tells Timothy that if he teaches ‘the brethren’ or fellow believers these things he will be a ‘good minister of Jesus Christ’. From his youth Timothy had been taught the Scriptures. When he heard the gospel from Paul, he believed. On his second missionary journey Paul saw Timothy’s faith and took him along with him. At some point he was set apart with the laying on of the hands of the elders (4:14).

The gospel was completed, and all Timothy had to do was preach and teach this gospel and encourage believers in the church. This ‘all’ was a ‘big ask’ in a world where men and women think they know more than God and/or want something new by way of doctrine or worship. Paul speaks about spiritual food and spiritual exercise here in these verses, before giving us another ‘faithful saying’.

**1.Spiritual food**

While false teachers focus on abstaining from certain foods, Paul’s focus is on spiritual food. God has given us physical bodies which we sustain with physical food. We are to love our bodies and care for our bodies with good food and exercise (cf. Eph 5:28,29). We naturally nourish and care for our bodies- unless we have a sickness or eating disorder. But we dare not make our belly our God. We should eat to live, not live to eat. If our society is characterised by gyms in every suburb, it is also characterised by numerous restaurants in every suburb and town. We must not reject what God has created good (4:4), but at the same time we must not regard God’s gifts as our gods, as things we worship.

How wonderful it would be if the campaign for healthy foods for our bodies was matched by a campaign for healthy food for our souls. Few people starve their bodies, but many starve their souls. Too many feed on junk food, and too many feed their souls junk food.

Paul writes of being ‘nourished in the words of faith and good doctrine’ (4:6); the word is ‘*entrophe*’, the opposite of atrophy in English. Just as the body wastes away for lack of nourishment, so does the soul. How do we nourish our soul? We nourish it with the words of faith and good doctrine (4:6), in other words, in Bible reading, meditation, and prayer. Just as we take food each day, so we must take spiritual food each day. Do you nourish your soul each and every day? Even if we have a feast once a week, we still need food every day. And do not say you have heard it all before. Do you stop eating food you have eaten before? My uncle had four Weet-Bix for breakfast every day of his life. He also read his Bible every day of his life after he became a believer. He did not go looking for a fancy new food for breakfast, and he did not go looking for fancy new teaching about life and death.

After telling Timothy what to embrace by way of spiritual food, Paul tells him what to reject: ‘Reject profane and old wives’ fables’ (4:7). He began this letter denouncing Jewish myths and genealogies (1:4, Tit 1:14). There is no harm in children’s stories but let us not start believing them. These stories come from the minds of men or women. Fantasy is fantasy; it is not real. The Bible is real; it is historical, and it is true because it comes from God: ‘Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit’ (2Peter 1:21). So much fantasy surrounds the teaching of the Bible in some churches. Today we have conspiracy theories, which amount to the same thing. Whatever you teach or hear taught, check that it agrees with the words of Scripture. If it does not agree, reject it!

**2.Spiritual exercise**

Moving on from food, the apostle speaks of exercise, spiritual exercise: ’Exercise yourself towards godliness’ (4:7). We touched on this when we were talking about athletes. Athletes have to do more than eat a healthy diet; they have to exercise. They have to get their body into shape if they want to win the race. They develop a strict training routine, getting up early to run five miles or more, or do ten laps in the pool. In a similar way we must exercise our minds, our souls and our bodies towards godly living (4:7).

The apostle speaks of the Christian life being like that of an athlete or a soldier enduring hardship (2Tim 2:3-5). One does not become an athlete or a solider to enjoy an easy or comfortable life. Yet this is how many view the Christian life. We are, of course, saved by grace; God in Christ has done it all. But we are saved unto good works. We join the army of God, as it were, working to defend and promote the gospel of Jesus Christ. When God says go into all the world and preach the gospel, we must obey. God desires all men to be saved and so do we (2:4).

Godliness means being like God or like Jesus. As we learn about Jesus- our spiritual food- we must be imitating him or exercising our faith and living like Jesus. The writer to the Hebrews tells us to ‘lay aside every weight, and the sin that so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race set before us’ (Heb 12:1). The Greek men ran without any clothes. Athletes today wear minimal clothing, although I saw some with chains around their necks. And as they run, they look to the finish line, not at where they came from or at the people around them. When we focus on Jesus we will be running or living in the way that pleases him. We will of course, be calling people around us to join us in following the path of life to glory in Jesus Christ.

Paul does not condemn physical exercise but says that it has limited benefits. Those who win medals at the Olympics are usually young; they still have the rest of life to live, and then there is ‘that which is to come’ (4:8). I am reminded of the famous Olympian and missionary to China, Eric Liddell. You can see the story of him winning gold at the 1924 Paris Olympics in the film, ‘Chariots of Fire’. He died in a Japanese internment camp in 1945. Liddell believed in bodily exercise but knew this brought only earthly rewards. He knew about spiritual exercise, about godliness that brings rewards not only in life now but in the life to come and eternity.

You may not be an Olympian or sporting hero, but you can be a winner in the race that is set before you in Christ Jesus (Heb 12:1). Jesus will set you on the starting blocks, and he will be with you all the way to the end if you believe in him, and trust or have hope in him (4:10). You have his promise that he will never leave you or forsake you (Heb 13:5). Like Paul, you have the promise of a crown of righteousness laid up for you (2Tim 4:8).

**3.Faithful saying**

In verse 9 we come across familiar words: ‘This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance’. This is the third time hearing such words in this letter. In the other two instances these words introduce a saying, but is this the case here? Some think the ‘saying’ is the preceding verse 8. Reading the NKJV we can go either way, but the NIV starts a new paragraph at verse 9 and links the ‘saying’ with verse 10. The subject matter of both verses is similar, but we still prefer the reference to the following verse 10.

So, what is Paul’s ‘faithful saying’? He firstly speaks of labour and striving for something, which seems to follow from the godly life spoken of in verse 8. Paul certainly laboured hard and suffered greatly in the ministry to which he was called (1Cor 9:24-27, 2Cor 11: 23-27, Col 1:28,29). He ministered in the strength the Lord gave him. He ministered with all his being because his trust and hope were in the living God. This is the key to persevering in the faith. Trust in the living God who is powerful to keep you all the days of your life. Even when the body grows weary, the spirit remains strong when you are trusting in the Lord.

Pauls faithful saying is that ‘The living God is the Saviour of all men, especially of those who believe’ (4:10). This cannot mean that all men will be saved, as in born again and be given eternal life, because this would contradict the doctrine of election and, in fact, make preaching the gospel unnecessary. Besides, in saying, ‘especially those who believe’ he cannot be saying that everyone will believe in the end. The Bible does not teach universalism. The word ‘save’ can be used in a temporal rather than spiritual sense. When Jesus healed people, the word often used is the Greek word for ‘saved’ (Mark 5:23). Back in verse 15 of chapter 2, Paul writes of women being saved in childbirth, remember, and in 2Timothy 4:18 ‘*sozo*’ is translated ‘preserve’.

Paul is calling God ‘the Saviour’ in this sense, the sense of delivering people from troubles and disasters, the sense of providing for all people, rain upon the just and the unjust alike in what we call common grace. With this understanding, the phrase, ‘especially to those who believe’ makes sense. Those who believe in Jesus are recipients of special grace or saving grace. There is a parallel with physical exercises and spiritual exercises of verse 8. God provides food to all creatures, and clothes and shelter to all human beings (Acts 14:17); but especially to those who belong to him, to those who have become his covenant children and are saved from sin and death through faith or belief in Jesus Christ our Lord.