

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
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Spiritual Olympics 4

2 Timothy 2:5

Competing by the Rules

- 1. God's rules and standards**
- 2. Our follies and foibles**
- 3. So why keep the rules?**

**Hymns: 440 – 754 – Distribution: 306, 287, 288 –
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All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

2 Timothy 2:5 - If anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules.

This past week, many people in our area threw the word "love" around in their vocabulary. Some were heard to say, "I love air conditioning!" With temperatures soaring into the 90's, this last week was one of those stretches where native Pacific Northwest folks wish they had that air conditioning unit in their house. On the other hand, many others were saying, "I love this heat!" Perhaps they enjoy a little more sun and warmth than we normally get, and August is a time of year that they really enjoy. They love it!

We tend to overuse the word "love" quite a bit in our speech: "I love air conditioning!" "I love the heat!" And you've heard people use that word with many other things:

- I love Mexican food
- I love views of Mt. Rainier
- I love my cat

But I have never heard anyone say: "I love... rules!" Have you? As we continue our sermon series on "***Spiritual Olympics***" this morning, the Apostle Paul gives us a word about athletes, Christians, and God's rules. Are they

really something that we love? And why would a Christian strive to follow God's rules and laws in his Christian race of life? Let's learn some valuable lessons for life in this area today!

The passage before us today is 2 Timothy 2:5: "*If anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules.*"

1. God's rules and standards

Paul originally wrote those words to Timothy, the young pastor he trained and mentored. When Paul wrote that, he was suffering tremendous trials for his faith. He was in prison in Rome, and it did not appear that he was going to be released, but would be losing his life soon. He had many people around him who were persecuting him and who were not following God's "rules." Yet what was his counsel to his young pastor in training? A pastor follows the rules! And he does it despite what those around him are doing. The same is true for all Christians in their life of sanctification.

Rules are nothing new. The ancient Olympics had their own set of rules for their competitions. We find records and documents that list rules such as:

- Only free born male Greek citizens not accused of murder or sacrilege were eligible to participate
- You were not allowed to bribe an athlete to represent your city in the Olympic Games (Athletes competed for specific cities in ancient times)
- Bribes for losing were strictly forbidden
- Wrestling - Punches were allowed, but not biting or gouging an opponent's eyes, nose, or mouth with fingernails. Attacks such as kicking an opponent in the belly, which are against the rules in modern sports, were perfectly legal.
- Ancient Olympic wrestlers were not allowed to break their opponents fingers during the match

The concept of rules is nothing new, and the concept of God having rules and laws is not new either. What are God's rules? What laws are his will for mankind to keep?

We could answer that in a number of ways. Some of you might be quick to point out that Jesus talked about the two great commandments that God would have us keep: *"One of the teachers of the law... asked him, 'Of all the commandments, which is the most important?' 'The most important one,' answered Jesus, 'is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these.'"* (Mark 12) and you'd be correct. This is a summary of God's law.

That's a tall order, isn't it? Love God perfectly. And love your fellow man perfectly. But there's more. These two great commandments are divided and expounded in God's Ten Commandments. The first part (love God) is described in the first three commandments:

1. You shall have no other gods
2. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God
3. Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy

The second part (love your neighbor) is described in the second table of the law:

4. Honor your father and mother
5. Do not murder
6. Do not commit adultery
7. Do not steal
8. Do not give false testimony
- 9 / 10. Do not covet

What a tall order this is!

But there's more. Each of the commandments has a principle that can be expanded into more laws. For example, the 4th Commandment (honoring father and mother) encompasses our willing submission to all of God's authorities – those in the home, in the government and in the church. The 6th

Commandment (adultery) encompasses all things with marriage and morality – adultery, fornication, living together before marriage, perversion. That's a tall order!

Yet there's more. With each commandment comes not only a prohibition not to do this or not to do that, but there is an active way we are supposed to be keeping God's laws as well. For example, the 5th Commandment (you shall not murder) does not only mean that we are not to be going around taking people's lives, but that we "help and befriend him in every bodily need." The 7th Commandment (you shall not steal) doesn't mean simply that we are not to be breaking into people's homes and stealing their possessions, but that we are to do all we can to help our neighbor keep his money and goods. That's a tall order!

But there's more. God not only looks at outward actions, but he looks at the heart and the thoughts of mankind. There is not a court of law anywhere that I'm aware of that will condemn a person because "they thought greedy thoughts" and "wanted to rob a bank." But God condemns greed. And hate. And lust. And more.

We see how tall an order it is to keep God's laws when we look at his standard. Leviticus 19:2 says, *"Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy."* James 2:10 says, *"Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."* The Lord looks at his laws with a "balloon concept." If you break a balloon in only one little spot, it's broken! Completely!

We might feel this is a bit unfair of God, but in sports such as the Olympics we use the same concept. Consider Wallace Spearmon. Spearmon ran the 200 meter dash in London this year, but that wasn't his first Olympic games. Four years ago in Beijing he also ran the event and made it to the final race. He finished third! He took a victory lap around the track with winner Usain Bolt, celebrating and wearing an American flag. And then his time disappeared on the scoreboard, replaced by a "DQ." Why? He had stepped on the line of the

lane coming out of the turn. One step. And he was disqualified from getting the bronze medal!

God's standards are the same. All or nothing. Pass or fail. Saved or damned. Perfection or failure.

2. Our follies and foibles

Therefore, we need to examine our lives today, taking a hard look at the rules and at our behavior. How have we fared? (And if you look at the title of this second part of the sermon, you get a clue)

Rule-breaking and outright cheating are nothing new in history, even the history of the Olympic games. It's interesting to look back in history and see stories of dishonor. And there were two penalties for breaking the rules. Corruption earned you big fines. And cheating during the competition earned you a whipping.

In the Olympic games in 388 B.C., a boxer named Eupolus of Thessaly bribed three boxers to let him win. The officials found out and fined all four men. They had to pay a fine that was used to mount six bronze statues of Zeus with inscriptions of what happened. Cheater!

In 420 B.C. the Spartans were excluded from the Olympic games. But a Spartan named Lichas entered his chariot horses as being from the city of Thebes, so they could compete illegally. When his chariot and his rider won, he made the mistake of running onto the field and tying a ribbon on his charioteer. So he was flogged by the attendants. Cheater!

In the London games, cheaters have surfaced as well. Chinese badminton players were found to be throwing matches to get a better draw in the championship round. The gold medal women's shot putter from Belarus tested positive for an anabolic steroid. She was disqualified, and the second place finisher from New Zealand was awarded the gold. South African swimmer Cameron van der Burgh admitted to taking extra illegal underwater kicks during his turns in his 100-meter breaststroke victory. Breaststroke swimmers are allowed one underwater kick on turns. He took three. However, he will get away with this

since underwater cameras are not used to review swimming races. What was Cameron's response? "If you're not doing it you're falling behind or giving yourself a disadvantage... If you're not doing it, you're not trying hard enough." Cheaters!

You wouldn't do that, right? Are you a cheater? When we think back in our lives and examine ourselves honestly, we must admit that it is so. Our sin before God has appeared in various ways. Perhaps you can see where you have deliberately disobeyed God's holy and righteous laws:

- You took the dishonest discount
- You downloaded the software illegally
- You told the lie anyway
- You copied the DVD
- You wasted the food
- You talked back to your parents
- You overate
- You drank too much

And you did it deliberately!

If we examine our lives more closely, we get even more depressed when we see how we've broken God's laws when we weren't even trying. We offended him unintentionally and fell short. Perhaps you've seen clips on a show like "football follies" and had a good laugh watching professional players make hilarious mistakes while playing. They weren't trying to, but simply messed up! Our lives have been a string of follies as well, breaking God's laws early and often when we weren't even trying:

- The word just spontaneously slipped out of your mouth
- You just forgot about that promise because you were busy
- I honestly didn't know I was going that fast, officer

We have let God down!

And in all this we haven't even talked about our sins where we have omitted doing the good and neglected to help out, to call that friend, to be a good neighbor because we really didn't want to.

Our follies and foibles have earned us God's wrath and punishment, and have disqualified us from the Christian race and from our place in heaven.

3. So why keep the rules?

What a depressing message this is! As the Apostle Paul said long ago we also say: *"What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7)* And it could really lead to a question of despair: So why even try to keep the rules?

There are a couple important answers to that question. And to find those answers, our attention has to switch from pointing at ourselves (wretched man) and pointing to another. Listen to what Hebrews 4 says about someone: *"Since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin."* There has been a perfect rule-keeper! Jesus Christ, during his life on this earth, perfectly kept all of his heavenly Father's laws, all Ten Commandments in thought, word, and deed. Amazing!

And even more amazing is what we hear about his obedience: *"Just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5)* Christ's perfect life and obedience has been credited to your account. By his substitute, you have led the perfect life that God requires!

Another important answer to the question of why we keep the rules is how our cheating, sins, and guilt have been taken care of. Isaiah 53 says it so well: *"He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the*

LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." By his suffering and death, Christ has taken your guilt away! He has paid your price of sin before our holy God. He has changed your status. You are allowed to "win" through him!

Why would we want to go back to our old ways? Why do we love the laws of our heavenly Father? As Titus 2 says, *"Jesus Christ... gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good."* We are eager to keep God's laws, not to save ourselves but out of love and thanks for his salvation. As John also writes, *"This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome."* (1 John 5:3) God is no unloving taskmaster, but a loving Savior who has changed our status before God and our destination after this life.

One final answer remains in why we keep the laws of God. The writer of Psalm 119 penned: *"Take away the disgrace I dread, for your laws are good. How I long for your precepts! Preserve my life in your righteousness."* God's laws are good for our life. They preserve our life. They are the way to a stable and blessed life on this earth. We see this in ways that God's laws and commandments keep us safe and happy. They are the rules he has designed for us. In following them, there is great joy and blessedness, and we even would be led to say, "I love... God's rules!"

So today, may our sermon message end with the prayer, "Lord, may you make it so!" We have seen God's holy laws and standards, which are perfect. We have also seen our regrettable behavior and sins that have broken God's rules. Yet in Christ we have seen perfection and salvation.

May God bless us with joy and happiness in Christ our Savior. And may he give us joy in a life of service to him and our fellow man! Amen.