

26B SML 2018  
MK 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

To excel in sports takes an awful lot of discipline:

- ✓ Agility drills
- ✓ Lifting weights
- ✓ Running
- ✓ Changing the way you eat
- ✓ Memorizing plays
- ✓ Coming together as a team

All with a goal in mind, to do their best, to win. This was brought to our attention at SML Back to School Night Presentation on our sports program, and again last Sunday at our Fall Sports Mass.

Most of us understand this, we appreciate it, even if we don't play sports anymore. We understand the value of self discipline, the satisfying feeling that comes from knowing we have competed to the best of our ability, that we've learned self discipline.

As we listen to today's gospel, we need to remind ourselves that it's just not Our Blessed Lord speaking to people 2000 years ago. Our Blessed Lord is speaking to us just as well, and His words today are just as frank. Given the context

of sports, perhaps the image we could use for reflecting on today's gospel is Our Blessed Lord as a coach.

Just as a coach pushes and challenges and prods his players for their good, so does the Lord push and challenge and prod us so we can accomplish the only goal that really matters. I'll use the image of an athlete as St. Paul uses the image of an athlete. We are all athletes competing for a crown. Jesus reminds us that life is a great competition. It is a battle field. It is a fight that goes on, in my heart and in yours. It's been described this way since the Book of Genesis Chapter 32, where Jacob wrestles with "some man" through the night. And when the man saw that he could not overcome Jacob, he broke his hip, and in those days, there was no hip replacement. And at daybreak, the man said, "You will no longer be called Jacob. You will be called Israel," which means literally, I have wrestled with God.

Faith is not a spectator sport. We are not passive in this, no more than a great athlete is passive in the process of competing for the crown. You, as believers, should not be in the pews watching the Mass just as players should not be in the bleachers watching the game. Players have to work, they have to discipline themselves. And so too, for us as believers.

In the words of St. Paul, “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.” (1COR 9:24) Run to win.

That’s the image to keep in mind when you hear Our Blessed Lord’s incredibly direct words.

- ✓ If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.
- ✓ If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off.
- ✓ If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out!

Two things to note. First, Jesus is not talking to us second person plural. He’s not saying, “If you all got a foot that causes you to sin, cut it off. He says second person singular, “If your foot, Jim, causes you to sin, then cut it off.” “If your eye, Erin, causes you to sin, then pluck it out.” It’s more literally, “If your eye sets a trap for you . . .” It’s more practically, “If you drinking causes you to sin, stop drinking – period!” If your mouth sets a trap for you. “If your Internet time causes you to sin, no Internet time!” If your “whatever it is” sets a trap for you, then rid yourself of it, so like an athlete you can accomplish your goal. You can win the race of eternal life.

Of the three, the hand, the foot and the eye, it is the eye that is most important. Jesus says, “The eye is the lamp of the body.” (MT 6:22) Meaning, what I see will have an impact in

my mind, how I think, and in my heart. Images leave “after-images” in our mind. And unfortunately, we cannot “unsee” what has been seen. My eyes like your eyes have seen many things they should never have seen, read many things they should not have read, causing incredible conflict. It’s the childhood nursery rhyme, “O be careful little eyes what you see, O be careful little eyes what you see. There’s a Father up above who is looking down with love. So be careful little eyes what you see.”

In today’s gospel, Jesus is not singing a nursery rhyme. He is frank. Do not dabble. If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.

Today’s message is to evaluate how we use our senses. Do we have good habits using our senses? If we are going to be great disciples, like great athletes, those who follow the Lord, we have to fight, like Jacob who was renamed Israel, to acquire great habits of speech, hearing, sight.

Disciple and discipline come from the same Latin root meaning pupil. I came across a very telling radio piece that pretty much sums up what happens when we are not self disciplined, when we do not practice the skills of self mastery,

when we do not acquire great habits of speech, hearing, sight, entitled, “If I were the Devil.”

“If I were the devil ... If I were the Prince of Darkness, I’d want to engulf the whole world in darkness. And I’d have a third of its real estate, and four-fifths of its population, but I wouldn’t be happy until I had seized the ripest apple on the tree — Thee. So I’d set about however necessary to take over the United States. I’d subvert the churches first — I’d begin with a campaign of whispers. With the wisdom of a serpent, I would whisper to you as I whispered to Eve: ‘Do as you please.’

“To the young, I would whisper that ‘The Bible is a myth.’ I would convince them that man created God instead of the other way around. I would confide that what’s bad is good, and what’s good is ‘square.’ And the old, I would teach to pray, after me, ‘Our Father, which art in Washington...’

“And then I’d get organized. I’d educate authors in how to make lurid literature exciting, so that anything else would appear dull and uninteresting. I’d threaten TV with dirtier movies and vice versa. I’d pedal narcotics to whom I could. I’d sell alcohol to ladies and gentlemen of distinction. I’d tranquilize the rest with pills.

“If I were the devil I’d soon have families that war with themselves, churches at war with themselves, and nations at war with themselves; until each in its turn was consumed. And with promises of higher ratings I’d have mesmerizing media fanning the flames. If I were the devil I would encourage schools to refine young intellects, but neglect to discipline emotions — just let those run wild, until before you knew it, you’d have to have drug sniffing dogs and metal detectors at every schoolhouse door. Within a decade I’d have prisons overflowing, I’d have judges promoting pornography (or lawyers promoting porn stars – my addition) — soon I could evict God from the courthouse, then from the schoolhouse, and then from the houses of Congress. And in His own churches I would substitute psychology for religion, and deify science. I would lure priests and pastors into misusing boys and girls, and church money. If I were the devil I’d make the symbols of Easter an egg and the symbol of Christmas a bottle.

“If I were the devil I’d take from those who have, and give to those who wanted until I had killed the incentive of the ambitious. And what do you bet? I couldn’t get whole

states to promote gambling as the way to get rich? I would caution against extremes and hard work, in Patriotism, in moral conduct. I would convince the young that marriage is old-fashioned, that swinging is more fun, that what you see on TV is the way to be. And thus I could undress you in public, and I could lure you into bed with diseases for which there is no cure. In other words, if I were the devil I'd just keep right on doing on what he's doing."

This piece was not written in the last month, though it sure could have been. It was written in 1965 by American radio broadcaster for ABC Radio, Paul Harvey.