



Searching for a Winner: Mental Attitude of a Winner: *Askesis*: The Principle of Asceticism: The Self-Denial Required for World-Class Competition

The way by which one may be assured that he is advancing properly in this sophisticated system is the maintenance of a clear conscience. This is expressed by Paul in:

Acts 24:15b - "... there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.

v. 16 - "In view of this, I also do my best [**present active indicative of the verb ἀσκέω, askeō: to strive, endeavor**] to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men."

Paul is testifying before Felix, procurator of Judea, in response to accusations brought by Tertullus \ter-tul'us\, a trial lawyer retained by the Sanhedrin, that implicate Paul as a troublemaker among the Jews. Paul denies the charges but does admit to the worship of the God of Israel and asserted his desire to live under the standards required by Him. In order to do this he tells Felix that he makes a practice of exercising—**ἀσκέω, askeō**—self-discipline and self-control in order to not only please the God of Israel but also his fellow man.

Such a lifestyle denies the one who practices it the privileges others might enjoy who do not have the same vision.

It is worthy of note that there is a false asceticism that is practiced by those both inside and outside the church. Such a philosophy promotes the heresy that by self-denial one may achieve salvation, attain spirituality, or even regain one's salvation lost by submitting to one's desires.

The belief that Christ died only for the elect motivates its followers to assume that a good conscience is the proof they are among the elect. However their analysis is based on performing good works in order to prove their salvation to be certain rather than as evidence of spiritual growth. This blurs the differences between salvation and the Christian way of life.

But Paul is speaking of a mental attitude which motivates the believer to exercise self-discipline and utilize self-restraint so that his energies are concentrated on executing the plan of God for the glory of God, not self-validation.

In other words, there is nothing wrong about doing the things Paul denies himself. It is a matter of priorities. There are certain things which Paul is free to do but refrains from doing because he has a responsibility before God as well as his fellow man.

Every discipline in life demands submission to a system which limits your freedoms. By limiting freedoms, I mean that in order to excel in a given endeavor, you must not allow distractions to draw your attention away from the chosen objective. This is authentic asceticism, or **ἀσκησις, askēsis**.

Such asceticism places on you the burden of strict denial of certain freedoms. This denial that must come from self-motivation that results in self-restraint and self-control.

For example, in athletics, true asceticism means strict adherence to training rules. The athlete must train himself mentally to ignore distractions that might hinder his physical conditioning, the development of his skills, and the ability to concentrate under pressure.

The movie *Searching for Bobby Fisher* is a good example of these principles. Based on a true story it follows the exploits of a seven-year old boy who is a chess prodigy. Tension develops between the boy and his father who wants to exploit his son's talent to the maximum while the boy wants to just play chess for fun. But the father is determined and hires a high-powered chess instructor who begins to prepare the child for world-class competition.



There are many subtleties in this movie but the one I would like to emphasize is the concept of self-denial, self-discipline, and self-restraint in the development of one's innate abilities and talents.

I have debated this concept with others who rightly point out that the boy was abused by his father and by his teacher for their aggrandizement and thus robbed him of his childhood. This observation is true. But it is not my point. Children are not good at self-denial, self-discipline, or self-restraint. If a person is gifted and if he has the talent to perform up to world-class standards, be it at chess or tiddlywinks, he will not be able to successfully compete in that arena without outside discipline that imposes asceticism.

By asceticism I mean isolation from any distraction that would cause the student to lose concentration on the objective. If he responds to the training and willingly pursues the objective then this is how champions are made. If he rejects the training and instead opts to pursue instead his childhood, he will be probably become well-rounded and possibly normal, but he will not excel on a championship level in the discipline for which he has been gifted.

This is true of any discipline. Some enter the military but will not completely submit to the system. Although physically and mentally they have the assets to excel, they don't have the mental attitude of asceticism required of the soldier and therefore finish their tour of duty and then retire.

Similarly, people enter into the Lord's army through faith alone in Christ alone. They simultaneously receive all the divine operating assets required for the advance to spiritual maturity. But even though they have equal privilege and equal opportunity to make the advance, even though they have spiritual IQ to comprehend the instructions for the advance, and even though they have the requisite power to pursue the objective to its fulfillment, they choose not to do so because they refuse to become ascetics. They will not isolate distractions in order to give the plan of God top priority in their lives. They will probably become well-rounded by man's standards and possibly be considered a normal person. But they will not receive the rewards imputed at escrow fulfillment in time or eternity.

There are two Greek words that describe the mental attitude of asceticism but they are associated with physical activities. One stresses preparation for competition while the other stresses the execution of one's preparation under pressure.

The noun **ἀγωνισται**, *agōnistai* is a derivative of the noun **ἀγωνία**, *agōnia* from which we get our English word for "agony." It stresses the athlete who labors in the gymnasium in preparation for the national games.

On the other hand, there is the **ἄθληται**, *athlētai* which stresses the athlete who competes in the various contests. The former is the athlete in training to compete while the latter is the athlete involved in competition following his training. One is found in the gymnasium while the other is found in the stadium.

The athlete has a reason and a purpose to train and to become ascetic regarding certain personal desires: the prospect of winning among very stiff competition. Thus to be a winner, the athlete must sacrifice many personal freedoms and deny many personal desires.

To qualify to compete in the national games, the athlete had to submit to strict training for ten months. He mentally and verbally committed to exercise under the authority of the **γυμνάσιάρχ**, *gumnasiarch*, the superintendent of athletic training. He would be equal to the drill instructor at Boot Camp or the pastor in the local church.

During the ten months the athlete could not leave the training complex, e.g., the filling of the Holy Spirit inside the divine power system.

All were on a very strict diet, e.g., Bible doctrine only; no human viewpoint.



All athletes exercised and trained in the nude, in fact the Greek word γυμνάζω, *gumnazō*, from which we get our English word “gymnasium,” means “to exercise or train naked.” This emphasizes that God is no respecter of persons. You enter the local church with no portfolio and no special privileges beyond those possessed by anyone else.

Trumpet calls were made each day at different times for the athletes to assemble for training, e.g., the daily intake of doctrine.

If any of the rules were violated on just one occasion, the offender was disqualified from participating in the games, even if the offense occurred after nine months and 29 days. This is not applicable to the believer’s spiritual life since his failures can be corrected immediately by confession alone to God alone.

As a result of the strict training in the gymnasium, those who arrive at the stadium to compete in the games were worthy to participate. They had paid their dues by isolating all distractions and as a result were in superior physical condition, a condition they would not have possessed had they chosen to live a normal life.

But because they voluntarily took on a mental attitude of asceticism, they had the capacity to perform against fellow athletes who were just as prepared as they were. The difference between the athlete in our example and the mature believer is that the believer does not compete against fellow believers but against the world, the sinful nature, and the devil. Consistently successful combat against this triumvirate requires maximum self-denial so that the training in the gymnasium can prepare him to become a winner in the ongoing battles of the Invisible War.

Those athletes who qualified for participation in the games were worthy since they had paid their dues by isolating all distractions and thus had prepared to the maximum for the challenges of competition.

The winners were rewarded with lavish gifts that no one could rightly deny them. Each man had remained loyal to the system into which he entered. They trained under the strict supervision of the *gumnasiarch*, and had thus developed the mental attitude necessary for victory.

Therefore, a win at the national games resulted in receiving the winner’s crown presented at the stadium, e.g., escrow blessings in time.

On his return to his hometown other phenomenal blessings awaited him:

- 1- A special gate was cut into the city’s wall through which he would enter.
- 2- After his entry, the wall would be sealed shut and a plaque placed on it in his honor.
- 3- He would proceed through the city in a grand procession riding in a royal chariot.
- 4- He received a lifetime pass to all future national games.
- 5- He was the recipient of a very large monetary reward.
- 6- The city’s poet laureate would compose an ode in his honor.
- 7- His image would be sculpted and alter unveiled in the agora, the public square.
- 8- His children were cared for and received their education at public expense.
- 9- He became exempt from paying all income taxes for the rest of his life.

All these rewards are symbolic of escrow blessings for eternity.

What was true of the Greek athlete was also true of the Roman soldier. In the military, soldiers trained for warfare by isolating any distractions which might cause them to be at a disadvantage in combat.



The motivation is to win, to be the best, to defend the national honor, to maintain freedom, and to preserve prosperity.

The grand strategy of the Roman Empire was based on the tactical superiority of the Roman army. Nineteenth-century French military historian Ardant du Picq wrote that the Roman Army's superiority was because of an esprit de corps among the troops.

Esprit de corps: The common spirit existing in the members of a group which inspires enthusiasm, devotion, and a strong regard for the honor of the group.

Du Picq believed that esprit de corps was the result of tactical organization and training. His writings are quoted by:

Ferrill, Arther. *The Fall of the Roman Empire: The Military Explanation*. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 28:

The determining factor is the quality of troops, that is, the organization that best assures their spirit, their reliability, their confidence, their unity. We have seen that man will not really fight except under disciplinary pressure. The purpose of discipline is to make men fight in spite of themselves. No army is worthy of the name without discipline. Discipline cannot be secured or created in a day. It is an institution, a tradition.