

“THE UNATTRACTIVE CROSS”  
I Samuel 12:19-25, I Timothy 6:17-21, Mark 24:3-14  
March 9 & 10, 2024

“Wilma was born prematurely. This produced complications that resulted in her contracting double pneumonia (twice) and scarlet fever. But the worst was a bout with polio which left her with a crooked left leg and a foot twisted inward. Metal leg braces, stares from neighborhood kids, and six years of bus rides to Nashville for treatments could have driven this young girl into a self-made shell. But she refused.

“Wilma kept dreaming. And she was determined not to allow her disability to get in the way of her dreams. Maybe her determination was generated by the faith of her Christian mother who often said, ‘Honey, the most important thing in life is for you to believe it and keep on trying.’

“By age eleven, Wilma decided to ‘believe it.’ And through sheer determination and an indomitable spirit to persevere, regardless, she forced herself to learn how to walk without the braces.

“At age twelve she made a wonderful discovery: Girls could run and jump and play ball just like boys! Her older sister Yvonne was quite good at basketball, so Wilma decided to challenge her on the court. She began to improve. The two of them ultimately went out for the same school team. Yvonne made the final twelve, but Wilma didn’t. However, because her father wouldn’t allow Yvonne to travel with the team without her sister as a ‘chaperone,’ Wilma found herself often in the presence of the coach.

“One day she built up enough nerve to confront the coach with her magnificent obsession - her lifetime dream. She blurted out, ‘If you will give me ten minutes of your time every day - and only ten minutes - I’ll give you a world-class athlete.’

“He took her up on the offer. The result is history. Young Wilma finally won a starting position on the basketball squad; and when that season ended, she decided to try out for the track team. What a decision!

“In her first race, she beat her girlfriend. Then she beat all the girls in her high school, then,

every high school girl in the state of Tennessee. Wilma was only fourteen, but already a champion.

“Shortly thereafter, although still in high school, she was invited to join the Tigerbelle’s track team at Tennessee State University. She began a serious training program after school and on weekends. As she improved, she continued winning short dashes and the 440-yard relay.

“Two years later she was invited to try out for the Olympics. She qualified and ran in the 1956 games at Melbourne, Australia. She won a bronze medal as her team placed third in the 400-meter relay. It was a bittersweet victory. She had won - but she decided that next time she would ‘go for the gold.’

“Wilma realized that the victory would require an enormous amount of commitment, sacrifice, and discipline. To give her ‘the winner’s edge’ as a world-class athlete, she began a do-it-yourself program similar to the one she had employed to get herself out of those leg braces. Not only did she run at six and ten every morning and three every afternoon, she would often sneak down the dormitory fire escape from eight to ten o’clock and run the track before bedtime. Week after week, month in and month out, Wilma maintained the same grueling schedule for over twelve hundred days (over 3 years).

“Now we’re ready for Rome. When the sleek, trim, young black lady, only twenty years old, walked out onto the field, she was ready. She had paid the price. Even those eighty thousand fans could sense the spirit of victory. It was electrifying. As she began her warm-up sprints, a cadence chant began to emerge from the stands: ‘Vilma...Vilma...VILMA!’ They were as confident as she was that she could win.

“And win she did! She breezed to an easy victory in the 100-meter dash. Then she won the 200-meter dash. And finally, she anchored the U.S. women’s team to another first-place finish in the 400-meter relay. Three gold medals - she was the first woman in history ever to win three gold medals in track-and-field. It should be added that each of the three races was won in world-record time.”<sup>1</sup>

Why do I share this marvelous feat of human athleticism? I want to contrast this physical battle

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<sup>1</sup> (Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998] p. 601-603)

with the spiritual battle that we all face. Wilma Rudolph had set her mind on becoming a world-class athlete at a very young age, and set her life at achieving it. She was willing to put in the time, energy and dedication to following her regimen of workouts so that she could excel in her sports events. She was willing to put all other things aside so that her sole focus was on “getting the gold” at the Olympics.

Even when things got tough, when she faced hardship and disappointment, she kept on striving to be the first one across the finish line to gain her gold medals. From the very beginning, life was seemingly against her, but through her focused dedication and persistence (and spending 10 minutes a day with her coach), she was able to achieve her goal. And when put to the test at the Olympics in Rome in 1960, all of her hard work paid off as she became the first woman in track and field to win three gold medals, and all of them in world record times. She had put in an “enormous amount of commitment, sacrifice, and discipline,” and when the testing came, she not only endured, but thrived.

So how do we apply that to our own lives in our spiritual pursuits?

We heard the prophet Samuel tell the people, *“Do not be afraid...You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart. Do not turn away after useless idols. They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless. For the sake of His great Name the Lord will not reject His people, because the Lord was pleased to make you His own”* (1 Samuel 12:20-22).

Even though we may have had lots of things stacked up against us, though our sins are many, Samuel encourages us to diligently pursue the Lord our God, *“with all our hearts”* he tells us. That means that seeking the Lord and following His commands has to be our highest quest, and our greatest goal in life. With the help of our spiritual “Coach,” Jesus, we are invited to work hard at doing all that He commands us to do so that when the trials and temptations come to us, we are able to stand strong in our faith in Him and endure all sorts of persecutions in order to be living witnesses for Jesus. If we desire to know Jesus, “an enormous amount of commitment, sacrifice, and discipline” will be needed to growing closer to the Lord Jesus Christ, and that commitment will carry us on to victory, too.

But that means that we are not to let anything side track us or lead us away from the pursuit of Jesus Christ. We're surrounded by a myriad of distractions and rabbit trails **off** course. The things of this world can be mighty attractive, and can easily become more important to us than our love for the Lord Jesus. But we are to keep our focus on Him and let Him be the one to help us concentrate on living for the Lord. If we strive to let Jesus Christ be the Lord of our lives, He directs our ways and guides us to victory over the trials and struggles and temptations of this world.

We have to remember that God loves us so much that even though we might become distracted and misled away from the Lord, He desires us to come back to Him and live according to His ways. Though our setbacks and hardships and troubles and disappointments may seem too large to overcome, we are not to become afraid that God doesn't love us. We are to simply turn back to the Lord and set our hearts and minds upon serving Him in all we do and say, and He will bring us back to Him - warts, wounds, scars, brokenness and all. God desperately desires us to be with Him, so that He can claim us as His very own and encourage us along our way.

Paul cheered on Timothy, to "*guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have departed from the faith*" (I Tim. 6:20-21). Paul challenged Timothy to be dedicated to serving the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind and strength. Paul called Timothy to dedicate the time and energy and commitment to know the Lord so that he could be a powerful witness to the people he ministered to throughout the Mediterranean Sea.

Likewise, we are called to follow that same regimen into our lives, to be like an athlete devoted to achieving the prize of the gold medal at the Olympics; we are to keep our hearts and minds solely intent on receiving the reward of God's approval. Though the things of this world look mighty attractive, they only detract us from living lives in service to the Lord Jesus Christ. We are to "*guard what has been entrusted to [our] care*" and to give up the distractions so as to wholeheartedly focus on seeking the Lord. Give Coach Jesus 10 minutes each day to begin, and see what you can achieve.

Now that doesn't mean that we become so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good. No, the earth is our temporary home, so we are to do our very best to keep at doing what the Lord has called us to do, and to follow all of Jesus' teachings so as to win the prize of the upward calling of God (Philippians 3:14). We are to be drawn towards the life of Jesus in such a way as to take His cross upon ourselves and persevere in all our ways for the sake of the Gospel.

But the reality is that we are living in perilous times, when the right has become wrong, the wrong has become right, where people are abandoning their faith in the Lord, and are pursuing the satisfaction of their own cravings. We are witnessing governments begin to outlaw Christianity, and instigate cruel persecutions, imprisonments, and even executions of those who remain faithful to Jesus Christ. We are seeing laws implemented that prevent Christians from having an impact on court cases, limiting Christian influence in all areas of our society, and hearing of outright attacks upon folks committed to following Christian standards in their professions. It can be intimidating to anyone who wants to be a follower of Jesus. But these are becoming the tests that allow us to shine brightly in our faith as we unquestionably put our hearts and minds into following Jesus Christ.

Jesus warned His disciples that things like this would happen so that they would not lose heart and fall away from following Him. Jesus told them (and us) that they would take place so that we could prepare ourselves for them ahead of time, doing our workouts as hard and passionately as we can, in order to perform well when they do come to us. Listen to Jesus' words to His disciples (us). This is Matthew 24:3-14. (READ Matthew 24:3-24)

Now, Jesus is letting us know that following Him will not always be easy, in fact it will be downright demanding and difficult. But as our Coach, He wants to make sure we have the full scoop of what will happen so that we might prepare ourselves for it. Like an athlete coming to the blocks for the starting gun, Jesus invites us to be prepared and ready for the test, ready to give our all for Him.

So Jesus warns us about false "messiahs" who will come and mislead many. He tells us of wars and rumors of wars, but He tells us, "*but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen,*

*but the end is still to come*” (Matt. 24:6). Jesus tells us of all of the “birth pains,” so that we will be ready to endure the race set before us and never give up. We must be prepared to live our lives as witnesses to Him, no matter what. Things might look bleak and the way may grow disappointing and dark, but if we keep our eyes upon Jesus, we will be able to endure.

You see, through all the tough stuff, God has promised to be with us, even in the middle of it. He promised never to leave us or forsakes us (Deuteronomy 31:6-8), as long as we remain faithful to Him. And Jesus reiterates this same promise when He says, “...*but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved*” (Matt. 24:13). As we persevere and press on in faith in Jesus Christ, our witness will be even greater so that “*this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come*” (24:14).

The light of Jesus Christ will shine in all of us as we remain faithful to Him. We may make mistakes, we may become misled from time to time, we may lose our focus and allow the darkness of this world to invade our souls, but our preparations, our diligent workouts and our long-term commitment to discipline and obedience to the Word of the Lord, will always bring us back to the Lord Jesus so that we might be the witnesses to all nations of the love that God has for us.

I have to admit that the last 5 years has had a toll on me, and you have seen it in me. My messages and outlook on life has been sliding deeper and deeper into gloom and doom, even up to last weekend. With the onset of separation within the United Methodist Church, then the whole drama of Covid19, and the tumult of a country in crisis due to the presidential elections, and then the actual process of disaffiliation, the outbreak of war in various places, and the loss of some of my family members, it has caused me to lose my focus on the joy of the Lord and instead, directed my focus on the darkness of all the troubles in the world. I ask for your forgiveness.

Yet, a few friends, through prayer and petition to the Lord, have helped me to see that slippery slide, and have given me the challenge to keep seeking the Lord Jesus with all my heart, soul, mind and strength, so that I might be about the business of making disciples for the sake of Jesus Christ.

And it happens to all of us, when we allow ourselves to lose our focus on the main thing of God's great love for us and His giving us a Savior to guide us in all our ways. That is the source of our joy and delight, a source that the world has not yet connected with. So it is up to all of us to challenge each other, and encourage each other, and build up each other, so that as a team we can persevere and continue to grow in our faith in Jesus and help those around us to see the light and love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. We have to let go of the things of this world to keep our eyes upon Jesus Christ. Where else in the world will we find any kind of hope and strength and life?

But to the world, our following Jesus Christ is very unattractive. The cross that Jesus died upon is ugly to so many because they don't understand the real purpose of Jesus' sacrifice for us. And when Jesus says, "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*" (Mark 8:34), it scares many right out of faith in Him.

And that is where we can step up and begin to explain the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and let all those around us know the joy of the Lord, that the yoke of Jesus is easy and His burden is light (Matthew 11:30) when we keep our eyes and hearts focused on Him.

You see, all too many people in our world today think that God can't possibly love them, that their hardships, their limitations, their bad decisions, and their addictions are too much for the Lord to forgive, so they give up on trying to do better. They are suffering from the effects of spiritual polio that leaves them broken and crippled. So without a coach to encourage them to grow stronger and overcome their condition, they turn to whatever they can to find some sort of meaning in their lives.

But God desires much more than that for us. When we come to know that God loves us way beyond our comprehension, and when we determine in our lives that God is the One who can change us and empower us and guide us to be His disciples, everything changes. New revelations open up to us. New opportunities present themselves for us, and though the way might still be difficult, He walks with us through it all as we walk with Him. God is ever more ready to hear our cries for help than we are to turn to Him for help. He simply invites us to follow Him.

And when we do follow Jesus, our endurance increases, our stamina develops and our strength grows so that no matter what might come before us, we are able to face it with confidence that “*we can do all things through Christ who strengthens [us]*” (Philippians 4:13). And then we begin to win the battles of life. We triumph over the temptations that once sidetracked us. We gain the joy of the Lord in our lives. We find new doors opening up to us that lead us to greater performance as a witness for the Lord. As we persevere in our faith in Jesus, though the world around us rages, a calm and peace within us gives us the determination we need to keep running for the Lord in order to win the prize set before us.

The season of Lent is a time when we can discover the things in our lives that hinder us and prevent us from doing our best. As we evaluate our lives, seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit and open up our hearts for the Lord Jesus Christ to come in and transform us, we are made new creatures in Him. Then He gives us the power and courage to face all of life’s difficulties with a new perspective and a new direction. And then we begin to live the Gospels as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ, so that all those around us might see Jesus through us.

So don’t let the difficulties of being a Christian keep you from striving to find victory over all the things that the world might throw your way. Remain strong, diligent and committed to follow Jesus each day of your life, and you will always be a winner in God’s eyes. Let’s pray.

Father, thank You for Your great love for us. Thank You that You never give up on us, but continue to call out to us to “Follow You.” Give us the determination we need to not only maintain our faith, but continue to grow in our faith, so that we might be living examples of following Your commandments and teachings. Enable us to find and fall in love with our Coach, Jesus, so that He will help us in our pursuit of winning Your prize of the upward call. Help us to keep our hearts, minds, eyes and spirits focused on living for You, so that those around us might see our success, and then seek that same success in their own lives, too. Encourage us, challenge us, and move us as Your disciples, to the glory of Your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN.