
People Get Ready

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on February 12, 2012 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

The essayist G.K. Chesterton was a large man, 6'4" tall and rather portly. During the First World War, at the height of the fighting, he was approached by a woman who wondered why he hadn't been called up to go to the trenches. She said, "Mr. Chesterton, I see you're not out at the Front." Chesterton patted his stomach and replied, "Oh, I assure you, madam, if you walk round to my side you will see that I am."

I don't know about you but I'm feeling a bit out of shape. And the statistics suggest that most of us are. I wonder if you know what's the greatest public health crisis facing the United States of America right now. It's not cancer. It's not heart disease. It's not mental illness. It's not AIDS. These are all serious, especially for those facing them today. But if you're in public health there's one issue that's looming on the nation's horizon like a gathering storm. And that's obesity.

We all know that obesity is about excessive eating and reduced exercise, and that there can also be genetic factors like an underactive thyroid and social factors like quitting smoking or not having time to cook healthy meals. But obesity is the tip of the iceberg. There's no point in getting judgmental or moralistic about the way some of us look or how some of us live. The point is, all of us who are out of shape are on a continuum, and that dimension of our shared culture is symbolic of something important.

What is the epidemic of obesity telling us? What's the significance of such a high number of us being out of shape? I'm not talking on the practical level of nutrition or the psychological level of addiction or eating disorders. I'm talking on the metaphorical level of what obesity symbolizes in our society, in our imagination, in our church.

Let's step back for a moment and ask, leaving health and aesthetics aside, what's the symbolic power of obesity? I suggest obesity's a visible indication of not being ready – of not being nimble, not being in training, of not being alert and poised and all set for the starter's gun. And why does that matter? – After all, not everyone aspires to have a body like an Olympic sprinter, and we can't all spend our life in the gym. It matters because it's perhaps the most vivid visual symbol that there's nothing in life we need to be in shape for, that there's nothing of any significance that's worth making sacrifices to be ready for – that's there's no urgent job to do that requires us to be on our toes.

And that's the point at which obesity becomes more than a public health epidemic. That's the point where the fact that so many of us are overweight becomes a metaphor for our society as a whole. Our culture isn't at all sure what it's necessary to get in shape for, what it's worth making sacrifices for, what it's so important to get ready for. Our culture is obese.

I don't mean our culture eats too much and exercises too little. I'm talking about the loss of a purpose in life more fundamental than comfort and pleasure and consumption – a loss that's in evidence not in isolated individuals but in our society as whole. Why is Duke such a prestigious institution? Because it's at the center of a hamster wheel. If you go to college here you're more or less guaranteed a place in a great graduate school program. And then you can walk into a highly-paid job. Which means when you have kids, you can get them into the kind of elementary and high school that can kit them out to go to a college like Duke. And if they go to Duke they can get into a great grad school program. It's a wheel, and you're the hamster running fast and staying still. It has just the right combination of competition, comfort, challenge, and consumption to be wholly absorbing and thoroughly addictive.

A school or college or university becomes great when it generates the maximum number of options for you to pick from when you leave. That's what we call choice. Choice becomes tangible when we turn it into money. Money is visible evidence of choice. Money is what we do with our choices until we've decided what to do

with them. Money has no meaning in itself: it's simply a holding station while we turn one kind of value into another. But our society has found it harder and harder to talk about any of those values, so our politics and our public conversations end up becoming about money and choice, even as we can't imagine what might be good choices to make.

What kind of language do we need to break out of this hamster-wheel of money and choice? We need the language of goal, of purpose, of what the Greeks called *telos*, or ultimate direction. We need to be able to articulate what all this education and wealth creation and health provision and military protection is actually *for*. In the Bible Abraham is told what Israel is for – Israel is brought into being as a channel so that all nations may receive a blessing. When Moses is given the Ten Commandments, they're given so that Israel can remember its God, live long in the land God is going to give it, become holy as God is holy, and so be a channel for all nations to receive a blessing. Jesus' purpose is really no different. He wants the church to be ready to stand before God and to be a channel by which all the world can be ready to stand before God and be with God forever. This is what the Bible's for, this is what Israel's for, this is what the church is for. This is what I'm for. This is what you're for.

In sending Jesus, God gives us an overarching focus around which to organize our whole lives. Jesus calls us to organize our whole lives so as to be ready to stand before God and to make all the world ready to stand before God and be with God forever. That's why we need to get in shape. There's no point in talking about the Ten Commandments or any kind of Christian morality except in relation to this overall purpose. Any law is bound to become oppressive and arbitrary as soon as it becomes detached from an overarching *telos*. The reason that I say our society is obese is because our society has no sense of such an overarching purpose that it's worth getting in shape for. But there's no sense in Christians trying to impose their morality on people who don't share their ultimate goal, because Christian morality makes no sense detached from the overarching *telos* it's designed to advance towards.

This is the argument Paul is making in 1 Corinthians 9, which we've just read together this morning. Paul knows the Corinthians are fanatical about sports. Every couple of years Corinth hosted an event called the Isthmian Games, which was second in prestige only to the Olympic Games. So Paul makes an analogy between athletics and Christianity. What he's saying is, to be a Christian is to have a mission, a purpose, a goal. That mission is twofold: to be ready to come face-to-face with God, and to participate actively in bringing the whole creation face-to-face with God. Christians shape their whole lives, and the whole character of their communities, around this twofold purpose, which we call the kingdom of God.

But there's a small catch. The small catch is that there's a great deal in our lives, and a very great deal in creation, that doesn't want to come face-to-face with God. So to shape our whole existence around this goal is to enter into a life of conflict, sacrifice, hardship, and suffering. This is something our society finds very hard to comprehend, and even harder to countenance. In today's culture sacrifice and suffering are things you avoid at almost any cost. In fact you could almost say that the avoidance of sacrifice and suffering *are* the overarching goal of our culture. Paul says, "Get over it. If you really want to be a Christian, conflict, sacrifice, hardship, and suffering are things you're going to encounter on the way. You're not going to go looking for them. But you're not going to set out explicitly to avoid them either, because you have your eyes set on the overarching goal, and the path there may go through some pretty agonizing territory. But, even if that territory is costly and frightening, you keep your eyes on the goal and you'll eventually get through it."

Which is why you need to be in training. You need to be in training because your mission to stand before God and bring creation before God is bound to get into trouble. And you don't want to fall away or lose sight of that mission at the first obstacle. Or the second obstacle. Or the third. Paul uses some pretty strong language. He says, "I punish my body and enslave it." He's not talking about self-harm. He's using the body of an athlete as a metaphor for the kind of conditioning Christians need if they're going to fulfill their twofold mission to bring themselves and the world before God.

And that's why I call our contemporary society obese. I call it obese because it's in no kind of shape, it's in no kind of training, it's taking on no kind of diet and no kind of exercise to stand before God and to bring others before God. It's very difficult to identify what overarching goal our society is genuinely shaped around, beyond money and choice – and, as we've seen, such things aren't genuine goals, they're simply holding areas leading to multiple possible goals that our society is reluctant ever to name.

Why does this matter so much? Well, look with me for a moment at the kinds of issues our society struggles over and why these issues seem so impossible to resolve.

Let's start with money. We've heard a lot lately about the "1%." In a nation where money and choice are gods, you end up looking pretty silly pretty quickly if you suggest people should be constrained from making big money. How would Paul think about money? He would ask, "What's money for?" He would say, "How is your money helping you come face-to-face with God? How is your money and your way of earning it making you more able to participate in bringing the whole creation before God? Is your money getting you more in shape to face the sacrifices, the sufferings, and the trials of the gospel, or less?" Forget about the 1% for a moment, and ask yourself the same questions. Is the money you have part of the overarching mission of your life, to be in the presence of God and to bring others and the whole creation before God too? Do others look at the way you earn and spend money and say, "Yes, that's precisely how it should be done! I want to do it like that"?

Let's take another question, that of marriage, sex and relationships. We're more or less at sea in these areas. When a couple gets into marriage difficulties, we have no idea what to say to them – particularly if there are no children involved. When young people want to discover themselves and one another, we have no idea how to guide them or suggest putting boundaries around their desires. How would Paul advise us? He would ask, "What are marriage and sex for?" He would say, "How are your covenanted and sexual relationships witnessing to the world the constancy and forgiveness of God and drawing others into God's kingdom and bringing them face-to-face with God's grace? Do people look at you and say, "I can see those people know what it means to abide through sunshine and rain, have understood what it takes to keep a promise, and have truly discovered together what love is. I want to be like them"?

Now let's think about education. We all know we want education to be brilliant, and we quickly start reaching for words like excellence and the best and the 90th percentile. Education opens the door to money and choice, so it's obviously the most competitive and controversial aspect of our culture. But Paul would say "Money and choice are what you want if you haven't worked out something better to want." Paul would ask, "What exactly is education for?" He would look at you and wonder, "In what way is your education making you more ready to come face-to-face with God? How is your education preparing you to bring the whole creation before God?"

Paul is saying laws like "Don't steal" and "Don't kill" are very helpful and we should keep them, but if you really want a constructive way to order your existence, you need to have an overarching goal that every part of your life can dovetail towards. Jesus gives us that overarching goal. Jesus says, "Seek first the kingdom of God. Make yourself ready to meet me, and bring as much of the world with you as you can." But Jesus does something else. Jesus shows us that *God's* whole life is shaped to be ready to meet with *us*. God's in training. God's getting ready. God's shaping up. Jesus is God meeting us face-to-face. It costs God everything to come face-to-face with us. We should expect it to cost us everything to come face-to-face with God.

What kind of shape are you in? Are you ready to come face-to-face with God today? Or do you look at your life and see you've become spiritually obese? If you're not in training for the kingdom of God, what exactly are you in training for? Paul says, "I punish my body and enslave it." In other words, "My whole life is about bringing myself and others face-to-face with God."

You look at Paul's life, and it's pretty easy to know what he wants. He's in shape because he wants Jesus. He wants Jesus really badly. You look at God's life, and it's pretty easy to know what God wants. God wants you. The cross is the shape God gets into because God wants you really badly. Look at your life. Is it easy to see what you want? What *do* you want?