

Win-win situation: Speed and excellence

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [October 18, 2005](#) issue

"I believe that God made me for a purpose, for China. But he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure. . . . To win is to honor him." So Eric Liddell says in a pivotal scene of the classic movie *Chariots of Fire*, defending the compatibility of his commitment both to serve as a Christian missionary to China (in the long-term) and to run in the 1924 Olympics in Paris (in the short-term).

I had just shown this scene to a gathering of laity and clergy, and one man observed: "I don't believe that last line comes from Eric Liddell. It's pure Hollywood. It is out of character for Liddell to be so focused on winning." What followed was an interesting exchange about winning, its compatibility with Christian faith and the criteria by which we measure what it means to be a winner.

"Why does it seem strange for Liddell to be focused on winning?" a laywoman responded. "We need standards and measures to test whether we are in fact getting better, and Liddell clearly found joy in running races."

I sympathized with the woman. I have seen too many Christians in the United States who seem resigned to mediocrity—and sometimes even proud of it.

Another person responded to the woman, "Perhaps the difficulty is what we mean by 'winning.' In the United States, we automatically mean that to win is the primary focus, and it always means that somebody else loses. But isn't it possible to have standards and measures of achievement without presuming there have to be losers?

"For example," he continued, "Cross-country runners are driven to excel by internal standards of improving their speed and stamina. A cross-country runner will often feel like a winner by beating his or her previous best time, regardless of where they finish in the order of a race."

"Yes," said another, "but there was surely also a part of Liddell that enjoyed the competitive aspect of winning. That was not central for him, since he clearly had

convictions that overrode his desire to win the 100-meter dash. But he also liked being the fastest person in the race. And that invites sinful comparisons where there are losers.”

“What about those who are ‘special Olympians’?” another person responded. “There is a genuine excellence to their achievements that is just as wonderful as Eric Liddell’s or Carl Lewis’s. The special Olympians who finish the race are often thrilled to have run the race well, even if they don’t actually finish first. Don’t they win? And don’t they honor God in doing so?”

I asked: “Is it possible to be a ‘winner’ without there being losers? Can we understand the desire to excel without relying on a comparison to others who are less than excellent?” I was thinking of practices in which the standards of achievement are internal to the practice. But the conversation turned in a different direction. A participant called attention to the fact that earlier in the film Liddell compares Christian faith to running a race and notes the importance of hard work and discipline in both. In making this comparison, the participant observed, Liddell echoes a familiar and prominent biblical motif.

Then it dawned on me—the threads of our discussion are all there in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. So I turned our attention from the film to scripture, lifting up several passages that seemed to illumine our discussion. What does it mean, I wondered aloud, for Paul to be focused so clearly on the hope that “Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true” (Phil. 1:18)? What does it mean for Paul to reject “selfish ambition” (Phil. 2:3)—is he suggesting that there is an appropriate ambition, an ambition for the gospel? How should we understand Paul’s analogy to running a race in 3:12ff., including the image of him pressing on “to make the goal” his own because Christ Jesus has made him his own?

I turned to Paul’s rhetoric in chapter 4: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil. 4:8).

People began to connect Liddell’s interest in what “pleases” God and the runner’s genuine desire for “excellence” with his profound faith in Christ and desire to serve Christ as a missionary. There is an interesting tension in Philippians, embodied also in Liddell’s life, between the exclusive claim of Christ and an inclusive awareness of

looking for what is pleasing—and true, honorable, just, pure, commendable, excellent or worthy of praise—wherever it can be found.

At the end of our discussion, we returned to the analogy between Christian faith and running a race, and how we might understand genuine excellence in ways that are not dependent on invidious comparisons to others or presumptions that there must be losers. The woman who had emphasized the importance of standards and measures noted that genuine excellence should always be focused on exceeding our own internally specified standards, not on externally imposed comparisons.

As we concluded, I asked about our capacity for excellence in Christian practice. Do we have sufficient practice, discipline and “lung capacity” for faithful living? In what training are we engaged, and to what extent are we growing in grace and faithfulness? Is God taking pleasure in our lives?