

The Paris Olympics came to a close last month, and we are still reflecting on the highlights of the games. The Olympics motto is Faster, Higher, Stronger. Indeed, world records keep on getting shattered with each successive Olympics, and it seems that there is no limit to human potential. It is amazing to see the best athletes in the world accomplish feats that we could only dream of.

Rachael Gunn, also known as Raygun, sparked controversy at the 2024 Paris Olympics for a terrible performance break dancing. Her interpretive moves such as the Kangaroo Hop did not impress judges. Many people wondered; how did she get there?

We have a similar puzzlement in our Gospel text for today. **“And [Jesus] sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”** 1. (oops!) Jesus could not have meant the first must be last. It would seem inappropriate, really, for the world’s only perfect man, Jesus Christ, to say such a thing. Who is faster, higher, and stronger than Jesus Christ Himself, true God in human flesh?

Of course, it is somewhat frivolous to think about, but could not have Jesus—because He is true God—outperformed any of the athletes in the 2024 Olympic games? He who can walk on the water, could He not have swum the fastest? He who formed the Earth, could He not have lifted the heaviest weights? In what way could Jesus not have been the greatest?

Yet Jesus said, **“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” “And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”**” Much like Rachael Gunn, someone might have wondered, where did that kid come from? How did he get here? Jesus is teaching deep theological truths here.

2. (ugh!) They wouldn't hand out gold medals to the worst Olympians. Why is Jesus highlighting the last and the least? Do you want to live in a world where Raygun gets the gold medal in breaking, where the swimmer who completed the race in half the time of the champion gets the glory, and where the one lifting the least weight gets first prize?

“And [Jesus and His disciples] came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.” We all want the gold medal. We all want to be the greatest. We are honored to receive rewards, to get the trophy, and to be recognized. We become angry when the system gets rigged, when the champion is ignored, especially when it's us.

“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”

Okay, maybe the Olympics is a silly example. The Olympics would cease to exist as we know it if they awarded medals to the weakest, the slowest, and the least athletic. But our sinful pride peeks its ugly face when we hear these words of Jesus. We want to be recognized for our hard work. We want to use our God given talents. We want to shine. Is that so wrong? We want life to be easy. We want respect. We would love it if someone waited on us hand and foot.

Yet Jesus doesn't just tell us, He shows us how to live. You could say He was given a gold medal for last place. 3. (aha!) Jesus was placed on the strangest winner's podium. Our text starts with Jesus' prediction of death: **“for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.”**” The first being last and the servant of all looks like Jesus Christ being given a crown of thorns rather than a victor's crown. It looks like His throne being a cross rather than one of gold. His winner's podium was Mount Calvary with criminals placed on either side.

Because He is God, there's a lot of things Jesus could have done. He could have become an Olympic legend. He could have defeated the Roman occupiers with a zap of lightning. He could have stepped down from the cross. However, He didn't because in Him, the first became last and the servant of all so that you could become first. He died a shameful death on a cross, so that you could be forgiven. In the eyes of the world, He was dead last. **BECAUSE JESUS GOT LAST PLACE, THERE'S A GOLD MEDAL FOR YOU.**

4. (whee!) Gold medals for last place means you win in Christ. We all have this delusion that we're somehow the best. The disciples thought it and they were jockeying for first place. However, the odds are that unless you're an Olympian, there's someone better than you. There's someone more skilled than you. There's someone nicer than you. There's someone richer than you. Whatever you think your specialty is, there's someone doing a better job than you are.

We cannot be the best at following God's law. God demands perfection. The more we reflect on God's Word, the more we realize we don't make the grade. We cannot earn heaven through our works. The Apostle Paul reflects on his faith journey. He was a strict observer of the Law, and he even persecuted Christians because he thought he was serving God. He gives his resumé of all the great things he did. But he considered it all garbage compared to the new life He has in Christ. He proclaims, **“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”** Christ becoming last of all through His death and resurrection moves the goalposts to what success looks like.

It's the least in the kingdom of God who become the rockstars. It's the smallest who become the giants. What that means first and foremost is that Jesus

Christ cares about you: the chief of sinners, the nobody, the person who finishes in last place. He forgives a sinner like you. He cares about you even if you think nobody understands you. After the fans get up and they get out of town, He's still at the finish line cheering you on.

Because we know that because Jesus rose from the dead, death is not the end. We have the gift of eternal life. We have the gift of seeing our loved ones again who have died in the faith. We have the gift of a new resurrected body that will no longer know pain, aging, or injury. That is the gold medal that is ours in Christ.

Because we know that we have every gift in the heavenly places, we don't need to be looking over our shoulders knowing if we're making the grade. We don't need to wonder how we got here and if we really belong. We are surrounded by a supporting community, the Church which welcomes us and shares the love of Jesus with others.

Thus, 5. (yeah!) Gold medals for last place means there's room for service. This wasn't at the Olympic games, but at the World Triathlon Championships in 2016 in Cozumel, Mexico. Brothers Jonny and Alistar Brownlee from Great Britian were on pace to get first and second in the race. As Jonny turned the last corner, he had a comfortable lead with Alistar trailing and South African Henri Schoeman close behind Alistar.

Jonny collapsed due to dehydration and fell onto a volunteer. Without hesitation, Alistar came to help Jonny, and half-carried him the remaining 500 meters to the finish line. Alistar pushed Jonny across the finish line before him. Henri won the gold medal, but Jonny got second, and Alistar got third.

Alistar gave up first place so his brother could get second, doing what Jonny was not capable of doing. I think we can see a picture of what Christ has done for us in this story. He took us across the finish line, we who were dead in our trespasses and sins.

Knowing this is the case, we can gladly do the same in our lives. We can sacrifice ourselves in service. You're not going to get a gold medal by going the extra mile to care for a family member. You might sacrifice the opportunity for a promotion if you spend more time with your kids than you go on business trips. You might miss out on some much needed r & r if you get up early to attend church, but there's something beautiful in what Jesus is calling us to do.

He is calling us to serve others just as He serves us. He is calling us to imitate the humility of a child. It may be embarrassing. It may be humiliating, but the way of the cross is the way of the Christian, and we see the great glory that awaited Jesus that Easter morning, and we too through the eyes of faith can follow in Jesus' footsteps knowing that one day eternal life awaits us who have been rescued and claimed by Jesus Christ.