

Competition

by EARL F. PALMER

THE WORD FOR COMPETITION in the Greek New Testament is the word *athleo*, from which we have the English words *athlete* and *athletic*.

St. Paul makes use of this word as a part of his discipleship teaching in Philippians when he describes the Christians at Philippi as those who stand side by side sharing together in the contest for the good news and against fear. *Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side (competing side by side) with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents* (Phil. 1:27, 28). He also describes three people at Philippi as his co-contestants for the gospel: Euodia, Syntyche, and Clement, to whom he refers by saying *Yes, and I ask you to help these women, for they have struggled (competed) beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life* (Phil. 4:3). In both texts the word *athleo* is used.

He sees the word "compete" as a team experience of those who are working together toward a good purpose. They compete against hardships, dangers, fears, and time, not against people or one another. Even the argument that two of them, Euodia and Syntyche, are having does not disqualify them in Paul's mind as teammates. He asks them to find their deepest solidarity in the Lord Jesus Christ, who is their center. He does not demand that they sacrifice their respective points of view, but what they need to find is the agreement that they have in the Lord. *Therefore, my brethren, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord* (Phil. 4:1, 2).

Paul is describing the best kind of competitive experience. It is focused not on my superiority or my inadequacy alongside of those who are also in the race, but rather on our work together to finish a grand race to the glory of God. It is very much like a corps of alpine climbers working as a rope team to enable each climber to reach the summit and then achieve a safe return to base camp. They

compete alongside each other and together against the mountain and its extreme weather conditions, rather than working against each other. They work hard in conditioning and the study of climbing as a competitive event so that they will be able to carry their part of the total effort and then, still have enough strength remaining to be available for any unforeseen emergency that may arise.

But the word is a strong and challenging word as well because it calls upon each competitor to be in condition, to be in constant training, to be faithful to the rules of the event, to work hard, to watch out for those who compete alongside, to remember that we are beloved companions of the Lord, and that our names are in the book of life (Phil. 4).

Paul, near the end of his life journey, decided to tell of his own personal feelings in these same athletic terms — *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith* (II Tim. 4:7).

Is competition a good or bad instinct? I believe it can indeed be toxic when it becomes a means of

proving my worth above or below other people where the word then hardens into a scorekeeper's statistic instead of a living excitement. But when it is the challenge to be a faithful worker who has discovered the joy of being in a race that deserves the running, then competition is altogether healthy. The New Testament writer to the Hebrews put it that way. *Run the race, looking to Jesus who has gone on ahead and listen to the great cloud of fellow competitors on all sides of you who are cheering you on* (Heb.12:1).

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