

Running the ministry marathon: Looking in

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In the [first article](#) in this series, I described ministry as a marathon, not unlike the Boston Marathon, and I promised four “looks,” or perspectives, that have helped me stay in the race.

The first “look” is inward—looking in spiritually and physically.

Look in spiritually

Paul wrote: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore, I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize” (1 Corinthians 9: 24-27, NIV).

The Apostle Paul certainly was one of the great ministry marathon runners in the Bible. Paul encountered his fair share of “walls” along the way—adversities, hardships, troubles, problem-causing people, trials, tribulations, weariness, pain, everything with which marathoners are well-acquainted (2 Corinthians 6:3-10; 10:16-29; Philippians 4:10-20).

What strikes me most about Paul is he seemed always to know the importance of “looking in” and taking care of his own spiritual life.

What we put into ourselves

Joe D'Amico is another interesting marathoner who made recent headlines. D'Amico gained notoriety by becoming known as the marathon "[McRunner](#)." While preparing for the 2011 Los Angeles Marathon, D'Amico, a veteran of 14 marathons, incorporated into his personal training schedule a most unusual dietary regimen. He ate food only from McDonald's restaurants for the 30 days leading up to race day. During his special month-long marathon "McDiet," D'Amico devoured 23 hamburgers, 24 chicken snack wraps, three filet-o-fish sandwiches, 91 hotcakes, and 63 cookies. As a result of his special marathon-preparation diet, Mr. "McRunner" gained 23,000 new Facebook fans, and when he completed the race, he had raised some \$27,000 for the Ronald McDonald House Charities.

For most serious marathon runners, a fast-food, junk-food diet would be a pretty ill-advised training technique. Without proper physical nourishment and nutrition for the duration of the training days, the body simply will not be ready for the rigors of the race day. The same principle holds true for running the ministry marathon. The ongoing spiritual diet of the ministry runner is going to make a huge difference running the great race of ministry.

The importance of spiritual discipline

When we think about the proper spiritual diet necessary for running the ministry marathon, volumes have been written on the subject of practicing the spiritual disciplines. See, for example: *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* by Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* by Richard J. Foster and *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* by Dallas

Willard. These now-classic resources remain valuable training manuals for the minister's library and life.

Martin Luther once said: "Prayer is the most important thing in my life. If I should neglect prayer for a single day, I should lose a great deal of the fire of faith." Without the consistent "fire of faith" that comes through prayer, our fuel for the ministry marathon will be sorely insufficient.

Following Paul's example of sticking to a basic but consistent spiritual disciplines "training diet" of prayer, meditation, Bible study and reflection, personal and corporate worship, and regular fellowship with other believers has made a marked difference in the success of my own 30-year-old ministry marathon.

Josiah Hotchkiss Gilbert quotes 19th century American preacher and author James Freeman Clarke: "The modern Christian does not retire into a cell to pray, but goes about doing good. He thus avoids the risk of narrowness, which attends the man who desires only to do the 'nearest duty.' But there is a danger here also, that of shallowness. The man who is always giving, never receiving; always helping others, and never feeding his own soul, is in danger of becoming empty." This could be spoken to 21st century ministry marathoners as well.

Ministry runner, there simply isn't a more crucial training tool for effectively running the race without running on empty than simply to maintain a consistent, daily diet of feeding your own soul.

Look in physically

"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own" (I Corinthians 6:19, NIV).

Ministry marathoners, while we are “looking in,” we had better be “looking into” the health dimension of our running.

A report on the health and wellness of clergy and lay leaders conducted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s Division for Ministry and Board of Pensions found that while the majority of ministers are satisfied by their work, they are more overweight, sedentary and prone to stress and depression than the average U.S. citizen.

The report found during a one-year period, 16 percent of male clergy and 24 percent of female clergy suffered from depression compared to 6 percent of U.S. men and 12 percent of U.S. women. It also noted that nutrition, high blood pressure and heart disease are areas of concern.

Fellow ministry marathoners, how can we preach and teach about the body being the temple of the Holy Spirit if our own temple is being neglected?

Let’s run the race, but let’s be sure while we are running we always are careful to “look in,” being mindful that the spiritual and physical aspects of our race are crucial considerations.

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