



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday, February 16, 2020**  
*The Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany*

*Festal Evensong*  
*at 4:00 p.m.*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Dr. Patrick S. Cheng, *Theologian in Residence*  
*on*  
1 Timothy 3:14–4:10  
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## **Training in Godliness**

I recently came across an interesting book written by a priest and systematic theologian in the Church of England. The book is called *A Brief Theology of Sport*. It's one of the first works to look at sports through the lens of Christian theology.

Now, growing up, I was never very good at sports. I always preferred the library to the football field. And so, I never developed an interest in athletic events. I'm a bit embarrassed to admit that, two weeks ago, I didn't even know who was playing in this year's Super Bowl. I did know that J. Lo was performing in the half-time show, though. So there's hope!

Even though I might not be that into sports, a book about the *theology* of sports is quite another matter. You can be sure that this book caught my attention. Its author, Fr. Lincoln Harvey, is a dean and lecturer at St. Mellitus College in London, and he notes that the church has always been of two minds about sports throughout its history.

On the one hand, the church has opposed sports since its earliest days. This is because athletic events in the Roman Empire were intertwined with practices of idolatry and paganism. For example, the fourth-century Council of Arles declared in 314 A.D. that any Christian who drove in a chariot race – think Ben Hur, for example – was to be excommunicated.

But on the other hand, the church has also viewed sports in a positive light. That is, the church has used sports as a way of reflecting upon and teaching about the Christian faith. We see this, for example, in St. Paul's epistles, in which he compares the Christian life to a boxing match or a foot race in which the athlete seeks to win the prize.

Tonight's New Testament reading from the First Letter to Timothy is one of those texts in which St. Paul uses sports to teach us about the Christian faith. Here, Paul is giving his mentee, Timothy, instructions on how to "behave in the household of God" when Paul isn't around.

Among other things, Paul instructs Timothy to train himself in godliness. Paul says that even though “physical training is of some value,” training oneself in godliness is even more valuable. That’s because training in godliness not only benefits this life, but also the life to come.

The Greek word that Paul uses for “training” in tonight’s reading is *gymnazo*. This is where we get the English word for gymnasium. I don’t know if you noticed this, but the King James Version actually uses the word “exercise” in this passage. As we heard in the second lesson, Paul says:

[E]xercise thyself rather unto godliness. For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.

In other words, Paul argues that Christians should not only be athletes of the gym, but also athletes of God. We are called to exercise not only with our bodies, but also with our souls.

The theme of training in godliness from tonight’s text is particularly appropriate with Lent right around the corner. (Believe it or not, Ash Wednesday is just ten days away. And, under the 1928 Prayer Book calendar, we would already be in the pre-Lenten season, with today being Sexagesima Sunday.) In fact, one way of thinking about Lent is viewing it as a forty-day period for training in godliness, leading up to the Easter Sunday finish line.

So what exactly does it mean to train ourselves in godliness?

Well, even though I’m clearly not a big sports fan, I’ve actually been fairly disciplined when it comes to working out. For the last twenty years, I’ve gone to the gym on a weekly basis – whether to lift weights or to do cardio or even kickboxing.

Over time, I’ve come to realize that there are three lessons that physical training or exercise can teach us about the Christian life: persistence, pain, and partnership.

First, persistence. Keeping up a regular training regimen is hard. It’s much easier to come up with all kinds of excuses for not working out. It’s too cold to go out. It’s too hot to go out. It’s too early. It’s too late. You know what I mean.

Similarly, it’s hard to stick with a regular prayer or worship routine. There’s a lot of things that are competing for our attention here in New York City. The second-century theologian Tertullian understood this. He likened the Christian life to a difficult training ground in which we must persist. He wrote:

Your master, Jesus Christ . . . has brought you to this training ground. He determined long before the day of contest to take you from a softer way of life to a harsher regimen, that your strength may increase.

Second, pain. We all know the saying, “No pain, no gain.” It might be painful to wake up sore the morning after a particularly intense work out, but that’s actually a sign of progress.

Similarly, progress in the spiritual life can be painful. We often face failures, disappointments, and humiliations. The fourth-century theologian St. Jerome likened the Christian life to a valley of tears.

He wrote: “God has entered us as contestants in a racecourse where it is our lot to be always striving. This place, then, a valley of tears, is . . . an arena of struggle and of endurance.”

Third, *partnership*. It’s hard to advance in physical training without the help of a coach, a trainer, or a running partner. You just can’t do it all by yourself.

Similarly, we cannot grow in the spiritual life by being alone. We need spiritual guides and friends. But most importantly, we need the grace of Jesus Christ. The fifth-century theologian St. John Chrysostom viewed Jesus both as our coach and the finish line. He writes:

As in all arts and games, we impress the art upon our mind by looking to our masters . . . . [S]o here also, if we wish to run and learn to run well, let us look to Christ, even to Jesus, “the author and finisher of our faith” . . . . He put the beginning into us; he will also put on the end.

Persistence. Pain. Partnership. Three lessons that physical training can teach us about training in godliness.

I invite you to reflect upon how you might train in godliness during the upcoming Lenten season. There are many ways of doing this right here at Saint Thomas. For example, if you are interested in theology, make a commitment to attend theology class on Sunday mornings. In fact, Fr. Spencer will be teaching about St. Ignatius Loyola’s “Spiritual Exercises” next week, which couldn’t be more appropriate. Or come to the Pilgrims’ Course on Tuesday evenings.

Train yourself in godliness. Think about how you might experience persistence, pain, and partnership in your spiritual life. And remember that our “toil and struggle” in the Christian life is never in vain because we “have our hope set on the living God,” Jesus Christ our Lord.