

Spiritual Olympians sermon series  
Swimming – Romans 6:1-5  
Aug. 25, 2024  
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We finish up our sermon series on becoming spiritual Olympians today. So far, we've learned that we become better runners of our races by remembering the cloud of witnesses that is cheering us on, and we talked about the paradoxical idea that we become strong when we lift less weight, instead sharing our burdens with Jesus Christ. Today, we'll dip our toes into the pool as we discover what it means to swim like spiritual Olympians.

This is a sport in which Americans have dominated over the decades, from Mark Spitz to Michael Phelps to Katie Ledecky. And some of us more seasoned folks will remember the name Greg Louganis, the second diver in history to sweep all the diving events in two consecutive Olympic games. But here's the thing: Louganis didn't start out as a good diver. I bet the first time he jumped into a pool, he did a cannonball or a belly flop. The only way Louganis got better was through practicing what we learned.

The pool in which we learn to swim as followers of Christ isn't Olympic-sized. It doesn't have a diving board or lanes. In fact, it's only a little bigger than a hot tub. You can swim a lap in about half a second. But that small pool is symbolic of something so much bigger and more powerful for those who are willing to enter the waters.

Baptism is somewhat of a mystery for us as followers of Christ. Jesus modeled for us the importance of baptism when he asked to be baptized by John. It holds different meanings for us, from the washing away of our sins to joining the church family to being adopted as a child of God. No one truly understands what happens when we go under the baptismal waters, or have them sprinkled on our heads, as some of us may have experienced. Like so much of faith, there's a place where our human understanding ends and our trust in God begins.

Paul does a good job of trying to explain to the Romans what happens when we are baptized, but it can sound a bit confusing at first. Remember the stereotype in old Westerns of the bad guy? Black hat, black horse, black teeth, scraggly beard, a name like Buck Ruffhouse. His picture would be pinned up in the post office with the headline: Wanted – Dead or Alive. And then the sheriff or the Lone Ranger would go get him.

Not a lot of ambiguity there. No nuance in that binary. Dead or alive. If you bring Buck Ruffhouse in alive, he's not dead. If you bring him in dead, he's not alive. Didn't matter which way he was brought in. Could be dead. Could be alive. Couldn't be anything else. No such thing as slightly dead; that's like being slightly pregnant. Dead or alive; only two alternatives.

But Paul would argue with that. Paul says in our Romans reading today that God wants to capture the hearts of each one of us even more than the Lone Ranger wanted to capture Buck Ruffhouse. But God wants us dead *and* alive.

How can we be both dead and alive? That's what Paul is trying to help the Romans understand. In chapter 5, Paul appears to paint himself into a bit of a corner. He is explaining to the Romans how all of them had sinned and fallen short of God's glory, and how all of them deserved God's judgment. But through Christ, that judgment had been eradicated and replaced by God's grace and mercy. When Christians sinned, God's grace was activated, and they were its recipients. Paul makes the point in 5:20 that "where sin increased, grace increased all the more."

My guess is that Paul preached that message one day at church and was stopped at the door by a clever and inquisitive churchgoer, not unlike yourself, who said, “So, you say that God’s grace is available to us whenever we sin.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“And you say that God’s grace is the most wonderful thing in the world.”

“Indeed, I said that.”

“Well then, I’m going to go sin as much as possible, because the more I sin, the more God’s grace will increase, and that’s the most wonderful thing in the world.”

And Paul said, “I didn’t realize someone was paying that much attention to my sermon! Excuse me while I go add another chapter to my letter to clarify that.”

Paul sees the danger in his argument about how committing sins increases God’s grace, so he helps the Romans understand why God’s grace isn’t simply a get-out-of-judgment free card. We have not only been freed from the penalty of sin, but from the power of it, as well. That’s why he starts chapter 6 by saying, “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?”

How did we die to sin? I don’t remember dying, and I feel like that’s something I would remember. And my life is not sin-free, so if I died to it, I did a pretty poor job of it. I wish my sin was dead in me. That would make life a lot less complicated and a lot more joyful. But every day I do something that disappoints God, that doesn’t honor the image of God in another person. Have I really died to sin?

Paul continues, “Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we were buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life.” Dead and alive. Dead to sin. Alive to Christ. Through baptism, we’re no longer who we were.

Paul calls our former condition the “old self.” This “old self” was powerless in the face of sin’s influence, it couldn’t help but give in to sin’s calling. It’s the voice that whispers in your ear and tells you to lie to someone you love, or tells you to be jealous because God is blessing other people, or tells you it’s OK to gossip about people because you’re just keeping your friends informed. That’s sin’s voice at work.

Paul says our “old self” has died and we’ve been given a “new self” through Christ. As Christians, we have been woven together with Christ like two tree trunks that have grown up intertwined together. We have been united with Christ to the point that what he experienced, we experience. When he was crucified, we were crucified, and when he was resurrected, we were resurrected. Paul points to baptism as this symbolic moment. When we go into the water, our old self dies, and we arise a new creation through Jesus Christ.

I don’t know about you, but I forget that. I forget that Christ died so that I can be free, I forget that sin no longer has power over me, I forget that I have the choice every day to live for Christ because I am a new creation. How do we overcome our forgetfulness that pulls us back to our old self? The answer is pretty simple: we need to go swimming.

While in seminary, I went on a mission trip to North Carolina to help clean up after Hurricane Floyd. At the house where we were working, one of our tasks was to clean out and refill the swimming pool, which was filled to the top with goopy, gunky flood waters. We strapped on our hip waders and our rubber gloves and dove in, spending an entire afternoon cleaning out that pool one bucketful at a time. It was totally gross, nothing but mud and algae and sticks that I kept thinking were snakes. It took several hours, but when we finished, we

scrubbed the sides and floor and refilled the pool with sparkling clear water. Then, later that day, we went for a swim.

Do you think I wore my hip waders and rubber gloves to swim? As Paul would say, “By no means!” I wore my swimming trunks. Letting sin control our lives when we’ve been freed from it through Christ is like going swimming in hip waders and rubber gloves. Sure, you can do that, but why would you want to? Every day, we need to remind ourselves that we are a new creation. Just as Christ was dead and is now alive, so are we. Dead to our sins. Alive in Christ Jesus. Free to live a life of grace and love. Free to be who God created us to be.

Does this mean every day we need to be baptized? By no means! If you’ve been baptized, whether as a baby, a teenager, or an adult, I believe it took the first time, so no need to do it again. Our souls are still dripping with the waters of baptism. We just need to remember, to regroup ourselves in who we are, in what Christ did for us. That can be as simple as a prayer each morning: “God, help me to be the person you created me to be. Help me to live my life for you. Help me remember.”

Rev. Brad Braxton says that if we take Paul’s words seriously, every day there should be a funeral in our lives. Every day we ought to lay to rest something in us that is not like God. Christians who are dead to sin and alive to Christ don’t do the same old stuff. They don’t talk the same old junk. They don’t think the same old ungodly thoughts. We are no longer controlled by such things. We are dead; we are alive.

Every time you’re tempted to do something you know won’t honor God and the image of God in the other person, remember. Every time you want to choose what feels good over what is right, remember. Every time you want to lift yourself up at the expense of putting someone else down, remember. Remember, you are dead and alive. You are a new creation.

What needs to be buried? A bad attitude, jealousy, animosity, an unforgiving spirit, feelings of shame or inadequacy, lies, unfaithfulness – look at them and say, “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” “I won’t see you later, alligator.” If you have been baptized, think about what has taken place, and claim it. We have been intertwined with Christ, we have been crucified, we have been buried in the tomb, and we have risen again to the new life God has offered us. God wants us to live as if we are dead and alive, dead to sin and alive through Jesus Christ. We don’t have to. We can go on living as if our sin is more powerful than Christ’s grace. But why would we?