

So, you finally get it together and decide to begin an exercise program. It almost doesn't matter whether it's walking, jogging, swimming, practicing yoga or step aerobics, weight-training or following some other plan. As long as it's gotten you off the couch and onto your feet in some active way, it's a good thing.

And perhaps this time, you really get into the program and stay with it for a while. Your muscle tone and overall fitness improve, your cholesterol numbers head in the right direction, your pulse slows, your weight goes down while your energy goes up, your self-image improves, and your sense of well-being becomes buoyant. You may even feel as though you can keep going like that for years to come.

But then something happens that, at least temporarily, derails your plan. It could be an injury that forces you to put your program aside for a while. It could be *a death or crisis* in the family that not only disrupts your routine, but also demoralizes you, so that you have no heart for physical activity. It could be the arrival of the *Thanksgiving-to-New Year's* holiday season, with all the parties and the abundance of rich food in the house. If your exercise program is an outdoor one - such as downhill skiing - the arrival of warmer weather forces it to a halt. It could even be a happy family event, such as a wedding, that requires a lot of your time and causes you to set aside your fitness plan for a while.

Whatever the case, in a very short time, all those physical and fitness gains start to reverse. After all, most things, it seems, don't stay the same; and if they aren't improving, they're probably decaying. In the vocabulary of sports and fitness training, that's often expressed as "no pain/no gain," but the truth is, it's also no pain/no maintain. As bodybuilder Tom Venuto puts it, "The ultimate truth is, you are either moving forward or moving backward; growing or dying. There's no such thing as comfortably maintaining."

In fact, Venuto also applies the no pain/no gain philosophy to endeavors beyond the physical. He says, "To grow, you must step above past achievements, beyond your perceived boundaries and limits. That means stepping out of the known, into the unknown; out of the familiar and into the unfamiliar; out of the comfortable into the uncomfortable. You must get out of your comfort zone."

But is it really true? If there's no pain, is there really no gain? Whatever the answer might be, one could argue that the idea of no pain/no gain is a philosophy that the apostle Paul would probably have supported. In fact, it's one of the foundations of his discussion that can be found in our second lesson this morning from Romans.

Apparently, at least some of Paul's readers were suffering for their faith. Paul doesn't identify what that suffering is, but it may have been persecution, or at least isolation. Paul refers to that when he says his readers are "children of God ... if, in fact, we suffer with [Christ] so that we may also be glorified with him." He goes on to say that no matter how difficult the suffering, he doesn't consider the sufferings of this age worth comparing to the glory to come when God's kingdom arrives. In other words, bear the pain now and gain the kingdom of God later. No pain/no gain!

In this same passage, Paul also mentions the idea of falling back when we stop striving to grow. He calls it "bondage to decay," and he applies it to the whole creation. We can see examples of decay in nature, but we experience it most intimately in our own bodies when we stop exercising. Almost as soon as we do, we start losing ground. And we also experience it spiritually, when we don't exercise our faith. In all those cases, it's a no pain/no gain/no maintain situation.

I think it is important for us, though, to understand what Paul is talking about when he speaks of suffering with Christ. It's unlikely he meant the suffering that comes to us, just because of our mortality, such as the pain of an injury, a

sickness, a disappointment, the loss of a loved one, victimization, wrongdoing, a guilty conscience, or some other hurt that comes to most human beings at various times in life. God sympathizes with us because of our mortality, and sometimes he comforts us, but the pain of human existence isn't what Paul has in mind when he speaks of suffering *with* Christ.

Rather, he's talking about **chosen** pain. I mentioned earlier that some of Paul's readers were likely being persecuted for their faith, and persecution isn't something any mentally healthy person would seek. Nonetheless, the persecution was chosen pain, in that all they had to do to stop it was to deny Christ. If they publicly denounced their Christian faith and joined the throng that bowed to the emperor, the suffering would stop.

But Paul probably had more than just the persecuted in mind, when he spoke of suffering with Christ. He likely would also apply the no pain/ no gain correlation to those who were hurting from their efforts to minister in the name of Jesus. Sacrifice can be painful, and if you've sacrificed to do God's will, that pain brings spiritual gain.

Paul makes the same claim for those who diligently exercise their spiritual muscles, who discipline themselves to pray, to study, to work at giving their all to Christ. In fact, Paul alludes to that in another of his letters. Writing to the Corinthians, he says, "Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we [do it to receive] an imperishable one. So, I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified." That's chosen pain!

And writing to the Philippians, Paul speaks of the goal of the believer's life - the resurrection of the dead. He then says, "Not that I have already obtained this, or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ

Jesus has made me his own. ... this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." That, too, is chosen pain.

But let's back up a minute. I said earlier that Paul wasn't talking about the common suffering of life, that which is not chosen, but comes to us because we are mortal. That's correct, and yet there are exceptions to that rule. If, for example, we're stricken with a serious illness, we can, even while seeking whatever medical help there may be for us, also say, "I'm going to use this illness to listen for whatever God may tell me in this." Or "I'm going to use what I've learned from my pain to reach out to others who are suffering." Or in some other way incorporate that unavoidable suffering into our life of faith and practice of faith. As Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said, "Suffering confers no privileges. It's what you do with it." And what we do with it can make us spiritual athletes even while our bodies are rotting away.

Which begs the question, what might a spiritual workout look like in our daily life? It can mean looking at our realm of influence and doing what we think Jesus would want us to do in that realm. Take, for example, the well-known prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. Listen to it as if it's an instruction sheet for **exercising** your faith, and note how it speaks about both pain and gain.

First the pain:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light.

Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,  
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;  
to be understood, as to understand;  
to be loved, as to love.

And then the gain:  
For it is in giving that we receive.  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Here's another example. Speaking at the memorial service for the victims of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, President Clinton said, "When there is talk of hatred, let us stand up and talk against it. When there is talk of violence, let us stand up and talk against it. In the face of death, let us honor life."

Of course, if we really stand up and consistently talk against hatred and violence, there's a good chance we might get hurt in some way. Yet consider what might be gained. We may save some people from the damage that hatred and violence may do. We may stop or help to stop a bad idea in its tracks. And in suffering with Christ, we are bettering our spiritual health and are being joint heirs with him of the kingdom of God. Suffering for doing what is right, while no fun, can be considered the good pain that brings good gain.

Paul considered life a training period, a time for us to work up a sweat in our efforts to follow Jesus. We can take courage from the prospect of the kingdom to come, and from knowing that God is with us, but we should be exercising our faith, living it out each and every day!

We can, of course, get derailed in our spiritual workouts as much as we can in our physical ones. But spiritually speaking, we need to keep going back to the

gym, or back to church, stretching ourselves to be stronger, and to have a greater endurance in the life of faith. Yes, it might hurt some, but we can spur ourselves along by remembering how important the goal is and how, if we're not growing, we're falling back. Amen.