

No Pain, No Gain (Excellence - Chapter 9)

n/a

Ready:

"I do not run like one who runs aimlessly, or box like one who beats the air. Instead, I discipline my body and bring it under strict control, so that after preaching to others, I myself will not be disqualified." -1 Corinthians 9:26-27

"Some people have greatness thrust upon them. Few have excellence thrust upon them ... They achieve it. They do not achieve it unwittingly by doing what comes naturally and they don't stumble into it in the course of amusing themselves. All excellence involves discipline and tenacity of purpose." -John W. Gardner

Set

When Chris Byrd hears the iconic pop-culture phrase "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas," he can't help but crack a smile. And not for the reasons you would assume, coming from the former World Boxing Organization (WBO) and International Boxing Federation (IBF) heavyweight champion who also happens to reside in Nevada's self-proclaimed Sin City.

"For me, I put Christ first," Byrd says. "I still do the same things I've always done. I stay home when I'm training, so I can be in church and not in some secluded place. I want to live my life like I live every day. I'm a boring guy. I don't do anything. I don't know what happens in Vegas. I don't know anything about this city."

Boxers are among the most disciplined athletes, and Byrd is certainly no exception. Despite the vast array of entertainment options that the Vegas strip so readily offers, he has somehow managed to shield himself from all distractions. His ability to stay focused has been a work in progress that dates back to his early days growing up in Flint, Michigan.

Byrd's foray into athletic competition began at the age of 5, and by the time he was 10, he was fully immersed in an amateur boxing career. His father, Joe Byrd Sr., was and still is his trainer and is also known as one of the finest "cut men" in the professional boxing ranks. His mother, Rose Byrd, was also a part of the process and one (if not both) of his parents can usually be found in his corner on fight night.

"My parents pushed me to a whole other level my entire life," Byrd says. "They wanted nothing but great things from their kids. It goes back to the training part. When my mother's in the corner with me, she's always whispering in my ear, 'You know how hard you worked. You remember all those miles you ran. You remember all the stuff you went through.' She made me into a beast in the ring. It's crazy. She made me really tough. She wanted excellence from every one of her kids because of how hard we trained. My parents never settled for anything

less than excellence.”

By the age of 23, Byrd had racked up 275 amateur wins and had claimed three U.S. amateur titles (1989, 1991 and 1992). As a middleweight, he won the silver medal at the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona, Spain, and won the gold medal at the 1992 Canada Cup.

Everything in Byrd’s life was seemingly perfect. He was married to his high-school sweetheart, Tracy, and was the proud father of daughter Jordan (two more children—son Justin and daughter Sydney—were added to the family later on). But the one key element that Byrd lacked was a relationship with God. So when Tracy began taking Jordan to church, Byrd curiously took notice. Then, when his wife later gave her heart to Christ, his interest was really piqued—although not necessarily in a positive way.

“She got saved and I was like, ‘Wow, what’s that?’” Byrd says. “‘I’m not going in that direction because I don’t want to be like that.’ My brother and sister-and-law had gotten saved five years earlier, and I thought they were strange, so I didn’t want to be like that.”

As his wife and daughter continued their spiritual walk, Byrd quickly started to feel left out. Begrudgingly, he opted to tag along and, eventually, had a miraculous change of heart.

“I went a few weeks and really wasn’t listening,” Byrd says. “But one week I listened, and God just convicted my heart so bad. I truly understood why Christ died for me. I walked that aisle, and someone led me to the Lord.”

By then, Byrd was embarking on his professional boxing career and was still fighting as a svelte 175-pound middleweight. But after three fights, he felt inspired to move all the way up to the heavyweight division. Byrd was so convinced that this move was part of God’s plan, he prayed for supernatural intervention.

“I can honestly tell you that I spoke to the Lord,” Byrd says. “I wanted to be a heavyweight. I was tired of losing the weight, and my career at that time was going nowhere. There were no major guys in the division. I told the Lord, ‘If I can be a heavyweight, I will be a witness for You. I won’t forget about You ... It’s going to be all about You.’”

God answered his prayer, and almost immediately Byrd began to gain weight until he was a rock-solid 210 pounds. In April 2000, the six-foot-one fighter defeated Vitali Klitschko in Berlin, Germany, for the WBO title. Byrd lost that belt six months later, but in December 2002, he claimed the IBF title by defeating Evander Holyfield.

After his career-altering victory over Holyfield, Byrd seemed to be on top of the boxing world, but he was fighting another kind of battle internally. “I won’t say I was playing the Christian game, but as far as boxing was concerned, it was still all about me,” Byrd says. “After I beat Holyfield, no other heavyweight wanted to fight me because my style was too hard. It was like that for a long time. I was on top of the world. And the guy came over to my house and did an interview; and then Sports Illustrated said I was the baddest man on the planet, and it was like, ‘Wow.’ It was that inward pride. I thought it was all about me.”

In September 2003, Byrd stepped into the ring for his first title defense against Fres Oquendo. The fight was originally supposed to be a co-main event on HBO, but then the network decided to focus only on Byrd’s fight as the featured bout.

“That took me over the top,” Byrd recalls. “I thought, *I am the man. This is all about me.* But

the fight with Oquendo was a horrible fight. The only way it could've gone worse is if I would've lost. But it was really like a loss. It was controversial. People thought I lost. I got all of these bad emails. After the fight, I stayed in my house for about two weeks. I don't even think I went to church. I was so embarrassed. The Lord put me in my place."

Byrd had learned the hard truth found in Proverbs 16:18: *"Pride comes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall."* After that humbling experience, Byrd prayed for forgiveness and vowed to never let selfishness and ego get in the way of what God had called him to do.

Although Byrd eventually lost his IBF title to Wladimir Klitschko in 2006 and lost to Alexander Povetkin in 2007 as part of the IBF heavyweight tournament, Byrd still found ways to use his platform to share God's love with others. Both losses took place in Germany, where his demeanor and strong moral character made a lasting impression on the nation's rabid boxing fans.

Byrd then decided to drop down to the light heavyweight division in an effort to revitalize his career. And though Byrd lost in his first light heavyweight fight against Shaun George (and ultimately retired from the sport shortly following the May 2008 bout), he maintains a deeper revelation of his purpose as a boxer and as a follower of Christ. To that end, his pursuit of excellence on all fronts has taken on greater significance. Just as before, it still comes down to preparation, but Byrd's full surrender and trust in God for the results—win or lose—gives his legendary work ethic new meaning.

"I know I'm going to be excellent in my sport because I'm good at what I do," Byrd says. "But if my training is perfect, if I do everything in order, I'm going to achieve the goal that God has put in front of me. If you give it your all and you know you've got the ability to be the best and you achieve that, there's nothing better. And you bring glory to God by doing it. That's excellence."

When Byrd isn't training for a fight, he still maintains an extremely disciplined routine. But five weeks leading up to any given bout, things get intense, although his methods are quite a bit different from the average professional boxer. "Most guys go to training camp," Byrd says. "So they're off somewhere in high altitudes up in the mountains or they're in seclusion. I'm at home. I've always been at home. It never changes. I get up early—4:30 or 5 o'clock in the morning—and run my miles. I'll come back and eat a small meal and try to get some liquid in me; then I lift weights and then I'm off to the gym."

Following this routine has taught Byrd the truth of a popular cliché from the 1980s: "No pain, no gain." The less catchy phrase in its original form can be found in Hebrews 12:11: *"No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it"* (NIV).

"Hard work is everything," Byrd says. "Hard work will bring excellence—even in losing. If a guy beats me, he was just better than me, but I know I did everything I could. I was in great shape. So I'm going to get excellence out of what I do."

Thanks to his experiences in Germany, Byrd can also attest to another biblical truth tied to the concept of excellence: Self-control for the believer is more beneficial than self-control for the nonbeliever (see 1 Corinthians 9:25-27). The reason for this is because Christians who exercise self-control do so in order to receive an "imperishable" crown, or, in other words,

benefits that will carry over into their eternal life.

Paul goes on to describe one who only trains with discipline as an athlete who runs *“aimlessly, or box like one who beats the air.”* But for the follower of Christ, self-control affords the opportunity to speak into others’ lives and keeps us from being “disqualified” because of a hypocritical lifestyle.

Byrd believes that many challenges to discipline and self-control exist. He personally has to be careful about his diet in order to stay in top physical condition during training and during his fights. Byrd has also observed that many in his profession have specific struggles with relationships that often cause them trouble, often losing years from their careers.

“I came out of the Olympics and started getting notoriety,” Byrd says. “Then I moved up to the heavyweight division and started getting more fame on top of that. It really could have gone to my head ... You’ve got to stay on point because if you’re a good athlete, it will mess you up.”

Byrd again takes his cue from some key New Testament writings. In this case, the admonition to remain disciplined can be found in Romans 6:12-13:

“Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, so that you obey its desires. And do not offer any parts of it to sin as weapons for unrighteousness. But as those who are alive from the dead, offer yourselves to God, and all the parts of yourselves to God as weapons for righteousness.”

While some believers might question the violent nature of Byrd’s sport, it’s apparent that his body (and more specifically, his hands) has quite literally become a “[weapon] for righteousness.” And that quest for excellence doesn’t just end in the ring. It carries over into every facet of his life.

“I want to be the best,” Byrd says. “I want to be the perfect husband for my wife. It’s not so I can brag. I just want her to feel so comfortable and so proud of the fact that she can trust everything her husband does. I want to be an excellent father. I want my kids to be proud of me. And I’m really stern. I’m not a pushover. But at the same time I’m really fair, and they know I love them. I try to live according to what the Bible says. I’m not perfect. I just try to be a godly father.”

Byrd is a blessed man, just as all who claim Christ as Savior are blessed. That’s why he believes firmly Jesus’ words in Luke 12:48: *“Much will be required of everyone who has been given much. And even more will be expected of the one who has been entrusted with more.”*

“God is expecting more from us as Christians,” Byrd says. “He wants us to put our faith in Him and know that we trust Him and know that He is able to do it. All you have to do is look at the Israelites. They never trusted Him for anything; and when they did, it was only for that time, and then they’d soon forget what God had done for them. The Lord has brought me out of Egypt and he’s brought me through the wilderness. I’m not going to stay in the wilderness when I probably only have 40 miles to go.”

Byrd certainly experienced times in the wilderness and times in the Promised Land. But the constant that remains for him—as it should for all believers—can be found in 2 Corinthians 8:7, where Paul writes, *“Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us—excel also in this grace.”*

“God wants excellence from you—and not just in sports but in attitude and service,” Byrd says. “Have the right attitude. You’re representing Him all the time. Let people see Christ through you in your sport. Be a great athlete also. He’s given you this ability. Don’t cheat yourself. Don’t do it halfway. Do it to the fullest because He’s in you, and He’s expecting more from you. Push yourself to another level. Trust Him for the strength and the endurance to do it.

“As a Christian athlete, I can go that extra mile,” Byrd adds. “It’s for God’s glory.”

Go

1. What are some examples of discipline in your sport or field of interest? With which areas of discipline do you tend to struggle? What areas of discipline generally come easier to you?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 9:25-27. What does Paul mean when he says that he doesn’t “run like one who runs aimlessly, or box like one who beats the air” (v. 26)? How do you think purpose works together with discipline? Is it possible for your discipline to ultimately have little meaning?
3. Read Romans 6:12-13. What are some things that challenge your physical discipline? What methods do you use to overcome those challenges? What are some things that challenge your spiritual discipline?
4. Read Luke 12:48. What are some things that are required of you as an athlete, student, employee, parent or child? As your level of responsibility increases, how does that impact the decisions you make?
5. What are some things that you have had to sacrifice in your pursuit of excellence? What are some other things that you need to sacrifice in order to fulfill your potential? What are some steps that you need to take in order to maintain a high level of discipline both physically and spiritually?

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Bible Reference:

Hebrews 12



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