



Unfading Glory

Featuring Stephen Barrett
NCAA Champion

Like any other competitive athlete, wrestlers have dreams that help them push through the difficult times. For some, it might be as simple as winning the next match. For others, it might be a much higher goal of winning a championship. And with winning comes a certain level of glory.

Whether it's a physical prize, like a trophy or a medal, or an emotional reward, such as praise from others or fame and notoriety, the allure of that glory can have a strong pull on any athlete's life. Stephen Barrett knows all about it. He achieved the highest level of competitive greatness within the college ranks when he won the 1977 NCAA individual title in the 142-pound weight class at Oklahoma State University.

And then, he learned a harsh reality about personal glory: it eventually goes away.

"I always felt like I could be happy the rest of my life if I won the national championship," Barrett recalls. "But by the next morning, that happiness was gone. I'd worked so hard for that championship and it didn't change my life at all."

Barrett began thinking about what was really important in life and ultimately realized that there was deeper joy in using his talents for God. After wrestling for a sports ministry's international traveling team, he became a full-time missionary and eventually moved to Russia, and then to Mongolia, where he trains and disciples wrestlers.

The Apostle Paul had a firm understanding of what Barrett and so many other athletes have experienced. He too had been tempted to accept praise for his contributions to the Early Church, but ultimately gave way to the truth he wrote about in a letter to the Christians in Corinth:

"All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize." (1 Corinthians 9:25/NLT)

There's nothing wrong with winning. In fact, right before Paul explains the difference between earthly and heavenly rewards, he encourages the readers to "run to win!" (1 Corinthians 9:24/NLT)

But winning is meaningless if there is no eternal significance attached to it. Barrett realized this truth and transferred his personal pursuits into God-focused pursuits. Be excellent in what you do. Go for the prize. Then, regardless of the result, use the opportunity that He has given you to impact others with the life-changing Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the competitive goals that you have set for yourself? Which of those goals have you accomplished and which are you still striving to reach?
2. How important is *winning* to you? How do you usually feel immediately after a victory? How do you feel immediately after a loss?
3. Go back and read 1 Corinthians 9:25. Have you ever experienced the reality of the fading prize? What was your emotional response when you realized that the excitement was going to be short-lived (surprised, disappointed, depressed, etc.)?
4. How would you define the phrase “eternal prize?” Have you set that as a goal in your life, and if so, how often do you think about attaining it?
5. In what ways might you be able to use your athletic career as a way to impact others for Christ? Are you doing those things now? If not, what do you need to do that will allow you to better experience the “unfading glory” that people like Steven Barrett have experienced in their lives?

Closing Prayer