

2 Timothy 2:5

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned,
except he strive lawfully.

Analysis

And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully. Paul shifts from military to athletic metaphor. "Strive for masteries" (athlē, ἀθλή) refers to competing in athletic contests—the verb gives us "athlete." Ancient athletic competitions, especially the Olympic and Isthmian games, were immensely popular. "Crowned" (stephanoutai, στεφανοῦται) refers to the victor's wreath (stephanos, στέφανος)—laurel, olive, or pine branches awarded to winners.

The critical condition is "except he strive lawfully" (ean mē nomimōs athlēse, ἐὰν μὴ νομίμως ἀθλήσῃ). The adverb nomimōs (νομίμως) means "according to the rules, legitimately." Ancient games had strict rules governing training, competition procedures, and conduct. Athletes who cheated, took shortcuts, or violated regulations were disqualified regardless of performance. Winners had to compete according to established standards.

Applied to Christian ministry, this teaches that faithfulness to divine standards matters as much as results. God rewards not merely activity but obedience—ministry conducted according to Scripture's guidelines. Pragmatic methods that "work" but violate biblical principles disqualify servants from reward.

Historical Context

Greek athletic competitions were central to Hellenistic culture. The Olympic Games dated to 776 BC; the Isthmian Games near Corinth occurred biennially. Athletes trained for ten months under strict supervision before competing. Rules governed everything: training regimens, diet, competition procedures, conduct. Judges (hellanodikai) enforced rules rigorously. Violations resulted in disqualification, public shame, and sometimes fines. Winners received wreaths, public honor, free meals, and exemption from taxes.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. In what areas of Christian service might you be pursuing results through methods that 'work' pragmatically but violate biblical principles?
2. How carefully do you study Scripture to ensure your ministry methods align with God's revealed standards rather than contemporary church culture?
3. Are you more motivated by visible success and human approval or by faithful obedience that may go unnoticed until Christ's return?

Interlinear Text

ἐὰν	δὲ	καὶ	ἀθλήσῃ	τις	οὐ	στεφανοῦται	ἐὰν	μὴ
if	And	also	he strive	a man	not	crowned	if	G3361
G1437	G1161	G2532	G118	G5100	G3756	G4737	G1437	

νομίμως	ἀθλήσῃ
lawfully	he strive
G3545	G118

Additional Cross-References

Revelation 3:11 (Parallel theme): Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.

Colossians 1:29 (Parallel theme): Whereunto I also labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily.

James 1:12 (Parallel theme): Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.

Hebrews 12:4 (Parallel theme): Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.

Luke 13:24 (Parallel theme): Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.

Revelation 2:10 (Parallel theme): Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.

Hebrews 2:9 (Parallel theme): But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man.

Hebrews 2:7 (Parallel theme): Thou madest him a little lower than the angels; thou crownedst him with glory and honour, and didst set him over the works of thy hands:

Philippians 1:15 (Parallel theme): Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will:

1 Peter 5:4 (Parallel theme): And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.