

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Running The Spiritual Race I Corinthians 9:24-27

The difference between a good athlete and a great athlete is not ability but desire. A great athlete has the drive to win, a determination to succeed in his or her particular sport. There are athletes with wonderful coordination and agility but they lack desire and the fire to win so they never reach their full potential. There are others with only fair to good ability who have tremendous desire and they become great athletes. They have the burning desire to win and the determination to make whatever sacrifices are necessary to do so. A winner wins, and a loser loses. Red Auerbach, the famous ex-coach of the Boston Celtics says, "Show me a good loser and I will show you a loser."

Christians are in a spiritual race, and there must be a desire to win the race and a determination to make whatever sacrifices are necessary to be a winner. Christians must learn self-control and self-denial if they are going to win the race and receive a reward. Show me a man or woman who doesn't care whether he or she wins the Christian race, and I will show you a person who will not win the race!

Apparently the Corinthian Christians had become soft and flabby spiritually. In their worldliness and carnality, they did not want to persevere in the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. Words such as trust, faith, rest and wisdom were really liked by the Corinthians, but words like self-control, self-denial, self-discipline and perseverance were shunned by these flabby Christians.

RUNNING TO WIN 9:24

Do you not know. In I Corinthians 9, Paul has been dealing with the giving up of rights to be effective for Jesus Christ. He has shown that he had the right to be paid money as a gospel minister, but he willingly set that right aside so as not to have the Corinthians connect the giving of money with the preaching of the gospel. He then used his own life as an example of a person who became "all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." Paul give up the right to do all kinds of legitimate practices such as the eating of meat sacrificed to idols, the drinking of wine and the observing of Jewish holidays so as not to offend men in order to win men to Christ or help them grow in Christ. As a mature Christian, Paul set aside his rights to any questionable practice in order to reach as many men, women, boys and

girls as he possibly could for Christ. This whole context is about reaching people for Christ, so in I Corinthians 9:24-27, the emphasis is upon practicing self-denial for the salvation of others. Paul's point will be that by giving in all the time to the love of indulgences and luxury, we may find ourselves trapped in a lifestyle spiritually injurious to us which could cause us to be disqualified from the spiritual race.

That in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Paul was an avid sports fan and he picks out an athletic event which was well-known to the Corinthians. Every three years the Isthmian Games were held outside the city of Corinth. They were second only to the Olympic Games which were also held in Greece. These games were centered around pagan holidays where there was much feasting, amusement and excitement. Important people from all over Greece and the Roman empire would assemble for the games which consisted of leaping, throwing the discus and javelin, boxing, wrestling and all kinds of dash and long distance runs. Only free men, not slaves, could enter into these games as contestants, and in each event only one of the contestants could be a winner, taking home the prize or reward. Those who won were crowned with a garland or wreath of pin leaves, parsley or ivy. The victors became national heroes and were almost immortalized. The families of the victors were held in great honor, and when the victor returned home to his particular city he did so riding in a chariot. Triumphantly he rode through a hole made in the wall surrounding his town or city, indicating that a city with such a strong citizen as he needed no walls for defense. The victor was given money out of the city treasury and he was exempted from all taxes.

Paul used the Isthmian Games as an illustration of how all Christians should run the spiritual race. In the Greek context, while many ran the race, only one could win the prize, but in the Christian life the prize is open to all, and all should run to win the promised reward.

Run in such a way as to get the prize. The prize at the end of the race is not salvation because the Christian already has that due to his eternal relationship with Christ Jesus the Lord. He runs the race for rewards which come for faithful service. Again, there is an analogy with the Greek games. For a young Greek, the reward at the end of the race would not be his Greek citizenship. It was the law of the Greeks that no person could participate in the games unless he could prove that he was of pure Greek parentage. These young Greek athletes were already Greek citizens running in a race to obtain honor, glory and a prize. Christians are already citizens of heaven, and that happened at the moment they were converted to Christ. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ (Philip. 3:20). We Christians are not running the race hoping that we will someday be citizens of heaven. We are citizens of heaven now, and we are running the race for spiritual crowns, for rewards given to us by Christ himself at the Judgment Seat of Christ as an expression of His satisfaction because of the Christian's love, devotedness and faithfulness in this life.

Christians are free men and women in Christ, and as such are placed in the spiritual race and are to win that race. If we fail to give all we have to win, we do not lose heaven, but we lose reward. Salvation is by grace, not by works. We do not work to keep ourselves saved, but we work to prove or demonstrate salvation. We work, not for salvation, but because of salvation,

and the result of that work is reward in heaven at the judgment Seat of Christ. Salvation is by grace, and thank God that even though we fail at times, God's grace is sufficient. If salvation were by works, we would be miserable, for none of us ever lives the Christian life as he could or should. When would we do enough works to know that we were saved? As runners put forth every effort to win, so the Christian must strain every nerve and stretch every muscle to produce his finest spiritual effort.

No one can deny the oftentimes intimidating difficulties of the Christian life. It is like a race. It is a struggle from beginning to end, but the prize that waits for you at the finish line is worth it. Sometimes the struggle gets so overwhelming, sometimes your sin hangs about you like a weight, and sometimes you feel like giving up; but if you keep your eyes focused on Christ, on the prize of glory and eternal life, you will be strengthened to endure (Table Talk, I Corinthians).

Why are you here on earth? God saved you. He designed you with your gifts, talents and abilities that He might use you, that you might be pleasing to him, and that you might win the race. If you do not win, it is not God's fault; it is your fault because you refused to get in spiritual shape, to pray, to discipline your body, to bring your mind under control, to make your heart obey. Paul says, "Run that you might win!"

RUNNING BECAUSE OF SELF-CONTROL 9:25a

Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. For those who competed in the games, there was a struggling, an agonizing to bring self-control to the body. There was self-discipline. An athlete cannot win the race without self-discipline. Every Greek athlete had to sign an oath that he had been training for ten months before the games began. He gave up certain delightful pleasures that would keep him from winning the contest in the games. He gave up sweets, delightful food, kept a curfew, gave up relations with the opposite sex and exercised continually. He willingly subjected himself to rigorous, strenuous discipline to win the prize. Any indulgence which made the body weak or effeminate was given up to win the race. The ancient Greek Epictetus says,

Do you wish to gain the prize at the Olympic games? Consider the requisite preparations and the consequences. You must observe a strict regime; must live on food which is unpleasant; must abstain from all delicacies; must exercise yourself at the prescribed times in hot and in cold; you must drink nothing cool; must take no wine as usual; you must put yourself under a pugilist, as you would under a physician, and afterwards enter the lists.

Paul had to deny himself lawful, legitimate rights in order to win the spiritual race. He gladly, willingly and voluntarily set aside rights he had in order to win more people to Christ. Why? He was doing this ultimately to win a prize, to finish the race, to be a winner at the Judgment Seat of Christ. What does it take then for any Christian to win the race? It takes denial of personal rights. He must limit indulgences, set aside legitimate pleasures, and refuse to give way to laziness. Self-control comes when one has Christ controlling his life. A life of discipline flows out of a life of dependence on Jesus Christ, an occupation with Him who said, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). With Christ, a life of discipline is possible. I can do everything through him who gives me strength (Philip. 4:13). If we have a life of discipline but no life of faith, we face a possible spiritual burnout. If we have a life of faith but no discipline, we face a spiritual passivity. A balanced Christian knows how to depend on Christ and how to discipline his body with all of its legitimate and evil desires.

In order for a Christian to win the spiritual race, he must have self-control in all things. Self-control is to be exercised in temper, in diet, in sleep, in Bible study habits, in prayer habits, in sexual habits and in witnessing habits. In fact, self-control is the key to winning the spiritual race and receiving the crowns that are ours for faithful service for Christ.

The sacrifices that athletes in training make call to mind as well that Paul's "evangelistic principle" should permeate all of our lives and order all of our priorities. From time to time we verbally share our faith and explain our moral commitments, but all of life involves modeling for a fallen world the balance of freedom and restraint that Paul articulates here. Whether at work or at play, at church or in the world, we are never "off-duty" with respect to the tasks of exhibiting the values of a balanced Christian life or of identifying with our culture for the sake of redeeming it (Craig Blomberg, I Corinthians).

RUNNING FOR A REWARD 9:25b

They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. A Greek athlete would rigorously train to receive a corruptible, perishable wreath made of ivy, parsley or pin leaves which brought with it the praise of men. But we Christians run that we may receive the ultimate crown which is our salvation and be rewarded at the Judgment Seat of Christ with crowns for our faithful service. In the New Testament, we are told about various crowns. There is the incorruptible crown for those who walk a holy life. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever (I Cor. 9:25). There is the crown of rejoicing for souls we have led to Christ. For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy (I Then 1:190-20). There is the crown of righteousness to all

who long for the return of Jesus Christ. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for this appearing (II Tim. 4:8). There is a crown of life for those Christians who faithfully endure testing on this earth. Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him (Jms. 1:12). There is a second crown of life for those who die as martyrs for Christ. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life (Rev. 2:10). There is a crown of glory for faithful pastors who instruct their flocks. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away (I Pet. 5:4). Christians run for spiritual crowns and for the glory of God. The strenuous self-denial of the athlete in training for his fleeting reward is a rebuke to all half-hearted Christian efforts and flabby Christian commitment. What kinds of crowns will you be receiving Christian?

Upon being rewarded at the Judgment Seat of Christ, each Christian is not going to parade around showing the size or number of his crowns. Christians will throw their crowns at the feet of the Lord Jesus. The twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives forever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power..." May I suggest that these spiritual crowns will not be given as permanent possessions but will be given to us to place at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ

RUNNING WITH PURPOSE 9:26

Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; The first athlete Paul picks out is the runner, probably a dash runner, to illustrate how we Christians should run the spiritual life. In the dashes, the Greeks would run with their eyes fixed on a pole at the end of the race. Their goal was to reach the pole. Paul was determined to run the race with definite aims, goals and purposes. He made a solemn resolution that he would not run the race aimlessly. Everything he did as a Christian had a definite purpose. He fixed his eyes on the goal which was Christ and gave every ounce of strength to win the race.

Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ (Philip. 2:13-14).

Paul knew where the finish line was and he was not going to let anyone or anything hinder him from finishing the race. No sin would keep him from the prize.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.. .. (Heb. 12:1-2).

Paul's point is that if we Christians are not willing to give up rights and press towards the mark, focusing our lives on the goal of pleasing Christ, we will not win the race, and we will miss our rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

I do not fight like a man beating the air. The second athlete Paul uses as an illustration is a boxer. He would not live his life like a boxer who was constantly throwing punches at his opponent but never landing a punch. For Paul, every punch was to be meaningful, everyone landed on its mark, every one counted. Paul so lived his life that everything he did counted for eternity.

As Christians, we must not miss spiritual punches and waste energy. Every blow is to strike its object. We are not to waste energy on that which will produce no results. We are not to fight with rash, ill-advised or uncertain blows, but all efforts are to be directed towards subjugating the body to make it do the will of God.

Do you have a plan? Are you wasting effort on things that do not count for eternity? Are you giving up rights? Are you given to holiness of life? Are you involved in reaching a lost world for Christ? Will you come up to the Judgment Seat and have to admit to Christ that you spent most of your time spinning your wheels? Will you be able to tell Christ that you struck definite blows for Him against the enemy in this life? Will the inscription of your tombstone say, "Here lies one who spent his life beating the air"?

RUNNING OUT OF DISCIPLINE 9:27a

No I beat my body. What kept Paul from running the race? What kept him from giving up fights to win men for Christ and to glorify Christ? His body! Yes, but more than that he is referring to the flesh or sin nature which was housed in his body. The flesh wants its rights. The way Paul kept his sin nature down was to discipline his body. Literally this says, "I beat my body black and blue." Paul dealt harshly with his body which wanted by nature to be lazy, slothful, indifferent and even rebellious. He had to put the body to death by severe discipline.

Running the Christian life sometimes calls for radical mortification of the flesh in order to be effective for Jesus Christ. When things get rough in the Christian life, the Christian sucks it up on the inside and endures. Someone has said, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going!" We should not want to get into heaven by the skin of our teeth. We should run the spiritual race for the glory of God to win it.

And make it my slave. Paul subdued the flesh with vigor. Literally this says, "I lead my body around like a slave." He made his body his slave and did not become a slave to the cravings and desires of the flesh. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul would dominate his body and not let it dominate him. He would not indulge in anything that would hurt his testimony or keep people from coming to Christ under his ministry.

Christian, is your body a slave to you? Are you able to go to bed at night and get up early? Are your eating habits such that you are not overweight? Are your sex drives under control so as not to bring a bad name on Christ? Do you make your body be involved in Christian service? Do you keep your mind from wanting more and more money and more and more things in order that you might give more and more to the cause of Christ? Until we train our bodies to be our slaves, we will never be as effective as we should be for Christ, and we will end up at the Judgment Seat with few or no crowns to throw at Christ's feet. Christianity is not a life of complacency but of commitment. For sure, the Christian life is not for sissies. God is looking for a few good men and women.

RUNNING NOT TO BE DISQUALIFIED 9:27b

So that after I have preached to others, Paul was very concerned that his life should not be hypocritical, for he preached to thousands and knew that he could be disqualified from the spiritual race God had called him to run. It seems like monthly I hear of some famous preacher or well-known Christian who has fallen into adultery, or stolen from the church funds, or left the ministry out of disgust. These men and women have preached to thousands but their ministry ends in disgrace because of sin.

I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. The Greek word for "disqualified" is *adokimos* which means to test and disapprove or reject. It can mean either "to disapprove" or "to reject." The King James Version uses "castaway," favoring the idea of rejection. The New English Bible says "rejected" or "reprobate." Since the context is about rewards, I believe Paul is referring to loss of rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

How might a runner get disqualified from a race? He first of all could be disqualified if he failed to keep the rules. Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules (II Tim. 2:5). If we, as Christians or as ministers of the gospel, choose, by an act of our own will, to go against God and His revealed will for us in the Bible, we must be ready to suffer the consequences. Sin can disqualify a Christian from winning the race. If we choose to sin, God may bring heavy discipline upon us in this life. If we refuse to repent God just may take our lives because we are of no use to Him down here. We would not lose our salvation but our opportunity to serve Him, and our lives would be wasted in this world. What motivated Paul was the godly fear that he might lose his ministry, lose his opportunity to serve, lose his chance to gain rewards to throw at Christ's feet.

You may have heard the story of the American Indian, Jim Thorpe. In the 1912 Olympics, Thorpe won both the decathlon and pentathlon. King Gustaf V of Sweden said to Thorpe, "You, sir, are the greatest amateur athlete in the world today." After he had received his gold medals, it was discovered a few months later that Jim Thorpe had played for a professional baseball team, making him no amateur. The King of Sweden asked him to return his medals and it nearly broke Thorpe's heart. He sent the awards back to the King with a letter which read, "I hope your majesty will not think too hard of me. Please remember that I am only a poor, ignorant Indian boy. I did not know that taking five dollars a week for playing ball on the village baseball team made me a professional. I never meant to deceive." The greatest athlete in the world, at that time, perhaps the greatest athlete of all time was disqualified because he broke the rules.

A second an athlete may be disqualified is if he receives an injury while running and is unable to finish the race. Because of laziness, indifference, coldness of heart, lack of discipline, a Christian may give in to the indulgences of the flesh. The indulgence of the so-called "good life" may so entrap him that he will fall into temptation, receiving a spiritual injury that may put him on the shelf spiritually. God may disqualify him temporarily by putting him on the shelf or permanently taking him home to heaven. When the Christian life is dry, mechanical and ritualistic, with no power of joy, the Christian is in danger of being disqualified, not from salvation but from life and service for Jesus Christ. When Christians refuse to deny themselves, to exercise discipline, to undergo self-control, then the spiritual power goes and a person's life may be wasted. There will be a going through the motions, a charade, a ritual of futility, but there will be no power. Some spiritual injury has set in to disqualify from the race. A Christian cannot lose his salvation but he can lose his reward at the Judgment Seat of Christ, and he can lose his only purpose for living which is to please Jesus Christ.

There is a third way an athlete may be disqualified. He can quit the race. He may begin strong, but if he quits he cannot win. A person who claims to be a Christian and then quits altogether running the race, showing absolutely no interest at all in spiritual things, may experience total rejection that is, he may be tested and rejected, finding out he is a reprobate, having never really known Christ's salvation. This person was not saved and then lost. He was never saved at all. He may have looked saved externally, but time and the cares of the world choked out his interest in Christ. This sounds much like the second and third kinds of soil in the Parable of the Sower. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy, But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one

who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful (Matt. 13:20-22). This person completely stops running, turning from the faith once for all delivered to the saints and goes back into the world. The reprobate is different from a Christian who may falter, may stumble, may go backward for awhile, but he does win the race. A mere professing, unsaved Christian quits and refuses to run the race. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved (Matt. 10:23). Someone has put it this way, "Quitters never win and winners never quit." Frank Barker, pastor of Brierwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama puts it well when he says, "He who fizzles before the finish was faulty from the first."

Christian, God wants you to finish the race. The race is difficult, taxing and challenging and it may zap you of every ounce of strength at times. But your goal must be to cross the finish line with arms stretched high and a shout of joy and victory! Then you can fall to the ground in total exhaustion. But you will know you have finished the race. Where you finish in the race is not nearly as important as that you finish the race.

CONCLUSION

If you are a Christian who is running the race poorly, if you have broken God's rules or have some spiritual injury due to sin, God says that you must repent. You must come to grips with your life before a holy God lest He put you on the shelf and you become useless to Him. Remember, Christian, God is loving, compassionate and merciful and He is ready to forgive any Christian who has gone astray. He wants you to run the race with power, freedom, liberty and joy. If anything is keeping you from running and winning the spiritual race, deal with it today.

If you are not a Christian, you cannot even think about winning the spiritual race until you qualify to get into it. You cannot run the spiritual race until you come alive spiritually and become a citizen of heaven. How do you come alive to God? How do you become a permanent citizen of heaven? You trust Christ as your Savior from your sins, transferring all your trust to Christ and away from yourself for salvation. You bow to Christ as Lord, giving Him the right to rule in your life. The moment you accept Christ as Savior and Lord, the starting gun sounds and you are beginning the most exciting race in the world--the Christian life!