

Run Your Race

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Our passage of scripture is Paul's continuation of the fact that he had the authority and right to receive material support, but being a mature Christian, he balanced his authority with discipline. He did not have the right to give up his liberty in Christ, but he did have the liberty to give up his rights. This began with him answering a question that been sent to him by the Corinthian believers who wanted to justify their selfish behaviors by declaring that freedom in Christ. But Paul responded that the stronger believers in the church should be able to set aside their rights for the sake of the weaker saints, that eating meat was not more important than building up the weaker saints. Again Paul was talking about priorities, the things that are really important to us in our lives. He believed it was unfortunate that some Christians had their personal priorities confused and, as a result, hindered the work of Christ. He pointed them back to Jesus' teaching about seeking God's kingdom and God's righteousness and all those things that we think are so important will be added in God's time.

Last week we learned from Paul's writings how he had given his own personal examples of how he disciplined himself for the sake of the gospel, as he had been commissioned by God and he was compelled to faithfully perform his ministry. He also stated that he preached for the sake of unbelievers and wanted nothing he did to be a stumbling block to hinder them from receiving saving faith. In this portion of scripture Paul talks about himself and his own convictions about why it is so important for him to be faithful.

Paul, like so many in our day, was fond of sports events. He liked athletic images and used them often in his letters. The Corinthians would have been

familiar with the Greek Olympic Games as well as their own local Isthmian Games. Knowing this, Paul used a metaphor very close to their experience.

Today Paul would have been comparing the Christian life to the discipline of Allyson Felix, Anna Pierce, Galen Rupp or Wallace Spearmon, all members of the 2012 U.S. Olympic Track and Field team. Or maybe Paul would have compared us to Eduardo Alicea; Damon Allen, or Raven Barnes of Ypsilanti, Michigan, members of the 2012 U.S. Olympic Boxing team.

An athlete must be disciplined if he or she is to win the prize. Discipline means giving up the good and the better for the best. The athlete must watch their diet as well as the hours they keep. They must smile and say “No, thank you” when people offer fattening desserts or invite them to late-night parties. There is nothing wrong with food or fun, but if they interfere with your highest goals, then they are hindrances and not helps.

The Christian does not run the race in order to get to heaven. We are in the race because we have been saved through faith in Jesus Christ. Only Greek citizens were allowed to participate in the games, and they had to obey the rules both in their training and in their performing. Any contestant found breaking the training rules was automatically disqualified.

In order to give up his rights and have the joy of winning lost souls, Paul had to discipline himself. That is the emphasis of his writing: Authority and rights must be balanced by discipline. If we want to serve the Lord and win God’s reward and approval, we must pay the price.

We don’t want to be “disapproved” or “disqualified.” At the Greek games, there was a herald who announced the rules of the contest, the names of the contestants, and the names and cities of the winners. He would also announce the names of any contestants who were disqualified.

Paul saw himself as both a “herald” and a “runner.” He was concerned because he didn’t want to get so busy trying to help others in the race that he ignore himself and find himself disqualified. Again, it was not a matter of losing personal salvation, because the disqualified Greek athlete did not lose his citizenship, only his opportunity to win a prize. The whole emphasis is on rewards, and Paul did not want to lose his reward.

In Paul metaphor only one runner could win the olive-wreath crown in the Greek games, but every believer can win an incorruptible crown when we stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ. This crown is given to those who discipline themselves for the sake of serving Christ and winning lost souls. We keep our bodies under control and keep our eyes on the goal.

For some of us this means turning off the television or computer and remembering our disciplined body and a Spirit-filled life go hand-in-hand. We must have disciplined eating, exercising, and resting, and a Spirit-directed balanced life. For some this means limiting our smoking and use of alcohol, but also our eating habits. And many Christians must discipline their time to have a consistent devotional life or Bible-study program.

Paul had one great goal in life: to honor God by winning the lost and building up the saints. To reach this goal, he was willing to pay any price. He was willing even to give up his personal rights! He sacrificed immediate gains for eternal rewards, immediate pleasures for eternal joys.¹

Paul’s commitment to this course of ministry did not come easily. It required personal discipline and strict training like that of an athlete who strove for supremacy in their field. To that end Paul willingly gave up certain privileges which might otherwise be his to enjoy so that he could win the prize, the

¹Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. 1 Co 9:15

consummation of the reward was the opportunity to glory before Christ in those he had been able to win (2 Cor. 1:14; Phil. 2:16; 1 Thes. 2:19). To accomplish this Paul would not let his body master him (cf. 1 Cor. 6:12); sometimes he denied even its demand for rightful privileges and pleasures (8:9) for a greater good (10:33). Paul was concerned that some might not be able to say with him one day, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race” (2 Tim. 4:7)²

Paul insists to those Corinthians who wanted to take the easy way that no one will ever get anywhere without self-discipline. In this passage Paul reminds us of his philosophy of life.

First, life is a contest. A flabby and untrained runner cannot win races. We must regard ourselves always as persons engaged upon a race pressing onwards to a goal.

Second to be victorious in the race demands discipline. We have to discipline our bodies; it is one of the neglected facts of the spiritual life that very often spiritual depression springs from nothing else than physical unfitness. We do our best work in anything when our bodies are healthy and fit. We must also discipline our minds; so we can think more clearly and solve problems more easily. We must discipline our souls; we can face life’s sorrows with calm endurance, its temptations with the strength God gives, its disappointments with courage.

Third, we need to know our goal. So many people are aimless in their lives; they are drifting anywhere instead of going somewhere. Someone once drew a cartoon showing two men on Mars looking down at the people in this world scurrying here, there and everywhere. One asked the other, “What are they doing?” The other replied, “They are going.” “But,” asked the first, “Where are they

²Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:525

going?” “Oh,” said the other, “they are not going anywhere; they are just going.” And to go just anywhere is the certain way to arrive nowhere.

Fourth, we need to know the worth of our goal. The great appeal of Jesus was not based on penalty and punishment. Rather, it was based on the declaration, “Look what you are missing if you do not take my way.” The goal is life, and surely it is worth disciplining ourselves to win that.

Fifth, we cannot save others unless we master ourselves. The Greeks declared that the first rule of life is, “Human know yourself.” Certainly we cannot serve others until we have mastered ourselves; we cannot teach what we do not know; we cannot bring others to Christ until we ourselves have found him.^{3 4}

Today, you have the opportunity to give our lives to God through faith in Jesus Christ, and Christ will give you self-discipline to finish the race that God has given to you. Amen.

³ Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Letters to the Corinthians*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 84

⁴Ellingworth, Paul ; Hatton, Howard ; Ellingworth, Paul: *A Handbook on Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*. New York : United Bible Societies, 1995 (UBS Handbook Series; Helps for Translators), S. 210