

Run to Win

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

February 14, 2016

If you can take your Bibles and open them to 1 Corinthians chapter 9 this morning. Normally on Sunday mornings, we're going through, working our way through Luke's Gospel, but I felt compelled this week to direct our attention to the example of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. The elders met a couple of weeks ago to discuss some of the amazing things God is doing in our church these days.

We are, all of us to a man humbled, and at the stewardship God has given us. We also wanted to come together to pray against some of the ways that Satan is attempting to oppose the work, hinder the progress. And I've seen that God has been very quick to answer our prayers, encouraging saints in the truth, building a blessed unity among all of those who love and pursue the truth together. God is clearly at work in our midst. And it's



thrilling, absolutely thrilling to be at the center of what he's doing.

As elders, we've never been so united in heart and mind as we are now. There's such a joy and a harmony among one another. We're enjoying rich friendships and spurring each other on to greater growth and faithfulness. We're learning together what shepherding really means, how to be more effective shepherds of God's flock. That means caring for all of you. We want to be more effective in communicating, communicating more clearly so we can lead more biblically. So keep praying for us. We have so much to learn, so much to grow in as we seek to be faithful to the task God has called us to in our role in the body.

Throughout the church, though, we're watching God work in many individual lives, watching people saved, watching people sanctified through the proclamation and the application of the Word of God. There is a growing concern among the whole body for discipleship, to see a Colossians 1:28 mindset take deep, deep root in our church.

GRACE CHURCH



Colossians 1:28 says, "Him we proclaim," and that's referring to who? Jesus Christ, right. "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ." Maturity is what we're after. And that's happening churchwide. From our Children's Ministry and AWANA program, you saw those little bodies running out there, so excited to be in that part of the building. It's not an indictment on my preaching. That's just an encouraging sign that our Children's department is just a wonderful place, a lively place, for them to be. It's healthy; it's thriving.

The ministries to the older saints, everybody above their age, also thriving. Sunday School classes, mid-week Bible studies individuals meeting with other people to meet practical needs, to get into spiritual issues with each other. Scripture-saturated Christians are ministering to those who draw near in many ways in a spirit of grace and truth.

And the deeper we grow in doctrinal and relationship unity, loving one another and serving one another, the stronger we individually, the stronger we collectively, the stronger we



sense the call of God, to shine like lights in a very, very dark world, especially right here where God has planted us. The need for God's saving and sanctifying grace is manifest everywhere. We're seeing it everywhere around us. And we want to proclaim these glorious truths to the folks that we work with, to the people that we go to school with, to those we mingle with, our neighbors, our friends, our family.

We want to see Greeley turn away from false gospels. We want to see Greeley turn away from lies that deceive and things that do not save or sanctify. We want to see people find salvation in Jesus Christ and to thrive in the truth. We want to restore true shepherding to a land that has lost that concept almost entirely but doesn't know that they've lost it.

We're fellowshiping with and partnering with other like-minded churches in the northern Colorado region, and even beyond. And that has been such a tremendous joy and strength to us as elders as well. We're reaching out to men in our midst and throughout all these churches for discipleship and training. As I just mentioned, we've opened up registration for the "Women of God" conference in April. God truly has something special planned for

here, not just a special role for our church, though I believe we have a special role, but for all the Bible-centered churches in our region and he has called us to be involved. He has called us to invest in this work.

Let me tell you, folks, Satan doesn't like what's going on here at all. The enemy absolutely hates to see God working through his word in our church. Many of us, and perhaps many of you, maybe you've heard false reports, slanders, false accusations, Satan is doing that. He's intending to discourage and to divide and to sow seeds of doubt. As Paul said, 2 Corinthians 2:11, "We're not ignorant of his devices," but we know, Ephesians 6:12, we know "we don't wrestle against flesh and blood but against the rulers and against the authorities and against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

It's an interesting word Paul used there, the word, wrestle. I'm not sure how many of you have ever wrestled someone, let alone wrestled for your life, facing a grave enemy who intended serious injury to you. If you've ever been in that type of a

situation, it's exhausting. It's terrifying. Spiritual warfare is energy-sapping stuff. But even though the warfare and the conflict is difficult, tiring, we need to be encouraged.

The enemy doesn't attack when he doesn't feel threatened. A church that's self-centered, that doesn't preach deeply, that doesn't confront sin and rebuke sinners, that doesn't strive for holiness, that's a church that's neutralized in the spiritual realm. It's an ineffective social club that poses no threat at all to the enemy. He'd be safe to let it continue on in its deep self-centered slumber.

But when the enemy has a sense of something dangerous going on, that's what warrants his attention. That's what brings his attacks, his attempts to divide and scatter, his attempts to discourage and dismay. So folks, whether we're talking about the larger interests of the corporate assembly or the personal struggles of intimate, struggles of Christians, it's the same story. As Paul warned Timothy, "Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be," what? "Persecuted," right. While evil people and imposters will go on from bad to worse,

deceiving and being deceived, that's going to continue. And what we've been learning from Luke's Gospel, what Simeon said to Mary, Jesus Christ and his truth is "appointed for the fall and the rising of many and for a sign that is opposed so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

And indeed, the thoughts of many hearts are being revealed, for better and for worse. God is at work. Satan is attacking. And even though that's painful at times, look, I acknowledge it's painful. It hurts sometimes when you see what happens with people in their lives. Satan wants to mangle people's souls. And it's painful to see that, that work itself out. Nevertheless, we rejoice to see how God is refining us, how he's winnowing the church, how he's strengthening and unifying and building us to accomplish all that he has called us to do.

As elders, we realize we need to shepherd the flock, teaching them, Hebrews 10:39, teaching them not to be of "those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls." We want to help everyone to press on by God's grace. And we will stay the course, we will stand firm in

grace and in truth. There's probably no one, apart from Christ himself, who endured such continual opposition to the Gospel ministry, and therefore, no one who put forth more spiritual effort than the great Apostle Paul. He is such a tremendous encouragement to us as believers.

There are many who fight the fight, but they don't fight the good fight. There are many who begin the race, but never finish. There are many who profess the faith, but they fail to keep the faith; not Paul, at the end of his life, 2 Timothy 4:7, he declared triumphantly under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." And all this he did amid much, much opposition. Amid much trial and tribulation.

What was it that kept him so strong and encouraged? What fueled his commitment to the Gospel? What is it that motivated his incredible personal sacrifice? Well let's take a look at a word of personal testimony from Paul, a window into the way he thought about his life. You should already be there in your Bibles, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercise self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified."

Listen, if we're going to live the Christian life well, if we're going to endure to the very end, if we're going to cross the finish line triumphantly, then we need to understand our challenge. If we do not understand the nature of the Christian life, you know what? We're not going to embrace the challenge at all. We're going to shy away. Not only that, but to keep us pressing on in the hard times, we're going to need some very serious motivation that goes deep. Failing to understand why we endure hardship can lead to discouragement. And for some, sadly, it could mean falling away. And we certainly don't want to be disqualified.

So that's what I want to give you this morning from this text: Two facts to inform your minds and three motivations to encourage your hearts. Why? So that you'll fix your eyes on Jesus like Paul did and run the race that's set before you so that you'll run to win it. Okay, before we get into our outline, let me set this this passage in its context. It's very important to understand the background here so you see why this mentality is so vital, so significant.

If you've read Paul's letter to the Corinthians before, you understand that this is a letter of rebuke. It's a letter of correction. Over and over again, Paul is correcting something that is wrong. The Corinthian church was fragmented by prideful, factious people and that's why right out of the gate in chapter 1, Paul confronts the corporate sin that has marked this church. "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chole's people," notice he names her. "It's been reported to me by Chole's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers."

People here were circling up in little cliques, dividing, separating from each other. And that factious spirit led to quarreling and further division in the church. It was all a manifestation of a deep-seated pride and arrogance. The deep heart level sin of pride, it was also manifest in other outward sins and Paul confront a number of them throughout the letter.

The first four chapters confront division on the church. Chapters 5 and 6 confront those in the church who tolerated or even celebrated sexual immorality. Chapter 6 even shows a loveless greed in the church as believers were suing each other in court. Later on in the letter, there was a failure to demonstrate proper order in propriety. Listen, wherever disorder exists, all manner of sin exists as well.

Starting with male and female roles, then undermining the message of the Lord's Supper itself, there was disorder in the church. A serious misuse also of spiritual gifts. And an almost unthinkable doctrinal error was circulating in the church. They were denying the very fact of the resurrection from the dead. That's spiritual suicide, folks. I mean, Paul said, "If the dead

are not raised," then what, "not even Christ has been raised, and if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins."

Whoa! That was happening in the church? Right in the middle of all this chaos, at the very heart of the letter, Paul confronted that Corinthian error of pride at the level of personal decision making. Some of the wealthier Corinthians, those who believed themselves to be more doctrinally astute, more of, you know, kind of ahead of other people, they were insisting on exercising their personal rights. They didn't see why their lives had to change for anybody else, in consideration for anyone else. To put it simply, they were just self-centered, and it was hurting the faith of some weaker Christians.

Look back, if you're in 1 Corinthians 9, look back at 1 Corinthians 8 verse 1. Look what he says here, "Now concerning food offered to idols." Okay, that's the context of this little controversy on personal decision making. "Concerning food offered to idols, we know that all of possess knowledge, this knowledge puffs up but love builds up, love edifies. If anyone

imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know; but if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

"Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that 'an idol has no real existence,' and that 'there is no God but one.'" He's quoting them there. "For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth- as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords'- yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

"However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Food will not commend us to God. We're no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." We'll stop there for a moment. Here's what was going on.

Many today have made the mistake of looking at this section, 1 Corinthians 8-10, they look through this section through the lens of what they call Christian Liberty. There are Christians who will say, I have the freedom in Christ to basically, they wouldn't say it this way exactly, but to indulge my liberties, to enjoy my freedom, to pursue my preferences, to do what I want as long I'm really hurting nobody. After all, I'm not under law, but under grace. Ever heard that kind of attitude? Ever heard that expressed? I have.

That's not exactly what Paul is confronting here. It's close, but it's not exactly the same thing. Notice the very important word there in verse 9. And I love that the ESV translators use this word. "Take care that this right of yours," it's the word *exousia*, which refers to, right or authority. It's not talking about just a liberty here, as a freedom issue, a conscience issue, it's talking about a right that they claim that they had. Make sure that your right doesn't cause a weaker brother to stumble.

This section, this passage is confronting the exercise of individual rights. It's not primarily about liberty. Some of these Corinthians had been afforded certain civic rights in Corinth, by virtue of their statuses, freedmen, or citizens, or, or even by virtue of their social standing in the community, their business attachments and engagements, involvements. They had rights of access to certain trade guilds. They had rights of membership in certain business associations and social organizations. And that meant that they could get into exclusive meetings. They could participate in society, which was important for making business contacts, for networking for the purpose of conducting trade, of increasing one's personal wealth.

Networking happened over meals, as happens today, right? But in those days, many business lunches were held at temples in and around Corinth. Pagan worship meant pagan sacrifice, which meant meat offered to idols was served there in the temple restaurants. So some of these Corinthians, exercising their rights, they were eating meat sacrificed to idols and they were eating the meat inside the premises of the pagan temples. What do you think? That okay? Would you go to those kind of business lunches? After all, those pagan temples are just a pile of

rocks, well-ordered and everything, right. Put together with mortar and concrete. What's in a temple? Nothing. They'd bow down to little statues of rocks, right? Well, it's just a rock.

That's how these Corinthians Christians were justifying their eating of meat, exercising their right. They made a rather simplistic argument that Paul does quote there earlier in Chapter 8. He says, There's no such thing as an idol. It's just a rock these pagans bow down to. So the meat's unaffected, so I'm eating it. I'm conducting business, I'm taking care of my family. What's the big deal? What's wrong with that?

Well, two things, Paul says in chapters 8 to 10, he confronted that self-centered attitude on two levels. In chapter 10, he comes back full circle, and he comes around to the problem of association. That is, provoking the Lord to jealousy by dining with the devil. But first in chapters 8 and 9, he confronted the deeper problem. And what was that deeper problem? It was a lack of love; it was a lack of love. Knowledge puffs up, but love what? Edifies. It builds up. So focused on themselves, they

didn't even see or even care how their actions were affecting other Christians.

Okay now, go back to verse 9. Paul says, "But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge, this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against" whom? "Christ." You sin against Christ!

Do we believe that or not? Sin against Christ. "Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble." Wow, that's quite an attitude, isn't it? "I'll never eat meat again if it makes my brother stumble." Do we say that? Man, I like steak. Do you? Would you give it up for the sake of somebody else if it made them stumble? Would we deny ourselves our rights for the sake of other Christians? Would we sacrifice to love others like that?

Paul wasn't commending to the Christians something that he had not practiced for himself. Shepherding is about leading from the front. And Paul led by example. Paul had given up his own right to remuneration for their sake. He gave up the right to receive a regular paycheck from them. In love, he gave up his right of support from them to avoid any doubt about his motives for ministry. Paul's example, such a huge contrast to their way of thinking.

See the Corinthians had insisted on exercising a cultural right granted to them by society, by social norms. Paul, he sacrificed his right granted by God, established in the Old Testament, commanded by Jesus Christ. Look at verse 14, "Those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel." Should, ought to, it's a moral issue. But the Corinthians had been thinking of themselves. And they refused to let go of their rights. Paul, he was thinking of others and he willingly sacrificed his rights to love them.

You see, Paul's decisions were based entirely on love, on what was best for the sake of the Gospel. Notice what he said there in 1 Corinthians 9:19, "For though I am free of all, I've made myself a servant to all that I may win more of them. To the Jews, I became as a Jew in order to win Jews. To those under the law, I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak, I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. And I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings."

Look, we've got to ask ourselves some very hard questions, confronted with this example from Paul. Do we do all for the sake of the Gospel? Do we keep ourselves from whatever hinders the clear witness of the Gospel? Do we engage in activities to advance the cause of the Gospel? Are all our decisions Gospel-centered decisions? Pauls' were. He was an exemplary Christian and he's opened up his own life here. He's opened up his thinking to us as an example, how we ought to think. What

explains this guy? What makes this guy tick? Let's get into our outline.

We'll start by taking a look at two significant facts that informed Paul's thinking, and two significant facts that have to shape our thinking. This is what has shaped his mindset. We'll follow his example when first you run your race to win. Run your race to win. Whether or not you're aware of it, if you're a Christian, you are in a race and you must run. Look at verse 24, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it."

The command itself presupposes that you, as a Christian, are running a race and since you're in the race, win the race. Look, mediocrity isn't okay. Just getting by, just squeaking by, not okay. Run to win the race, not just crawl across the finish line. That's the charge to each and every Christian. And it's exemplified here in Paul's life. Paul took his illustration, as you might know, from the Isthmian games held every couple of years, very close to Corinth.

The word isthmus, it's hard to say in English, right? Our tongues gets all tied up, but isthmus refers to that narrow land bridge that separated the Corinthian peninsula from the rest of Greece. And the word, race, there in verse 24, it's literally the word where we get our word, stadium, from. It refers to the arena in which the athletes raced, in which they ran and competed. It's about 200 yards long or so, that stadium. And the, and the runners would run in the presence of spectators surrounding the stadium. You've probably seen the pictures of those old stadiums in ancient Greece.

Same thing we might picture today in a track and field even, today's Olympics runners running, circling the track. But notice there's a contrast here. There are many runners, there's one winner. Only one receives the prize. There were no prizes for second place, no gold, silver, and bronze. Only one prize was awarded, just one, to the winner. Nothing for the losers. And the prize here in the Isthmian games was a pine wreath placed on the head of the victor like a crown, like a symbol of honor. There would be also attendant civic honors, like statues that would be constructed and sculpted and erected or, or maybe a

song, an ode, written to celebrate the victory, maybe even a triumph.

But the immediate prize was this wreath and that signaled and symbolized the honor and the glory and it signaled also future fame and wealth and privilege that would come to this winner. Everybody wanted to be associated with the winner, right? Kind of like today's sports figures who get these lucrative endorsement contracts. The hard work that they put in over many, many years, often since they were very young, finally leads to victory and it opens the door to future honor and privilege.

It's been interesting to me, and I think probably to a number of you to listen to the interview with the Superbowl winning Denver Broncos, right? But how the players, how they describe what it took to overcome the adversity of their season. I think it was Mark that was telling me how the other team, I don't know, I don't remember their names. Do you remember their names? I don't remember their names. But, anyway, they were, the other team, they were the previous week practicing their touchdown dances. They were getting ready to be interviewed by the

reporters with the microphone in their face. They're putting together victory raps and all that kind of stuff.

The Broncos didn't pay any attention to any of that. They ignored the doubters, the critics, the naysayers, and they focused instead on the hard work and the dedication that would lead to victory. Preparation and planning, following the plan, submitting to the plan, the sweat and the blood, the effort, the pain, it all paid off, didn't it? They put in the hard yards and they were awarded with victory.

In the same way, the athlete who runs the race winning consumes his life. From sunup to sundown, he's focused, he's disciplined, he's single-minded, he's dedicated to the achievement of that one goal. It determines how he lives, when he sleeps, when he wakes, what he eats, what he refuses to eat. It determines how he trains, how he spends his time, everything. That is the mindset that marks the difference between the one winner and then the many losers, between honor and shame.

That's the comparison that Paul wants us to see here. Between the Christian life and an Isthmian or an Olympic race, it's, it's the mindset of winning that he wants us to understand, of gaining, of doing whatever it takes to win, to gain the prize. To live like Paul lived, to sacrifice like he did, to give up rights, to restrict freedoms, to forego pleasures, to set aside preferences, you know what? You've got to have the mentality of a winner, of a runner, who will do anything to win. Your spiritual Olympian, who does whatever it takes to win.

Just as an athlete is willing to trade an easygoing life of self-indulgence for the hard-earned glory of victory, of athletic accomplishment, the Christian life is the same way. We do it all for the sake of the Gospel. You've got to think that way as a Christian. Paul, understand this, Paul is not here describing something exceptional. He's describing something normal. Hebrews 12 says we're all in a race that's set before us. You're in a race, you've got to run. You fix your eyes on Jesus and you run that race. You've got to run it to win it. That's the first significant fact that informs our thinking. That means we have to embrace something else.

A second significant fact that is going to inform our thinking, if you're going to win, you have to discipline your body to run. You gotta discipline your body to run. I don't how you feel right now sitting in your chair, but my body is not disciplined to run. I need to work on that. But whether you feel like it or not, if you're a Christian, you must discipline yourself to run your race. That's verse 25. "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things."

The word, athlete, it's a smoothed over translation of a verb that means, one who competes in the games. That's the literal translation, but it's, it's the verb *agonizomai*, and we get the word, agonize from that. Let me take a moment to describe the kind of agony that any one of these athletes endure to run in order to win. Athletes who competed in the Isthmian games were amateur athletes. That's not derogatory to call them, amateurs, it just means they weren't professionals. They didn't have personal agents. They didn't have multi-million-dollar contracts, corporate sponsors.

These guys came from different walks of life. They had to set aside time and money so that they could train for the games. Sometimes they came from the farm. Sometimes they came from industry or business, but they had to set aside time and that meant set aside earning money. They spent money. This competition cost them from the very start and that was only to train in order to compete. Victory was far from certain at the beginning. They started training in earnest about ten months before the competition, and like athletes today, they restricted their diet, they regulated their sleep. They engaged in a strict regimen of rigorous and targeted exercise.

Their dedication to their training required great discipline, personal discipline and it required the mental preparation and the hard work which readied them to make them successful at that one moment when that gun went off, I guess for them it wasn't a gun that went off, right? But to make them successful in that one moment when that race started to run that one race.

Everything in life revolved around that one event. They were consumed with winning; everything became subordinate to winning. Every aspect of their lives carefully scrutinized, meticulously ordered to achieve the ultimate aim. They ran to win.

Now look, I understand that can sound a bit intimidating. Me, Olympic athlete, I don't, I don't know. Does living a faithful Christian life mean living continuously, continuously at the same level of dedication and intensity of an Olympic athlete. Well, no, but then again, don't let yourself off the hook too quickly. Same intensity as an Olympian? Well, no, not all the time, anyway. God is gracious to give us seasons of intensity and seasons of rest. Sometimes it's the calm before the storm and sometimes it's the furious storm. We all go through times of trial, times of joy.

But the dedication of an athlete, the precision living, the discipline, the careful attention to training, I think that's what Paul has in mind by making the comparison, by calling us to self-control, to self-discipline. As we've been learning in our Ephesians, study, Paul commands us to watch how carefully we're walking, not as unwise people, but as wise people. We're to live lives of excellence, putting God's wisdom on display, glorifying him because we're living according to his prescriptions. When we live like that, people notice, people ask.

God didn't create a world to put his glory on display he didn't decree a plan to perform the greatest rescue in all of human history, then execute that plan and actually redeem us only to have us slouch along to mediocrity. God has called us to live excellently for his glory because his glory matters. His glory is weighty. I'm afraid we've lost some of that heaviness in our own society. God is glorious. We serve a glorious God, and our lives ought to reflect that glory. He's called us to run the race and to win.

So we live lives of holiness, love, light, wisdom, right? Ephesians. That means we're going to have to work at it if we want to run to win. We've got to treat our Christian lives like a runner treats a single race, discipline ourselves, control ourselves, ignore distractions, exert ourselves, strain ourselves even sometimes. Embrace the struggles and the trials and the denials of the Christian life. In Corinthian terms, it meant, don't eat the meat sacrificed to idols, in fact don't even go near an idol's temple if it means hurting your brother's weak conscience, causing him to stumble, derailing his spiritual life. So what if it costs you a business deal. So what if you

don't make that partnership or make that connection. Don't you trust God to provide all your needs? If only "you'll seek first his kingdom and his righteousness," right? "All these things will be added to you as well."

Look, we face similar temptations today, don't we? We can prioritize our careers, our temporal commitments, our extra-curricular activities, our routines, our social engagements, but listen, none of that should take priority over these two facts: God has called us to run and to run to win. And therefore, God has called us to discipline ourselves for the running.

Well those are the two facts that informed Paul's thinking. God gave him an accurate perspective on the Christian life, and we need that perspective. As Christians, we're running a race and that means, as Christians, we must discipline ourselves. And look, it wasn't easy for the Apostle Paul. Not at all. It's not easy for us either. Trials, persecutions, pains, sorrows, it's hard. But it's normal Christian living. That's expected.

So what kept Paul going here? Three motivations strengthened him. Three motivations kept him encouraged and I trust you'll find this encouraging, too. Know this, first of all, number one, your prize is worth it. Your prize is worth it. Run the race, discipline yourselves because the prize is infinitely valuable. Look at verse 25 again. "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable."

Winning athletes in the Isthmian games received a pine wreath. Probably didn't take long for that thing to dry out, start losing the needles. It's the very picture of a fading glory, isn't it? Even the statues that were erected, the songs that were sung, the parades of triumph, the money, all temporal, isn't it? We don't remember any of the ancient winners today. Most people don't even realize there ever was such a thing as the Isthmian games, but who do we remember? Paul, unknown to the Isthmian games. He didn't get paraded in the winner's circle. We remember him.

Like the flower of the grass, all that temporal glory fades away. It's not long after you've won the race, gained the victory, achieved the achievement, been the hero, all those trophies gather dust. They get put up in the garage attic. Plaques on the wall, they fade in significance. You always have to tell the story again to remind people of how great you were once. Just like that pine wreath, right? It's funny how that story keeps getting bigger and bigger, right, over the years.

But look, we don't run for a perishable wreath, do we? We exercise self-control to receive an imperishable crown. This refers to the, crown of salvation. This is referring to final salvation. It's called the, crown of righteousness, 2 Timothy 4:8. It's called the crown of life, James 1:12. It's called the crown of glory, 1 Peter 5:4. And that crown is promised to those who are what? Faithful. Faithful. Marked by sacrificial love for and devotion to Jesus Christ. What's at stake here is eternal life. And the prize is a never-ending glory. We look forward to eternal enjoyment of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Sadly for some, they become enamored with this life, with this world. The upward call of Christ Jesus sounds too faintly in their ears. But for Christians, this is such a massive encouragement to order our lives around that future hope. We need to discipline ourselves because the prize is infinitely valuable.

Second motivation for disciplining yourselves to run the race to win, number two, your opponent is obstinate. Your opponent is obstinate. It means stubborn. You must discipline yourselves because your opponent is stubborn, very hard to subdue. That's verse 26. So Paul says, "I don't run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air, but I discipline my body and keep it under control." As every true athlete knows, the most difficult opponent in athletics is not the person running beside you on one side or the other, your real opponent is yourself.

Notice here how Paul changed metaphors. He's still in the realm of athletics here, but he switched on us from running to boxing. Two very disciplines involving two very different sets of challenges, two different ways to train. First, he's talking

about the focus that's required to be a runner. This is Hebrews 12 again, "Running the race that's set before us with endurance, fixing our eyes on Jesus." Our eyes are always fixed on the end, always fixed on the goal, always fixed on the prize. This isn't running circularly around a track. Certainly not the wasted effort of running on a treadmill. Listen, is there anything more discouraging than running on a treadmill? All that effort and you haven't gotten anywhere.

But the runner, this runner, a distance runner, a cross-country runner, a pilgrim runner, we could say, he looks ahead to his goal. He fixes his gaze. He focuses his mind on the mechanics of running. The right muscles tensed at the right time. Other muscles relaxed to save energy. Proper breathing, perfect stride, perfect cadence, regulated pace, all things are ordered to reach the goal. Don't run aimlessly.

But then there's an abrupt switch of metaphor from running to boxing. Verse 26, "I do not box as one beating the air." Look, he's not sparring in a gym. He's not beating on a heavy bag. He's facing a real opponent in a real fight in which there are

consequences for throwing worthless punches. In a real fight, if you swing and miss, you pay. You not only waste valuable energy, missing makes you vulnerable to counterattack. And Paul says, I don't do that. When I throw a punch, I connect, and I do damage.

Running, he's got his eye fixed on the finish line, but boxing, he's looking in the mirror. Paul's opponent here is his stubborn self, his stubborn flesh, his obstinate self, his sinful nature. The word translated discipline, it's accurate, but Paul intends us to understand something stronger here, more violent about disciplining himself. It's the word *hypopiazō*, which literally means, to strike under the eye, to give a black eye to. Paul's not playing around here. He realizes the real hindrance to victory is his sluggish self.

And left to its own preferences and tendencies, the natural inclination toward laziness means we have to be persistent and calculated with the opponent called, the sinful nature, the old man. Those are the influences and the habits of our past life as non-Christians. Look, your body, it'll look for any excuse to

sleep in, right, to procrastinate, to take the easy way out.

We're like water, we like the pathway of least resistance.

So like a boxer who studies his opponent, you've got to study yourself. You've got to know your own weaknesses and then go after them in the ring. Practice self-control, practice self-discipline, bring yourself into submission and run to win.

That's what Paul says in verse 27. "I discipline my body and keep it under control." That right there, keep it under control, it's a rather softened, muted translation of a very, very strong word.

The verb there comes from the word for slave, *doulos*. Paul is saying, I discipline my body, or I strike it with blows, and I enslave it. I strike it with blows. That's figurative, mind you. I don't want anybody going out of here and being like some medieval monk and flagellating himself with a whip or something. That is not the idea. It's figurative. He strikes his body with blows. He enslaves his body. He forces his body into submission. Our bodies in submission, look, they can be very, very useful in the service to Christ and to his people, right? You do not obey

your body. Your body obeys you if you're a Christian. If you're not a Christian, yeah, it's the other way around. You just go wherever your impulses lead you. If you're a Christian, you have power and self-control, and your body will obey you if you command it.

Romans 6:12, "Do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts." Do you know what the implication there is? You have the power to not let sin reign in your mortal body, so you obey its lust. So do not go on presenting the members of your body, the parts. That includes even the spiritual parts like the mind, the emotions. "Don't present the instruments of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead and your members as instruments of righteousness to God."

Don't be subject to sinful thoughts. Take your thoughts captive and make them obey Christ. Don't be dominated by sinful emotions led astray by feelings. Look, refuse to feel in ungodly ways. Bring those emotions into conformity with truth and righteousness. Command yourself. Preach to yourself. Your body

is for righteousness. Its members are instruments for righteousness.

By the way, all those verbs in verses 26-27, run, box, discipline, enslave, they're all in the present tense. The present tense in Greek means continuous, habitual. So running the race, boxing the self to discipline and submission, this is supposed to be the habitual life of a Christian. That means this is normal Christian living. And to not live this way is out of step with true Christianity. This is Paul's lifestyle. It's not peculiar to his apostolic calling to live this way. By using himself as an example for the Corinthians, he's telling them that this is the way all Christians are to live.

For those tempted to think this is an extreme, that's an indication of how far we've drifted from true Christianity and its demands and its requirements from what Jesus said. "Let everyone who would come after me deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." That's a call to die to self, folks. We need to learn this all over again, some of us. We're to live sacrificially, preferring others above ourselves all for the

sake of love. We're running the race and we run to win. We must live disciplined Christian lives. Why? Because the prize is eternal and our opponent, ourselves, is so very obstinate, stubborn.

There's a third, final motivation, which we'll need to explain carefully here. In as much as the prize for winning our race is infinitely worthwhile, you know what the failure to win represents, a terrifying outcome. Run to win because your failure is permanent. We might rather say failure, were it to happen, would be permanent. You must run to win, discipline yourself for the race because failure to do so is devastating. For Paul, a fall into the abyss would be from such a dizzying height as he says in verse 27. He says, "I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified."

It's that last word, disqualified, that is so troubling. It's the word *adokimos*. *Adokimos*, which means rejected and it implies scrutiny, it implies judgment, that one has failed to stand the test. Whatever is *adokimos* has been judged to be disqualified,

worthless. In the ancient world, coins were easily counterfeited and so people used to apply a test. Just two outcomes of that testing. Whatever stood up the test was put into the approved category, *dokimos*. Whatever failed the test went into the *adokimos* category, the rejected category.

So whenever *adokimos* is used in the New Testament, that is the sense. It refers to something that has failed the test. It's therefore rejected as worthless and useless. That word describes the debased mind of the unbelieving world; it's *adokimos*, Romans 1:28. That word is used of those who examine themselves to see whether or not they are in the faith, 2 Corinthians 13, verses 5, 6, and 7, and they fail the test, they're *adokimos*. Jannes and Jambres, the men who opposed Moses' leadership in 2 Timothy 3:8, they were tested and then disqualified, rejected regarding the faith.

So the word *adokimos* indicates something very, very serious: rejected, disapproved, worthless, useless, disqualified. But what are we talking about here? Rejected from what? Some people take Paul to mean a Christian can lose his salvation. That's

clearly not the case based on everything else Paul wrote, Romans 8, Romans 9, Ephesians 1 and 2. We could go on and on. Paul did not teach a true Christian can lose his salvation. Salvation is totally God's doing as Jesus said. He said, "All that the Father gives to me will come to me and whoever comes to me I will never cast out," John 6:37. Not only will he never cast them out, but John 6:44, "I will raise him up at the last day."

It's that golden chain of redemption in Romans 8:29-30. "For those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified," right? Speaking of a future event, glorification, in past tense terms. Glorified; it's a done deal. For those who are truly saved, their salvation is absolutely secure, guaranteed by the sovereign election and completed redemption of God in Jesus Christ.

Others, they take Paul to mean that after preaching to others, he would be disqualified from preaching, from ministry. And in

the context Paul is talking about his ministry, but appealing to the context, we should keep reading to see what Paul says next. Look at the very next section and see what Paul meant by disqualification. Verse, chapter 10 verse 1, "I want you to know, brothers," and look how he says, "For I want you to know, brothers," meaning he's connecting it to the previous section.

"For I want you to know brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things took place as examples for us that we might desire evil as they did. Do not be idolators as some of them were; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.' We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer."

Stop there. Notice the parallels between 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 and chapter 10 verses 1-10. There were many runners just as there were many Israelites under the cloud, passed through the sea, baptized into Moses, all the rest. The runners have a visible role in the race. They line up, just as the Israelites seemed to be members of God's people. In the end, most runners are rejected, disqualified, not attaining the prize. They don't win. In the same way, most of the Israelites who left Egypt, they died in the wilderness, disqualified, and rejected. By contrast, only one runner is approved, accepted to the winner's stand to receive the prize. Also, just a few of those original Israelites entered the Promised Land.

Folks, Paul's mentality, and the motivations that drove him to live a Gospel-centered, sacrificial, loving life, it serves as a warning to those who do not live that way. To those who are indifferent to holiness, who are self-centered and uncaring, who are proud and unconcerned, uncritical about how they live their lives, to those who are self-justifying about their thoughts and attitudes and behavior and words, like these Corinthian meat-eaters, for them this is a sober warning. The Christian life is

not about asserting our own rights. It's not about pursuing our own interests, demanding our own way. It's about love and obedience. It's about fearing the Lord. It's about devotion to his Word.

The Christian life is about sincere love of all the brethren, sacrificing ourselves for the least of these. And I fear for many in our evangelical churches who've professed Christ all their lives, and like the Israelites consider their profession unshakable, untouchable. They've been taught not to examine themselves. They've been taught not to examine some doubts that they might have, not to look too hard at inconsistencies in their lives. Cover it all over with grace. Ah, just give them grace. I fear for them that God will judge their lives unfavorably at the end. And they'll be in for such a rude awakening and, and by then, it'll be too late.

That's what happened to the Jews historically. Paul wants us to learn from them. Look at 1 Corinthians 10:11, "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

Therefore, let him who thinks that he stands take heed lest he" what? "Fall." Paul took that warning personally. Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 9:27 is this: How tragic. If I were to spend my life preaching the Gospel to other people, but I failed to win the crown of salvation for myself. Wait! You, Paul? Yeah, even for Paul.

Listen, this is the spirits warning to us today as well. What an absolute nightmare! Imagine Christian, professing Christian, if you came to the Lord thinking you're secure in your salvation and your profession and you hear those words, "Depart from me you worker of iniquity. I never knew you." Now, the warning here, it's not meant to frighten genuine Christians. But I usually find it is the genuine Christians who find this warning most terrifying.

The people I'm most concerned about here are those who hear a message like this, and they walk away indifferent, or even as some have, angry that I dared to preach on such an issue. How dare you raise doubts in my mind, or somebody else's mind that I love. If anyone's indifferent to this warning, listen, if

anyone's mildly irritated or worse, listen, consider yourself warned by the Holy Spirit. These are his words.

But for genuine Christians, this text demonstrates the profound wisdom of God. And also a profound paradox. On the one hand, we are absolutely confident about entering heaven because of Christ's finished work, as we should be. But on the other hand, we're concerned about attaining to heaven, being found worthy, which spurs us on to pursue holiness in the fear of God. That's exactly how God preserves us to the end.

We find this same thing in Peter, 2 Peter 1:10-11. "Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about his calling and choosing you, for as long as you practice these things," you say, wait a minute; that's legalism. No, it's not. It's not legalism for him to command your obedience, for him to call you to diligence and perseverance. "As long as you practice these things, as long as you obey them you'll never stumble. For in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you."

Look, all genuine believers share the same mentality as Peter, same mentality as Paul, who ran to win, disciplined himself for winning, "lest after having preached to others he himself should be disqualified." Perish the thought, right? But if he thought like that, shouldn't we? And if you're concerned about that, you know what, you're in a very, very good place. That, what is a warning for you genuine believers turns out to be a comfort and an encouragement. You know why? Because you share the concern of your heart as the Apostle Paul did. He was concerned about that for himself. He's a genuine believer. He set the foundations of the entire apostolic church. If you share the same concern about your own life, you know what? You're in good company. You are in good company.

Two facts to inform your minds: Paul ran to win; he disciplined his body to run and so should we. Three motivations to encourage our hearts: Paul was motivated to run because of the future reward, because of the heavenly prize. He was motivated to discipline because his opponent was so obstinate, so stubborn and intractable that he had to enslave it. And he was motivated to run and discipline himself because the significance of failure was absolutely unthinkable. He wanted to keep himself

away from that. Let's pray that the Lord will allow these truths to sink into our hearts as well.

Dear Father, like the great Apostle Paul, we want to come to the end of our lives saying the same thing that he did 2 Timothy 4, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith. In the future there is laid up 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 loved his appearing." That last phrase refers to all of us, those who are genuine, in the truth, in faith in Jesus Christ. We are all those who love the appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. Help us to live now and order our lives now in such a way that it increases our anticipation for the prize, in such a way that it increases our assurance and strengthens our confidence in the Gospel and in our Savior Jesus Christ. In whose name we pray. Amen.