

ALL OUT, ALL THE WAY 1 CORINTHIANS 9:24-27

The Bible uses a number of different metaphors to describe the Christian life. One of the most common is a *race*. The way we respond to God's particular call upon our lives, the way we prepare to be used by Him, and the manner in which we carry out our ministry assignment is comparable to a long distance foot race.

I love sports. I love to *watch* sports. And even though my favorite sport is baseball, the sport I like to watch the most is track. When I see an athlete running in a race--especially a long distance race--when I see him in full stride, giving it everything he's got, pressing toward the finish line, straining to win, I almost always get a lump in my throat.

Maybe that's because I know what goes into preparing for a race. The months of strenuous conditioning; the grueling hours spent each day in the weight room and on the track, in all kinds of weather, when not a single soul is around to cheer you on; the searing pain in one's lungs after running so hard and so long; the utter exhaustion that puts one's body on the brink of collapse. Why, the very thought makes me want to go stand in the outfield and wait for someone to hit me a fly ball.

But you are aware, I'm sure, that good long distance runners rely on more than just natural ability. They rely on hard work, discipline, and sacrifice. And that's the reason the Bible compares the Christian life to a marathon rather than a baseball game. It's because, in order to be effective in doing what God has called us to do, we've got to do the very things a long distance runner does when he/she prepares to compete in a race.

This is what our passage is about this morning. Listen to what Paul says in **verses 24-27**. *"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."*

1 Corinthians 9 is more or less Paul's explanation of his motives and methods for ministry. As you know, Paul was assigned by Jesus to preach the gospel in places where the gospel had never been proclaimed. His motive was to please the Lord by being faithful to that assignment; his method was to make sure he didn't get in the way.

Paul's particular assignment was to preach the gospel, especially to those who had never heard it. And in order to do this most effectively Paul practiced self-denial and self-discipline. Early in chapter 9 he tells us that he voluntarily gave up many of his legitimate rights and liberties so that nothing would hinder the spread of the gospel. Then we are told that he was careful to adapt to the customs and cultures of the places he went in order to give people the best opportunity to authentically encounter Jesus and respond to Him.

In other words, Paul made sure he didn't get in the way. He didn't want his preferences, his mannerisms, or his personal rights or freedoms to distract from his message or from the One he represented.

But Paul, in 1 Corinthians 9, isn't just giving a personal testimony about how *he* practiced self-denial and self-discipline in order to be an effective servant of Christ. He's instructing *us* how to be effective ambassadors as well, and he's telling *us* that we must do the same. *We've* got to stay mentally and spiritually alert and focused, and not let anything divert us from the assignment

God has given us. We've also got to be willing to do whatever it takes not to let our own personal preferences and mannerisms and rights and freedoms prevent us from being maximally effective in our service to Christ. And we are going to learn in verses 24-27 that doing this requires self-denial and self-discipline.

Look what he says in **verse 24**. "*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.*"

The Greeks had two great athletic festivals--the Olympics and the Isthmian Games. Corinth was the permanent host of the Isthmian Games which were held every other year.

Therefore, the recipients of this letter would have been intimately acquainted with this metaphor of a race. They would have known, for example, that it was the common practice for the contestants of the Games to train rigorously for ten months prior to the competition. They would have also been able to *observe* at least part of their training, because, no matter what part of the Roman Empire the athlete was from, the last month of training was always spent in Corinth, with supervised daily workouts in the gymnasium or on the athletic fields (MacArthur, p.214).

The Corinthians knew that the Games held in their city were taken very seriously by these athletes. They weren't doing it merely as a hobby, or to stay in shape, or to burn off some excess calories. Running was their life. All of their time, attention, energy, and efforts were directed toward the upcoming race. And they had one goal: to win the prize.

Paul, in asking this rhetorical question in verse 24, is saying, "You know what it takes to win. You've seen these athletes train with your own eyes. You've seen them practice self-denial and self-discipline. That's the way I approach my ministry assignment from the Lord, and that's the way you need to approach yours. "*Run in such a way as to get the prize*".

Paul is *not* saying that as Christians we are to compete against *each other* to see who gets the prize for being the most spiritual or to see who can win the most people to Christ or get the most rewards when we get to heaven. He is saying the way that each of us approaches our God-given responsibilities here on earth, the way each of us is to carry out our particular assignment from the Lord is the way a serious athlete approaches an important competition.

What does it mean to run in order to win? I would suggest to you that it means *going all out, all the way to the finish line, hurdling any obstacle along the way, and not letting anything divert or distract us from our calling*.

We all have a specific calling, and it varies from person to person. Earlier in the chapter Paul identified *his* specific calling as preaching the gospel. He said, "*I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!*" (9:16). And then he went on to say that he ordered his life around that calling so that he could be maximally effective. Preaching the gospel was his priority, and everything else took a back seat, including his own personal comfort or rights or ambitions or freedoms.

Your specific calling may be different. Maybe you're called to serve behind the scenes, or to be an encourager, or to give your resources for God's work, or to shepherd God's people, or to teach God's Word, or to come alongside those who are hurting. Whatever your specific assignment from the Lord, He wants and expects you to get after that assignment with all your heart and all your strength; to go for it; to go all out, all the way to the finish line, hurdling any obstacle along the way, and not letting anything divert or distract you from your calling.

And if we are going to do that, says Paul, then we need to practice self-denial and self-discipline, just like a long distance runner. Look at **verse 25a**. "*Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training.*"

I told you about the ten months of rigorous training prior to the games. Even back in those

days there was a science to maximizing one's performance on the track. What to eat and drink, what *not* to eat and drink, when and how much to eat and drink; what kind of weightlifting routine one should or should not do; how and when and at what rate one should increase the distance of the run during training, when to accelerate during the race, when to conserve energy; and on and on and on.

But I think you know that what makes a good runner is not so much the performance techniques he/she uses, it's the dedication and the discipline he/she possesses. He's out the door when everyone else is hitting the snooze button. She's pounding the pavement, rain or shine, in the darkness, by herself.

That's the kind of dedication and discipline Paul is talking about in verse 25. In order to be a competitive runner you've got to work hard, stay focused, and persevere even when the going gets tough.

And that same principle applies to the specific ministries to which God has called each of us. For example, I am called to teach and preach the Word of God. Paul gave an admonition to Timothy that applies equally to me: "*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth*" (2 Timothy 2:15).

Pastor-teachers are likened to "workmen" or manual laborers. Implicit in the call to teach and preach God's word is *hard work*, not primarily in the *delivery* of the message, but in the *preparation*. Preparing to preach and teach the Word, understanding the meaning of a text, doing the exegesis, understanding how to apply it, understanding how to communicate it skillfully and effectively, takes a lot of time and energy and effort. It can be enjoyable work, stimulating work, gratifying work; but it's *hard work*.

I have found in thirty years of preaching and teaching that there are no real shortcuts to sermon or lesson preparation. There are some time saving tools, but the strenuous mental effort remains the same.

The same is true for other kinds of ministry, whether it be shepherding, encouraging, exhorting, serving, giving, leading, evangelizing, etc. The nature of the task demands that you do it whether you feel like doing it or not. You do it whether it's convenient or not. You do it whether it's appreciated or not. You do it whether you see results or not.

Serving the Lord in whatever capacity He has called us to serve Him is not always easy, or fun, or enjoyable, just like training for a race is not always easy or fun or enjoyable. Sometimes it's exhausting. Sometimes it's heartbreaking. Sometimes it seems like all your labor is in vain. But that's where self-discipline and self-denial come in. Because we have to consciously remind ourselves that our service for the Lord is never about us; it's not about what we get out of it, and it's not even what we do for Him. It's exclusively what *He* chooses to do *through* us for His own pleasure and glory.

And so the "strict training", spiritually speaking, is the discipline to have an eternal, godly perspective. It's the conscious attempt to remember that God has called me to do what I'm doing, that I am not in charge of my life or ministry; I am not responsible for results of my ministry; I am not going to back down or give up because of criticism or accusations or apparent setbacks.

I'm going to discipline myself to put my trust in Jesus. I'm going to discipline myself to be vigilant so that I'm not blindsided by the attacks of the evil one. I'm going to discipline myself to see the big picture, rather than focus on the immediate circumstances. I'm going to discipline myself to *not* seek men's approval, and not to become resentful when people hurt me, or become disillusioned when they disappoint me.

I'm going to stay alert and stay focused on Jesus and stay the course on which He has called me to be.

You cannot read 1 and 2 Corinthians without realizing that this kind of resolve and discipline is what Paul had in mind when he talked about his call to be an apostle and preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. The Corinthian church criticized and marginalized and disparaged his leadership and his ministry like you can't believe. And even after proving himself over and over to them by his faithfulness and integrity they wouldn't let up. They kept jumping to conclusions and making assumptions and comparing him with other leaders in such a way that he always came out on the short end.

And I'm not going to say it didn't bother Paul. It did! He was deeply grieved by their immaturity and their carnal attitudes and perspectives. But he kept loving them. He kept serving them. He kept shepherding and instructing and exhorting even when it was rebuffed. And that required discipline--discipline to not let his heart get hard; discipline to not let his feelings determine his level of commitment; discipline to fix his eyes on Jesus and remember that the only thing that really mattered was what He thinks, and that the only reward that was worth working for was the reward He gives when he finished the race.

Look at what Paul says at the end of **verse 25b**. *"They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever."*

I admire the athletes who compete in the Olympics. I am inspired by them. But, in all honesty, I cannot really understand them. Here's an individual who has devoted almost every waking hour of his/her life, who has produced more sweat, endured more pain, experienced more exhaustion, risked more injury than I will ever know...for what? For the *slight* possibility that he or she will be recognized as the best in the world. For the *slight* possibility of a few moments of fading glory. For the *slight* possibility that he/she might receive a medal--a medal that will eventually tarnish. (It is interesting, in fact, that in the Isthmian Games the winner's prize was a pine wreath, which withered in just a few short days.)

I can't relate. The potential for a reward is just too small, and the reward itself is just too insignificant.

But it's different in the spiritual realm. What sets Christian endeavor apart from athletic endeavor is not the way we approach our work, but the quality and certainty of the reward we receive from it. We are working towards a goal and for a reward that doesn't tarnish or fade.

I believe the crown Paul is referring to is Jesus' pleasure and Jesus' glory. The prize is hearing Him say to us on the day we see Him, "Well done my good and faithful servant". There can't possibly be anything more exhilarating, more satisfying, and more meaningful than that.

That's why Paul would say in **verse 26**. *"Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air."*

This is not a hobby or a sideline or a pastime with me. My ministry is not just a component of my busy life. I'm not in it merely to see how theologically astute I can be or how holy I can be or how many people I can influence. No. I'm in it because this is what life is all about. It's about Jesus and His kingdom, it's about heaven and hell; it's serious business with enormous consequences.

That's why, **verse 27**. *"I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."*

What's he talking about? Self-denial and self-discipline. When he says *"I make my body my slave"*, he means, I don't let my passions and selfish desires control me.

Again, think about this metaphor of a marathon runner. Let me ask you a question: Those

of you who are reasonably healthy and sixty years or younger, do you think you could run a marathon? I'll bet you could. I know I could. I'm confident that I *won't*, but I *could*. Do you know why most of you and I won't ever run a marathon? It's not that we're *incapable* of doing it. It's that we lack the will and the discipline to do it. For me, the reward of running a marathon is not worth the price I'd have to pay to prepare for it. The sacrifice, the self-denial, the exhaustion, the pain and discomfort. As I said, that's why I played baseball. During baseball practice I used to watch the guys on the track team run by and think, "Whew, I'm sure glad that's not me!"

Many people are slaves to their bodies. Their bodies tell their minds and spirits what to do. Not a runner. He tells his body what to do. "He runs when he would rather be resting, he eats a balanced meal when he would rather have a milkshake, he goes to bed when he would rather stay up, he gets up early to train when he would rather stay in bed. An athlete leads his body, he does not follow it. It is his slave..." (MacArthur, p. 215).

Paul said it's the same when it comes to ministry. We don't just do what we want to do; we do what God has called us to do, because if we don't do what God has called us to do, then what God wants to do through us will not be done, and God's kingdom will not advance in the way He wants it to, and He will not be pleased.

That's what Paul means when he says, "*so I myself will not be disqualified for the prize*".

I told you about the training regimen that an athlete went through to be part of the Isthmian Games. That training regimen was not optional. It was a requirement, and every athlete had to have proof that he had met those training requirements before he was allowed to compete. And if he failed to meet them, he was disqualified. He could not even run, much less win.

It was a serious matter to follow the rules when training for the Games. How much more serious when the stakes are so much higher in the spiritual realm?

We've been looking at a metaphor this morning. Paul has been comparing something about the Christian life to a long distance race. I hope you've been able to see that the thing he is comparing in these verses is the way we respond to God's particular call upon our lives, the way we prepare to be used by Him, and the manner in which we carry out our ministry assignment.

Each of us who has put our faith in Christ has been called by God to serve Him in some way--we've been given a specific task. I have two questions for you: Do you know what your assignment is? If not, it's very, very important that you find out, because you are responsible to God for the talents and gifts He gives you. If you don't know what your particular assignment is then I would strongly encourage you to make it your New Year's resolution to find out. And you can start by simply talking to the Lord about it. It's not like He's trying to hide it from you. Then, I would recommend that you begin having some serious conversations with the leadership in your church or with the people who know you well.

Secondly, if you do know your assignment, are you getting after it with all your heart and all your strength? Or are you going after it half-heartedly? Or have you been distracted or diverted from your assignment by discouragement, or by laziness, or by criticism, or by worldly pleasures that provide instant, albeit temporary gratification?

I told you a few minutes ago that I will probably never run a marathon, and I don't feel the slightest bit of guilt over that, because running a marathon is optional. But my assignment from the Lord is *not* optional, and neither is yours. You may think it is. You may hang around people who think it is. But just read the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, which is one of the most sobering passages of Scripture in the Bible.

When God gives us talents, He expects us to use them for him, and when we do, He is pleased and will reward us greatly. Those who don't, suffer serious consequences.

ALL OUT, ALL THE WAY
1 CORINTHIANS 9:24-27

Main Idea: *In order to serve God effectively we must practice self-denial and self-discipline in order to stay alert, stay focused, and stay on course.*

THE CONTEXT

THE METAPHOR-A RACE
RUNNING TO WIN (v.24)

GETTING PREPARED (v.25A)

EYES ON THE PRIZE (v.25B)

PURPOSE IN EVERY STEP (v.26)

FINISHING WELL (v.27)

THE APPLICATION-HOW TO RUN WELL
AVOIDING THE PITFALLS

STAYING ON COURSE