

RUNNING HARD ALL THE WAY (2) 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.

This is what our passage is about this morning. Paul says in **verses 24-27**. 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.* ²⁵ *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.* ²⁶ *Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air.* ²⁷ *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" (NIV).*

1 Corinthians 9 is more or less Paul's explanation of his motives and methods for ministry. He was assigned by Jesus to preach the gospel in places where it 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. 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 he says that he was careful to adapt to the customs and cultures of the people and 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 did not get in the way. He did not 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, is not just giving a personal testimony about how *he* practiced self-denial and self-discipline in order to be an effective servant of Christ. He is instructing *us* how to be effective ministers as well, and he is telling *us* that we must do the same. *We* must stay mentally and spiritually alert and focused, and not let anything divert us from the assignment God has given us. We must also 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.

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 to train rigorously for ten months prior to the competition. And they would have 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. Participation in these Games was not a pastime or a hobby; it was not a means to merely stay in shape or to burn excess calories. Running was their life. All of their time, attention, energy, and efforts were directed toward competing in the race. And when

the race began, all of them had the same 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 is precisely the way I approach my ministry assignment from the Lord, and that is the way you must approach yours. *"Run in such a way as to get the prize."*

By the way, Paul is *not* saying that Christians should 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 that our God-given task is so important that we must perform it with the same focus, effort, and intensity that a serious runner has when competing in an important race. That 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 assignment.*

All of us have been given a specific assignment from the Lord. Earlier in the chapter, Paul identified *his* assignment 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.

Each of us has a specific calling. Some of us are called to serve behind the scenes, or to be an encourager, or to give our 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 our specific assignment from the Lord He wants and expects us to do that assignment with all our hearts and all our strength. To be focused and to be faithful. 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 or 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. And they do it even when they don't feel like it, even when they would rather be doing something else, and even when it doesn't feel like they're making any progress.

That same kind of dedication and discipline is needed in order to be effective in our ministries as well, whether it be shepherding, encouraging, exhorting, serving, giving, leading, evangelizing, etc. God insists that we be faithful to do what He has called us to do, and to persevere in it whether we feel like doing it or not, whether it's convenient or not, whether it's appreciated or not, whether we see results or not.

One thing is for certain: Serving the Lord faithfully is not always a walk in the park, 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 discipline comes in. We have to consciously remind ourselves that our service for the

Lord is never about us and what we get out of it. It's about what *He* chooses to do *through* us for His own pleasure and glory.

And so, I believe the "strict training" in verse 25 is the discipline to keep pressing on, staying the course, and running hard all the way to the end. It's the discipline, in Paul's words, to "...forget what is behind and strain toward what is ahead, pressing on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called [us] heavenward in Christ Jesus (Phil 3:13-14).

It's the discipline, according to Hebrews, to keep our eyes on Jesus during the race, and not focus on our circumstances, or our stress, or our discomfort, or what other people think, or how well or not we are performing. It's the discipline to be vigilant so that we are not blindsided by the attacks of the evil one. It's the discipline to not become resentful when people hurt us or become disillusioned when they disappoint us.

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 was constantly criticizing and disparaging Paul's leadership and ministry. And even after proving himself over and over to them by his faithfulness and integrity, they would not 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 Paul was hurt by their immaturity and their carnal attitudes. But he kept loving them. He kept serving them. He kept shepherding and instructing and exhorting even when his efforts were rebuffed. And that required discipline—discipline to not let his heart get hard, discipline to not let his emotions 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 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 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 laurel wreath, which withered in just a few short days.)

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

But it is 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 does not 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, "Well done my good and faithful servant". There cannot possibly be anything more satisfying and more rewarding 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.*

During a race, a runner may be aware that his loved ones are in the stands cheering

him on, but he doesn't exit the track to go talk to them. Nor does he pull out his smart phone and check his emails or make some calls. Nor does he make a quick stop at the snack bar to grab some refreshments. No, he is focused on one thing. Getting across that finish line before everyone else.

So Paul says, "*I do not run like a man running aimlessly...*" I'm focused; I'm resolute; I'm determined to stay the course and run hard all the way to the finish line. I'm not going to let discouragement, or fatigue, or criticism, or anything else slow me down.

Likewise, Paul says, "*I do not fight like a man beating the air.*" Paul is alluding to something we call "shadow boxing," which is when a boxer simply practices his jabs, hooks, uppercuts, combinations, and flurries in a ring without an opponent. He literally "beats the air." Shadow boxing is definitely part of a boxer's training regimen. Muhammed Ali would shadow box for 45 minutes as part of his daily workouts in order to sharpen his footwork and increase his stamina. And it was very entertaining.

But if that is all he did, he would be ill-prepared for any bout, because one of the primary ways you get prepared is by being punched and pummeled by a sparring partner in practice in order to toughen up your body so that it can withstand the blows. Which is why Paul would say in **verse 27a**. "*I beat my body and make it my slave...*"

When Ali was preparing to fight George Foreman for the World Heavyweight Championship, he spent an extraordinary amount of time letting his sparring partner pummel his mid-section. Foreman was known for his power, and he would often wear out his opponents by relentlessly assaulting their mid-section. So, when Ali and Foreman met in the famous, "Rumble in the Jungle," sure enough Foreman spent the first seven rounds pummeling Ali's abdomen. And Ali let him do it, and it appeared like he was doomed to be defeated. But as Ali expected, Foreman wore himself out by delivering all those punches, and in the eighth round, Ali, sensing Foreman's fatigue, came to life and knocked him out.

That was the result of his training—beating his body and making it his slave. And that is precisely what Paul is talking about. Because in ministry we are dealing with an opponent that is powerful and relentless. He knows our vulnerabilities and he will mercilessly attack those vulnerabilities, trying to knock the wind out of us, or knock us down, or knock us out. He definitely wants to disable us.

Before Paul engaged in ministry, like preaching the gospel, he prepared for those assaults and attacks so that while he was doing that ministry he could withstand the inevitable blows, and so that, at the appropriate time, he could deliver a knock-out punch that would advance the Gospel. Paul said in another place, "We will not let Satan outwit us, *for we are not unaware of his schemes*" (2 Cor. 2:11).

Paul says in **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.*

Let me ask you a question: Those of you who are reasonably healthy and sixty-five 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 us will never run a marathon? It is 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. 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 I'm not one of those guys!"

Many people are slaves to their bodies. Their bodies tell their minds and spirits what to do. Not a serious 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 mandatory, and before a competition, every athlete had to show proof that he had met those training requirements. 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 ministry to a marathon. 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.

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 specific assignment is? If not, it's very, very important that you find out, because you are responsible to God to use the talents and gifts He gives you. If you don't know what your particular assignment is then I would strongly encourage you 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 have some conversations with the leadership in our church or with the people who know you well.

Secondly, if you do know your assignment, are you doing your assignment with all your heart and all your strength? Or are you doing it half-heartedly? 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.

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.

RUNNING HARD ALL THE WAY
1 CORINTHIANS 9:24-27

MAIN IDEA: Our God-given task is so important that we must perform it with the same focus, effort, and intensity that a serious runner has when competing in an important race.

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