



1 Cor. 9:24-26

Unfit, Untrained, Half-Hearted, and Ready for Action?

24 Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.

25 And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown.

26 Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air.

I still remember when the first *Rocky* movie came out in the 1970s, it was a movie that absolutely electrified people. It seemed like for 10 years afterwards whenever anyone did anything impressive in the world of sports, particularly if they were an underdog, all you heard was the theme music “*Gonna Fly Now*” you remember with the trumpets, and everybody remembered the picture of Rocky running up the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. That movie grabbed people because the central character, Rocky Balboa, while he’s a nobody in the eyes of the world, he’s all heart and when he is given the chance out of nowhere to fight the heavy weight champion of the world, he throws everything he has into his training. There are the famous scenes where he is punching the sides of beef in the back of the meat packing plant and being put through all this grueling training by Burgess Meredith. By the time the actual fight rolls around, you can’t help but want him to win, because he’s just put everything he has into getting ready for this fight.

Can you imagine though if in the movie Rocky had spent the time getting ready for the fight by mostly sitting around on the couch, here’s the scene of Rocky taking a nap, over here we have Rocky going out for extra potato chips and a carton of Cigarettes, Rocky goes out for a light jog to the Ice Cream parlor. By the time the final fight came around you would expect him to lose bad in the first round and when it happened, you wouldn’t care – because the way he trained showed how uninterested he was in winning the fight in the first place.

Now brothers and sisters, it has been my good fortune to have met and even to be mentored by Christians who have approached the fight of faith in the way that the original *Rocky* did. These were men and women who poured their lives into their training. But I would be lying if I said they were the majority of Christians in the church. The training program most Christians seem to be following has more of the marks of the couch potato approach. They are not so much running towards the prize as dawdling their way in that general direction. *We’ll get there eventually, what’s the hurry?*

That attitude towards the Christian life was what Paul was specifically trying to address in these verses and show how wrong it was. He uses the example of athletic competition on purpose, largely because the Greeks, like our own culture, were mad about sports. There were two sets of Greek games in particular that used to attract worldwide attention. They were the Olympic games held at Olympia every 4 years, and what for the Corinthians were more important the Isthmian games held every third summer. These games were so popular that people from all over the Roman empire entered them, but

in order to even compete you had to be willing to commit yourself to 10 months of intensive training where all they did was get ready for their particular event. During that time of training as Paul puts it verse 25, they became temperate or self-controlled in all things, they denied themselves many of the liberties that we would take for granted, their eating and drinking became extremely temperate, they made sure they got enough sleep, and everything they did was concerned with getting ready for the games. Unlike the Corinthian Christians these athletes did not spend all their time arguing over their rights to exercise their liberties, they willingly gave up anything that might slow them down or encumber them.

NKJ Hebrews 12:1 Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

The Corinthian athletes ran to win, not merely to compete. And what were they competing for? A perishable crown. The winning athlete in the Isthmian games would receive a wreath of pine and as much glory as men could give. But in time that wreath would wilt and men would forget. Who today for instance remembers EVEN **the greatest** athletes in those games?

Paul obviously is pricking our consciences with this example, if athletes train so hard for a prize that fades away very quickly, why is it that Christians who are running to win a crown that never fades seem to be so much less interested in their goal?

Now here I should say, that in the analogy that Paul is using he is not saying that Christians are competing to win their salvation. That salvation was won for them by Jesus Christ. Paul makes that point again and again saying for instance in Romans 5 that we were saved “when we were still without strength” and “while we were still sinners” In fact in Ephesians 2 he makes it clear that believers were saved when they were dead in sins and totally unable to contribute one thing towards their own salvation. He sums it up in Eph. 2:8-9 ***“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”*** What we are competing for are the imperishable rewards that our Lord will bestow upon Christians in glory, we are competing to hear these words from the mouth of Christ: ***“Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.”***

Christ himself makes it clear that we will receive those imperishable rewards according to the way we made use of the gifts he gives to every Christian. For he Saved us specifically that we might do good works in his name here on earth: ***“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”*** (Eph. 2:10)

Paul uses his own life as example of this principle of running or competing to win the reward. Paul lived his entire life with the finish line in sight enduring everything that at the end of the day, he might be found worthy of an imperishable crown. He says he “disciplined” my body (beat it up – gave it a black eye) and make it my slave. We do not know for certain if Paul was the author of Hebrews, but certainly he exercised his ministry in a way that showed he might well have penned the words of Hebrews 12:1-2 ***“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy***

that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Paul ran to the prize and because of his training every punch he threw hit its intended target. He was not like the untrained man who in sparring constantly makes contact with nothing but air and he points that out in verse 26.

So then let me draw three applications from this:

1) We live in a military community, and one where most soldiers pride themselves on how highly trained and ready for anything they are. They are America’s elite, they will literally undergo the most horrifying training in order to obtain the coveted Tab. Men willing sign up for schools that will have them standing in swamps or shivering in the cold. And you know, after a while they begin to look down on or even distrust the men and women who are unwilling to train as hard as they do. The units they know haven’t put in the time, the guys who don’t give 100%. They rightly believe that their commitment and their training are vital to successfully achieving their objectives.

And yet, this town is literally filled with Christian men and women who will endure any grueling physical training, who believe that the Christian faith should be approached like a walk in the park.

Brothers and Sisters, you are engaged in spiritual warfare, and your success in that warfare will depend in great measure on your training. I have seen men come back from deployments, physically whole but spiritually destroyed because they went to war prepared for physical combat but totally unprepared for spiritual warfare. You, who are in the military, hear what Peter said: 1 Peter 5:8 ***“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.”*** Peter knew very well what happens when you aren’t prepared for an encounter with the adversary.

Train now, train at least as hard as you would for the less important physical combat of earthly warfare.

Eric Liddle example...

2) Know that your ability to be used in winning souls to Christ will depend in large measure in your willingness not only to train but to compete. Rocky would have been pretty boring if after all that training he hadn’t shown up at the end to fight Apollo Creed. Brothers and Sisters, if we go strictly on training the Reformed should be the elite troops of the Christian world. But so often that’s all we do, we never actually put our training to use. We have knowledge, but we lack zeal. Notice what Paul says, “when I have preached to others”, how many of us know the gospel but never really share it with others. Oh that we had more of the zeal of those who while they barely know the gospel, can’t wait to share it with others! We need fewer coaches and more competitors.

3) Finally, know that in a race you have to be in it to win it. Ask yourself, is the reason I’m not zealous to run perhaps because I’m not yet in the race. There are many who have not even entered the race because they have not yet been saved. - *run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith*