

Sermon Notes
Run and Fight to Win
 I 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. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control,^[a] lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. - I Corinthians 9:24-27, ESV

Athletic Competition & the Gospel Life

I mentioned last week that I love sports and competition. One of the things I was sad to see cancelled by COVID-19 was the 2020 Summer Olympics. I have loved the Olympics since the 1984 Los Angeles Games with Mary Lou Retton's perfect 10 and Carl Lewis' 4 Gold Medals, winning the same four events that Jesse Owens had won in 1936.

Apparently, the Apostle Paul had more than a passing interest in athletic competition, too. The most famous athletic competition of the ancient world were the Olympics Games, of course, which were held every four years, probably beginning in the year 776 BC, at Olympia, at the foot of Mt. Olympus, home to the mythical Greek King of the Gods, Zeus. The Olympics were begun as a tribute to Zeus and to entertain the gods of Olympus. Over time, other games emerged, and the second most important in the whole Roman Empire, behind only the Olympics, were the Isthmian Games, held on the narrow Greek Isthmus, about 10 miles east of Corinth next to the Temple to Poseidon. These games were held every two years, in the 2nd and 4th years of the Olympiad, so the year before and the year after the Olympics.

The Isthmian Games were held in the Spring of 51 AD, while the Apostle Paul was in Corinth. Corinth would have been all abuzz about the games, and Paul may have attended and watched the games himself. They are the background for today's passage, and these kinds of athletic competitions serve as the background for several other New Testament passages.

In the Isthmian Games, the athletes would be required to train and compete according to the rules. The Games prescribed a formal 10-month training period, which had specific rules. The Games themselves were held inside a massive marble arena that sat thousands of people, a great crowd of witnesses gathered to watch the Games. When the athletes were finished competing, they would stand before a Judgment Seat, called the Bema. There, their performance would be judged according to the rules and the winners who competed lawfully would be crowned with a Stephanos, a victor's crown, which was made of pine and/or parsley, sometimes with a few olive leaves woven into it. It was indeed a perishable crown. Also, the Isthmian Games were different from the Olympics in that they included boxing and wrestling.

Understanding the background of the Isthmian Games helps us not only understand today's passage but also a couple of others in Paul:

In 2 Corinthians 5:10, Paul says, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.” The word here for “judgment seat” is Bema, which was not uniquely used to judge athletes in the Games, but it was the name of the judge’s chair in the Games.

Also, in 2 Timothy 2:5, he says, “An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.”

In 1 Timothy 4:7-8, Paul writes, “train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.”

And, finally, most powerfully, Paul writes in 2 Timothy 4:7-8, in the last chapter of the last letter he ever wrote, he wrote, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth 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.”

As we go through our passage in 1 Corinthians 9, we’ll bring in insights from these other verses, too.

I. Effort, v. 24

The first thing we see Paul urging the Corinthians to do in verse 24 is to put real effort into their Christian lives. As he’s been doing so often in 1 Corinthians, he begins with a rhetorical question: “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..”

Now, Paul is not trying to say that of all of the Christians trusting in Jesus and heading for glory, only one will win the prize. But he is saying that we should be pressing on toward heaven with the same kind of focused effort as a runner trying to win a race.

Kevin DeYoung has written very well on the topic of effort in the Christian life. In a 2011 blog post at The Gospel Coalition, he wrote this, based on 2 Peter 1:3-5:

First, here is 2 Peter 1:3-7 –

*³ His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴ by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. ⁵ For this very reason, **make every effort** to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.*

Here’s what Kevin DeYoung wrote:

Count the letters carefully: effort is not a four-letter word. Even those who believe in blood-bought, Christ-wrought, undeserved, sovereign, gospel grace do not despise effort in the Christian life. How can we? 2 Peter 1:5 tells us to *“make every effort.”*

Of course, anyone familiar with this passage will remember that the effort enjoined by Peter is God-graced effort. Verse 3 says we have divine power through *“knowledge of him.”* Verse 4 says we can become *“partakers of the divine nature”* through *“his precious and very great promises.”* Verse 5 harnesses these twin turbines of Spirit energy when it says *“For this very reason, make every effort.”* In other words, Peter holds up a pattern of godliness—increasing faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and love. This pattern relies on gospel power. And the gospel-powered pattern requires effort.

So, are you running the race of the Christian life with sincere, Gospel-empowered, grace-driven effort? So often, we either drift away in listless effortlessness, growing complacent, too comfortable with our sin and too compromised with the world. Or, we get really serious and roll up our spiritual shirt sleeves and are convinced that we can and will do better, but we put forth the wrong kind of effort, an effort of self-determination and human resolve, not an effort of total dependence on Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Effort that bears fruit in our lives for the glory of God must be empowered by the grace of God, rooted in the Gospel, secure on the foundation of Christ, and fueled by the Holy Spirit. My boys are doing cross-country right now, and I’m helping coach. We’ve found out the importance of the right shoes and good hydration. Poor quality shoes make it impossible to run well and cause pain. I’ve gone running several times when I’ve been a bit dehydrated, and it’s a miserable and frustrating experience.

In the race of the Christian life, the shoes we wear are the Gospel, the foundation for our striving is the free grace of God in Jesus Christ to save us from our sins and reconcile us to God. Without this foundation, without these Gospel shoes, you will only hurt yourself worse with the greater effort you exert. I remember years ago, I had pretty cheap shoes, and they were fine, until the first time I ran 6 miles. My feet needed a week to recover from the pain.

The Gospel is the Good News that God has sent His Son, Jesus Christ, who came from heaven and became a man to seek and to save the lost. The Gospel is a rescue story, and Jesus is the Hero, the Champion, the Savior from Heaven. He fulfilled all righteousness for us. He went to the cross willingly and became the embodiment of our sin and failures, taking on Himself the wrath of God and providing true cleansing and forgiveness for our sins. Then, having taken away our sins, He rose again on the Third Day, to bring everlasting life to light in His overthrow of death and His glorious resurrection in a glorified, eternal body. Now, He is sitting at the Right Hand of God the Father in heaven, and He is making intercession for us, praying for us continually. One day, He will return to judge the living and the dead, and He will bring us home to be with Him forever. This is the Gospel, and this is the only foundation for sure effort in our race toward eternity.

The living water we need to keep our souls well hydrated is the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity, whom the Father gives to all who trust in Jesus. John 7:37-39 says, *“On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, asf the Scripture has*

said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”

II. Goal, v. 25

So, running well requires the right foundation, the right shoes, and also good hydration, but you also need to be running with a clear goal in mind. Paul says, “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.”

It’s hard to imagine a more perishable crown than one of pine and parsley. In contrast to that crown, Paul says we will receive a crown that will last forever. Paul clearly ran the race of his life with that crown in clear view, as he wrote at the end of his life, right before he was martyred - “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth 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.” – 2 Tim 4:7-8, ESV

Athletes competing for the perishable crowns at the games would endure strict discipline and self-control, affecting every area of their lives – diet, exercise, rest, etc. How seriously do we take the Gospel call to self-denial and sacrifice for the higher goal of the heavenly crown?

Again, this is not about trusting in your own efforts or your own righteousness. It’s not about trying harder to be a good person so you can somehow earn your way into heaven. Paul rejected all efforts at self-righteousness or trusting in ourselves. In Philippians 3, he wrote:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. – Phil 3:4-14, ESV

Have you ever worked really hard for a goal? Have you ever sacrificed because you were reaching for something worth sacrificing for? Saving money to buy your first house or a car? Dieting to lose weight? Exercising to get in shape? These are all fine endeavors, but they are all perishable crowns, aren’t they? Nothing in the world could even begin to compare with the surpassing greatness of the goal of the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

III. Focus, v. 26

Philippians 3 also shows us the relentless focus of Paul, as well as the goal for which he was striving. In verse 26, Paul writes, “*So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air.*”

Great effort, even toward a great goal, is pretty useless unless it is focused, deliberate, intentional, aimed well. The devil is a great distractor, and unfortunately, lots of spiritual distractions are out there in the Christian world which may sound God-honoring and Biblical but which aren't. The latest Christian fads (and you might want to pull your feet in here), like the Prayer of Jabez or WWJD or *The Purpose-Driven Life* or the Daniel Fast or best-selling books about someone's visit to heaven or guides to *Your Best Life Now* or fascinations with prayer circles or with candles or whatever – most of the time these fads are just distractions, taking our eyes off our Jesus and the Bible and heavenward call. I just named a bunch of things. Some of them have some value, and many of them do not.

How do we know if something is helping us sharpen our focus on Jesus, the Bible, and the heavenward call of God, or if it is a distraction? Well, we need a solid grounding in Biblical and Systematic Theology to help anchor us and give us a filter for evaluating these things in the light of Scripture and sound Christian orthodoxy. Seeking advice from your pastor or elders is always a good idea, but make sure we are steering you by the light of Scripture. Be a Berean, and test everything by the Word of God. Don't let Satan get your eyes off the prize.

IV. Warning, V. 27

Finally, in verse 27, Paul issues a stern warning, and he does so in a deeply personal way: “*But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.*”

Paul tells us here of the depths he goes to in his struggle and why he does it. “I discipline my body” is boxing language, taken from the training boxers would do to prepare for fighting, beating their bodies to make them harder. Muay Thai fighters use kicks in their fighting, and to train, they kick banana trees and sugar cane and bamboo to toughen up their shins and make them hard as rocks.

Now, Paul is not literally talking about beating himself black-and-blue for the Gospel, but rather, he probably has in mind the many times when he would willingly submit to severe hardship for the sake of the Gospel. Last week, we talked about the five times he received from the Jews the 40 lashes less one, and how this was part of his voluntarily submitting to Jewish synagogue leadership, so he could keep his status as a Jew.

In 2 Corinthians 11, right after he mentions the lashes he received from the Jews, Paul also says: “*Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?*”

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.” - 2 Cor. 11:25-30, ESV

When we willingly suffer for the Gospel, we demonstrate to ourselves, to the devil, and to a watching world that we truly trust Christ and we belong to Him, body and soul. We are casting ourselves fully on Him, trusting Him with all that we are and have.

Paul says he does this, living by this kind of self-sacrificing, weakness-displaying faith for a reason: “lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”

What does Paul mean when he says “disqualified”? The NIV adds, “for the prize,” and some have suggested that he is talking about Christian rewards for faithful stewardship of the Gospel. But the word Paul uses here is too strong for that interpretation. The word translated “disqualified” is *adokimos*, and it means to fail the test of authenticity. It was a word most commonly used for testing the genuineness of coins and metals; so, it means, “shown to be a fake.”

This aligns with what Paul writes right after this word, the beginning of chapter 10, which we’ll look at next week:

For I do not want you to be unaware, 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. – 1 Cor. 10:1-5, ESV

Paul didn’t want to preach the Gospel to others and then be shown to be a fake, an imposter. He wanted to be able to demonstrate that he truly and sincerely trusted in Christ and in Christ alone for his salvation. He would not – he dared not! – trust in anything else.

What are you trusting in to get you to heaven? In your parents? In your baptism? In your church activity?

I have seen too many pastors – men of great learning, sound theology, gifted preaching, and apparent genuine sincerity – make complete shipwreck of their faith and abandon Christ. You might think, “Well, didn’t Paul know if he had sincere faith? He had to know, right?” Well, he knew enough not to trust his own heart or how own sincerity.

We must trust in NOTHING and NO ONE but CHRIST ALONE.

All other ground is sinking sand. On Christ the Solid Rock I stand. I hear the voice of Jesus and I run to Him. Not I but Christ in Me is the hope of glory. The only strength, the only hope, the only endurance, is Christ. And sometimes I need to risk truly trusting in Him, even being willing to suffer for His Gospel, to show that I am in His hands. For in His hands, I am safe, and NOWHERE else.

