

Run to Win, Part 1

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

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, 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. 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. 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.

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?

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 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.

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. 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, 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. 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 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.

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. In Ephesians, 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.