

Run to Win, Part 2

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

As Christians, we're running a race and that means, as Christians, we must discipline ourselves. And look, it wasn't easy for the Apostle Paul. Not at all. It's not easy for us either. Trials, persecutions, pains, sorrows, it's hard. But it's normal Christian living. That's expected. So what kept Paul going here? Three motivations strengthened him. Three motivations kept him encouraged and I trust you'll find this encouraging, too. Know this, first of all, number one, your prize is worth it. Your prize is worth it. Run the race, discipline yourselves because the prize is infinitely valuable. Look at verse 25 again. "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable."

Winning athletes in the Isthmian games received a pine wreath. Probably didn't take long for that thing to dry out, start losing the needles. It's the very picture of a fading glory, isn't it? Even the statues that were erected, the songs

that were sung, the parades of triumph, the money, all temporal, isn't it? We don't remember any of the ancient winners today. Most people don't even realize there ever was such a thing as the Isthmian games, but who do we remember? Paul, unknown to the Isthmian games. He didn't get paraded in the winner's circle. We remember him.

Like the flower of the grass, all that temporal glory fades away. It's not long after you've won the race, gained the victory, achieved the achievement, been the hero, all those trophies gather dust. They get put up in the garage attic. Plaques on the wall, they fade in significance. You always have to tell the story again to remind people of how great you were once. Just like that pine wreath, right? It's funny how that story keeps getting bigger and bigger, right, over the years.

But look, we don't run for a perishable wreath, do we? We exercise self-control to receive an imperishable crown. This refers to the, crown of salvation. This is referring to final salvation. It's called the, crown of righteousness, 2 Timothy 4:8. It's called the crown of life, James 1:12. It's called the crown of glory, 1 Peter 5:4. And that crown is promised to those who are what? Faithful. Faithful. Marked by sacrificial love for and devotion to Jesus Christ. What's at stake here is eternal

life. And the prize is a never-ending glory. We look forward to eternal enjoyment of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Sadly for some, they become enamored with this life, with this world. The upward call of Christ Jesus sounds too faintly in their ears. But for Christians, this is such a massive encouragement to order our lives around that future hope. We need to discipline ourselves because the prize is infinitely valuable.

Second motivation for disciplining yourselves to run the race to win, number two, your opponent is obstinate. Your opponent is obstinate. It means stubborn. You must discipline yourselves because your opponent is stubborn, very hard to subdue. That's verse 26. So Paul says, "I don't run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air, but I discipline my body and keep it under control." As every true athlete knows, the most difficult opponent in athletics is not the person running beside you on one side or the other, your real opponent is yourself.

Notice here how Paul changed metaphors. He's still in the realm of athletics here, but he switched on us from running to boxing. Two very disciplines involving two very different sets of challenges, two different ways to train. First, he's talking

about the focus that's required to be a runner. This is Hebrews 12 again, "Running the race that's set before us with endurance, fixing our eyes on Jesus." Our eyes are always fixed on the end, always fixed on the goal, always fixed on the prize. This isn't running circularly around a track. Certainly not the wasted effort of running on a treadmill. Listen, is there anything more discouraging than running on a treadmill? All that effort and you haven't gotten anywhere.

But the runner, this runner, a distance runner, a cross-country runner, a pilgrim runner, we could say, he looks ahead to his goal. He fixes his gaze. He focuses his mind on the mechanics of running. The right muscles tensed at the right time. Other muscles relaxed to save energy. Proper breathing, perfect stride, perfect cadence, regulated pace, all things are ordered to reach the goal. Don't run aimlessly.

But then there's an abrupt switch of metaphor from running to boxing. Verse 26, "I do not box as one beating the air." Look, he's not sparring in a gym. He's not beating on a heavy bag. He's facing a real opponent in a real fight in which there are consequences for throwing worthless punches. In a real fight, if you swing and miss, you pay. You not only waste valuable energy, missing makes you vulnerable to counterattack.

And Paul says, I don't do that. When I throw a punch, I connect, and I do damage.

Running, he's got his eye fixed on the finish line, but boxing, he's looking in the mirror. Paul's opponent here is his stubborn self, his stubborn flesh, his obstinate self, his sinful nature. The word translated discipline, it's accurate, but Paul intends us to understand something stronger here, more violent about disciplining himself. It's the word *hypopiazō*, which literally means, to strike under the eye, to give a black eye to. Paul's not playing around here. He realizes the real hindrance to victory is his sluggish self.

And left to its own preferences and tendencies, the natural inclination toward laziness means we have to be persistent and calculated with the opponent called, the sinful nature, the old man. Those are the influences and the habits of our past life as non-Christians. Look, your body, it'll look for any excuse to sleep in, right, to procrastinate, to take the easy way out. We're like water, we like the pathway of least resistance.

So like a boxer who studies his opponent, you've got to study yourself. You've got to know your own weaknesses and then go after them in the ring. Practice self-control, practice self-discipline, bring yourself into submission and run to win.

That's what Paul says in verse 27. "I discipline my body and keep it under control." That right there, keep it under control, it's a rather softened, muted translation of a very, very strong word.

The verb there comes from the word for slave, *doulos*. Paul is saying, I discipline my body, or I strike it with blows, and I enslave it. I strike it with blows. It's figurative. He strikes his body with blows. He enslaves his body. He forces his body into submission. Our bodies in submission, look, they can be very, very useful in the service to Christ and to his people, right? You do not obey your body. Your body obeys you if you're a Christian. If you're not a Christian, yeah, it's the other way around. You just go wherever your impulses lead you. If you're a Christian, you have power and self-control, and your body will obey you if you command it.

Romans 6:12, "Do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts." Do you know what the implication there is? You have the power to not let sin reign in your mortal body, so you obey its lust. So do not go on presenting the members of your body, the parts. That includes even the spiritual parts like the mind, the emotions. "Don't present the instruments of your body to sin as instruments of

unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.” Don’t be subject to sinful thoughts. Take your thoughts captive and make them obey Christ. Don’t be dominated by sinful emotions led astray by feelings. Look, refuse to feel in ungodly ways. Bring those emotions into conformity with truth and righteousness. Command yourself. Preach to yourself. Your body is for righteousness. Its members are instruments for righteousness.

By the way, all those verbs in verses 26-27, run, box, discipline, enslave, they’re all in the present tense. The present tense in Greek means continuous, habitual. So running the race, boxing the self to discipline and submission, this is supposed to be the habitual life of a Christian. That means this is normal Christian living. And to not live this way is out of step with true Christianity. This is Paul’s lifestyle. It’s not peculiar to his apostolic calling to live this way. By using himself as an example for the Corinthians, he’s telling them that this is the way all Christians are to live.

For those tempted to think this is an extreme, that’s an indication of how far we’ve drifted from true Christianity and its demands and its requirements from what Jesus said. “Let

everyone who would come after me deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” That’s a call to die to self, folks. We need to learn this all over again, some of us. We’re to live sacrificially, preferring others above ourselves all for the sake of love. We’re running the race and we run to win. We must live disciplined Christian lives. Why? Because the prize is eternal and our opponent, ourselves, is so very obstinate, stubborn.

There’s a third, final motivation, which we’ll need to explain carefully here. In as much as the prize for winning our race is infinitely worthwhile, you know what the failure to win represents, a terrifying outcome. Run to win because your failure is permanent. We might rather say failure, were it to happen, would be permanent. You must run to win, discipline yourself for the race because failure to do so is devastating. For Paul, a fall into the abyss would be from such a dizzying height as he says in verse 27. He says, “I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”

It’s that last word, disqualified, that is so troubling. It’s the word *adokimos*. *Adokimos*, which means rejected and it implies scrutiny, it implies judgment, that one has failed to



stand the test. Whatever is *adokimos* has been judged to be disqualified, worthless. In the ancient world, coins were easily counterfeited and so people used to apply a test. Just two outcomes of that testing. Whatever stood up the test was put into the approved category, *dokimos*. Whatever failed the test went into the *adokimos* category, the rejected category.

So whenever *adokimos* is used in the New Testament, that is the sense. It refers to something that has failed the test. It's therefore rejected as worthless and useless. That word describes the debased mind of the unbelieving world; it's *adokimos*, Romans 1:28. That word is used of those who examine themselves to see whether or not they are in the faith, 2 Corinthians 13, verses 5, 6, and 7, and they fail the test, they're *adokimos*. Jannes and Jambres, the men who opposed Moses' leadership in 2 Timothy 3:8, they were tested and then disqualified, rejected regarding the faith.

So the word *adokimos* indicates something very, very serious: rejected, disapproved, worthless, useless, disqualified. But what are we talking about here? Rejected from what? Some people take Paul to mean a Christian can lose his salvation. That's clearly not the case based on everything else Paul wrote, Romans 8, Romans 9, Ephesians 1 and 2. We could go

on and on. Paul did not teach a true Christian can lose his salvation. Salvation is totally God's doing as Jesus said. He said, "All that the Father gives to me will come to me and whoever comes to me I will never cast out," John 6:37. Not only will he never cast them out, but John 6:44, "I will raise him up at the last day."

It's that golden chain of redemption in Romans 8:29-30. "For those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified," right? Speaking of a future event, glorification, in past tense terms. Glorified; it's a done deal. For those who are truly saved, their salvation is absolutely secure, guaranteed by the sovereign election and completed redemption of God in Jesus Christ.

Others, they take Paul to mean that after preaching to others, he would be disqualified from preaching, from ministry. And in the context Paul is talking about his ministry, but appealing to the context, we should keep reading to see what Paul says next. Look at the very next section and see what Paul meant by disqualification. Chapter 10 verse 1, "I want you to

know, brothers," and look how he says, "For I want you to know, brothers," meaning he's connecting it to the previous section.

"For I want you to know 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. Now these things took place as examples for us that we might desire evil as they did. Do not be idolators as some of them were; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.' We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer."

Stop there. Notice the parallels between 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 and chapter 10 verses 1-10. There were many runners just as there were many Israelites under the cloud, passed through the sea, baptized into Moses, all the rest. The runners have a visible role in the race. They line up, just as the Israelites

seemed to be members of God's people. In the end, most runners are rejected, disqualified, not attaining the prize. They don't win. In the same way, most of the Israelites who left Egypt, they died in the wilderness, disqualified, and rejected. By contrast, only one runner is approved, accepted to the winner's stand to receive the prize. Also, just a few of those original Israelites entered the Promised Land.

Folks, Paul's mentality, and the motivations that drove him to live a Gospel-centered, sacrificial, loving life, it serves as a warning to those who do not live that way. To those who are indifferent to holiness, who are self-centered and uncaring, who are proud and unconcerned, uncritical about how they live their lives, to those who are self-justifying about their thoughts and attitudes and behavior and words, like these Corinthian meat-eaters, for them this is a sober warning. The Christian life is not about asserting our own rights. It's not about pursuing our own interests, demanding our own way. It's about love and obedience. It's about fearing the Lord. It's about devotion to his Word.

The Christian life is about sincere love of all the brethren, sacrificing ourselves for the least of these. And I fear for many in our evangelical churches who've professed

Christ all their lives, and like the Israelites consider their profession unshakable, untouchable. They've been taught not to examine themselves. They've been taught not to examine some doubts that they might have, not to look too hard at inconsistencies in their lives. Cover it all over with grace. Ah, just give them grace. I fear for them that God will judge their lives unfavorably at the end. And they'll be in for such a rude awakening and, and by then, it'll be too late.

That's what happened to the Jews historically. Paul wants us to learn from them. Look at 1 Corinthians 10:11, "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore, let him who thinks that he stands take heed lest he" what? "Fall." Paul took that warning personally. Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 9:27 is this: How tragic. If I were to spend my life preaching the Gospel to other people, but I failed to win the crown of salvation for myself. Wait! You, Paul? Yeah, even for Paul.

Listen, this is the spirits warning to us today as well. What an absolute nightmare! Imagine Christian, professing Christian, if you came to the Lord thinking you're secure in your salvation and your profession and you hear those words,

"Depart from me you worker of iniquity. I never knew you." Now, the warning here, it's not meant to frighten genuine Christians. But I usually find it is the genuine Christians who find this warning most terrifying. The people I'm most concerned about here are those who hear a message like this, and they walk away indifferent, or even as some have, angry that I dared to preach on such an issue. How dare you raise doubts in my mind, or somebody else's mind that I love. If anyone's indifferent to this warning, listen, if anyone's mildly irritated or worse, listen, consider yourself warned by the Holy Spirit. These are his words.

But for genuine Christians, this text demonstrates the profound wisdom of God. And also a profound paradox. On the one hand, we are absolutely confident about entering heaven because of Christ's finished work, as we should be. But on the other hand, we're concerned about attaining to heaven, being found worthy, which spurs us on to pursue holiness in the fear of God. That's exactly how God preserves us to the end.

We find this same thing in Peter, 2 Peter 1:10-11. "Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about his calling and choosing you, for as long as you practice these things," you say, wait a minute; that's legalism. No, it's

not. It's not legalism for him to command your obedience, for him to call you to diligence and perseverance. "As long as you practice these things, as long as you obey them you'll never stumble. For in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you."

Look, all genuine believers share the same mentality as Peter, same mentality as Paul, who ran to win, disciplined himself for winning, "lest after having preached to others he himself should be disqualified." Perish the thought, right? But if he thought like that, shouldn't we? And if you're concerned about that, you know what, you're in a very, very good place. That, what is a warning for you genuine believers turns out to be a comfort and an encouragement. You know why? Because you share the concern of your heart as the Apostle Paul did. He was concerned about that for himself. He's a genuine believer. He set the foundations of the entire apostolic church. If you share the same concern about your own life, you know what? You're in good company. You are in good company.

Two facts to inform your minds: Paul ran to win; he disciplined his body to run and so should we. Three motivations to encourage our hearts: Paul was motivated to run because of

the future reward, because of the heavenly prize. He was motivated to discipline because his opponent was so obstinate, so stubborn and intractable that he had to enslave it. And he was motivated to run and discipline himself because the significance of failure was absolutely unthinkable. He wanted to keep himself away from that. Let's pray that the Lord will allow these truths to sink into our hearts as well.

Dear Father, like the great Apostle Paul, we want to come to the end of our lives saying the same thing that he did 2 Timothy 4, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith. In the future 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." That last phrase refers to all of us, those who are genuine, in the truth, in faith in Jesus Christ. We are all those who love the appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.