

The Character of a Spiritual Champion

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

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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 exercises 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. (1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

As I was preparing this message, a staff person asked me how it was going. I said, *I wish all weeks were like this week.* What I meant is that this is a passage in my sweet spot. As most of you know, I love sports. They have been a big part of my life. Many of my happiest moments are somehow related to playing sports, watching sports, and this January 7 it's possible that another lifelong dream will be realized as the Iowa Hawkeyes play and win the College Football BCS championship. I'd like to call our church to prayer over that, too.

I often use sports illustrations in my message. My mind just goes there. This is why I am excited to speak today from this passage. Did you hear what Paul did? The same thing. He illustrated a spiritual truth from the world of athletics. I think Paul may have been an ESPN kind of guy. He uses athletic metaphors several times in his letters (2 Timothy 4:7; Acts 20:24). That may have been because he liked them. It was certainly because those he wrote to were crazy about sports. The Greek world loved sports and guess where the second biggest sporting event in the ancient world was held? That's right, Corinth.

They were called the Isthmian Games and they were second only to the Olympics in popularity (Isthmian taken from Corinth's location on the Isthmus). As an example of how popular they were, in 412 BC, even though Athens and Corinth were at war, the Athenians were invited to the games and participated as usual. Wouldn't want a little war to get in the way of the big game, would we?

The events included racing, wrestling, boxing, hurling the javelin and discus. The competitions were held in stadiums. In fact, a *stadia* (from which we get the word stadium) is a measure of length equal to the running course of a Greek stadium. Two years ago some



of us were in one of these ancient stadiums during our tour of Israel. In Caesarea, right by the Mediterranean, some of us decided to have our own foot race. I just want to point out Pastor Jim Pitts in the back. I'll refrain from commenting on who is leading and ultimately won the race. Since these games were held in Corinth every other year, Paul was there for at least one. This was like being in the host city of a Super Bowl. The city shut down and all anyone talked about were the events and the athletes and who was winning.

So with that background, let's take a look at this passage. Remember, Paul is challenging the Corinthians (and us) to live with missional/gospel priorities. The Corinthians were living very non-missionally and were letting unimportant matters become too important. Paul

would have none of this and gives his own life as an example in verse 22, *I become all things to all people so that by all means I might save some*. That aim of evangelism trumps the preferential issues in the Church.

Our passage today is an illustration of the intense determination behind that verse. God wants us to think about the force of will required to orient one's life around the goal of maximum life impact for Christ. What better example of grit and determination than an elite athlete? This is a passage dripping with sweat. If the Bible had a soundtrack, over these verses would play the theme song to Rocky. The song symbolizes the story of a man who gave all of himself to be a champion. Elite athletes orient their entire selves around the goal of winning – physically, mentally, diet, daily schedule, practice, practice, practice.

Champion athletes have always been this way. The Greek athletes would spend ten months prior to the games completely committed to training. Today, Olympic athletes give up a normal childhood and live at the gym. Why? That's what it takes to win; to be a champion. I remember visiting Lake Placid, New York and going into the ice skating arena and seeing little girls jumping and twirling. These were future Olympians at age 7 totally dedicated to the Olympic Games that were still a decade away. What gets them out of bed? What drives them to train to the point of exhaustion day after day? They want to be champions who get a reward that in their minds is worth it. The challenge of the passage is this: *If they do what they do to get what they get, what should the average Christian be willing to do to get what God promises?*

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A determination to win the prize (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.

Ancient races were like today's races. Everyone runs. Have you ever seen a running race where the runner ran with the goal of losing? No. Every runner lined up in the starting blocks is there to win. You don't become an elite runner without a will to win. Our superstars are the ones who dig deep and find a force of will at the key moments that give them the victory. Two clear examples are Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods. Hundreds of thousands of grown men pay insane ticket prices just to be in the same room with them. They are in it to win it. I saw a sports ad today that had a coach yelling at a player, "You've got to work hard! You've got to want it!" Like Larry Bird who walked into the locker room before the first ever three point shoot-out and said to the other competitors, *You are all competing for second*. That's a champion. He's there to win. If you don't have that, you play in the band.

What Paul isn't saying here is that we are in a race against each other or that there is only one person who wins the prize. He's getting at the intensity of effort the athlete puts out going for the prize. They run to win.

Someone might be thinking, "I don't like today's message. First of all, I played in the Pep band and I didn't appreciate that previous comment. I am saved anyway. I already got the prize, right?" Paul writes about the prize, *So run that you may obtain it*. What prize should Christians pursue? He's not referring here to salvation or eternal life. These are gifts we receive at the beginning of our race when we repent and believe in Christ and His saving work on our behalf on the cross. I begin with that prize, but I run for another one.

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. (2 Corinthians 5:10)

Someday Jesus is going to sit on a throne and distribute rewards to His people. These rewards are based on the quality of service and sacrifice we gave for Him in this life. Do we all get the same? No. The greater the effort, the greater the sacrifice, the greater the eternal reward will be. Similarly, the less the effort, the less the reward, and as it says in chapter 3, you may be saved, but only as one escaping the flames (3:15). That's a life wasted. An eternal regret.

Paul says, *You gotta want it! Run for the prize! Give yourself to serving Christ like a runner gives himself to the race. Run to win.* What does that look like? Here are some spiritual categories to consider that are a part of the race: *the battle against sin and temptation; personal involvement in spiritual disciplines; prayer; Bible reading, study and meditation; worship; giving; time and energy put toward serving Jesus in the church and community; intentional discipling of children and family.* It's not too different than identifying the athletes at a track meet. How do you know? They are the ones who are running. Sweat is pouring off of them. Service and sacrifice and sweat. Great will be their reward.

Some might be thinking, *What? You got to be kidding! I don't have time for those things AND all the other things that are important to me – my social schedule; my hobby which is so cool; I always have to see the latest movies; then there's keepin' up with my friends on Facebook. God expects me to do all those things and serve Jesus?* No, He doesn't. He expects us live wisely to max out our lives for the Kingdom. Or as a coach would say, *You gotta want it! Do you want the prize or not?*

A spiritual single-mindedness (Verse 25)

Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

Athletes need self-control? That's an understatement. An elite athlete applies self-control to everything. Her time, lifestyle, diet, sleep patterns, removing anything that could impact her performance. Often these are good things by themselves, but they might just be distractions. I remember my high school basketball coach giving his annual speech to the team about the Greek Spartan warriors. They were totally focused on being the best fighters on the planet. His application for the speech was he didn't want us distracted during the season so no dating girls. Apparently, my season has never ended.

All of this single-mindedness, for what? *They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.* The argument is from the lesser to the greater. The prize for winning in Corinth was a wreath of pine twigs. All that effort for pine twigs? If they are willing to give that kind of effort for twigs, what kind of effort should we give for eternal rewards for Christ?



So what should we say about the Christian who is exerting only a small effort, serving only in small ways, sacrificing only a little? 1 Corinthians 3 describes it as loss and someday there will be tremendous regret by so many who did so little for the Lord.

As your pastor, I desperately don't want that to be any of us. Can I respectfully ask you, is the effort you are putting forth for Christ a worthy one? Any sweat? Any determination? There are eternal rewards waiting that are worth our every effort. You gotta want it! The rewards will be worth our every effort.

In running, what step is the hardest? The first one. Some of you are contemplating a first step. It may seem hard. The first one always is. Let me offer some suggestions:

- Memorize this Bible passage this week
- Offer to pray with your spouse at a non-meal time
- Look for a meaningful service/ministry opportunity: Second Saturday; volunteer at the women's conference; sign up for a week of prayer slot; commit to regular worship service attendance, etc.

The first step is the hardest, but you don't finish if you don't start and you don't win if you don't run.

Discipline, Discipline, Discipline (Verses 26-27)

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.

Let me explain the ending first regarding being disqualified. Paul is not insinuating that in the end he might be disqualified from salvation. The clear teaching of the New Testament is that eternal life cannot be lost. The Greek word there means "proved unworthy" or "not approved." He is concerned that after exhorting others to pursue the prize, that his personal effort would be lacking – like the captain of a cross-country team exhorting his teammates to run their best but then not doing it himself and thereby not receiving the prize. Let that amaze us. Paul was concerned that HIS effort wasn't what it should be. How much more should little ol' you and I be concerned about our efforts?

The verse begins with the absurd. Running aimlessly; boxing with flailing arms in every direction. This is apostolic humor. It's totally ridiculous. What runner zigzags or runs in circles? What boxer punches randomly in all directions? You never see that. Runners run directly toward the finish line and boxers aim their punches carefully. They know what they are doing and where they are going. How do we live so that our lives don't resemble running aimlessly?

But I discipline my body and keep it under control. "Discipline" comes from a word that means to punch oneself or to treat your body harshly. Again, cue the Rocky music and think of his example. Rigorous workouts. Harsh treatment of the body to toughen it and get it ready to fight.

Spiritually we have to do the same. That is often our problem. We don't rule our bodies, they rule us. The body wants to be lazy, so we are lazy. The body wants to spend energy elsewhere and so we do. It is discipline that refuses to let our natural desires rule us. I think of that scene from Spiderman 3 where Dr. Octavius' arms want to do violence and he yells at them, "No, you listen to me!" We have these kinds of conversations and it is only discipline over our bodies that keep them from ruling over us.

Men, let me just talk to you a second. I have rarely met a man who didn't have something that got him excited. Things he gives energy too. Cars. Hunting. Baseball. Investing. Motorcycles. Computers. Working out. All men have something that they really love, know a ton about, enjoy doing. That's great. There's nothing wrong with that. All those things have a certain reward to them. A kind of perishable wreath. Happiness in your team winning. The rush of a good workout.

Here's the thing, as a Christian, your level of interest and commitment to spiritual pursuits MUST be greater than your time and energy given to your thing. Why? As a Christian, serving Jesus in some way meaningful to you should be your favorite thing. It is only short-sighted foolishness that allows something else to seem more important. There is nothing wrong with these other things but they ALL perish. For example, if your happiness is determined by how well overpaid and spoiled athletes perform, please remember they don't care at all for you and will never do one thing for you. Christ gave His life for you. What is a wise way to live and what is foolishness?

I wish I could harness the energy that is given by Christian men to their hobbies and unleash that energy and creativity on Bethel Church and this community. Men, you are amazing with the things you prioritize! We just need you to prioritize the right things! So much time and energy is wasted. The Cubs are probably going to lose next year and your son isn't going to play in the NBA and no one but you cares what your yard looks like. One thing is for sure, however. You are going to personally stand before Christ and give an account of that time and those talents. With great love I urge you to give to God your best; take that masculine energy and use it for the glory of God. Go for the gold. You gotta want it! Sisters, you too. At the end of our lives we want to be able to say what Paul said at the end of his life:

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... (2 Timothy 4:7-8)

Spiritual champions have the following character traits: determination to win, single-minded focus, and discipline, discipline, discipline. See you at the finish line.

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