

## ***Run to Win!***

Our second Scripture reading is 1 Corinthians 9:19-27. The context is Paul's defending his rights against his critics who claimed he was not an authentic apostle since he, unlike a group of self-proclaimed apostles, was not asserting his rights. Paul's critics claimed that his life and ministry were not successful as measured by their standards. This apostle of the cross countered these accusations by replying that what matters is not success by their standards but by the standards of God. Paul uses the analogy of the Christian life as a race we must all run.

Follow as I read... **1 Corinthians 9:19-27**

*<sup>19</sup>For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. <sup>20</sup>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 I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. <sup>21</sup>To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. <sup>22</sup>To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. <sup>23</sup>I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings. <sup>24</sup>Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. <sup>25</sup>Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. <sup>26</sup>So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; <sup>27</sup>but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.*

Paul employed images and illustrations from the world of sports, and the most popular sport of his day in Corinth was running, particularly in the bi-annual Isthmian Games, hosted by the city of Corinth, and second only to the Olympics in importance. You might say it was like the AFC vs. NFC game, leading up to the Super Bowl.

Paul makes it quite clear that the way God measures champions is not at all like the way the world measures them. In fact, not even like the way Christians sometimes measure champions. Paul was always being compared with those who called themselves "super apostles" (2 Cor. 11:5; 12:11), who claimed to have superior charismatic gifts, and more impressive public rhetoric and oratory. They were also, obviously, quite good at self-aggrandizement, and had convinced the people in the church that Paul, even though he had evangelized them, just didn't measure up to their standards for success. Paul describes his life and his God-given ministry as the running of a race, and his intention is to run to win.

In what seems like ancient history, I participated for 19 consecutive years in an annual mini-marathon, a 10-kilometer race. In community running events that often attract thousands of runners, there's an elite group who run to win, who finish in little more than half the time it takes participants like me. There's also a category that participates in the run as a fun social event.

To Paul, every believer has been enlisted to run a race of faith and faithful service, and we're to run to win! We're to be successful in God's sight by running life's race to please him, and are not in the race just for show, as were some of Paul's critics.

So-called super apostles were influencing the church to measure success by the world's standards and not by God's. Christians today are also being duped by Satan and the fallen world into thinking they must measure up to their standards of what makes a person successful and important. To these false prophets, financial gain, and putting on an impressive display of intellect and oratory, and popularity with the world's people and worldly people in the church was all that mattered.

Paul's description of success God's way was a message needed by the church in the first century and by us as well. Paul says the Christian life is like a race. And our text essentially asks the question, "What are you running, i.e. living for?" And, "Are you running to succeed by God's standards?"

The race God has for us is run successfully, first, by winning people. People, to Paul, were a crown to be won. We live in a time and culture of self-centeredness. Just about everybody, and sometimes the church, as Paul would lament, is "looking out for number one." But if you want to run the race of life successfully God's way, your concerns must be with the infinite value of others, these precious souls God has placed in your daily "traffic patterns." Your spouse, and the children around your dinner table are those God has called you to win to faith. Your work associates, neighbors, and even your enemies are "fair game" to be won to Christ through your prayers, your actions of loving concern, your willingness to forgive, and your godly example and seizing every opportunity to expose them to the good news of Jesus.

In order to win as many as possible, Paul was willing to renounce his personal rights and privileges (8:1-9:18). He accommodated himself to the conscience and need of others, and was willing to relinquish his personal freedoms and legitimate indulgences for the sake of others. This is a challenge to us to become "world Christians," ready to relinquish our cultural preferences and prejudices in order to relate the gospel to people not like us, ethically, socially and politically. This willingness seems extraordinary in our American culture of individualism and self-aggrandizement. Yet, to be like the Savior, we have to be willing to deny the self-centered self, and follow the cross way of self-denial.

Some of us in the ministry profession can find ourselves accustomed to being given preferential treatment. Leaders run the risk of expecting special treatment. An airline flight attendant friend told me that among her colleagues, a certain well-known, (now retired, thankfully) television preacher has a horrible reputation for being rude, unreasonably demanding and downright obnoxious. He thinks he should be treated like a king, whereas Paul was content to be "the scum of the earth" for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor. 4:13). Paul endured all sorts of trials and abuse, because his focus was not on his needs, rights, and privileges, but on the eternal prospects of people, and their urgent need for the gospel. Paul was not only willing, he was committed to doing whatever he could to eliminate artificial barriers that kept people from coming to faith in Christ.

All of us have unique contacts with people in our everyday life patterns. Some of these are family, old and new friends, and people we've yet to meet. Sometimes they're unlikely. A new friend I met at my former workout facility is a professional poker player and sports bar owner. Unlikely, you say, for a minister, yet we've become friends and he shares with me some of his and his family's needs. I pray for him and try to stay connected as a witness to him.

Paul says he's seeking also to win a prize (24-27). This athletic imagery was well received by the Corinthians, who were proud of their Isthmian Games. The crown awarded to the winners of these games was a wreath of celery worn on their heads! A far cry from a Winter Olympic gold medal or a Super Bowl ring! Probably thinking about the garland of celery leaves worn on the heads of their champions, Paul says we're running to win a prize that is of far greater worth than wilted vegetables! Paul speaks highly of the prize God gives to all who run the race of life his way.

It's not only permissible, but even commendable to seek after God's rewards. "Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak," says CS Lewis. He explains that rewards promised in Scripture are not mercenary and self-centered. For example, if the reward a man sought in marriage was a girl's inheritance, he would be venal. But to win a woman's love through marriage is the proper reward for his courtship. To fight in battle and risk one's life with deep patriotic love for one's country, and then be awarded and promoted in rank is not mercenary. It is the proper reward for service rendered (Lewis). We believers look for the rewards the Lord himself has promised us, for which he has given us a longing, the reward of pleasing God. The prize is to hear Jesus say, "Well done, you good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21), and to be finally and eternally like him in perfect love and character.

Paul knew he could not gain the prize, that he could not be God's champion, unless he went into strict training (25). The Isthmian games required strict training for 10 months, without which athletes would be declared ineligible. The athletes who compete in the Olympic Games or Super Bowl pay the price of years of rigorous training. They all seek to win some kind of medal, financial reward or recognition.

Paul was one who disciplined himself like a serious athlete, employing spiritual disciplines for growth in godliness. How much more do we need to avail ourselves of the disciplines upon which not only the apostle depended, but also our Lord Jesus depended, such as worship, prayer, the word, fasting, silence and solitude, evangelism, giving, learning, and perseverance. We grow and are made clean by abiding in Jesus, the True Vine (Jn. 15:1-17), and we grow by the way we respond to life's trials, which are God's way of disciplining us (Heb. 12:7-11). The athletes that will mount the awards platform will get there by strict discipline.

John Bunyan wrote his best and certainly most far-reaching work, *Pilgrim's Progress*, while in a Bedford jail. Similarly, Jonathan Edwards did his most significant writing after being fired from a long and fruitful pastorate in Northampton, and virtually exiled to an Indian settlement in the frontier village of Stockbridge in Western Massachusetts. God often sends his best servants through the fires of tribulation, to develop the discipline of perseverance that leads to maturity and godliness (Jas. 1:2-4).

In my long-ago past, I ran mini-marathons, just to remind myself to stay in decent shape. And there were times when, about a third of the way through the race, I gave serious thought to ducking out of the race, and walking through a wooded, secluded, obscure pathway, back to my car (or faking a leg cramp, or whatever).

Paul was fearful he would experience the disgrace of not finishing the race, of being disqualified as a spiritual leader (27). I know of too many ministers and active church members who dropped out of the race. Because of a moral or spiritual failure, they had to relinquish the prize for finishing the race. They'll go to heaven, but have had to forfeit so much of the eternal reward, that which comes to those who finish well, who are faithful to the end, and whose lives cause no embarrassment to the Kingdom.

Everyone can run successfully. Some are in the midst of the pursuit of your career and perhaps are wondering if your life can have any significance. You may have been told by your boss you're a failure in business, or Satan may be telling you you've failed as a spouse or parent or that you're a failure in life itself. I'm here to tell you, on the authority of God's word that you can be successful in God's eyes because of his grace through Jesus Christ.

Paul spoke of seeking to reach the goal and win the game for which Jesus Christ had captured and enlisted him. Christ enlists and then he enables us to run successfully (Phil. 3:12). To run to win, all you need is the grace of God, given when we follow Jesus as Lord. Immediately he puts you into the race of your life! He also takes us believers who might have grown weary and even dropped out of the race, and he lifts us and encourages us to resume running.

In most races and games, there's only one winner. In God's race, he gives the prize to all who finish the race. That's what Paul told Timothy he had done, at the close of his life: "I have finished the race" (2 Tim. 4:7). Maybe you haven't thought well of yourself, and have been an underachiever in the race of faith. But God thinks highly of you, and cheers you on as a winner. I was impressed to see a runner stop before the finish line and lift up and help carry a fallen runner to the finish line. There are some fallen runners you and I can help.

Kent Hughes told the story of Bill Broadhurst, who in 1981 entered the Pepsi Challenge 10,000-meter race in Omaha, Nebraska. "Surgery ten years earlier for a brain aneurysm had left him paralyzed on his left side. Now, on that misty July morning, he stands with 1,200 lithe men and women at the starting line.

"The gun sounds! The crowd surges forward. Bill throws his stiff left leg forward, pivots on it as his foot hits the ground. His slow plop-plop-plop rhythm seems to mock him as the pack races into the distance. Sweat rolls down his face, pain pierces his ankle, but he keeps going. Some of the runners complete the race in about 30 minutes, but 2 hours and 29 minutes later Bill reaches the finish line. A man approaches from a small group of remaining bystanders. Though exhausted, Bill recognizes him from pictures in the newspaper. He is Bill Rodgers, the famous marathon runner, who then drapes his newly won medal around Bill's neck. Bill Broadhurst's finish was as glorious as that of the world's greatest-----though he finished last. Why? Because he ran with perseverance" (Hughes, 160f).

Let's stay in the race!