

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

Our Scripture text is 1 Corinthians 9:19-27, where Paul is 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 God's. 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 their "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. But Paul describes his life and his God-given ministry as the running of a race by God's standards, 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, 10-kilometer race. Now, with my artificial hips and cardio issues, I'm confined to walking and using my exercise machine. But I find joy in following my grandson's exploits in cross country and distance track running.

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 questions, "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 and grandchildren 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, ethnically, racially, socially or politically, or even morally. 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 (at least this was the way it used to be!). Leaders run the risk of expecting special treatment. An airline flight attendant friend told me that among her colleagues, a certain well-known television preacher had a horrible reputation for being rude, unreasonably demanding and downright obnoxious. He thought 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, such as a friend I met at my former workout facility, who is a professional poker player and sports bar owner. Unlikely, you say, for a minister, yet we became friends.

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 Olympics gold medal or a Super Bowl ring (and with big financial rewards)! 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 a lonely life in 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).

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 likely 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. Grace means that God has forgotten all our past failures and sins of all kinds.

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. My race running, now in my old age, is from a sedentary or standing posture! I can and still must run the race of growing in godliness through prayer and with kindness and words of encouragement and witness from a sitting or standing position!

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. Recently 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. And if you've fallen, God will send you someone to help you get back in the race.

Paul ends our Scripture stating the possibility of being disqualified. This is the dreadful possibility of marring our witness and example to others by conduct that is unworthy of a follower of Christ. The image is one who leads others astray or fails to finish the race of life well. A truly "being converted" child of God has assurance of salvation, of being in glory for eternity. Yet, there are everlasting blessings and an enduring witness and positive influence we can leave behind as we remain faithful and keep our eyes on Jesus.

I recall the very sad, disappointing end of a race in the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, Australia. Jane Kara Saville, who was born in Sydney, was a champion race walker, who had won a bronze medal in the Olympics in Athens in 2004, the birthplace of the Olympic Games. She formerly met disgrace when in the 2000 Olympic Games, in her hometown of Sydney, she was disqualified for an "illegal gait," as she headed into the stadium before a cheering crowd. She had completed an amazing feat of leading the other race walkers for the entire 20 kilometers. But at the end, losing her concentration of keeping her legs straight, with one foot always on the ground, while paying too much attention to the crowd, she was disqualified. When asked what she needed after collapsing in tears, she said "A gun to shoot myself."

I hope none of us reach that point of despair. We all have events, issues, character flaws that need correction and would keep us from finishing well. At this time in my life, when my mortal days become fewer, I have an increasing desire to finish my race well. I hope to hear my Lord say, when He meets me in His heavenly kingdom, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21, 23). I pray I will finish my race well, and I want the same for you. Let's stay in the race!