

# 17. Ready, set, endure

September 30, 2018

Every four years, millions of people revolve around the event that celebrates the height of athletic achievement: the Olympics. Spectators gladly change their routines so they can watch their favorite athletes compete. And the athletes make their final preparations, polishing their routines and running through their strategies for the millionth time. The coveted medals are dangling in front of their minds' eye. The smell of victory is in the air.

In contrast to all the hoopla surrounding the Olympics, little attention is paid to the years of rigorous training that produce a winner. Champions are not born, but they're made. And the tools that forge them are discipline, motivation, and realistic goals.

What's true for athletes in the Olympic Games is true for Christians in the arena of life. Without the right training, desire, and objective, victory will always be out of reach. Here are the questions we often must ask ourselves: How is my Christian race doing? Is it a short sprint and I am running out of my steam? Am I running aimlessly without a goal? Am I still in the race toward the goal? Or have I disqualified myself by getting into the things that I was not supposed to?

I believe that the apostle Paul has a valuable lesson for all of us this morning. Let's open our hearts to the Author of this Book, the Holy Spirit and let Him speak to us.

## A. A COUPLE OF THINGS TO GO OVER FIRST

The core of our training manual is 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. These verses drip with the sweat of athletes. But we'll never fully understand these verses until we grasp the first century Greek key term and cultural background:

**1) The key word** – The crucial term in this passage is “temperate” in v25. The Greek word “egkrateuomai” means “self-controlled, strength within,” carrying the idea of mastering oneself instead of giving in to impulse or overindulgence. In this context, it gives the key to victory in the Christian life: discipline.

**2) The central event** – Paul is speaking from the viewpoint of the grandstands of the Isthmian games which was his equivalent of our Olympics. The Isthmian games held every 2 years, 10 miles outside Corinth. These games brought people from every part of the Mediterranean to compete or just to watch. It was THE sporting event of the year, drawing the empire's finest talent. The athletes competed fiercely, each one striving for the coveted Isthmian crown – a wreath of wild celery. Winners also received lifetime exemptions from paying taxes and serving in the military, tuition-free educations, and statues of themselves erected along the roadway that led to the site of the games.

## B. ONLY ONE RECEIVES THE PRIZE

*1 Corinthians 9:24 Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.*

Paul isn't talking about salvation, but rewards. Not all Christians will be rewarded for the way they lived their lives. Some will appear before Christ's Judgment Seat expecting a pat on the back for a job well done. But when their works are tested by fire from the Lord, they will all be burned to ashes, because they worked with selfish motives for themselves instead of the glory of God. These believers will never receive crowns from the Lord for their service.

Other Christians, however, those who faithfully obey His Word, will be rewarded for the spiritual good they accomplished on earth. So Paul encourages us, saying, "Run in such a way as to get the prize."

*2 Corinthians 5:9-10 Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. 10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.*

Many Christians, including some of you, run your Christian race carelessly, without aim, because you know that you will be in heaven when you check out from the earth. Your idea is, "My eternal fire insurance is paid up by the blood of Jesus, so I am gonna go to heaven when I die. No need to bust my back for the kingdom of God. I will enjoy what this world offers until my time to go to heaven." If that is your thought, I feel sorry for you and know that you will not get any reward when you get to heaven. There will not be any participation award like elementary school kids nowadays.

The apostle Paul wants us to realize that running just to finish the race will never bring a reward. It takes keeping the goal in mind.

### **C. FOR AN IMPERISHABLE CROWN**

*1 Corinthians 9:25 And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown.*

An athlete must be disciplined if he is to win the prize. Discipline means giving up the good and the better for the best. The athlete must watch his diet as well as his hours. He must smile and say, "No, thank you" when people offer him fattening desserts or invite him to late night parties. There is nothing wrong with the food or fun, but if they interfere with your highest goals, then they are hindrances and not helps.

Those athletes disciplined themselves so strenuously for a wild celery wreath that one day will be dried up and gone, how much more should we train to win an indestructible reward from our God?

In our Christian walk we are far too easily pleased or distracted by the temporal things. Can we list them?

- When you are supposed to do your daily devotion, you get distracted by something. What is it?
- When you are supposed to pray, your mind starts to wander off to somewhere in La La land. Why?
- When you are supposed to live the life as a Christian who represents your Savior Christ, for some reasons, you are not doing it. What is the reason?

If you can make a list of them, it is a good start for you to fight against those temptations and distractions, don't you think?

A lot of Christians start out their spiritual race like a jack rabbit. They are so excited about the Lord. They take off running and leave everyone else in their dust. Then they collapse and fall. The Christian life is a race, but it isn't a sprint. It's a long-distance run. There will be times when we collapse and fall. And all we can do is get up again and keep running until we cross the finish line.

Paul has one great goal in life: to glorify the Lord by winning the lost and building up the saints. To reach this goal, he is willing to pay any price. He is willing even to give up his apostolic rights as we learned in our last study. He sacrificed immediate gains for eternal rewards, immediate pleasures for eternal joys.

#### **D. NOT WITH UNCERTAINTY**

*1 Corinthians 9:26 Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air.*

If the apostle Paul was born in America during our time, he'd love to watch ball games on TV. Sunday afternoon, he would grab a bag of potato chips and a tall glass of ice tea, and sit in front of the TV and cheer for his team. Here is another sermon illustration of an athlete – this time, a boxer.

“Beats the air” means “shadow boxing.” Shadow boxing is when a boxer or fighter moves around by himself and throws punches at the air. Shadow boxing is a popular exercise for fighters to hone their fighting techniques, condition their muscles, warm-up or warm down during their workouts, or even to mentally prepare themselves before a fight. But if a boxer does shadow boxing only, not the rest of the training without any goal, he wouldn't be ready for the real fight.

I am not any good at sports that require throwing and catching balls, actually I am rather pathetic at them. But I am pretty decent in shooting, because it is my only hobby that I really enjoy. Each time when I practice for my shooting, I set a goal and strive to achieve that goal, whether the goal is speed shooting or precision target shooting. Many people say, “Practice makes you perfect.” That is a horribly wrong statement. Only good practices make you better, but bad practices make you worse than before.

We must work purposefully toward God's goal for us. Wishing and hoping never accomplish anything if there is no action. And effort that's not directed at the right goal is like “beating the air.” We may be working hard for our own purposes, but if they're not God's goals, it's all wasted effort.

What is God's goal for your life? Have you ever asked the Lord for that in your prayer? Does your prayer only consist of a long list of “Give-me-this” and “I-want-that”? Ask the Lord to reveal His goal for you if you have not done that. Once you receive it from Him, go after it for His glory. I can tell you this much with an absolute certainty that one of His goals for your life is being obedient to His Word every day, not just once in a blue moon.

#### **E. INTO SUBJECTION THAT I WOULD NOT BE DISQUALIFIED**

*1 Corinthians 9:27 But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.*

The Christian does not run the race in order to get to heaven. He is in the race because he has been saved through faith in Jesus Christ. Only Greek citizens were allowed to participate in the games, and they had to obey the rules both in their training and in their actual games. Any contestant found breaking the race rules was automatically disqualified.

If the Lord willing, I will stay in the course of my spiritual race that was designated by God and keep my faith in Christ, someday I will see my Savior's precious face. I am hoping that He would call me by my name and say to me, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” Then it is all worth it.

Earlier we talked about discipline. I haven't seen anyone who is disciplined, yet not willing to sacrifice something valuable for his and her goal. Discipline and sacrifice go hand in hand. They are inseparable.

You can indulge yourself with all the carnal desires that comes to your heart and do wherever your fleshly desires drag you. Or as Jesus taught us in His Gospels, because we want to be His followers, we can deny ourselves and what we want, and pick up our crosses, and follow Him. The choice is yours, so is the consequence of it.

There is no other thing in the Bible that scares me more than this word, "disqualified." The Greek word for "disqualified" is "adokimos." The Strong's definition is "unapproved, rejected; by implication, worthless (literally or morally), castaway." In our Christian walk with the Lord Jesus, no one takes us out of the intimate relationship with our God, except ourselves.

Since 1987 when the Lord saved me, I've seen one too many Christians who have fallen away from Him, especially Calvary Chapel pastor friends. Some disqualified themselves with pornography, embezzlements, adulteries, alcohol, drugs, even murder. Did they not know the Word of God? Of course, they did. Instead of keeping their eyes on the Lord, they looked at what the world offered to them – temporary forbidden ecstasies with utter selfish motives.

I fully am aware that I am so very capable to do what they have done. The last person I would trust in this world is myself. One of my frequent prayers to the Lord is that if He sees me doing that in my future, I beg of Him that He takes me out now, so that I would not bring disgrace and blasphemy to His precious name.

## **F. APPLICATION**

Walking with Christ in this world requires our strong determination to please our Master with discipline and sacrifice. In the end, it's all worth it.

*2 Timothy 4:7-8 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.*