

RUNNING TO WIN THE IMPERISHABLE PRIZE
1 Corinthians 9:24-27

A seasoned pastor began his new assignment with great expectations. But the honeymoon did not last long. The people quickly began to complain about his leadership, preaching, and pastoral care. Soon the murmuring turned into division that turned into attempts to force him out. At some point, the pastor decided enough was enough. And at the end of service one Sunday, he humbly resigned. When he finally made it to his car that afternoon, several concerned young adults were waiting for him. "Pastor," they asked, "what are you going to do? You have no family here. You have no money and no home. Where will you go?" Without hesitation, the godly preacher answered, "I'm going to heaven." "Well, we know that," they said, "but where are you really going to go?" He said, "I'm going to heaven. Don't worry about me. The fact that I am going to heaven makes these times of temporary hardship seem insignificant."

Perspective changes everything. More specifically, I contend that you cannot joyfully live the Christian life or faithfully carry out Christian ministry without an eternal perspective. Your uplook must determine your outlook. The world beyond us must shape our view on the world around us. We should live and minister in the hope of the imperishable prize.

This is the message of **1 Corinthians 9:24-27**. These four verses are transitional. They culminate the argument Paul has been making in chapter 9. And they introduce the warning Paul will give in chapter 10. Both chapters continue the conversation started in chapter 8, where Paul addresses the controversy of whether the Gentile Christians should eat meat from animals sacrificed to idols. Paul responds with a principle to practice. Christian behavior should be governed by its influence on others, rather than the exercise of our individual rights. In chapter 9, Paul offers his ministry as an example. He had the right to be financially cared for by the church. But he did not press his rights for the sake of the gospel.

Verses 19-23 present Paul's gospel-centered ministry philosophy in full: "For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. 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 not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings."

These verses have been used to justify a lot of foolishness. And in leaning over to reach the world, some churches have fallen in. But Paul is not saying that anything goes. He is making the point that the influence our behavior has on others should take precedence over the exercise of our rights. In chapter 10, Paul will give a forceful warning about the seductive pull of idolatry. But first Paul makes the parenthetical statement of our text. It is an exhortation filled with illustration. Using

a sports analogy, Paul calls the church to sanctification. The motivation for this disciplined life transcends a focus on either self or others. **1 Corinthians 9:24-27** teaches that we should pursue sanctification in the hope of winning an imperishable prize. In **Philippians 3:13-14**, Paul testifies, “Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” I repeat: We should pursue sanctification in the hope of winning an imperishable, incorruptible prize. How should we live and minister in light of the imperishable prize?

I. CHALLENGE THE SAINTS TO RUN TO WIN THE IMPERISHABLE PRIZE.

Paul demonstrates pastoral wisdom here. He exhorts the saints to run to win the prize. He explains how the saints can run to win. Then he emphasizes why the saints should run to win the prize. Let me show you that in verses 24-25.

A. EXHORT THE SAINTS TO RUN TO WIN THE PRIZE.

Verse 24 begins with a rhetorical question: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize?” This question assumes a positive answer. The Corinthians knew the rules of ancient Greco-Roman sports. Every other year, the city sponsored the Isthmian Games, which were second only to the Olympics. Beyond formal athletic rules, any child that played in the streets knew what happens in a race. You line up at the starting point. You run to the finish line. And the one who gets there first wins.

Paul asks a rhetorical question. Then he issues a stirring exhortation: “So run that you may obtain it.” Paul compares the Christian life to a race. But there is a sense in which this analogy leaks. In a race, only one person can win. But not so in the Christian race. Followers of Christ are not in competition with one another. **JOHN CALVIN** comments, “For God requires from us nothing more than that we press on vigorously until we reach the goal. Thus, one does not hinder another: nay more, those who run in the Christian race are mutually helpful to each other.” Unfortunately, comparison is one of the favorite indoor sports of the church. But you do not win the prize by comparing yourself to others. You become proud, as you compare yourself to those behind you. Or you become discouraged, as you compare yourself to those ahead of you. We must focus on the prize, not the other runners.

Every Christian that starts the race and runs by the rules and finishes strong can win the prize. This is what Paul exhorts. Run to win the prize. Don't be an also-ran. Don't take the prize for granted. Don't stroll to the finish line. **Hebrews 12:1** says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” We must press. We must pursue. We must persevere. The race is not a sprint. It's a marathon. It's not about how you start. It's about how you finish. That's the burden of this exhortation. We must not confuse

starting the race with winning the prize. By God's enabling strength, we must run and not get weary.

Jim Ryun was a favorite in the Olympic 1,500 meters the day he fell as he made his way around the track in a pack of finely conditioned runners. Of course, a fall virtually guarantees that it will be impossible to win. So Ryun had several options. He could have got up and headed to the locker room and a hot shower. He could have become angry at having trained for so long and missing his chance for the gold medal. He could have sunk into self-pity over the seeming bad deal he'd gotten by being jostled in the pack. Apparently, none of these came to his mind. He seemed to have had only one thought that eclipsed all other options: Finishing, even though he couldn't win. And that is exactly what he did. He got up and ran again. Others won medals, but Ryun a large measure of respect when he determined to finish the race.

B. EXPLAIN HOW THE SAINTS CAN RUN TO WIN THE PRIZE.

It can be counterproductive to tell people what to do without telling them how to do it. But Paul does not leave the saints with an exhortation to obey. He explains how to do it. How can we run to win the prize? Verse 25 asserts: "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things." This was axiomatic. Paul's readers understood that successful athletes practice self-control. In preparation for the ancient games, athletes were required to submit to a rigorous 10-month training regimen that involved diet, exercise, and abstinence. Likewise, self-control is crucial to success in the Christian race. I used to meet a friend to work out. It was discouraging. He was getting bigger and stronger. My workouts were not making a difference. The reason was not a mystery. Barry was in the gym virtually every day. I showed up once a week. Maybe. The rest of the week I sought to build my muscles on a steady diet of **In-N-Out burgers**. I really had no reason to expect success without discipline. So it is in the Christian race.

Paul says, "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things." The term "self-control" means to rule over self. It is self-mastery. It is to take dominion over one's self. This word is used in **1 Corinthians 7:13**, where Paul says, "But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion." The word speaks to more than sexual purity here. Paul says the athlete exercises self-control "in all things." His diet, exercise, rest, relationships, and activities are governed by his determination to win. The athlete does not just separate herself from bad things. She abstains from good things that may hinder her ability to compete. This is what Jesus demands. **Matthew 16:24**, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." We cannot do this alone. But those who trust in Christ for salvation have an expert trainer living within. **Galatians 5:23** says the fruit of the Spirit is self-control. We have divine help to say no to the flesh and to say yes to God!

C. EMPHASIZE WHY THE SAINTS SHOULD RUN TO WIN THE PRIZE.

The exhortation of verse 24 is the dominating theme of this text. But this exhortation stands on the foundation of verse 25: "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable." In the ancient games, the winner of the race was crowned with a pine wreath. But it did not last long. Of course, the victor was afforded money and power and fame. But Paul only mentions the wreath, because these other honors can fade as quickly as the wreath.

The most famous (or infamous) 100 meters race took place during the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, Korea. CARL LEWIS, who won 4 gold medals in the 1984 games in Los Angeles, was the headliner. But he faced stiff competition from Canadian, BEN JOHNSON. In less than 10 seconds, Ben Johnson won the gold medal and shattered the world record. Afterwards, Johnson was asked what meant more to him, the medal or the record. He answered that it was the medal, because the record could be broken but the medal could not be taken away. But the next morning, news broke that Johnson had tested positive for performance enhancing drugs. And he fled Seoul in shame, without his medal or record. He had given up so much to win a prize he was never able to keep.

Listen to how Paul makes this point by moving from the lesser to the greater: "They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable." Paul does not specify what the Christian crown or wreath is. He only states the nature of it. It is imperishable. If the athlete exercises self-control to win a prize that will not last, how much more should Christians discipline ourselves to win a prize that will never fade away. **Philippians 3:20** says: "For our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself." Christians are resident aliens. We are in the world but not of it. This world is not our home. We worship heaven's king. We obey heaven's laws. We serve heaven's agenda. We proclaim heaven's message. We seek heaven's rewards.

1 Peter 1:3-5 says: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

II. CHALLENGE YOURSELF TO RUN TO WIN THE IMPERISHABLE PRIZE.

Verses 24-25 are exhortation. Verses 26-27 are testimony. Verses 24-25 are pastoral. Verses 26-27 are personal. In verses 24-25, Paul is talking to the Corinthians. In verses 26-27, Paul is talking about himself. Feel the tension of the text. Paul was not a leader who set high standards for his followers but had no standards for himself. He believed his readers needed the example of his godly life as well as the content of this sound teaching. **1 Corinthians 11:1** says, "Be imitators

of me, as I am of Christ.” Lord, deliver us from preachers who preach one thing and live another way! **1 Timothy 4:16** says, “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” This is the key to effective ministry. You must constantly guard your personal integrity and doctrinal convictions. To ensure our salvation and the salvation of those who hear us, we must live with spiritual determination and holy fear.

A. LIVE WITH SPIRITUAL DETERMINATION.

Paul testifies of spiritual determination with two athletic pictures.

I RUN TO WIN THE PRIZE. Verse 26 says, “So I do not run aimlessly.” Paul did not run with uncertainty. How can you win the race if you can’t find the track? How can you win the race if you don’t know what lane you are to be in? How can you win the race if you don’t know where the finish line is? Paul stayed on course. He ran in his lane. He focused on the prize. In **Philippians 3:14**, Paul says, “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” Paul ran his race with great effort, focused diligence, and unwavering perseverance. He was like an athlete that strained for the finish line. He was like a hunter that does not relent until he has captured his prey. He was like an army that marches on until the enemy is defeated. This is the steadfast determination you must have to win the prize.

I FIGHT TO WIN THE PRIZE. Again, verse 26 says, “So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air.” Paul swaps metaphors here. He is not just a runner on the track. He is also a boxer in the ring. But he did not box as one beating the air. This is not a reference to the boxer’s prefight training. In training camp, boxers often shadow box to prepare the muscles for great exertion. But when the fight starts, it’s time to throw punches with bad intentions. This is how Paul described his spiritual determination. He was not swinging at the air. He was going for the knockout.

There is no debate about what the 2012 fight of the year was. It was the match between **MANNY PACQUIAO** and **JUAN MANUEL MARQUEZ**. Their previous three fights ended with disputes. But this fight ended decisively with the shot heard around the world. In the closing seconds of the 6th round, Pacquiao walked into a perfect punch. Do you know what a perfect punch is? It is a punch the opponent never sees coming. It is not so much about strength as it is about timing. You don’t win by throwing wild shots. You have to time your punches. You have to take advantage of the opponent’s vulnerable defenses. You must make the most of every opportunity. In **2 Timothy 4:7-8**, Paul says: “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 right judge, will award me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.” Do you want to end your ministry with this kind of testimony? You cannot box as one beating the air. You must fight to win the prize.

B. LIFE WITH HOLY FEAR.

In verse 27, Paul concludes: “But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” Paul lived in a sense of holy fear. But it was not a fear of losing his salvation. In **Romans 8:38-39**, Paul says, “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Yet Paul is candid here about the fact that a preacher can lead others to salvation from a God that he does not know himself. In **Matthew 7:21-23**, Jesus says, “**Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare, ‘I never knew you, depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.**” The apostle Paul took this warning to heart. **A.T. ROBERTSON** said it well: “It is a humbling thought for us all to see this wholesome fear instead of smug complacency in this greatest of all heralds for Christ.” You can teach others the rules of the race and be disqualified from winning the prize. This word of caution should cause us to constantly ask ourselves two big questions:

HOW AM I LIVING? In verse 27, Paul says, “But I discipline my body and keep it under control.” These are graphic pictures of spiritual discipline. The word “discipline” means to hit someone and give him a black eye. It is used in **Luke 18:5**, where the **UNJUST JUDGE** says, “Because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.” When Paul says he keeps his body under control, he pictures a prisoner of war being taken into captivity. Paul ruled over his body rather than letting his body rule over him. Would not let the flesh tell him what to do. He fought to bring every area of his life under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. Is that you? How are you living? Who or what is it that rules your life?

HOW IS MY PREACHING? Paul maintains this sports analogy throughout the text. But he temporarily drops it in his closing statement, to affirm his call to preach. Verse 27 says, “But I discipline my body and keep it under control lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” This reference to preaching should be understood in its normal sense. In the ancient games, a herald would announce the events and athletes and winners. But the analogy should be pressed that far. Paul was not a herald on a stage. He was a runner on the track. But a part of the race that was set before him was the call to preach to others. He was responsible for the life that he lived and the message that he preached.

The word “marathon” comes from the legend of an ancient message. Athens attacked the city of Marathon. When the battle was over, a messenger ran from Marathon to Athens without stopping to report the outcome of the battle. In his dying breaths, he announced the victory. The *Saturday Review* lampooned this legend with a cartoon of the messenger who make the journey and announces: “Uh oh, I forget the message.” It is a sad indictment when a man goes to the pulpit and forgets the message. What is the message? **Colossians 1:29** says, “Him we proclaim,

warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.” This is the message we proclaim: Him! What him?

- Him we proclaim – the one who is coeternal and coequal with God - the creator, sustainer, and infinite center of all things.
- Him we proclaim – the one who was born in Bethlehem to a virgin named Mary.
- Him we proclaim – the one who lived a sinless and impeccable life with no spot, blemish, or fault.
- Him we proclaim – the one who spoke as no man has ever spoken, full of grace, truth, and wisdom.
- Him we proclaim – the one who performed miracles over nature, sickness, demons, and even death.
- Him we proclaim – the one who died on the cross as the perfect substitutionary atonement, whose blood washes away our sins.
- Him we proclaim – the one who literally, physically, and gloriously arose from the dead, and who has the keys to death, hell, and the grave.
- Him we proclaim – the one who ascended to the right hand of the throne of God, where he sits right now making intercession for us.
- Him we proclaim – the one who is coming again soon to rapture the saints, judge the world, and consummate his kingdom reign.