

## Running to Win

**1 Corinthians 9:24-27**, *“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. 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. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”* Another translation says, *“Don’t you realise that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified.”*

This coming Friday, the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympics will take place in London and I’m sure it’s going to be an amazing spectacle. Therefore, whether you are interested in sport or not, it is very likely that you will feel part in this great global event. For centuries sport has made a significant contribution to our society. Sport has been able to express the fundamental human desire to win. In the passage we’ve just read, the apostle Paul calls on this basic human “desire” and directs it toward obtaining an eternal prize from God. He compares the Christian life to a competitive race, and says that we should **run to win**. But what was the argument Paul is putting forward? And what issues was he addressing in the church at Corinth? To understand this metaphor, and its imagery, we must first understand the sports culture of that era and the high profile it was given in that society. The ancient Greek Olympic games were always held in the Stadium, and the horse races took place in the Hippodrome. These celebrated sporting events included the following:

1. The Stadion: a foot race the length of the stadium. The athletes stopped at the end of the stadium without returning to the starting line.
2. The Diaulos: a foot race the length of two stadia, where the athletes finished at the starting line of the stadium.
3. The Dolichos (long distance race): a foot race which probably had a length of 24 stadia.
4. The Hoplitodromos (race in armour): a foot race the length of two stadia in which the runners were dressed in full armour.
5. The Pentathlon: an athletic event made up of five separate events: the stadion, the discus throw, the javelin throw, jumping and wrestling. The winner was the athlete who came first in three of the five events.
6. The Boxing: which was one of the most popular events.
7. The Pankradion: an event that combined boxing and wrestling. It is a violent event and many times the lives of the athletes were endangered.

When Paul referred to “runners in a race,” or “boxers swinging wildly,” the Corinthians could easily envisage what he meant because they had seen these games often, and had probably participated in the games themselves (in some way or another).

In **1 Corinthians 9:24-27**, Paul provides us with a clear picture of the Rules of the Race he is referring to:

1. Many can enter in the race.
2. Only one can get the prize.
3. All must run in such a way as to win.

Note, Paul’s rules are not very complicated. And he goes on to point out that some runners in the race run for a crown that doesn’t last, a wreath of fir branches, but we run for a crown that will last forever.

We also discover three important things about the race:

1. It’s not merely a game - it’s life and death.
2. It’s not that easy - it requires training and commitment.
3. It has a definite goal - a finish line, a winner’s prize.

So why was the apostle Paul running this race, taking on this fight for the Corinthians? The answer lies within the entire letter he wrote to the church in Corinth. To keep them from abandoning the faith they had found in Christ, and to help them train to run their own race, he tells them how to conduct themselves in worship, how to solve problems in their church, how to observe the Lord’s Supper, and how to practice the spiritual gifts that were evident in the congregation. He also cautions them against quarrelling, lawsuits against each other, sexual misconduct and immorality, falling back into the old habits of eating food offered to idols, and of disrespecting one another. Notice, Paul had his hands full with instructions, admonitions, guidance, persuasion, and criticism of the Corinthian church. However, this was also very personal. He was able to relate to many of their struggles and failings. So he says, *“I run with purpose,”* and, *“I discipline my body... So I am not disqualified.”*

To Paul, this was not just a game, it is life and eternity. In verse 26 he says, *“I’m not running aimlessly like those men of leisure in Rome.”* No, Paul says, *“I’m in training. I’m focused, I’m disciplined, I’m making my body my slave.”* That might sound unusual, until you remember that Rome and the Roman empire was all about appetites. If you wanted food, the empire had more than enough. The Caesars kept down the revolt of the poor by handing out bread each week. The Romans had gods for food and drink, for partying, for love, and for any other appetite you might want to engage in. So Paul reminds the Corinthians that a runner in training, a boxer in training, has to

follow the rules of training. To master your own appetites! Paul's concern was that the gospel of Jesus that he preached does not become just a creed or philosophy for others, but comes as real for him as it is for others.

Paul didn't want to lose the race he was in, after helping others win their race. He wanted to win! And he wanted to obtain the prize! The prize for winning in the Roman games was a laurel wreath, a branch of fir leaves woven into a very temporary crown. But the prize was not the laurel wreath itself. The prize was having the emperor place the victor's wreath on your head, proclaiming you the winner of the race. Paul was running, not for the crown, but for acknowledgment from the King of Kings!

So what specific instructions has Paul given to us? He tells us to be sure to run the race we're given in such a way as to win. Therefore, the question is, how can we run the race God has given each of us in such a way as to win? The most prominent quality he brings out in this passage is "discipline." Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. In church, business, school, athletics, you name it – those who succeed are those who discipline themselves to perform the tasks that are necessary for their success. And the same is true in our spiritual lives.

Although we celebrate the fact that our salvation is not something we can earn, it's important for us to realise that maturity in Christ only comes through the same route that success comes in any other area – and that's through discipline! The definition of discipline is, "the practice of training people to obey rules or a code of behaviour," or, "the controlled behaviour resulting from mental or physical training." Paul implies that you will get disqualified from the race if you are not disciplined.

Notice that there are not two races! It is one race for anyone to enter. But the prize is different. They run to get a prize that is temporal, we run to get a prize that is eternal. There is no such thing as Christian Olympics! We're in it to win it! That is, the real race. However, it takes discipline. It is not easy to compete and win. You have to go into strict training! If you want to run in such a way as to win the prize that God has for you, you need to take a look at your life and identify those areas that need some "shaping up" and bring them under spiritual discipline. Don't be neglectful or irresponsible! And remain humble and teachable during your training. Paul said that he forced his body into submission so that he would not be disqualified. How much effort are you willing to put into your own spiritual development?

Now we know that discipline is important for winning the race, but what other attribute do we need to develop? We must be disciplined and focused. As Paul said, *"I do not run like a man running aimlessly, I do not fight like a man beating the air."* We need to stay "focused" on where we want to end up. We need to keep our eyes on the goal! *"Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith"* (**Hebrews**

**12:1-2).** “Looking unto Jesus” is the key to you finishing the race the God has set before you. Remember, you cannot win unless you finish. That is why it says, “*run with endurance.*” Only focused and committed people can stay the course and win the race. Look into the eyes of any great athlete before he runs his race and you will see how incredibly focused he is. How focused are you? How easily distracted are you when it comes to spiritual matters? Have your selfish desires stifled your faith? The devil knows that you will never fulfil God’s plan and purpose for your life unless you are disciplined and focused.

When we get caught up in the mundane affairs of life, and quit focusing on Jesus, and the rewards He has for us (that will last for eternity), we lose our position in the race. And we end up settling for second best. That’s not what I want for myself, or for any of you. I want us to all run the race marked out for us with a single-minded focus on pleasing our Lord Jesus Christ. I want us to live a life that is free from those things that would hold us back in our spiritual development. I want us to learn the joy that comes from disciplining ourselves to grow in our spiritual life.

I want all of us to win the race set before us!