

1CO 9:24-27 "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. 25 Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. 26 Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. 27 No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."

All of this talk about running and competing and going into strict training along with fighting and beating our body so as to make it our slave sounds like an awful lot of work.

For anyone who has ever tried to get in shape after years of sitting around, you know the feeling of getting a few hundred yards from the house and all of a sudden your breath is short and your legs begin to feel the tightness.

But you never really know just how out of shape you are until you begin to test your body in these ways. But it's at this point of testing our body that we begin to determine rather quickly to what extent we want to continue.

Some will conclude that this exercise stuff is not all that it's cracked up to be and the effort is just too much this late in life. That was okay when I was a kid and played sports or was trying to impress the girls, but who do I have to impress now?

Others will count the cost and conclude that if I can get past the first week or two it will get easier and the benefits down the road for my over-all well-being will be worth the time and effort.

But you know, the same is true in the spiritual arena. For many Christians there is that decision to consider what kind of effort, if any, one is willing to put forth in this race for the finish line where the prize is eternal life spent in the presence of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

As we consider our text this morning we need to see past the analogies Paul is using and dig into his intent of what is the most important aspect of his life and what should be the most important thing in our lives.

1CO 9:24 "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize."

We might find it strange that Paul would suddenly break into a race scenario since most of what he has been teaching here has been on Christian liberties, but we need to keep in mind that for Paul Christian liberties are never meant to allow our liberties to get in the way of the race Christ has placed us in, and that is a race to advance the kingdom of God through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In fact, from verses 15 through 23 in this chapter, Paul has set forth his race and has concluded that nothing will deter him from that race. And so, for Paul, that means that though I am free and belong to no man, (as he says in verse 19), "I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible." (1CO 9:19)

If that means becoming a Jew to the Jews, or becoming like those without the law, or becoming weak to those who are weak, he will come along side each person and meet them where they are and not worry about what freedoms or liberties he has in Christ that he might use that could actually hinder him from bringing them the gospel.

You'll remember that this was precisely why he gave up the right to be supported by the church there in Corinth. He did not want to be accused by those ungodly Jews or Gentiles that he was in this for the money. He would rather make tents for the rest of his life than let that get in the way of advancing Christ and his gospel.

And so, he concludes in 1CO 9:23 "I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings."

Why does he do this? Why does he continue to press forward despite seeing little results, or despite the opposition? Because he has been set on a course by his Lord and Master. You see it's not as much about the actual race as it is about the one who put him in this race and the one he will meet at the finish line.

When we put this into its proper context then the race is not an option, but a privilege and a high calling to which we put in all our efforts to please the One who called us. So, let's dig into our text.

1CO 9:24 "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize."

Paul is talking to Christians here, specifically the Corinthian believers whom he addresses in this letter. And he is using an

analogy for the Christian life that the believers in Corinth could identify with.

You see, in those days there were two main sporting extravaganzas which the Greek world participated in. The Olympic games and the Isthmian games. The Isthmian games were second only to the Olympics and they were held every other year about 10 miles from Corinth.

They didn't have T.V. or the movies, and so this type of entertainment was central to their lives. They longed to see their own athletes compete against the rest of the world. If you watch football periodically the announcers will make a very interesting comment about the fans of any particular city where they have a professional team.

The comment about the fans goes something like this: "These fans know their football. They're smart football fans." And what the announcers mean by this is that the fans of Dallas or Chicago, or any other NFL team's home town, know the nuances of the game and can determine the best times during the game to get their team up or come to their defense with more noise or cheering.

They're often called the 12th man; the additional player in the stands to the 11 on the field. That's how important the fans can be to their home team. And that's how savvy they are to know enough about the game to where they can sometimes influence the outcome of a game.

This is the kind of fan Paul is addressing here in Corinth. These Corinthians knew their players and they knew the nuances of every athletic event in which each individual player competed in, and the best way to encourage their athlete to cross the finish line first.

In fact, when Paul was in Corinth during that year and a half of being with the church and instructing them from the word of God, which was from AD 50-52, the games were held in the spring of AD 51.

And so, it's very likely Paul saw the games and may have traveled the 10 miles with some of the people in the congregation there in Corinth to spend a day or two watching these world class athletes compete.

Paul now takes them back to the games they were so familiar with, and took quite seriously, and he now uses this analogy to remind them of how men will spend their lives training for an event

knowing that despite how many other racers there are, only one gets the prize.

And yet, none of those in the race are running with the idea of losing or simply showing up for the privilege of competing. At that level they all expect to win and so they run in such a way as to win.

And then Paul uses this analogy to teach these believers a very important lesson about life in Christ. Just as you've watched your favorite athlete run in that race, knowing he has dedicated his life to this event, as he gives it his all, you too must run the race in the same way.

1CO 9:24 "..... Run in such a way as to get the prize."

You see, again, Paul knows that these people are smart fans. He knows that they know what it takes to run in such a race. After all, many of the athletes could very well be their neighbors.

Knowing this Paul appeals to them to consider how important this spiritual race for Christ really is. And if it is important why would you run it in any other way than to run to win? Can you imagine an athlete showing up and not giving it his all? That athlete would be booed off of the course.

And that's Paul's point. Why would you run the most important race of your life as though you were not expected to give it your all? Why would you not take the gospel of Jesus Christ seriously enough to where you were sharing it as often as possible when the opportunity arose?

Are we running to win, or are we simply in the race to wear the T-shirt? "I competed in the Isthmian Games". Wearing the T-shirt, according to the word of God, is not enough for the believer who has been handed the baton by Jesus Christ Himself to run in such a way where we give it our all for Him.

It's very easy for Christians to enter into the race, and by that I mean by receiving Christ as Lord and Savior through faith in Him alone. But in this race we are not called to be spectators or cheer leaders, unless you're actually in the race while cheering your team mate on.

In this race our sponsor is God. And God says, "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and run with perseverance the race marked out for [you]." (HEB 12:1)

And yet, like that person who hasn't run in quite some time and decides it might be a good idea to get back into shape, but learns how hard it is to get back into the swing of things, there's the temptation to simply sit down and let someone else not only run their own race, but to have them pick up the slack for the race we're not willing to run.

And so, the burden of one now becomes a burden of two or three or more, of those who have quit running. The race for Christ is an individual race, but it's put in the setting of a team sport. This is why Paul refers to the church as the body of Christ. There are many individual members, but it's never meant to be a body with separate parts working independently from the body.

We're to be running together. Unlike the one athlete who wins the prize in a race, every Christian wins the prize in the race, in which Christ has placed us, as we run together. And it's with this understanding that we run. The victory is already ours. We are more than conquerors in Christ.

But unless we run, we show that the One who sponsors us, if you will, is nothing more than a bumper sticker we place on ourselves. When Mario Andretti Jr. wins at Daytona, he doesn't praise the sticker on his car that says, Valvoline. He praises the people at Valvoline who put up the money to buy the car and pay for the pit crew and mechanics.

Our race as believers in Christ is more than wearing the T-shirt or putting the bumper sticker on our cars. It's running in the race in such a way that we show gratitude and thankfulness for the Lord calling us to Himself and giving us the prize of Himself.

This is why Paul says to the Ephesians, "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." (EPH 4:1)

To live a life worthy of the calling we have received in Christ is to live a life running in the race as we take the truth to the world. And it does take discipline, it does take commitment. But isn't the free gift of eternal life worth running for and being committed to?

1CO 9:25 "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever."

The first thing we notice here is that Paul understands that competing and winning is associated with a discipline that happens well before any formal race is run and it's the discipline of

training. There is no way to be competitive unless one first trains for that event.

What Paul is not saying here is that running for Christ necessitates a prior discipline making someone suitable to be placed in the race. There is only one determinative factor in being placed in the race and that is the blood of Christ and His resurrection being put to our account as the Spirit of God calls us and brings us into the Kingdom through our faith in Christ.

Paul is simply starting at the point to which we have already been placed in the race and how we should view the finish line and the attitude we should have where we take seriously the means for advancing in this race and finishing well for the glory of God.

In our text Paul gives some insight into why he runs this race the way he does. He compares the prize an athlete receives after running and winning his competition. He shows how that athlete goes into strict training to be able to compete. But after he wins, he gets a wreath made from a bush.

How many people remember who won the 100 yard sprint in the last Olympics just a couple of years ago? It doesn't take long before the glory fades. But the race in which we find ourselves has as its reward that which is eternal.

How do we compare the temporal with the eternal as far as value is concerned? And yet, why is it that we put so much time and effort into the temporal while neglecting the eternal?

How is that we can devote ourselves to the things of this world, knowing that they will perish, and yet not devote ourselves, at least to the same degree, to those things above and to the people of this world who need to know about the Savior?

I don't have to tell anyone here that most of us spend more time in front of the T.V. than we ever would in the word of God. We spend more time on the telephone than we ever would in prayer to our Lord and Savior who loves for us to come to Him.

I'm not suggesting that any of these things are necessarily bad in and of themselves, but I do find it interesting that those things in life we deem important are those things we spend the most time pursuing. If we use that reasoning as our measuring stick, then how do we reconcile to God that He just happens to be down on the bottom part of our list of important things?

Are we willing to go into strict training to run this race for the Lord? By that I mean are we willing to pursue the things of God with a little more diligence and dedication and discipline?

Are we willing to put that crown of eternal life at the forefront of our lives to the degree that we determine that this race is very important? Important enough to make the time to do those things that promote our spiritual welfare and not just our temporal welfare?

An athlete devotes himself to hours of rigorous training. He gives up the niceties of life all with the purpose of winning that perishable wreath. I remember playing high school football. And it was during this time of year, before school was back in session, that the team began our fall training in the last part of summer.

In Florida summer time can be unbearable with temperatures well into the 90's. With 10 to 15 pounds of equipment on your back and running from the time you hit the field, practice was not a time we looked forward to. During the summer time we practiced three times a day.

We started at 8:00 in the morning until 10:30. When you came into the locker room after practice to hang up your equipment it was soaked. When we came back at noon we had to put that same equipment back on until 2:30, running sprints, tackling and blocking practice and then more sprints.

We'd then come back around 4:00 and work till about 6:00. Sometimes we'd have a session in the classroom going over plays. But sure enough, the coaches would have us put that wet sweaty equipment back on to run more sprints at the end of the day.

I remember one of our coaches getting in our faces one hot August afternoon as we were doing our warm up exercises. We were all on our backs doing sit ups, and he smiled at us and told us that right now all of your friends are at the beach enjoying the sun and the water, listening to music and playing in the sand.

But then he added, but you're here killing yourselves because come September on Friday evenings every eye of every student in this school will be on you, and this abuse you put yourselves through now will pay off then as they wished they could be in your shoes.

I remember that. And I remember thinking that he was right. I loved the spotlight. I loved the adulation and the cheers and all of

the fanfare that went with it. It was worth the sweat and tears to get the prize to see your name in the paper the next morning and all your friends looking up to you and patting you on the back Monday morning at school.

I just wished that I could have half of that dedication and commitment I had then for a temporal goal to put toward the eternal goal of pleasing my Savior. And this is what Paul is talking about. How important is your Lord? Are we willing to give Him the time and effort we are willing to give to other things in this life?

1CO 9:26-27 "Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. 27 No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."

Paul is using himself as the example here. He is the runner and the boxer. And the point he makes is that just as those athletes do not haphazardly enter into competition, neither does he haphazardly enter into service for Christ.

He doesn't run like a man running aimlessly. Can you picture a runner entering into a race not having a clue as to where the finish line is? Can you imagine a runner entering into a race and deciding for himself the course he wants to run without any regard for the planners of the race who have set a course?

We would laugh at such a notion. In fact, if you've ever watched America's funniest video's they periodically show such things where a little league football game has a player intercepting a pass and running the wrong way, or a little league hockey game where a skater takes it the length of the ice only to put the puck into his own goal.

We can't imagine how such things happen and yet in Christendom it happens all the time. But we don't laugh at it because it has become common place. There are more Christians than we can begin to imagine who don't seem to have a clue as to where the course is let alone the finish line of that course.

Running aimlessly is not the exception these days, but seems to actually be the objective. I wish I had a nickel for every time a Christian told me that they would begin to serve the Lord as soon as the Spirit moved them.

They aimlessly go here and there thinking that if they get just the right feeling that that will be the clue as to what they should do instead of understanding that the course has been made clear from the very word of God. When the Lord set us in this race he also gave us the instructions.

We don't have to run aimlessly. The aim has been made clear. And that is what Paul is trying to point out here. In fact, as I mentioned earlier his aim, and by extension, the aim for every believer, is to do all for the sake of the gospel.

Paul's aim included teaching the gospel, sharing the gospel, teaching the word of God to believers as it relates to our growing up in the gospel through the process we know as sanctification, which is nothing more than being conformed into the image of Christ as we love the Lord and follow Him according to His word.

There is a tendency to make the Christian walk more complicated than it has to be. Christians want to add more rules, or change the rules or take them away completely. Jesus says, "follow Me."

When we get our eyes off of Christ and place them on anything else as the aim in our lives then we find ourselves becoming frustrated and burned out and running in circles instead of running a race with a prescribed course with Jesus being at the finish line.

Instead of being productive Christians we end up being casualties which has a tendency to take other Christians out of the race as they try and show them the course. Now granted, that's part of what it means to be the body of Christ, where we help other believers back onto the course, but there's the tendency for many of these wayward believers to try and avoid the course.

Often times they don't want back in because they're not willing to discipline their bodies in a spiritual sense to get back into the spiritual race. For Paul this was not an option. He knew that the only way to keep from running aimlessly or boxing in such way as to only beat the air he had to take control as he relied on the power of the Spirit.

He had to discipline himself in such a way as to run this race with the aim of being an effective and productive servant for Christ, knowing that it had eternal ramifications, not only for him, but for those he served.

1CO 9:27 "No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."

Paul understands that you cannot separate the physical from the spiritual. They work side by side. We can't live a spiritual life outside of this physical world. This means that every aspect of our lives must be under the control of the Spirit; the physical, the emotional, or soulish part of us, as well as the spiritual; the new creation we are in Christ.

To neglect any part will affect the whole. We all know this. When we become sick or tired we often are at our weakest point, spiritually. We are less likely during those times to be strong in the Lord. The same is true from a spiritual standpoint. If we are spiritually weak then it effects the whole person as we are now more likely to submit to the flesh and the desires of self.

So, using Paul's analogy of beating our bodies so as to make them our slaves, how do we pursue the discipline it takes to run this race effectively? The answer is very simple. We rely on the grace of God. What does that mean?

When Paul said that God's grace was sufficient for him, he wasn't excluding the means by which that grace was administered. He knew that God's grace would be found as he studied the word of God. He knew that God's grace would be found as he prayed on his own and spent time in prayer with the body of Christ.

He knew that God's grace would be found as he came together to worship the Lord in Spirit and in truth. He knew that God's grace was more than sufficient when he simply obeyed the revealed word of God.

Again, there's the tendency to look for some pie-in-the-sky answer to our spiritual maturity and so Christians run from one tent meeting to the next, or one healing ministry to the next, or seek out some special supernatural event in a church which is supposedly known for such things.

The means of God's grace are all around us if we're willing to avail ourselves to such grace. And it's found in the local body of Christ which Jesus Himself has instituted. To cut ourselves off from the body is to cut ourselves off from His grace and the strength we need to run this race for His glory.

This is why it is so essential to come together and worship our Lord. This is why it is so essential to come together to study the word of God together. I love Thursday evenings because I glean a lot from those who are there. And I suspect that you glean some things from me and the others as well.

I love Wednesday evenings, because I love listening to how others talk to our heavenly Father. I'm sure there are those who wonder why I just open the prayer time and don't pray again out loud until we're ready to close. I'll let you in on a little secret. I just enjoy sitting at the feet of Christ and allowing others to bless and be blessed as they use their gifts.

It allows me to see what the Lord is doing in the lives of those there. And so, instead of pondering what to pray next, I get to relax and be part of the conversation that others are having with the Lord.

And once in a while those who come to Wednesday prayer and fast do the same thing as sometimes they don't pray out loud the entire time. But there's something special about coming to the throne of God with others even if you don't pray out loud.

And so, I encourage all because there too is where God's grace is being extended. Even the apostle Paul didn't neglect the means to this grace of God which was more than sufficient in his life to run the race marked out for him.

He wasn't one who talked about running the race and then didn't run it, which is why he says, "I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize." (1CO 9:27)

Paul is demonstrating his devotion to Christ as he moves all other distractions of the world to the side in favor of preaching Christ to others and he points out how important that is by suggesting that if he doesn't do that he disqualifies himself as a true athlete who runs the race to win.

He is not suggesting that he could lose his place in the Kingdom of God as if doing something for Christ in the way of works earned him the prize, but rather he points out the true spirit of one who runs because of the One who gave him life eternal and the appreciation he has for being given a crown that only Christ could have earned for him.

This is what Paul meant earlier in this very chapter.

**1 Corinthians 9:16** <sup>16</sup> For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.

May we not just preach about how to run this race. May we run it with all the vigor and strength and grace which only God can supply. May we use the means He has provided and may we just say no to our selfish desires, and yes to those things which will magnify our Lord and Savior who has called us to this course which will end in His presence forever.

HEB 3:1 "Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess."

EPH 4:1-3, 15-16 "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. 2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. 3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 15 .... speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."