

“Run the Race”

Corinthians 9:23-27

We just finished watching the Olympics two weeks ago, and it's always an amazing thing to watch. Paul knew about the athletic competitions in the ancient Roman world. In fact, the Christians he was writing to lived in Corinth, the place where they held the Isthmian games. They were held every two years in honor of the Greek god Poseidon. It was a popular competition in the whole Greek-speaking world.

Paul tells us that the Christian life is like a tough competition. It's a race and it's a fight, and the prize is the hope of glory. Like Paul says in Philippians,

I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:14)

The good news is that Jesus saves us and makes a home for us in heaven not based on the work we do, but only based on his great work for us on the cross. Our work is just to trust him for what he's done already.

But if we trust him, then we follow him. Jesus made it to the finish line, and we push for it, too, so we can get the prize that Jesus has already won for us. That means this competition isn't just practice. It isn't just working out in the gym. It has real consequences, real results that go on the record. This life is where we prove whether we really trust Jesus, where we prove what's important to us.

Now you need to hear this: the race isn't about proving to God how you deserve heaven. It's about proving who you trust—yourself or Jesus. It's about showing how Jesus is our Leader and the Forgiver of our sins, how he's got a hold of us, so we run for his glory, not our own, and now our life isn't just pointless running in circles and missing our punches and beating the air. Yes, we train hard, but we can do that because of what God's already done for us and what he's doing in us now by his Spirit. So, Paul says,

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. (1 Corinthians 15:10)

Getting to heaven isn't based on what we do, it's all about grace. But the Bible tells us that faith without works is dead (James 2:26). If we really trust Jesus, we follow hard after him. We run because already completed the race, and now he's got a hold of us.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. (Philippians 3:12)

In this race, we run in the power Jesus gives us for the running. Hebrews says,

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:2-3)

So, Jesus gives us power and purpose for the race. Paul puts it this way:

Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings [our hard training], because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. (Romans 5:3-4)

We can train hard in hope. Why? Because Jesus himself is our prize. And if you're running after the prize that is Jesus Christ, it's proof you already belong to him. That's why Paul can say now, "Run in such a way as to get the prize" (1 Corinthians 9:24b). If we do that, we have confidence in hope. Paul himself had that confidence. That's why he says at the end of his life,

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:7-8)

God hasn't saved you so you can stay in the locker room, but to get in the race. If you trust Jesus, now live in a way to show his glory to the world. Show the world the real Jesus not just with words, but with acts of service. We show he's real and powerful and holy and enough for all our needs. We run and we fight to show who Jesus is, and how good a thing life with him is.

Paul tells us not all the runners in a race win, but only one gets a prize. What does he mean by that? His point isn't that only one Christian gets the prize of heaven. He's already said it's for "all who have longed for his appearing." Paul's point is how we run the race, like you mean it. Let's look at how we're supposed to do that.

First, we keep our eyes on the goal.

Paul tells us we had tough training ahead, and he says, "We do it to get a crown that will last forever (1 Corinthians 9:25)."

Winning a race takes hard work and discipline, and the only thing that keeps us on track is keeping the eyes on the prize. Why would you go through what it takes unless you think the prize makes it worth it in the end? The Christian life isn't about our own comfort and satisfaction, it's about sharing in the kingdom, in bringing the "up there" down here, and one day to become like Jesus because we see him face-to-face.

That's what we're running for. Runners in Olympic Games in Paul's day didn't compete for medals but for a laurel wreath or crown, branches that would wither. Paul says, athletes

compete “to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever” (verse 25). Paul calls that the crown of righteousness, eternal life in heaven with God, and that’s a whole lot better than winning a crown of laurel leaves like the winners at the Greek games.

It’s like that in life, isn’t it? When you’re learning to ride a horse, you learn to keep your eyes where you want to go, or else you end up leading the horse off track. When you’re struggling through the pain of a Ph.D. program, you keep in mind the goal, or you’ll give up when it gets to painful or too costly. Keep your eyes on the prize.

### Second, we run with self-control.

This is what Paul’s getting at in verse 25 with his term, “strict training.” The word Paul uses is comes from the word *egkrateia*, which is made up of two words, *en*, or “in,” and *krateia*, or “power to rule.” It means to hold yourself, to control, yourself, “get a grip!” It’s an inner strength to do what you commit to doing.

Athletes know you can’t win without self-control. We say no to anything that pulls us away from our desire for God’s word, for our commitment to serving in his name, our desire for God’s holiness to reign.

At the end of the day, self-control is a matter of being controlled by the Spirit. The discipline of self-control is a fruit, a gift, of the Holy Spirit as God works out his good purpose in us. Paul refers to this in Galatians when he says,

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature  
(Galatians 5:10)

What hurts your self-control? What compromises your training? Too much TV? Too much sugar? Not enough sleep? Always wanting more, bigger, better things? On the other hand, what stirs up your resolve for God’s Word, his holiness, the love he wants you to share with others? Take anything that pulls you away from the prize, and ask God to help you get it under control.

That’s what Paul does. Look at how he puts it in verses 26 and 27:

Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave (verses 26-27).

Pau’s saying, be careful, and don’t be enslaved by the body and by its wants and appetites. Instead, take control.

### Third, we run with all our strength.

The winner wins by running hard. He or she gives everything they have. They don’t just jog or run until they start to get tired. This isn’t a race for the lazy or unmotivated. The

Christian life is like that—to be lived with all our might as long as we live. Isn't that what Jesus is getting at when he tells us the greatest commandment, to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind."

Now, God does give us rest in our Christian life so we can enjoy fellowship with each other and with him. The Sabbath he gives renews us and refreshes our soul. But the race we're running for the prize he sets before us takes all the effort, all the zeal, all the energy we have. We don't in our own strength, but in his, as we strive and push onward and serve and love in the strength he gives us.

Why all this talk about the hard work of the race, of the fight we're engaged in? It's because in our natural selves, that's a struggle. At one point or another, everything in us screams out, "Stop! Enough! I can't go on any more. I don't want to pay the price."

But that's the way of the cross, of self-denial, and Jesus tells us it's the secret of the Christian life, where down is up, where the least in the world are the greatest in the kingdom, and that when I am weak, then I'm strong.

Hard to learn that lesson in our times of self-gratification, isn't it? But if we don't learn it, if we don't run hard toward the prize that is in Christ Jesus, how can we know the strength and purpose and joy through self-sacrifice he has in mind for us?

If we don't learn that, how can we ever see what he has in mind for us as Christ Presbyterian Church? God will still accomplish his purpose of pouring out his power and love, but he'll do it through someone else.