

*"If You're Going to Run the Race, Run to Win"*  
*1 Corinthians 9:24-27*  
*Rev. Matthew Reeves*  
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Runners are a proud, funny bunch. Even before I'd preached my first sermon here last October, church members were coming to me, introducing themselves as fellow runners. The sermon is not the place for waxing philosophical on what it means to be a runner. For now, it's enough to say that any who take pleasure in an activity that, to many, seems more like punishment, must find in it something more than a way to keep off pounds.

A generation ago physician and running philosopher George Sheehan said, "The obsession with running is really the obsession for the potential of more and more life." Which, I recognize, is not what seems to be what it written across the faces of most runners you pass on the street. Still, it's not unusual for us runners to talk about our sport not as a hobby, but as a way of life.

Yet, even among the fellowship of runners, some are more driven than others. "Run in such a way," says Paul, "as to get the prize." I must to say, a little to my shame, I have never been that kind of runner. "In a race, all the runners run," says Paul. That's more where I am. Somewhere in the middle of the pack of all the runners running, among those not genetically gifted with a V-12 engine or the time for heavy training. Runners like me just slog it out against their own best time without any thought of breaking the tape and taking the prize. Us common folk tend to hit mile 24 of the marathon and think, "What kind of demon possessed me to do this?"

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A couple years back I was running my usual route and someone stopped me. "Hey, can I ask you a question?" she said. She was a middle school youth I often passed as she waited for the bus. Now, just as an aside (and I think speak for most runners when I say this), if you are going to stop a runner who is in the act of running, please have a good reason. Once I was running a 5k time trial on the track, and someone stopped me to ask which week of summer VBS was taking place. That was not okay.

But it turned out this youth's question was very, very good. She asked, "Why do you run?" I guess I wasn't prepared for this because I stood there a second, kind of stupefied. If she'd asked, "What are you training for?" "Or how far are you going today?" "Or what do you think of the new line of shoes New Balance is putting out?" I could have responded instantly. But instead just I sputtered and finally said, "I run because it's fun."

The words came of my mouth and seemed to fall on their face. "I run because it's fun." How pathetic a response was that?! No chance this girl was going to go out for cross country anytime soon. "What about, I run for joy? Because I feel alive? Because I feel free?"

"Why do you run?" It felt close to being asked, "Why do you get up every day?" Like if a neighbor who saw you leave for work early and often come home late asked, "Why do you work?" Or if, in the midst of running the kids all over town--to soccer, to dance, to Scouts, to drop a kid off at a friend's--someone asked, "Why are you trying to be 5 places at once?" Or if someone asked, "Where do you find meaning in life now that you're retired?" What would you say? And would it get at what you think life is really for?

Questions of sanity notwithstanding, to runners, running can feel close to the purpose of life. I don't know of Apostle Paul was a runner, but he seemed to get this. "Run," he said, "in such a way as to get the prize." According to Paul believers in Jesus are runners. It is my great pleasure, in the name of the Apostle, to declare everyone here a runner, and not just recreational runners. No mere middle of the pack, fun runner, but a hard-core, lean, chiseled runner who toes the line to win. Because even though "all the runners run, ...only one gets the prize." We are in it for the prize.

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Running for the prize makes all the difference, see. It's one thing to run for fun, but something else to strive for the prize. We happen to have some in this church who know what it is to run to win. So I asked Jim Kule, who ran for Cleveland State, "What's the difference between running just to run and running to win the race?"

Jim said, "Running to win is something that demands your whole life. Everything you do is focused on peaking for that race. You do your 80-100 mile weeks, your 20 mile runs every Sunday, you eat right, sleep well." If you don't feel like training, tough beans! You get out and do it. Because, like loving your neighbor, running for the prize doesn't wait until it feels good.

Nicholas Elswick knows about running to get the win. I asked him, "What does it take to toe the line with your eye on winning the prize?" And he said, "You've got to be confident in the best you can give, and just go out and give it. You can't hold anything back. You have to give everything to the race."

Eric McCaslin knows something about this and he said, "Running to win is about the urge to be the best. You to work hard as you can to be ready to race."

Apostle Paul says, "Amen, brothers! 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."

Here, Paul is thinking of celery. And not crisp, juicy celery, but limp, withered celery. This, the historians tell us, is the crown that athletes received at Corinth's famed Isthmian games, which were the Corinthian equivalent of Athens' ancient Olympics.<sup>1</sup> They drew the best of the best--boxers with fearsome jabs and runners who'd push to the point of passing out as they crossed the finish, all to have a wreath of wilted celery placed atop their heads. Really, says Paul. All that fanatical training and run-your-heart-out effort for a crown of wilted veggies that, a few days later, is fit for the compost pile?

Now, you are *spiritual* athletes, says Paul. You strive for a better crown. A crown that, to borrow Peter's words, "can never perish, spoil or fade--kept in heaven for you" (1 Pe 1:4). In 1 Corinthians chapter 9, see, Paul is only warming up. The difference between what perishes and what will last forever comes up again six chapters later as Paul truly hits his stride talking about resurrection and all the life God gives in Jesus Christ. "The body that is sown is *perishable*," he says, but "it is raised *imperishable*." It's put in the ground as though wilted celery; it's raised a crown of gold. Those who run in the name of Jesus, says Paul, are destined for a prize that shines with the brightness of the risen Christ.

Christians are people who run straining toward victory. "Thanks be to God. He gives us the victory through the Lord Jesus Christ," Paul says as he makes the final turn to bring the letter home. Paul looks to the day when bodies that fail and lives that hurt and hearts

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<sup>1</sup> Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, (Louisville: John Knox Press: 1997), 156.

that break and a world that sometimes looks to have spun off course all reach their finish in resurrection, and everything is crowned with life.

When Jesus rose from the dead he broke the tape, outpacing death and sin; when Jesus leapt out of the grave injustice was left looking at the bottom of his spikes. This is what you're running for, Paul says to the church. All creation strains toward this crown given by Jesus the risen Lord. If you're going to run the race, run like him. Run as people headed to win.

It's not the *whether* of running the race that occupies Paul. It's the *how* and the *why*. "I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air," he says. Paul is like an athlete that visualizes standing on the podium, hearing the cheers and the anthem. Only the victory Paul envisions is greater than personal triumph. He pictures the whole world made new—a day when not just death has gone down, but the force of sin and all that's broken in the world.

This is why Paul commends to a Corinthian church adept at fighting with one another the "still more excellent way" of love, with its kindness, patience, and great-heartedness. Christians live toward the victory Jesus gives, which is why he insisted people should not seek their own advantage, but their neighbor's instead. Across the letter Paul gives moral advice on economics, sexual ethics, how to deal with those different from you. But he doesn't just want people to have good values. He wants a church that lives in the way everything will be when history has run its course and the cosmos has the biggest victory party ever, when every hand will lift lifted and voice raise in praise to Jesus Christ.

Train for *that* day, Paul says. It's not to soon to live such that the hungry are fed, the lonely know love, and people divided one from another are brought together in Christ. To run to win is to look to the day when God has made all this so through Christ, and to start living it here and now.

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A family I know recently finished their basement. They put in a kitchen with an island and quality countertops. They furnished it with leather couches and a nice TV. But they don't spend much time there because the space isn't for them. They're using it to serve others. They give lodging people in who've hit a rough patch in life, or people they know who are in-between things and could use a place to stay. They don't charge rent or utilities. There's someone new every year or so.

Some might say they're not getting much of a return on the investment that they made. But then, they're striving for a different sort of prize. They've decided the race they are running is about service more than self; handing out more than getting; using perishable things to serve the imperishable purpose of Christ.

Running the race Christ gives takes takes focus, and sometimes rejection of prevailing ways. But then, as Paul says, "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training." Kind of like a certain college basketball team that, some years ago, won back-to-back national championships. There was a t-shirt on campus that said on the front, "You can talk the game, but can you play the game?" And on the back, in bold letters, it said, "We can play."

This is the calling to which Paul calls us. Church, is your game talk, or is it play? God grant a church that has game that says, "We are here to play." Amen.