

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

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Paul uses an analogy about athletes competing for a prize to show the ultimate goal in his ministry. He runs, and he urges the Corinthians to also run, to win the race of life so that they might win the prize of life. Paul works to support himself and has made his life purposefully difficult so that his entire focus is on bringing the gospel to all men, avoiding temptation and temporary reward, so that Jesus will reward him and be pleased with his obedience.

Paul is still answering the question from verse 18, “What then is my reward?” In this chapter Paul has dealt with an accusation that he does not have genuine authority as an apostle because he does not receive financial support, but rather works with his own hands, and pays his own way. Paul has been explaining his motivation for covering his own costs. He has explained that he not only covers his own costs, he also has become “all things to all men” (verse 22), meeting each person where they are, that he might “win more” to Christ. In explaining his method, Paul has made it clear that in every choice, he is making a deliberate and intentional decision to place advancing the gospel above his own comfort.

Paul now turns to an analogy to emphasize his answer to the question “What is in this for me?” The clear answer is “I want to win the greatest prize of life” which is awarded in the next life. To do this, Paul uses examples from a version of what we now call the “Olympic Games,” which were invented by the Greeks. The version that took place in Corinth were called the Isthmian Games. They took place in Corinth every second and fourth year of an Olympiad (in which the Olympics occur in year one of four).

Therefore, the athletic images Paul is about to use would be very familiar to his audience. As a Jew, Paul might naturally know little about such Gentile endeavors. But Paul had just stated that “I have become all things to all men”(verse 22). Part of this was apparently to understand the Gentile culture. For example, in Athens, Paul introduced the gospel of Christ to the Athenians by quoting Gentile poets (Acts 17:28).

Paul has been answering the question posed to him, “What reward do you seek?” He now asks a question: *Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize?* Paul will make clear that his goal is to run to win the race of life, and to do this requires not being disqualified.

To participate in the Isthmian Games, each athlete had to meet the following requirements. Failure to meet certain requirements would result in being disqualified. Some of these were:

- Each contestant had to be a natural born Greek
 - The gospel of Christ corollary was that to win the prize of life requires being born again into the family of Christ (John 3:14-16)
- Each contestant had to follow strict training rules, including a rigid diet

- The corollary of the gospel of Christ is that to win the prize of life requires suffering as Jesus suffered, and doing whatever we do as unto the Lord (Romans 8:17b, Colossians 3:23-24).
- Each contestant had to try their hardest in all training exercises.
 - The corollary of the gospel of Christ is that to win the prize of life requires being a good steward of our own gifts, calling, and opportunity

Failure to follow the diet or train with full earnestness would result in being disqualified. The context for this analogy would be well known by each Corinthian in Paul's audience.

Many of the contests in the Isthmian Games were foot races. Paul now turns from telling his questioners of his own motivation, and encourages every Corinthian to join him, saying: *Run in such a way that you may win*. In verse 18, Paul asked the rhetorical question, "What then is my reward?" Paul now makes clear that his purpose is to run the race of life in a way so as to win. He intends to train with all the earnestness and discipline of the "Olympic athletes." He refers to this strict training, noting that *Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things*. If the Greek athletes can exercise *self-control* to win a temporal reward, how much more should believers exercise self-control to win an eternal reward?

Paul makes this contrast, noting that *They* (the Greek athletes) *then do it to receive a perishable wreath*. The winners of the Isthmian Games would be called up to the "Bema Seat" to receive a garland made of vegetation. This would give them great honor, one of the greatest honors available in Greek society. But the honor was, by its nature, *perishable*. The trophy would decay. The fame would be lost. All they won would pass away.

On the other hand, believers in Christ can win their race and be called up to the "Bema Seat" (judgement seat) to receive an eternal reward that will never fade away. Paul states this overtly in another letter to this same church:

"For we must all appear before the judgment ("bema") seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." (2 Corinthians 5:10)

The Greek word translated "judgment seat" is the Greek word "bema." It was an elevated platform from which judgment was given. It could be judicial decrees, and it could be athletic awards. In the case of Jesus's "bema," it will be both. Jesus will judge how each believer "ran their race" and give rewards "according to what he has done."

As such, each believer is running the race of life. Paul now admonishes each person to run in such a way *that you may win*. The Greek athletes ran in order to gain a *perishable wreath*. Paul contrasts the Greek races with the race of life, saying *but we* are striving to win an *imperishable* reward. In the race of life, we do not compete against others, but against our own flesh.

Paul now concludes his answer of "What then is my reward?" *Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.*

Paul is running with a specific purpose, to win the prize of life. That is why he says *I discipline my body*. To win the race of life requires setting aside earthly comfort to pursue heavenly reward. This requires faith. One way Paul exercised faith was by disciplining his own body, and earning his own way. That is how this chapter began, with Paul answering an allegation that his apostolic authority was not genuine, since he did not have financial supporters, but worked to pay his way.

As Paul explained at length, ministers of the gospel have every right to raise a support team to free their time to minister the gospel. Paul has that right as well. But he has chosen to set that right aside for two reasons: a) he does not want to abuse his authority, knowing his own tendencies (verse 18), and b) he believes working and paying his own way provides additional opportunities to win more, perhaps by working alongside the Gentiles in the marketplace. In doing this, Paul is making the same sort of calculation as does an “Olympic athlete.” He is doing so with an end goal in mind.

Paul has a very specific objective. He is running *in such a way, not without aim*. Paul deliberately denies himself his own comfort. It is, in each case, to further his effectiveness in advancing the gospel of Christ. This is the stewardship to which He was called (verse 17). His goal is to willingly and effectively discharge his stewardship with all his might, hoping that he will be rewarded by Christ, whom he serves.

Paul switches sports from foot racing to boxing, which was also a popular sport in the Isthmian Games. He says *I box in such a way, as not beating the air*. Boxers only have so much energy. If they expend their energy beating the air, they are going to lose the match. Paul does not want to waste one ounce of energy on anything that doesn’t matter in the boxing match of life. He wants every single thing he does to count toward winning the fight. He wants “every punch to land.” He desires to gain the greatest prize from pleasing Jesus, the Creator and Sustainer of all that is.

Paul has now explained his motivations for his actions. But he has also exhorted the Corinthians to follow his example, and run their life’s race in such a way as to win as well. Paul says *I discipline my body and make it my slave*. He is like any person, preferring comfort to pain. But Paul has a goal, to win the prize of life. And to win that prize, he has to make his body do things it would prefer not to do, just like a high performing athlete.

And, just like the Greeks who train for the Isthmian Games desired to avoid disqualification from winning, Paul wants to make sure that *after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified*. Most of Paul’s preaching was oriented toward exhorting believers to endure persecution in order that they too might win the prize of life, to receive glory from Jesus at the judgment seat of Christ.

Paul stated this earlier in this letter:

“According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it.¹¹ For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.¹² Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,¹³ each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire,

and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. ¹⁴ If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire."
(1 Corinthians 3:10-14)

This passage makes clear that everything each believer does during their life on earth is "building a house" of work that will be judged with fire, likely the fire of Jesus's presence (Hebrews 12:29). If that work is high quality, it will endure the fire and receive a reward. But if not, it will be burned.

If a Greek was *disqualified* from the Isthmian Games, that did not mean they lost their citizenship. Being a natural born Greek was not something that could be taken away. Disqualification would however mean they could not win the prize. The application to believers is that no one can lose being born again into the family of God. Being born again is a gift, freely given. It is by grace, through faith (John 3:14-16; Ephesians 2:8-9). To win the prize of life requires discipline and effort. It requires each person to do whatever they do as unto the Lord. As Paul states in his letter to the Colossians:

Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve."
(Colossians 3:23-24)

Paul makes clear that everything he is doing is oriented toward winning this prize. At the end of his life, he writes 2 Timothy, which is primarily focused on exhorting his protégé (Timothy) to have courage to continue in the faith, even though Paul is about to lose his life as a martyr. Paul makes the point that he has won the crown of righteousness, and that is worth the loss of all things, including his life (2 Timothy 4:8). The last thing Paul wants to do is to teach this to others, then be disqualified himself.

This means that Paul recognizes his own fallibility and weakness, and has taken measures to counter them. He knows his flaws, and has removed temptation. He has a tendency to abuse authority, so he has set authority aside. He has his eye on the prize.

It is worth noting that Paul got to glimpse into heaven, and had a small taste of the immense glory for which he strived (2 Corinthians 12:1-6). While he was not permitted to say much about it, the extremes to which he went in order to win the prize of life show how great his motivation was to please Jesus with all his deeds, how glorious eternity with God must be. Paul has gone far beyond defending his apostleship, and given us a glimpse into the deepest parts of his soul. He has disclosed his deepest motivations. And he has invited all believers to join him in seeking to live a life that matters for all eternity. To win the prize of life, a reward that is *imperishable*.

Biblical Text

²⁴ **Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.** ²⁵ **Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an**

imperishable.²⁶ Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; ²⁷ but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.