

Challenges Christians Face

Paul's Pattern in Striving for a Crown

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

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Paul's Pattern in Striving for a Crown

Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of Christian liberty. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "Paul's Pattern in Striving for a Crown."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 9:24-27:

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

Introduction

In preparation for today's message I wanted to find out how an athlete trained for the Olympic Games. So I typed "Training regimen for Olympic athletes" into my Google spacebar, and picked the first athlete whose name appeared.

Shawn Johnson (born January 19, 1992) is an American gymnast who competed as a rising eleventh-grader at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China.

Shawn Johnson started taking gymnastics lessons when she was 3-years old.

"When I was little, I just did it because I loved it," she said. "When I started getting to the higher levels, I started thinking about making the elite. I put in more hours and learned more skills."

In the years leading up to the 2008 Olympics Johnson attended a full day of school before heading to the gym for four-hour workouts. She spent five hours in the gym on Saturdays and took Sundays off.

Practice consisted of at least 30 minutes of conditioning, stretching and endurance training, and then about 50 minutes on each event. Johnson usually completed extra tricks at the end of a routine during practice, and she also ran to build endurance.

Her strength training relied on her own body weight and exercises like push-ups, sit-ups, squat jumps, and pull-ups. For exercises like sit-ups, she usually did as many reps as she could of each exercise in one minute. Usually she did about 30 pull-ups, although she revealed that she's done up to 100 at one time.

All of this intense work eventually produced three silver medals (for the floor exercise, team, and all-around gymnast), and one gold medal (for the balance beam) at the 2008 Olympics.¹

The modern Olympic Games began in 1896. They were a revival of the ancient Olympic Games, which were held in Olympia, Greece, from the 8th century BC to the 4th century AD. Actually, the ancient Olympic Games were part of a cycle known as the Pan-Hellenic Games, which also included the Pythian Games, the Nemean Games, and the Isthmian Games.²

The Isthmian Games were held on the Isthmus of Corinth, which was about 10 miles away from Corinth. The Corinthians were therefore very familiar with the Isthmian Games. In fact, they sponsored the biannual Isthmian Games, which were second in importance only to the Olympic Games.

Since Paul was in Corinth in 48/49-51 AD, he was likely present for the Isthmian Games held in the spring of 51 AD.

The games included six events: wrestling, jumping, javelin, discus throwing, running, and boxing. Competitors in the Olympic Games were required to train for at least ten months before the

¹ <http://www.fitnessmagazine.com/workout/real-plans/celebrity/what-it-takes-to-be-an-olympic-athlete/?page=4>.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympic_Games#Ancient_Olympics.

games in order to qualify for participation. It is possible that a similar requirement existed for the Isthmian Games, which may explain Paul's references to strict training and disqualification. Winners received crowns either of pine or of celery, both perishable materials.³

Review

Now, let's briefly review how this fits into Paul's argument in his first letter to the Corinthians.

You may recall that *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* was in fact Paul's response to a letter he had received from them. Six times in his first letter to the Corinthians Paul said, "Now concerning. . ." (7:1; 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1; and 16:12). And six times Paul responded to a question or issue raised in the letter that he had received from the Corinthians.

In 1 Corinthians 8:1 Paul said, "Now concerning food offered to idols. . . ." This was the third of six issues. All of chapter 8 deals with the issue of food offered to idols. The Corinthian Christians were engaged in a debate about whether it was okay to eat meat offered to idols. This was an issue on which God had not clearly revealed his will. It was therefore a debatable matter, and the Christians in Corinth were divided over the issue. Some said it was okay to eat meat offered to idols; others said it was not okay.

Paul responded to their question by setting down a foundational principle in 1 Corinthians 8:13: "Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble." Paul would never do anything to cause his brother in Christ to stumble. He was willing to limit his Christian freedom in order to love his brother in Christ. His principle was that Christians must deny themselves their rights for the sake of the gospel.

In chapter 9 Paul now illustrated from his own life the very principle he laid down in chapter 8. His principle of self-denial for

³ Richard L. Pratt, Jr., vol. 7, *I & II Corinthians*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 156.

the sake of the gospel in chapter 8 was illustrated by his pattern of self-denial for the sake of the gospel in chapter 9.

In verses 1-18 of chapter 9 Paul's illustration had to do with his self-denial regarding material support. In verses 19-23 Paul's illustration had to do with his self-denial regarding cultural preferences. In verses 24-27 Paul's illustration now has to do with self-denial for the sake of an imperishable prize.

Lesson

So, in our lesson today, we learn that just as athletes exercise rigorous self-control in order to win a perishable prize, so we as Christians must exercise rigorous self-control in order to win an imperishable prize. Let's see how we do this under the following two headings:

1. The Goal for Every Christian (9:24-26).
2. The Method for Every Christian (9:27).

I. The Goal for Every Christian (9:24-26)

First, let's look at the goal for every Christian.

As I said, Paul was familiar with the Isthmian Games. He was likely in Corinth during the Isthmian Games that took place in the spring of 51 AD. He also knew that the Corinthians were familiar with the Isthmian Games. And so when he wrote to them from Ephesus a few years later (sometime between 53 and 55 AD), he made reference to two of the events in the games with which they were familiar.

A. *Run to Win the Race (9:24-26a)*

First, the goal for every Christian is to run to win the race.

Paul began by asking in verse 24a: **“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize?”**

No one trains rigorously for 10 months without intending to

win the race. Yet, out of all the **runners, only one receives the winner's prize.**

A great difference between the races to which Paul was referring and the Christian “race” is that every Christian who will exercise rigorous self-control will win. John MacArthur notes that “we do not compete against each other but against the obstacles—practical, physical, and spiritual—that would hinder us.”⁴ In a sense, every Christian runs his or her own race, winning people to faith in Jesus Christ and being faithful in his or her calling.

So Paul exhorts all Christians—and this is the heart of his exhortation, “**So run that you may obtain it**” (9:24b). In other words, set aside anything that would hinder people from receiving the gospel.

Holding tightly to rights is a sure way to hinder people from receiving the gospel. Many of the Corinthian Christians were limiting their effectiveness in reaching people with the gospel because they refused to deny themselves their rights. These rights had to do with the non-essentials of the gospel, things about which God had not revealed his will. For example, they had to do with food offered to idols. Some of the Corinthians knew that they were at liberty to eat that food but others really struggled to know what to do about it. By eating the food offered to idols and not limiting their rights regarding non-essentials, the Corinthians won few to Jesus Christ and offended many.

If **every athlete** who competes in the Olympic and Isthmian Games **exercises self-control in all things** (9:25a), then why cannot Christians do so as well, Paul asks. **They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable** (9:25b).

The **wreath** won at the Isthmian Games was made either of pine or celery. Nevertheless, the **wreath** represented accomplishment, acclaim, fame, and the life of an athletic hero. Winners were immortalized, much as Olympic athletes are today. But that “immortality” was just as mortal as the wreath itself, and lasted only a

⁴ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 214.

little bit longer. Both were **perishable**.

But, just like Paul, Christians **do not run aimlessly** (9:26a). We do not run for a **perishable wreath** or for perishable fame. The fact is that we already have true immortality. We run in order to receive “the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to [us] on that Day” (2 Timothy 4:8), “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for [us]” (1 Peter 1:4). That prize is **imperishable!**

But receiving the imperishable prize requires rigorous **self-control**. Every Christian who wins the prize exercises rigorous **self-control**. You take seriously your time in God’s Word, you pray, you serve, you give, you love, and you even deny yourself certain things if it means that others will be won to faith in Jesus Christ.

B. Fight to Win the Battle (9:26b)

And second, changing metaphors, the goal for every Christian is to fight to win the battle.

Paul said in verse 26b: **“I do not box as one beating the air.”**

Boxing was one of the events at the Isthmian Games. A boxer had to engage in a fight with a real opponent. He might have looked and felt good while he was shadow-boxing, but it was a different story when he was in the ring with an opponent.

I have never boxed. But I do occasionally try to play golf. When I take a few practice swings, it feels so good. It seems to me that when I strike the ball it is likely to go straight down the fairway for about 300 yards. However, when I actually strike the ball it usually veers off to the left or to the right for about 50 yards!

Paul’s point is that we are to engage spiritually so as to win the battle. We should not play at Christianity. We should not play at winning people to faith in Jesus Christ. We should get in the game by meeting with, praying for, talking to, sharing with, and introducing unbelievers to Jesus Christ.

Now, how should Christians go about winning the race and the battle?

II. The Method for Every Christian (9:27)

Let's look now at the method for every Christian.

Paul said that Christians are to do two things to win the race and the battle. The first is positive; the second is negative.

A. *Do Exercise Self-Control (9:27a)*

First, do exercise self-control.

Paul said in verse 27a: **“But I discipline my body and keep it under control. . . .”**

Paul exercised rigorous self-control. The word for **discipline** (*hupopiazō*) in Greek literally means “to hit under the eye.”⁵ So, Paul was willing to give his body a black eye, to knock himself out if necessary. He did it for the sake of winning people to faith in Jesus Christ.

The sad fact is that too many Christians do not exercise rigorous self-control. We are careless and lazy about spiritual things. We are self-centered and do not think about what we can do to win our family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, classmates, and so on to faith in Jesus Christ. And when we do see a Christian who is serious about his or her faith, we think to ourselves, “He or she is a fanatic.”

So, if are going to win people to faith in Jesus Christ we must exercise self-control.

B. *Do Not Be Disqualified (9:27b)*

And second, do not be disqualified.

Paul said in verse 27b: **“. . . lest after preaching to others I**

⁵ James Strong, S.T.D., LL.D., vol. 1, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), 75.

myself should be disqualified.”

This is another metaphor from the Isthmian Games. If the prospective contestant did not meet the training requirements, he was disqualified. He could not even run, much less win. Paul did not want to spend his life preaching the requirements to others, and then be disqualified for not meeting the requirements himself.

Now Paul was not speaking about losing his salvation. Yet, he was aware that he was to exercise rigorous self-control in order to win people to faith in Jesus Christ, and he did not want to be disqualified from reaching people because he was lax in his self-control.

Conclusion

In the autumn of 1912, presidential hopeful Teddy Roosevelt was in Milwaukee to deliver an important campaign speech. Throngs of well-wishers lined the motorcade route, hoping for a glimpse of the American icon. Roosevelt was only too happy to accommodate them, waving his hat and flashing that famed “bully grin” from his open-air motorcar.

But from out of nowhere, a deranged man stepped to the edge of the car and aimed a pistol at Roosevelt. From point-blank range he fired a single bullet that lodged three inches deep into Roosevelt's chest. The blast knocked TR across the car and into a crumpled heap. Blood was everywhere. Chaos reigned. The police gang-tackled the gunman. All eyes focused on the fallen hero.

Immediately, TR's handlers discussed contingency plans and the quickest routes to nearby hospitals. But the wounded Rough Rider would have none of that. “You get me to that speech. It may be the last one I ever deliver, and I'm not going to miss it.”

A man with a message is a powerful force.

Minutes after the shooting, Teddy Roosevelt stood before his appreciative, albeit unaware audience. And without a microphone, the usually robust TR, meekly said, “Friends, I shall ask you to be as quiet as possible. I have just been shot, and even now the bullet

is in me. So I cannot speak for long, but I will do my best.”

As Roosevelt opened his coat to retrieve his handwritten notes, he exposed for the first time his blood-soaked shirt. The crowd gasped. Doctors rushed to the stage, only to be held off by Roosevelt. Medical attention would have to wait. The message was the priority.

That night TR’s speech was more candid than scripted, more urgent than routine. It was driven by passion, not politics. It contained no campaign rhetoric, no jockeying for votes, no idle promises. Instead, he spoke with deep resolve to cure the nation’s problems, even at the risk of his own. The truth had to be told. Political correctness took a beating. Winning an election was less important. Declaring his deepest beliefs was the issue.

Even the many detractors who had come to jeer and protest sat silently.

Ninety minutes later, an exhausted and colorless Roosevelt was finished. He had done what he came to do. Slowly he turned to the nearby doctors and said, “Now, we can go to the hospital.”

A thunderous applause erupted and continued until the motorcade was out of sight.

It’s interesting that audience reactions tend to change when they sense the urgency of a message; they evaluate it differently. Truth is more acceptable. Vision is caught. Passions are stirred. Even Roosevelt’s greatest critic, the *New York Herald*, saluted him in the next day’s headline: WE’RE AGAINST HIS POLITICS, BUT WE LIKE HIS GRIT.

A man with a message is a powerful force.⁶

The same thing could be said of the apostle Paul. He knew that the gospel is a powerful message. It is the only message that changes individuals, communities, cultures, and even nations. Paul was extremely effective because a man with a message—the gospel—is a powerful force.

And that is why Paul did not want anything to hinder the

⁶ Ron Walters’ Pastors Letter for October 2011 - Monday, October 3, 2011.

progress of the gospel. He was willing to exercise rigorous self-control for the sake of an imperishable prize.

Frankly, Paul wants us to understand that there is an *exhortation* and a *warning* in today's text.

First, regarding the exhortation, let me ask this question: Are we exercising self-control? Chapter 9 is an illustration of a pattern of self-denial for the sake of the gospel. All around us are people who do not know the saving grace of Jesus Christ. We must be willing to give up our rights regarding non-essential, amoral things for the sake of the gospel. We must be disciplined in how we live our lives in order to see people come to faith in Jesus Christ. We must grow in the knowledge and grace of our Lord and Savior so that we can give an answer for the hope that is in us.

Let me try and make this as practical as possible. If you are a Christian, you will want to grow in your faith. But, frankly, my dear brother and sister in Christ, how in the world can you expect to grow if you are irregular in attending Worship Services? How in the world can you expect to grow if you don't regularly read God's Word? How in the world can you expect to grow if you aren't in some form of Bible Study? Get involved in a Growth Group! Get involved in a Men's Bible Study! Get involved in a Women's Bible Study! Get involved in Sunday school. And get your children to Sunday school too!

And second, regarding the warning, let me ask this question: Are we in danger of being disqualified? It is true that if we are Christians, we cannot lose our salvation. Nevertheless, the warning is real. Some who call themselves Christians are not in fact Christians. Many of us who are Christians are frankly running our race aimlessly. We are going through the motions with no real concern for those who are lost without Christ. We are in danger of losing the blessing of seeing many people come to faith. Why? Because we will not exercise self-control for the sake of the gospel and the lost.

May God help us exercise rigorous self-control in order to win an imperishable prize. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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Challenges Christians Face

PRAAYER:

O God, help us to run the race to win the imperishable prize. Help us to fight the battle to win the imperishable prize. Help us to exercise self-control and not be disqualified for the sake of the gospel.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and love your brothers and sisters well and be willing to forsake your rights for the sake of the gospel.