

Paul: A Biography of Running the Race with Strenuous Self-Control

Galatians 5:22-23; 1 Corinthians 9:25

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Suffering is one of the means God uses to grow the fruit of godly self-control in the Christian race that we must all run. Now I know that is not what a Christianity built upon comfort, prosperity, and ease is going to want to hear. However, consider for a moment the suffering, afflictions, and trials that the Apostle Paul faced in the course that he ran.

Shortly after his conversion, he had to be secretly let down by night in a large basket over the wall of Damascus in order to elude King Aretas of Damascus and the Jewish leaders who wanted him dead for his powerful testimony of the crucified and resurrected Christ (Acts 9:25; 2 Corinthians 11:32). Consider Paul's own summary of what he suffered for Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 11:23-28).

Consider that Paul was given a painful thorn in the flesh (some bodily affliction) by the Lord in order to humble him over the heavenly revelations given to him (2 Corinthians 12:7). Paul knew not only physical suffering for the gospel of Jesus Christ, but also betrayal and abandonment by fellow Christians as well; for in his first trial before Caesar, all forsook him (2 Timothy 4:16).

Now I find it helpful to review what Paul suffered in order to faithfully run the Christian race appointed to him by the Lord, so that I might be reminded again and again that suffering for Christ is not the lot of a super Christian, but is that which characterizes a Christian in strenuously running the race set before us (2 Timothy 3:10-12). Dear ones, Jesus Christ never intended that the life of a Christian be an easy and comfortable life, free of all hardship, heartaches, afflictions, and trials. That may be the kind of life presented by so-called evangelists on tv and radio, but it is not the life of a Christian presented in Scripture (and anyone who tells you different is lying to you).

As I look into the future, it is not a comfortable Christianity that will survive the persecution to come—that kind of Christianity will give up whatever is necessary to maintain its comfort. It is a self-denying Christianity that will persevere and will stand with Christ in defense of the pure gospel and of the holy commandments of God. The fruit of godly self-control is graciously given by the Holy Spirit to every Christian, but it is grown by the Holy Spirit in our lives through trials, heartaches, hardships, rejections, loneliness, which is agonizing work and yet is a rewarding work that leads to an incorruptible crown of life.

The main points from our text this Lord's Day are the following: (1) The Agony of Godly Self-Control ("And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things" 1 Corinthians 9:25a); (2) The Reward of Godly Self-Control ("Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible" 1 Corinthians 9:25b).

I. The Agony of Godly Self-Control ("And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things" 1 Corinthians 9:25a).

A. In Chapter 9 of 1 Corinthians, Paul is addressing a problem that certain Corinthian Christians were having in clinging to their "rights" as Christians to eat meat offered to idols, even if it caused others to stumble and brought division within the Church of Christ. Paul reminds these Christians that it is our duty

before God to willingly lay down our “rights” in order to serve Christ and others and in order to live the gospel of Jesus Christ before others. He uses his own ministry as an example of this very truth.

1. Paul states he had “power” (authority, a right) to eat and drink whatever was created by God (1 Corinthians 9:4).

2. Paul says he had “power” (authority, a right) to marry, as did other of the apostles, including Peter (contrary to Rome, 1 Corinthians 9:5).

3. Paul also writes that he had “power” (authority, a right) to be fully supported through the giving of the church (1 Corinthians 9:6). For no soldier goes to war at his own expense; no farmer plants a vineyard and does not enjoy the fruit of his work; no shepherd tends the sheep and does not enjoy the milk from the flock (1 Corinthians 9:7). Not even oxen tread out the corn without being paid for their services (1 Corinthians 9:9). The priests as ministers in the Old Testament likewise earned a living and were paid for their work through the sacrifices brought by the people (1 Corinthians 9:13). So Paul states that God has ordained that New Covenant preachers are also to live from the contributions of those to whom they minister (1 Corinthians 9:14).

4. But Paul concludes that though these are legitimate “rights” to which he was entitled as a Christian and as a Christian minister, he has not insisted on using them, if the gospel of Jesus Christ would be hindered (“But I have used none of these things” 1 Corinthians 9:15). What was of supreme importance was the gospel of Jesus Christ and that he not hinder it due to his clinging to his “rights”. Paul was not about to compromise the truth of the gospel, doctrine, worship, government, or the morality of God’s law, but he was willing to sacrifice these “rights” for the sake of Christ and the gospel.

5. Though Paul was free of all men in their ruling over his conscience before God in matters that were indifferent (in food, drink, adornment, etc.), he would make himself a servant of all men in order that they might be saved and grow in Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 9:19). Paul is not willing to sacrifice Christ’s truth in the least, but he is willing to be sacrificed for the sake of Christ that others might become partakers of the gospel with Paul (that is what *agape* love is). This reveals the heart of Paul to see others brought to Christ. Let nothing in our life that is not necessary to maintain our testimony for Christ be held so tightly that we cannot lay it down for our Savior as He laid down His life for us. This is not a super Christian, but is simply that which characterizes one who is a Christian (Mark 8:34). What is more important in your life—clinging to the things of this world, or clinging to Christ, His gospel, His commandments, His doctrine, His worship? **Love for Christ and others limits our liberty and our “rights”**. That is what Paul is teaching.

B. Now as we look more closely at our text (1 Corinthians 9:25), Paul elaborates on the agony required in exercising oneself in godly self-control, if we would be faithful witnesses for Jesus Christ to a perishing world.

1. Beginning in verse 24, Paul says, “Know ye not.” In other words, “What I’m teaching you now about being a faithful witness for Christ will only come by your hard and agonizing work to exercise temperance and godly self-control in your Christian life, and this hard work can be illustrated by an event with which you are all very familiar: the well-known athletic games at Corinth” (which rivaled the Olympic games).

2. The athletic games at Corinth occurred every two years, and included events like: running events, jumping events, throwing events, and wrestling/boxing events. Paul uses two of these events in particular as he addresses the agonizing training involved in growing in the fruit of godly self-control: running and boxing (1 Corinthians 9:26).

3. The point that Paul is driving home is that being a faithful witness is in some respects like being an winning athlete. It is not comfortable; it is not easy; it is not for the lazy in body or heart. An athlete in the Corinthian Games trained for years to compete. He suffered much by way of pain, exhaustion, loneliness, denying himself various food, drink, rest, comforts etc. If he was to win the prize, he must be

single-minded from the time he awoke until the time he fell asleep. Paul is certainly not endorsing all that was associated with the Corinthian Games, especially the idolatry involved—these games were dedicated to the honor of Poseidon (the earth shaking god of the sea) and were done for one’s own glory and for mere earthly benefits.

4. The similarity that Paul draws from the athlete competing in the Corinthian Games and the Christian running in his/her race is the time, resources, exertion, and commitment necessary to both. The course that each Christian is to run is not necessarily the same (God’s plan or course for each of our lives is specifically tailored by God’s infinite wisdom and love), but **the training** to run the race is the same (striving to the point of agony in training oneself in godly self-control), **the rules** in running the race are the same (the gospel, commandments, doctrine, and worship found in Holy Scripture), and **the goal** in finishing the race is the same (the incorruptible crown of eternal life in glorious beauty, peace, righteousness, love, and communion).

5. The power to run the Christian race comes from the resurrected Christ who empowers the Christian by means of the Holy Spirit, who works within us both to will and to do his good pleasure (Philippians 2:13). Although the power comes from God, there is no less effort on our parts that is due in running the Christian race.

a. Some act as though they need not strive and work as much because it is the power of God that works within us in running and finishing the Christian race. However, that could not be further from the truth. That is simply an excuse and a cop-out to be lazy. Because it is God that works in us to run and finish the Christian race, we are all the more empowered to be diligent, to exercise ourselves to godliness (1 Timothy 4:7), and to strive (literally, agonize in 1 Corinthians 9:25) in running and finishing the Christian race that God has set before us.

b. We are not lazy in running the Christian race because God works within us, but rather we are energetic because of Christ’s resurrected power. This is the reason you have such hope in running a faithful race and finishing a faithful race—it is the almighty Spirit of God that raised Jesus from the dead that supplies the power to deny yourself and to exercise yourself in godly self-control in saying “Yes” to that which enable you to run a faithful race, and saying “No” to that which will hinder you from running a faithful race.

6. Just as the athlete is temperate in all things (1 Corinthians 9:25), so is the Christian temperate (this the same word used for the fruit of “temperance” or self-control in Galatians 5:23). The Christian exercises himself strenuously in godly self-control. How so?

a. The Christian awakes to commit himself/herself to Christ in prayer. The Christian does not just wander aimlessly into the day. There is a divine course that he/she is to run that day to the glory of Christ and for the good of others, and that cannot be forgotten. This is not a running wherever he/she wants to run (or running a more comfortable course), nor is it merely practicing to run or to box. Every day is the real thing—the real Christian race (1 Corinthians 9:26).

b. Having begun the day with that renewed commitment and sanctification to Christ, the Christian prays without ceasing, is thankful in all things, is communing with the resurrected Christ (as his/her strength throughout the day).

c. The Christian lays aside whatever the burden of sin, the burden of worldliness, the burden of idolatry, the burden of distraction that takes his trust, love, and hope away from Christ. Can you imagine a runner binding a backpack over his shoulders and expecting to run a good race? No, he/she seeks to remove all burdens that hinder and distract from running a good race and finishing the race.

7. What are the burdens that are hindering and distracting you from running a good race?

a. Perhaps it is your love of money, your indulging the lusts of the flesh, your fear of man and worry about circumstances, your love of the approval of peers, your love of self and your body, your love of pleasures, your love of your dreams and ambitions, your love of family.

b. Perhaps it is bitterness, resentment, anger over some wrong that you have suffered. Perhaps it is your laziness, procrastination, and putting off the hard training that it takes to run a faithful race (in not only doctrine but in practice as well).

c. Perhaps it is having failed so many times in running a faithful race, you have given up for fear of failing again. Perhaps it is guilt that is weighing you down because you will not repent of a sin that you enjoy too much. Perhaps you are blaming others for your sin (or looking at their sin through a different lens than you look at your own sin).

d. Dear ones, godly self-control will do that which is hard, which is uncomfortable, which is even strenuous and agonizing in casting off the burden that hinders and distracts you from running a faithful race and finishing the Christian course that the Lord has set before you. Complaining about the course that God has set before you (wallowing in self-pity over that course) will not change that course nor make it any easier to run—in fact, it will make it much more difficult to run. That which will make it easier to run is when we exercise the fruit of self-control and cast off that burden that slows us down, that drops us to our knees on the track, that causes us to look to the bleachers to see who is watching us rather than keeping our eye of faith and eye of hope fixed upon Christ, the gospel, and our love bound duties to God and to one another.

e. All professing Christians start the Christian race by way of their profession of faith in Jesus Christ, but not all professing Christians run the race faithfully or finish the race, because some merely profess Christ (Titus 1:16). However, all who trust alone in Christ alone for their justification before God will also be supplied the resurrection power of Jesus Christ to run the race faithfully and to finish the race (not in perfection, but in faithfulness, even when one falls, casting off that failure through trust, repentance, forgiveness, and renewed love and obedience).

f. In summary of this first main point, dear ones, running the Christian race is not a comfortable stroll through the park, but is rather a strenuous and agonizing race that involves hard choices and decisions in following Christ, loving Christ more than anything in this world, being willing to suffer shame, heartache, pain, affliction, loneliness, loss of liberty and rights, in order to follow Christ.

II. The Reward of Godly Self-Control (“Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible” 1 Corinthians 9:25b).

A. In the Corinthian Games, Paul states that the goal in running is to win the prize (1 Corinthians 9:24). In the Corinthian Games the athletes were competing against one another to win the prize and only the winner received the prize (no silver or bronze medals). In the Christian race, we are not running against one another in competition to beat one another to the finish line, but are rather running our own race charted out for us by God from all eternity for His glory and for our good (Acts 20:22-24).

1. We are tempted to look at our race and to compare our race with someone else’s race and to complain that our race is not fair; but what if we compared our race to Paul’s race, would we want to run Paul’s race? Dear ones, we do not always know what is the race that another Christian has been called to run—we simply do not like our race. God knows best what race we need to run by way of suffering, afflictions, trials, heartache, and persecution in order to grow us in godly self-control and to be a comfort to others.

2. But regardless of the race you have been called to run, the goal and reward is the same for every Christian—an incorruptible crown (1 Corinthians 9:25). The athlete in the Corinthian Games trained with all of his might and ran with all his strength to win a corruptible and perishable crown or wreath made of pine boughs (along with some other earthly, perishable rewards). What agonizing exercise and strenuous exertion and all for a crown that would begin fading away from the very moment that it was placed on the head of the winner. If, therefore, those who are not Christians will work so hard (in sports, on the job, in school, in their marriage, in life) in order to gain that which perishes, how much more should we who are

Christians strenuously exercise ourselves to godliness in order to gain an eternal crown of life that will never ever pass away? Where your treasure is there will your heart be also (Matthew 6:21). And where your crown is there will your heart be also. Dear ones, it is time to take inventory because all eternity depends upon what crown you seek and whether (by your desire and effort) you believe it is worthy obtaining.

3. Paul closes by applying these truths to his own life (and so should each of us). In exercising godly self-control in his own life, he says, "I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection" (1 Corinthians 9:27). What Paul is saying is that he exercises godly self-control to the point of buffeting his body with bruises in leading his body captive to the will of God. Again this is not enticing the body with candy if it will but submit, but is rather taking whatever strong measures are necessary to exercise godly self-control over the appetites of the body (and heart). Paul is using the imagery of the athlete who seems to be punishing the body in order that the body will be able to run or box in such a way as to gain the crown.

4. And Paul ends with the sobering words, "lest by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway" (or rejected or disapproved of, 1 Corinthians 9:27). This is not a rejection by God, but by men. Paul did not want to preach to others and then have others reject his ministry and the gospel due to his lack of self-control, due to some hindrance in running a faithful race. Paul was fully persuaded of his salvation (2 Timothy 1:12). He did not want his life or ministry to be disgraced before man by his own sin or by carrying some burden in this life that hindered him in running a good and faithful race to the glory of Jesus Christ. And, dear ones, this is the desire and prayer of every Christian.

B. Conclusion

1. In closing, dear ones, I pray that you are in the Christian race and that you are not simply sitting in the stands and watching. There is no eternal crown of life to those who do not come to Christ alone by faith alone. You must enter the race, looking in faith to Jesus, repenting of your sin, if you would have everlasting life (Matthew 11:28; 1 John 5:12).

2. For those who have entered the Christian race, I pray for you that you would run the race with all your might, casting off every burden that hinders you in running a faithful race. You may have started the race well, but have since allowed certain burdens to weigh you down (1 Peter 5:7). The wall of godly self-control has fallen down, and these burdens have broken through to take you off course, to distract you, and to slow you down. Cast them upon Christ. And even when we have finished our race appointed by the Lord at our death, the crown of life is not something we have earned by our own merit, by our own virtue, by our own righteousness, for the crown which we shall graciously receive from the Lord will not be due to our credit and glory but now and for all eternity the crown of life will be due to the honor and glory of God who worked within us both to will and to do His good pleasure (Revelation 4:10-11).

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