

# The Air We Breathe

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2 ESV)*

*You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. (Matthew 5:13 ESV)*

## **Instant Gratification**

**August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

**1 Corinthians 9:24-27**

**Rev. Levi denBok**

### **Introduction:**

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 9.

We are continuing our summer series in which we are identifying the subtle yet sinful thought patterns that permeate our culture and that threaten to creep into the church. Thus far we've addressed tribalism, self-reliance and the idolization of feelings.

Our target today is instant gratification.

We are – by and large – a microwave culture. We demand quick results. Why read a book when you can read a tweet? Unlike our ancestors who placed seeds in the soil and waited for crops to grow, we get what we need with the click of a mouse.

And when you live in an “instant world”, you inevitably begin to develop “instant expectations.” We're forgetting how to wait. We're forgetting how to play the long game. But as Christians, those are muscles that we simply cannot lose.

Because the day after you pass through the waters of baptism, you are confronted with the painful reality that the Christian life is a *marathon*, not a sprint. Old habits die hard. Growth in holiness takes time. The road of salvation is long, and difficult, and anything but “instant.” Yet, Jesus said:

But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Matthew 24:13 ESV)

Endurance. Long suffering. Patience. Those are attributes that we require in the Christian life, but they are attributes that are absolutely undermined in our instant gratification culture.

In our passage this morning, the Apostle Paul corrects our short-sighted thinking. Look with me to 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

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. <sup>25</sup> Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. <sup>26</sup> So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. <sup>27</sup> 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 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Paul is writing here to a Corinthian congregation that was facing massive temptations. They lived in a city where they were surrounded by pagan temples, and much of the worship in those temples involved lavish feasts and sexual sin. Before these believers were saved, they grew up participating in those pleasure parties.

Imagine for a moment, that you're a Corinthian who has turned to follow Jesus. You have surrendered your life to him, you've gone through the waters of baptism, and you've plugged into the community of faith. You are ALL IN!

But then life gets hard. Discouragements multiply. Pressures abound. And you find yourself walking past these pagan temples where your old friends are feasting and partying and you find yourself thinking, "That would be a great distraction right now. That would feel good. That would relieve stress."

That's the temptation that these Corinthians were facing, and – in varying degrees – it's not all that different from the temptation that WE are facing this morning. Are you stressed? Are you uncomfortable? Are you discouraged? You could have a temporary solution to that problem in a second, couldn't you? You could sneak away to a private place with your phone, or you could

make a trip to the LCBO. You could find *instant gratification* that would – for a very brief moment – provide you with some relief. In an instant gratification culture, those instincts are as natural as the air we breathe.

But those short cuts won't actually lead you to the finish line. No, if you want to finish this race, then you need to learn how to play the long game. So, how do we do that? That's what Paul is teaching us in this passage.

## How To Play the Long Game In A Short-Sighted World

First, if you want to play the long game in a short-sighted world, then you need to:

### 1. Fix your eyes on the prize

We see this in verses 24-25:

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. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. (1 Corinthians 9:24-25 ESV)

The city of Corinth hosted games, and the prize in those games was a crown woven out of withered celery.<sup>1</sup> Paul's argument is not complicated. He says: "Look at these athletes! Look at how hard they work – and all for a CROWN OF CELERY! If they can do that for a SALAD HAT, then can't we give it our all for the imperishable crown that is in store for us?"

Brothers and sisters, Jesus has not called you to suffer simply for sufferings sake. As you endure your various trials, you need to remember that there is a REWARD waiting for you on the other side! Sometimes, we can fall into the trap of pretending that we're too holy to look forward to a reward. "Oh, I don't need the promise of a reward to motivate me!" Really? Well, that's well and good for you, but I NEED THIS! I need to remember that there is glory on the other side of these waves that are crashing over my head! I need to know that there is life on the other side of that grave! Jesus had no problem motivating his people with rewards! He listed seven different

---

<sup>1</sup> Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 439-440.

rewards for the seven churches in Revelation, but for the sake of time I'll just read the last one where Jesus promised:

The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. (Revelation 3:21 ESV)

There is a THRONE in heaven where a place has been reserved for you to reign with Jesus FOREVER! Think about that the next time you're tempted to throw it all away for a temporary shot of pleasure.

Brothers and sisters, I am convinced that one of the primary ways that the enemy attacks us is that he convinces us to take our eyes off of the prize by luring us with lesser rewards. Paul reminds us here that we'll never run the race – we'll never live the life that we have been called to live – if we take our eyes off the prize. The fleeting pleasures of this current life are as close to heaven as a stale, moldy bread crumb is to a meal at the Keg! Don't make that trade!

And church, far and above the *rewards* waiting for us in heaven is the *Person* waiting for us in heaven. What does it look like to fix your eyes upon the prize? It looks like fixing your eyes on Jesus. When Paul wrote to the Philippians, he made it crystal clear what prize was that he was after. He wrote:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup> Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, **in order that I may gain Christ.** (Philippians 3:7-8 ESV)

JESUS is the prize! And there is NOTHING better than him! Amen? If he is not the all-surpassing treasure of your life – if you love anything that this world has to offer more than him – then you will NEVER finish this race.

Which of your fleeting pleasures compares to him? Is there any sin that has come close to satisfying the needs that only Jesus can meet? Have you ever walked away from one of those temporary pleasures saying, "I am fulfilled"? Only in HIM do we have fullness of joy! Richard Baxter asks:

What are these things you set so much by as to prefer them before Christ and the saving of your soul? Have you found a better friend, a greater and a surer happiness than this?<sup>2</sup>

Brothers and sisters, the King of heaven stepped down from his throne and entered into this broken world so that you – a REBEL – could have this prize! He took all of the sin that should disqualify you from the race and he brought it to Calvary where it was nailed to a cross! He bore the wrath of God against your sin. He endured the shame. He paid the debt. He declared “It is FINISHED” and, brothers and sisters, it IS finished! The promises of God are yes and amen in Jesus! The gates of heaven are open wide! All that you need to do is to let go of that sin and lay hold of Jesus in faith! If you want to learn to play the long game in a short-sighted world, then you need to fix your eyes on the prize! And having seen the prize, you need to:

## 2. Resolve to pay the price

That’s the second lesson Paul teaches us here and we see it in verses 25-27:

Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. <sup>26</sup> So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. <sup>27</sup> But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:25-27 ESV)

There has been a surge of sports documentaries coming out on Netflix these days, and I will confess that I eat those up. I find it *fascinating* to hear about Michael Jordan’s insatiable desire for success. I *can’t get enough* of the stories about Kobe Bryant’s 4 AM gym sessions! I sit there and I marvel at the price that those athletes pay – the lifelong investment that they make – to be the best. The same was true of the athletes in Paul’s day.

Paul knows that we recognize their hard work. He knows we admire it. So, he says: “Look at those guys! They don’t eat junk. They don’t spend time with the prostitutes. They exercise self-control. For a SALAD HAT! And so, because my reward is SO MUCH GREATER, I train. I exercise self-control. I have set my sights for the finish line, and I am not running aimlessly. I’m not swinging wildly like a careless boxer. I am laser focused!”

---

<sup>2</sup> Richard Baxter as quoted in Warren Wiersbe, *Treasury of the World's Great Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1979), 23.

That's what Paul is saying here, and let's be honest: If this wasn't in the New Testament, then you might be tempted to write it off as legalism. "This whole paragraph sounds like *work*, but I thought that Jesus already did the work for us! Run? Fight? Discipline my body? Has Paul even *heard* the gospel?!"

He has, as a matter of fact. But the gospel that saved Paul and the gospel that *captivated* Paul is deeper and richer than what we often present as "gospel." Paul understood that Jesus didn't only die for our forgiveness – Jesus died for our *holiness*. Did you know that?

Jesus died so that you could become who you were made to be! Jesus died so that you could receive the Holy Spirit who gives us *actual power* to obey! Jesus died so that you could be released from the slavery of sin! In Romans 6, Paul writes:

So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. <sup>12</sup> Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. (Romans 6:11-12 ESV)

Through Jesus' death, the penalty of sin is cancelled, and the power of sin is broken! I know that we believe the first half of that sentence, but it's time for us to reclaim the second half. Through Jesus' death, the penalty of sin is cancelled – AMEN! but there's more! – *AND the power of sin is broken!* Our grandparents knew this. They sang it all the time:

He breaks the power of cancelled sin, He sets the prisoner free!<sup>3</sup>

Do we still believe that? Do we believe that the gospel not only offers *forgiveness* to the addict, but also *power* for a new life?! Do we believe that the gospel delivers the power to forgive my spouse and heal my marriage? Do we believe that the gospel delivers the power to overcome my anger, and my selfishness, and my lust, and my pride, and every other sin that the old me made peace with? Do we believe that – because of Jesus – we really CAN change?

---

<sup>3</sup> Charles Wesley, *O For A Thousand Tongues To Sing*, 1739.

If the gospel that we preach doesn't include this – if there is no room for a call to self-control in our gospel – then we have missed it! We are saved by grace alone – but the grace that saves is *never alone*. Real, saving faith is accompanied by a real transformed life!

Are you saved? Have you received the grace of the gospel? Are you indwelt by the Spirit of God? Then I want to challenge you this morning: Run this race and give it everything you've got for the glory of God!

Don't run aimlessly. Make a plan.

Is your goal to finally start reading your Bible regularly? Well, when is that going to happen? Do you need a reading plan? Do you need a partner to hold you accountable? Start putting those things in place.

Is your goal to become more disciplined in your prayer life? Well, when is that going to happen? Are you going to wake up earlier? Would it be helpful to join a prayer group? Are you going to use a prayer journal? Start putting those things in place.

Don't box as one beating the air. Identify a target. Which sin is holding you back right now? Attack it!

Is it lust? Well, how are you going to get at that? Who can you confess that to for accountability? Do you need to get a different phone? Do you need to give up certain shows? Don't swing at the air. Swing at your target.

Is it apathy? Have you given up in your spiritual life? How are you going to get at that? Who can be praying for you? Is there a verse you could meditate on? Is there some other sin in your life that is keeping you from the joy of the Lord? Don't swing at the air. Swing at your target.

Remember, the Christian life is a marathon, not a sprint. If you could simply grow in one small area this year, think about the difference that would make in your life! If all you did this year was develop a healthy habit of prayer, wouldn't that be an absolute game changer? If all you did this year was make progress in your battle with lust, wouldn't that be an enormous win?

By the grace of God and empowered by His Spirit, you CAN do this! Play the long game. Resolve to pay the price. And then, lastly, if you want to learn to play the long game in a short-sighted world, then you need to:

### 3. Remember what's at stake

Paul lands on a sobering note. Look again at verse 27:

I discipline my body and keep it under control, **lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.** (1 Corinthians 9:27 ESV)

This is a remarkable verse. The APOSTLE PAUL is saying that he is careful and disciplined in his spiritual life because *he doesn't want to be disqualified!* If anyone could afford to rest on his previous accomplishments, it was Paul. He could have easily said, "You know what? I'm good! There is a place prepared for me in heaven, and I've done plenty of work here, so I'm going to retire and soak up some rays in my finally years."

But Paul didn't say that. He said, "I'm not going to let my guard down, because I don't want to risk falling off the path and losing out on the prize altogether." Similarly, one of the great puritan preachers, George Swinnock, once said:

It is terrible to fall into hell from the pew. But how dreadful it is to fall into hell from the pulpit! Does not my heart tremble to think that it is possible for me<sup>4</sup>

I would imagine that this point rubs some of us the wrong way. Perhaps you're asking in your head: "Is he saying that we could lose our salvation?" To be clear, I'm not saying that, and neither is Paul. But Paul IS saying that not everyone who calls himself a follower of Jesus truly is. Not everyone who starts the race, finishes the race.

If you're not so sure that Paul would say something like that, I want you to look ahead to the very next paragraph in your Bible. In verses 1-5 of chapter 10 Paul immediately goes on to say:

---

<sup>4</sup> George Swinnock as cited by Yuille, J. Stephen. A Labor of Love: Puritan Pastoral Priorities (p. 15). Reformation Heritage Books. Kindle Edition.



For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, <sup>2</sup> and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, <sup>3</sup> and all ate the same spiritual food, <sup>4</sup> and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. <sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. (1 Corinthians 10:1-5 ESV)

The point that Paul is making here is a sobering – even frightening – point. He is directing us back to the Exodus and reminding us that, while they *all* passed through the Red Sea, and they *all* ate the manna and drank from the rock, *most of them* disqualified themselves from entering into the promised land!

The language that Paul uses here of “baptized into Moses” and “ate the spiritual food” is intentionally designed to mirror our Christian baptism and our Lord’s Supper. It’s as if Paul is saying to us: “Oh, so you were baptized? You partake of the Lord’s Supper? And you believe that this means you can let down your hair and live a little? Listen: Our fathers passed through the water and ate the spiritual food too. And yet, most of them failed to receive the prize.”

They turned to the temporary pleasures of the world. They longed for the “old comforts” of their slavery in Egypt. Not everyone who starts well, ends well. Which is why Paul wrote:

**I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.** (1 Corinthians 9:27 ESV)

One of my favorite teachers in my whole academic career was Dr. Thompson. What I loved about him was that he was more committed to my long-term success than he was to my short-term comfort. So, he would tell me things that made me sad or discouraged in the short-term, so that I would be thankful and successful in the long-term. Good teachers do that.

Paul was a good teacher. He loved the Corinthians, so he risked making them uncomfortable in the short-term. They were playing with sin. They were stunted in their growth. They were settling for instant gratification. And, if they persisted, they were on pace to miss out on the prize of everlasting life.

So, in love, he rattled their cage and reminded them that a lifetime of self-discipline and effort is a tiny price to pay for an ETERNITY of glory!

Maybe there's someone here today who needs that reminder. I'm going to risk offending you because I don't want you to miss out on the prize.

If Jesus has become small in your life – if Christianity has become nothing more than a hobby to you – if you're more interested in toys, and cottages, and baseball, and comfort then you are in Jesus – then you are moving in the direction of disqualifying yourself from the prize.

If you haven't grown in the last five years of your Christian life – if the sin you indulge today is the same sin you've been indulging for years – if you constantly find yourself settling for short-term pleasure – then you are moving in the direction of disqualifying yourself from the prize.

If there is no appetite in your heart for heaven – no warmth in your heart for Jesus – and no desire in your heart for holiness – then you are moving in the direction of disqualifying yourself from the prize. As the author to the Hebrews wrote:

without holiness no one will see the Lord. (Hebrews 12:14b NIV)

Paul was preaching this message to himself. I am preaching this message to myself. We will all hear the siren song and face the temptation to pursue the path of least resistance. We will all be tempted to turn back to short-term pleasures when we're overwhelmed by long-term problems. Even though we all began well, we have already watched as brothers and sisters that we started the race with have left the faith all together. How did that happen?

They settled. They didn't fix their eyes on the prize. They didn't resolve to pay the price. And they traded the eternal feast of heaven for a temporary mouldy bread crumb from the world.

Don't let that be you. Don't quit the race when you're already halfway to the finish line. Come back! Press in! I want to remind you that there is grace for the back slider and hope for the

addicted. But you can't keep going on like you have been. You need Jesus. You need to repent. You need to let some things go. You need to take up your cross. You need to ask Him for help.

Can I encourage you this morning? He will answer that prayer! He delights to answer that prayer!

We're living in a short-sighted world, but brothers and sisters, we are called to play the long game. So, by the grace of God, let's press in! Let's give this all that we've got! Let's run this race like there is GLORY at that finish line. Because there is.

Let's pray together.