

Ready, Set, Go!

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

INTRODUCTION

- A. It was the summer of 1968, and the world had “Olympic Fever.”
1. World-class athletes from almost every nation had gathered in Mexico City for the Olympic Games. Thousands of eager spectators were on hand, and millions more all around the globe were huddled in front of their television sets to take in the action and to experience the spectacle of the games.
 2. One of the most moving moments in the history of the Olympic Games came on the day of the marathon.
 - a. A large number of well-trained runners from most every continent gathered at the starting line.
 - 1) The gun sounded, and the twenty-six mile race was underway.
 - 2) It went through the streets of Mexico City and concluded in the stadium that was filled to capacity, and millions more watched by television as the race was finished and the awards ceremony began.
 - b. The bronze medal was presented, followed by the silver, and finally the gold medal was draped around the neck of the winner. He stood there proudly, eyes glistening, as the national anthem of his country was played and his nation’s flag was raised.
 - c. When the awards ceremony was over, people turned their attention to other events.
 - 1) Some time later, there was a murmur in the crowd as the people in the stands realized that the marathon was not over.
 - 2) A runner was still on the course. The other marathoners had finished over an hour ago.
 - 3) But here came this young man from the African nation of Tanzania, limping his way agonizingly toward the finish line. He was in great pain. You could see it in his face and in the awkward way he was forcing himself to keep running.
 - d. He had been injured in a fall early in the race. Now his knees were bleeding, his leg muscles were cramping, and dehydration was setting in; yet he kept on running. He would not quit. Finally, painfully, he crossed the finish line and fell to the ground.
 - e. A television reporter asked him, “You were injured early. You were hurting badly. You knew you could not win the race. Why didn’t you just give up? Why didn’t you stop? Why didn’t you just quit?”
 - f. The runner answered, “My country did not send me five thousand miles to start the marathon. They sent me here to finish the marathon.”
- B. Today’s text is about competing in the marathon of life.
1. Corinth was the site of the great Isthmian Games. The Isthmian Games were held in Corinth every two years and were surpassed in attendance and fervor by only the Olympics themselves.
 - a. The Isthmian Games included horse, chariot, and foot races, wrestling, boxing, musical and poetical trials, and later, the fighting of wild animals.
 - b. The metaphors Paul uses in this text would thus have been well-known to the Corinthians, and it seems likely that Paul himself watched the games. He writes here as one quite familiar with these contests.
 2. I don’t want to beat a dead horse, but I’m convinced that like the text we read last week, this is one which has often been taken out of context.
 - a. We often talk about this passage in the sense of running the race of life. I’ve already mentioned that application this morning, and we’ll make that application some more.
 - b. However, remember that Paul is writing to the strong in Corinth about their misuse of their rights concerning the eating of meat offered to idols.
 - 1) Thus, Paul repeatedly mentions self-control in this passage. Paul’s point is to demonstrate self-control to the strong in hopes that they will practice self-control in regard to their participation in pagan feasts.
 - 2) Paul writes about self-control, for self-control is such an important quality in Christianity.
 - a) Notice what we read as Paul was before Felix: “As [Paul] reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, ‘Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity, I will summon you’” (Acts 24:25).
 - b) “Take every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love” (2 Pt 1:5-7).
 3. This morning, we want to think about self-control in the race of life and what it takes to hear those words: “Ready, Set, Go!” What does it take? A DASH & A DISCIPLINE.

A DASH, vv. 24-25

- A. “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.”
- B. The Corinthians, because they were familiar with the Isthmian Games, understood that only one runner would get the prize.
1. Two teams competed in the BCS Championship Bowl last Monday, but only the LSU Tigers came out on top.
 2. The athlete from Tanzania understood when he entered the Olympic Stadium that he wasn't going to win—he knew that only one gold medals awarded in the marathon.
- C. But, Paul's emphasis here isn't on the fact that only one would get the prize, but he informs us of his emphasis in the rest of this verse: “So run that you may obtain it.” In other words, run your heart out—run that dash—in order that you get the prize and not some other runner.
- D. How can we run in order to obtain the prize—“Every athlete exercises self-control in all things.”
1. My brother Kyle recently competed in a half-marathon at Disneyworld. He has probably trained for more than two years to get ready to do this. When we were home at Christmas, he went and ran for two hours at a time. Kyle did quite well—he not only finished the race, but he came in at about the middle of the 16,000 member pack.
 2. The training for games in the ancient world was quite intense.
 - a. The runners were required to undergo fen months of training, and to exercise in the gymnasium in front of judges who spent ten months learning all the requirements of judging the races.
 - b. We know from ancient writers that their training was largely dietary:
 - 1) Epictetus says; “Thou must be orderly, living on spare food; abstain from confections; make a point of exercising at the appointed time, in heat and in cold; no drink cold water nor wine at hazard.”
 - 2) Horace says: “The youth who would win in the race hath borne and done much, he hath sweat and been cold; he hath abstained from love and wine.”
 3. What does all that training have to do with the entire text of 1 Corinthians?
 - a. The athletes in the ancient world gave up much in order to win the race. The strong in Corinth needed to think seriously about giving up their right to eat in pagan temples to run in the race. Recall that it is sinful to place a stumbling block in front of someone: “Sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ” (1 Cor 8:12).
 - b. Notice also that in the ancient world most of the discipline for running a race concerned dietary habits, a point likely not lost on the Corinthians who were making such a big deal out of preserving their dietary habits even to the detriment of their brethren.
 4. What's here for us in this society?
 - a. We need to learn discipline.
 - 1) “If you have found honey, eat only enough for you, lest you have your fill of it and vomit it” (Prov 25:16).
 - 2) “Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness” (Tit 2:2).
 - 3) Where do we need to discipline ourselves?
 - a) Do we need to discipline ourselves in our spending? Are we spending so much money through the week that we can only find a dollar or two to drop in the collection plate on Sunday morning rather than determining what we need to give to the Lord and then spending out of what we have left?
 - b) Do we need to discipline ourselves to spend time in prayer where we can praise God for all his goodness?
 - b. We also need to discipline ourselves with others in mind.
 - 1) The context of this passage is not so much disciplining ourselves in regard to our general lifestyle. Paul is writing to the strong in Corinth and basically saying, “Discipline yourselves in regard to eating meat offered to idols so the weak aren't led astray.”
 - 2) Is there some part of our lives we need to discipline ourselves to keep others from stumbling?
 - a) Do we need to watch our tongue at work so that our co-workers won't think we're hypocrites for claiming to be Christian and misusing our tongues?
 - b) Do we need to discipline what we watch on television so our children don't get the wrong ideas of morality?
- E. Ancient athletes competed for a perishable wreath, but we compete for an imperishable wreath.
1. In the Isthmian Games at Corinth, pine garland was awarded to the victor. In fact, this perishable wreath was already withered when it was placed on the head of the victor.
 2. Our crown, however, is imperishable.
 - a. Speaking to his fellow elders, Peter writes, “When the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the

- unfading crown of glory” (1 Pt 5:4).
- b. Jesus says to the church in Smyrna; “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rv 2:10).
- c. How much more discipline is required to gain an imperishable wreath! Are you running that clash, exercising self-control to win the race?

A DISCIPLINE, vv. 26-27

- A. “So I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”
- B. Paul declares that he doesn’t just run to be winning. He isn’t Forrest Gump in other words, who is just running, but he has a purpose in running.
- C. Paul does not box as one beating the air.
 - 1. As we’ve previously mentioned, the Isthmian Games included boxing.
 - 2. Boxing today is quite gentle compared to boxing in the ancient world.
 - a. Boxers wore leather gloves, which covered most of the forearm, except the fingers. These gloves were covered with knots and nails and filled with lead and iron.
 - b. It was not at all uncommon for boxers to end up dead or permanently maimed from such fights.
 - 3. One needed to be prepared for such a fight, and fighting the air did not provide adequate preparation.
 - a. One needed to fight other athletes in training to prepare for training.
 - b. You wouldn’t expect Tom Brady to prepare for a football game by simply throwing his arm in the air without a ball or teammates. I’m positive Curt Schilling didn’t get ready to pitch in the World Series by just throwing his arms.
 - c. Paul says, “I’m not like a boxer who simply swings his arms in the air. I prepare myself to fight.”
- D. As Paul prepares for a fight, he writes: “I discipline my body and keep it under control.”
 - 1. It is unfortunate that neither the ESV nor KJV comes close to getting this translation accurate.
 - a. The ESV reads: “I discipline my body” and the KJV reads: “I keep under my body.”
 - b. The Greek term literally means “to strike under the eye” or “to give a black eye.” The NIV does a good job and reads: “I beat my body.”
 - 2. Not only does Paul beat his body, but he keeps it under control—the word actually means to make a slave.
 - a. How many people have become slaves to their bodies rather than making their body their slave?
 - b. How many people do you suppose just can’t wait until they can become drunk again? How many people do you suppose just have to make meth because their bodies have become so addicted that they couldn’t just stop, even if they wanted to?
- E. Paul made his body his slave in order that: “lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” Paul wanted to make sure that he himself did not end up lost after he had preached to others.
- F. What application should we make from this text?
 - 1. Before we get to the application, I must confess that I find it quite interesting that Paul uses a physical illustration.
 - a. The problem Paul is writing about concerns the body—the strong in Corinth were satisfying physical desires (viz., the desire for fine food) at the expense of the weak.
 - b. Paul uses an illustration about disciplining the body to make his point.
 - 1) This could be pure coincidence—it could be that because of the Isthmian Games in Corinth, the Holy Spirit guided Paul to write about athletic competition and the necessity of physical discipline in those competitions.
 - 2) Yet, I doubt seriously that this is coincidence, for the Holy Spirit through Paul is communicating to the Corinthians and to us about the proper use of our bodies.
 - 2. The first application we need to make is that we need in a very general sense to discipline our bodies.
 - a. We have mentioned self-control already in this sermon, and self-control is important in all areas of our lives, but our physical selves need to be reigned in quite tightly.
 - b. Why do we need to discipline our bodies so carefully? When Jesus found the disciples sleeping when he asked them to pray with him, he said, “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mt 26:41).
 - c. The Scriptures encourage us to keep our flesh under control:
 - 1) “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell” (Mt 5:29).
 - 2) “Let sin therefore not reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions” (Rm 6:12).
 - 3) “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart; this person’s religion is worthless” (Js 1:26).
 - d. How much is our flesh under control? Is there some part of our body, we need to bring under better control—our sexual appetites, our tongue, our hands, our feet?
 - 3. The second application we need to make from this text is giving up our fleshly desires to serve others.

- a. That's the context of this passage—Paul is appealing to the strong in Corinth to give up their fleshly desires in service to the weak.
 - 1) When the rich young ruler came to Jesus, the Lord told him; “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Mt 19:21).
 - a) Those are challenging words! These words are so challenging, in fact, that the rich man went away sorrowful.
 - b) They are challenging, for Jesus was calling upon the young man to give up those physical possessions with which he fulfilled his fleshly desires in service to others.
 - 2) In Rom 14:21, another passage dealing with the eating of food sacrificed to idols, Paul writes: “It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.”
 - b. Am i going to give up my fleshly desires in service to others:
 - 1) When I get home from work, am I going to plop in front of the television and satisfy my eyes, my ears, and rest my weary flesh, or am I going to find an opportunity to willingly serve?
 - 2) Am I going to be willing to use my hands to fix a meal for someone who just had surgery? Am I going to be willing to use my hands to fix someone's plumbing, someone who can't afford to pay a professional plumber?
 - 3) Am I going to be willing to put myself out—even to make myself physically uncomfortable—to serve someone else?
4. The third application we need to make is that a refusal to serve will cause us to lose our souls:
- a. Notice why Paul disciplines his body and brings it under control: “Lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”
 - 1) It seems to me that we absolutely must read this disqualification as being lost.
 - 2) Paul's analogy is athletic competition—if someone is disqualified in an athletic competition, he or she isn't going to win the prize, Likewise, if he's disqualified from this race, he isn't going to inherit the prize, eternal salvation.
 - b. These are surprising words, aren't they?
 - 1) They surprise us, for Paul was one of the foremost leaders of the early church, he had the miraculous outpouring of the Spirit, and he himself could lose salvation.
 - 2) If Paul needed to be careful that he didn't lose his salvation, how careful do you suppose we need to be that we don't lose our salvation?
 - c. We know, of course, that we can lose salvation:
 - 1) “You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace” (Gal 5:4).
 - 2) Notice carefully the text we'll study next Lord's Day: “I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness” (1 Cor 10:1-5).
 - a) That text is about falling away! Notice what the text says: the Israelites were faithful, they even drank from Christ, yet they fell away.
 - b) We need to be careful that we don't drink from Christ, the spiritual Rock and then fall away. Have you fallen away and need to come home this morning?