

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Sermon Title: "Running the Race and Winning the Prize"

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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{SLIDE 1} It is Super Bowl Sunday. The athletes have worked hard to get to where they wanted to be. One may say it took a lot of blood, sweat, and tears to get the football players to Houston today. Two teams rose to the top and are now very close to reaching the prize.

{SLIDE 2} In light of the Super Bowl, it would be appropriate to look at what Paul says about competition. The NFL didn't exist during the time of Paul, but running did. The first Olympic games began in Greece in 776 BC as a religious ceremony honoring the god Zeus. The Greeks that visited Jerusalem and all of Judea must have told stories about the competitions, and so many Jews in the area would have an idea of what running was all about. In fact, the first Olympian in 776 BC was a cook who won a race that covered 600 feet.¹

Anyhow, Paul directs the attention of the Corinthian Christians to running, and says that many

¹<https://www.penn.museum/sites/olympics/olympicorigins.shtml>.

people run in a race but only one gains the prize.² All of the people running in the race wish to win the prize, but only one of them is going to get it. The fastest and strongest will make it to the finish line before everyone else. The same can be said about the Super Bowl: some people really wanted the Green Bay Packers to make it, but they did not. I really would have loved to see Pittsburgh in its ninth Super Bowl, but the Steelers did not score more points than the opposition. No amount of wishing or pleading is going to get everyone the prize. It takes a lot of work; it takes a lot of training.

Paul is addressing a situation that some of the Corinthian Christians found themselves in: they wanted to take the easy way out.³ Apparently, they thought that being a Christian should be easy-peasy, lemon-squeezy, without much work, without much discipline and training. Just say you're a Christian and that's about it. Heaven should automatically be their reward. Wherever they got this idea, it was all wrong. Paul tells them how wrong it is. He talks to them about racing. He says that not everyone wins the prize at the end of the race. If you want to win the prize, you have to train. You have to get your body and mind in such a way as to run the race, and then

² Cf. 1 Corinthians 9:24.

³ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Corinthians*, cf. 94.

you have to take extra steps to get yourself in the position to win the race.

Paul says that he doesn't run as though he is throwing himself all over the place. Paul takes a slight detour and says that if he were a boxer, he wouldn't step in the ring cold and start boxing, as though he would win the championship belt. He doesn't just go out there and run (or box), but he trains his body for it. He executes a plan and allows the plan to guide him. Paul even says that he beats his body. On translation says, "I strike a blow to my body." I make my body a slave to my will, keeping myself in shape for the race, keeping a strict discipline in order to win the race.

All athletes know this. You don't jump on the court and think you are Michael Jordan or LeBron James. You don't step on the field and think you are Matt Ryan or Ben Roethlisberger.⁴ You don't step into a church or read a Bible and automatically think you are a Christian. It takes a lot of work; it takes a lot of training. Paul attests to this in front of the Corinthian Christians.

{SLIDE 3} Let's look at it another way. Paul himself didn't just step into the role of being the great disciple who traveled to several Gentile countries and cities.

⁴ I am not mentioning the quarterback for New England.

Once he acknowledged Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, he didn't go right out and talk about Jesus. Paul took about three years of preparation before entering the mission field. He talks about this in Galatians 1.⁵ We don't know what Paul did during those three years, or where he was for his preparation. Paul never says. One thing he needed to do was convince people that he wasn't the bad guy anymore, that fiery Pharisee who wanted to capture all the Christians and string them up together. Paul had to take time to win confidence with others. He followed a regiment, beat his body, condition his mind, and other Christians were glad to have him onboard. Another thing he had to do is learn what following Christ. Paul knew about Judaism, but he knew nothing about Jesus' teachings of love and ministry. Paul heard the stories. He listened to the parables. He grabbed onto the lessons. Belief in Christ was more than just evoking his name; it was taking on Jesus' life and laying down his life for the good of others. Paul followed a regiment, beat his body, conditioned his mind, and other Christians were glad to have him onboard.

{SLIDE 4} The disciples of Christ had to train in the ways of Christ, too. Once they were called, they had to turn from naive, young believers, to more

⁵ Cf. Galatians 1:11-24 (especially verses 18).

experienced and more mature believers. They watched Jesus work, they debated over the parables, they allowed the power of the miracles to enter their spirits. They trained for about three years, watching and doing and growing in faith in Christ. Belief in Christ was more than just evoking his name; it was taking on Jesus' life and laying down their lives for the good of others. They followed a regiment, beat their bodies, conditioned their minds.

{SLIDE 5} The same goes for us: we need to exercise in all spiritual matters, if we are going to grow in faith. If we maintain a relationship with Jesus Christ, then we have to work at that relationship with the help of the Holy Spirit, as though we are preparing for a race. We cannot assume we are Christians without spiritual discipline, a spiritual regiment that builds up our spiritual muscles, so to speak. Belief in Christ is more than just evoking his name; it is taking on Jesus' life and laying down our lives for the good of others. We cannot win the prize of salvation without working together with Christ to gain the prize.

{SLIDE 6} Paul uses the example of running a race. I once had a youth director give the example of weightlifting. What is the purpose of weightlifting? It is used to build large muscles, but the main purpose

is to maintain strength. Younger people are more interested in becoming Superman or Wonder Woman with their weightlifting, but as we get older the lifting of weights helps us to maintain our muscle density. If we do not use our muscles, we will lose them, so lifting a barbell or two help to keep muscles viable, workable.

{SLIDE 7} The same goes with our faith in Christ: we have to do some spiritual weightlifting. Our exercise doesn't include 20-lbs or 100-lbs metal weights, but it includes reading our Bibles. Daily we sit down with Scripture and we read it. If we do not know where to start, turn to the Gospel of Matthew first, and work through all the Gospels. Turn to the Psalms and Proverbs for spiritual inspiration. Read Genesis if you like, just to get an idea of how God first built that strong relationship with his creation. Just as we need to lift weights regularly to remain strong, we must read our Bibles, so that we may run the race of life and not grow weak.

{SLIDE 8} We add to our Bible reading prayer, another spiritual discipline crucial to our growth. Prayer is our direct link to God. It is the avenue that God created for us to be in communication with God. We pray for God to open Scripture to us, and for the Holy Spirit to give us understanding as we read. We pray for God to answer our prayers, when we are in

need of help. We pray for God to give us ears to hear his voice, since God is always talking with us about our next moves. Prayer and reading Scripture help to train us in all spiritual matters, so we may run the race of life and not grow weak.

{SLIDE 9} And to our praying and reading, we add worship. We were built for worship. Worship isn't something we go to – it is something we do to honor and praise God. We may formally worship God during a service, like the one we have today. We may worship God privately with reading and praying, singing and meditating. We worship God while we sit quietly in the corner of a room, and we worship God while we serve others with our talents. Worship is a discipline that strengthens our faith in Christ. We may run the race of life and not grow weak.

Again, as Paul said to the Corinthian Christians, we cannot think faith in Christ is an easy road. We cannot assume we may say the name of Jesus and that's all it takes. It takes a lot of work; it takes a lot of training.

Sticking to a regiment that God has given us (of course, we prayed about the spiritual regiment we should follow, in order to build our spiritual muscles). Taking seriously our training every day, never letting a day go by without exercising and growing closer to

God. Realizing that it is far more important to build our entire lives than it is just to build muscles. Muscles look good. Muscles help us lift heavy things and carry us far distances. But even muscles will give way at some point. Eventually we will not have our muscles to carry us and make us look good. We do not strive after what Paul calls “perishable wreathes,” perishable prizes.⁶ We strive after unperishable wreathes. Our faith in Christ always endures. Our faith in Christ may be worked out, so to speak, at any age, at any time, in any place. Such working out with the help of the Holy Spirit gets us to our final, unperishable goal. Such spiritual discipline will eventually carry us to the end of life, where the crown of glory awaits us. We finish our races, we collect our prizes, and we live eternally with the God who helped us to build our faith every day.

{SLIDE 10} For, unlike a race in the Olympics, everyone who competes in the race Paul speaks of may cross the finish line and win. Every person who trains spiritually, following the guidance of the Holy Spirit, will get the prize.

In any other race only one person is given the medal. This evening we will discover that only one

⁶ Cf. 1 Corinthians 9:25.

football team can with the Vince Lombardi Trophy. But Paul speaks of another race, and he doesn't want any of the Corinthian Christians to be disqualified from it. God would not want any of us to fail to get our spiritual and incorruptible crowns.⁷ God calls us to train for the prize of salvation. Jesus showed us how to live the life that will win us a place in heaven. The Holy Spirit places the spiritual disciplines before us and encourages us to exercise them as though our lives depend on it.

This race we run is not a competition against other people. It is a competition but against sin and death. It is a competition against ignorance of God and even rejection of God. Who would want to ignore God? Who wants to reject God and God's righteousness? So we train. With the help of our God we exercise every day. We strive toward the goal, our faith growing, our understanding becoming clearer. And then we see the prize. And then one day we reach the prize, and the race is over. The competition is complete. We all stand at the finish line with others and with our God. Together, we celebrate the win.

⁷ Craig Blomberg, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, cf. 185.

Assurance of Pardon

Hear this good news from Psalm 16, “The Lord is our refuge, and so we have no good apart from him. The Lord gives us counsel, instructing our hearts even in the night. The Lord will not give us up to the Grave, but will always show us the path of life. In his presence there is fullness of joy, and at his right hand are pleasures forevermore.” Rejoice and believe the good news. You and I are forgiven through Christ our Savior, amen.