

Title: For Christ's sake, Run!

Text: 1 Corinthians 9.24-27

Theme: Effective witnessing demands intentional living

Series: 1 Corinthians #37

Prop Stmt. If you are going to be willing to give up your rights for the sake of personal ministry, you have to practice it.

The Winter Olympics are always fun to watch. I don't really care about the figure skating part, but I love watching the downhill skiing, the speed skating, the snowboarding, and I really love watching the ski jumping. However, if I could ever be part of any of the events, it would definitely be the skeleton, luge, bobsled or that new snowboarding cross that looks like Nascar on a snow. It is interesting that we are dealing with this passage while the Olympic games are being held, since athletic festivals of this nature were very popular in Corinth. By the way, one of our college students, Jessica Hicks, just returned from a study tour of Greece, and one of the sites her group visited was the ancient site of Corinth. Some of the pictures that she took will be used as some backgrounds on the screens this morning.

Corinth was the ancient site of the Isthmian games, which were second only to the Olympics which were held in Athens. The games in Corinth were held every second year and were a very important and prominent part of life in Corinth. Downhill skier Bode Miller talked a little about the life of an athlete this week when he said that he was much happier as a nobody. It is true that the higher you go, the less of your life you have. Prominence carries a big price. You can be on the top of the world, or your failures can be shown over and over and over.

One thing is rather obvious when watching these events. The participants look like they could use some rest, and the audience looks like they could use some exercise. You need to understand this. You are the participant. You are the runner. I am the runner. Paul is the runner. We do not come to church to sit in the stands and watch others run and then judge them on how well they did that day. Church is the carb-loading, pasta dinner the night before the race. Church is not a spectator sport. You are the runner.

This text, like the one we looked at last week has been subject to all sorts of abuses. It is easy to divorce this passage from the rest of the chapter because the imagery is so powerful. Keep in mind that Paul is using an athletic event to make a point about his own life, which is an illustration of the big idea. Now, like the Corinthian audience, we are very familiar with athletic events like running, and boxing and the preparation and training that are required to be a champion. In fact, we are so familiar with all of this, and naturally, we bring all of this with us into our view of this passage so when we read this passage it is easy to allow the illustration to become the point, instead of illustrating the point. When that happens, you can read into the illustration all sorts of things and miss the main point. This series has been so good for me, because I have not understood it at this level up until now. And again, I think that this text may have a surprise or two in store for you. Before we dig in, let me ask you a few questions about it:

- 1) What is the race that is in view?
 - a. The Christian life?
 - b. “Vocational” Christian ministry (e.g. Pastor, Seminary Prof.)
 - c. Life in general (work, marriage, etc.)
 - d. Being an effective witness to the gospel

- 2) What is the prize?
 - a. Eternal life
 - b. Crown of glory
 - c. Having a personal and fruitful ministry to others (sharing in its blessing)

- 3) What is the disqualification?
 - a. Losing your salvation
 - b. Loss of position as an apostle
 - c. Loss of effectiveness in ministry to others

- 4) What is the “beat my body black and blue” about?
 - a. Paul needs a therapist
 - b. The means to salvation
 - c. Asceticism is the means to higher spirituality
 - d. Giving up my rights for the sake of effective ministry

This section of 1 Corinthians is about relationships within the body of Christ. One of the major tests of a relationship is: what do you do when you find that you are on different sides of a debatable issue? There are always two parts to a conflict. First, there is the actual problem itself. Just defining what exactly the problem is, can be a challenging task as we have seen in chapter 8. But, the second part of the conflict, in addition to the problem, is the process. What is the process that you are supposed to take in resolving the problem? Now, here is what is so critical for you to understand. Foundational to resolving problems is attitude! Sure, there is a process to follow, but if your attitude isn't right, then following the steps will never get to the heart of the matter. The attitude that you and I must learn to adopt is this: The relationship with another believer is more important than the exercise of my rights.

But they started it!
I know more than they do.
I have been here longer than they have.

Why are relationships so important? God uses relationships to communicate the gospel and God uses relationships in the body of Christ as one of the major tools to make you like Christ. You need relationships. You don't have it all together yet. You need to learn from others, and others need to learn from you. But, relationships are not easy. When a conflict comes up, it is easy to ignore it, run from it or attack it. We are called to resolve it. We are called to set aside our comforts, our rights for the sake of the relationship. If I care more about my rights than I do the relationship, I miss the

opportunity to influence a person with the gospel and/or I miss the opportunity to grow and help another believer grow.

Now, when conflict takes place, someone has to take the first step. Paul is showing us from his own life how as a leader, he leads in humbling himself. Instead of exercising the rights he has, he has cultivated a life that defers to others. He practices self-denial. He practices giving up his rights and setting aside his own wants for the sake of either having, or maintaining or developing a relationship.

Now, hold the phone for just a minute. This is very important to see. The reason for the relationship is not simply to have a relationship. The reason the relationship is so important is because of the truth of the gospel that is communicated in the relationship, and the truth of the gospel that is illustrated in the gospel. We do not compromise truth for the sake of relationship. We do not condone sinful actions in others for the sake of appeasement. No. Right is right, and wrong is wrong. But, when, for example, we disagree on a cultural matter, or even a personality matter, we set aside our comfort zone because that relationship is more important. In fact, it is so important that like an athlete getting ready for the race of her life or the event of his life, you do everything that you can to live a life that passionately and purposefully pursues this goal of effective relationships. So, when this text is talking about running, or boxing, it is using athletic metaphors to indicate the intensity and focus that we have to have in order to carry out this task.

So, for Christ's sake, and for the gospel's sake...

1. **Run with Passion!** (24)

*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives a prize?
Run in such a way as to get the prize.*

Put your kid on a soccer team and everyone gets a uniform, everyone gets a treat after each game, everyone gets a trophy at the end of the season, because, everyone is a winner. If you are on the team, you are a winner. Frankly, that sort of stuff, drives me loony. You are not a winner just because you show up on the field. You are a winner when you win!

Now, the point that Paul is making is not, that there is only one winner in the Christian race. No, he is saying, just as the winner in the race has to run with more intensity and focus than all of the others, you have to live with that same passion and intensity. This is the passion that says, there are no off days in my Christian life. There is no down time. I never want anything to take place in my life that would ever hinder my relationship to another person.

When an athlete is competing, he cannot afford to get distracted. Neither can you. If you get distracted, then you are liable to do something that will hurt another person. This past year, we have had several families who have moved to other cities and states for

employment reasons. One family has a boy who a couple of weeks ago, was having a tough day, and he told his dad, “I really miss Pastor Bob.” His dad, put the family in the car and they came back for a weekend in order to be in church. Now, what if I became really lazy in my spiritual walk, and I started doing some things that were really borderline. And one day, this boy sees it or someone says to him, hey, do you know what Pastor Bob did? That could crush him. Shouldn’t he learn to stand on his own? Sure. Shouldn’t he learn not to base his life on expecting perfection from others? Sure. But the truth is, we are people and we are not machines. We affect each other. So, as you run your race this week, do not get distracted by those things that would get you off course and be an occasion for others to stumble.

2. **Run with Purpose!** (25-27)

A. **The Preparation** (strict training) (25a)

Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training.

If you are going to have effective relationships in the lives of others, you have to prepare yourself for it. How do you do it? Well, what does an athlete do? He goes into strict training. He denies himself what others participate in so that he has the freedom to do what they cannot. That is the value of preparation.

If you want to play the piano with proficiency, you have to turn off your I-pod and sit your backside on the piano bench and practice. If you want to get the academic scholarship, and get accepted into a reputable school, you have to do well on your S.A.T. and mommy can’t take that for you. That means that you have to turn off the TV and turn off the video games and get off the phone and study. If you want to compete at the Olympic level, you get up when others are sleeping in and you go to bed when others are staying up. You deny yourself certain foods and certain activities because otherwise you would not qualify. It is not a matter of rights, it is a matter of what your goal is.

B. **The Prize** (an eternal crown) (25b)

They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.

They do it – they train, they compete, they endure – for what? The women’s figure skating competition lost a little bit of its luster when Michelle Kwan had to withdraw because of a nagging groin and hip injury. That is minor compared to what so many ice skaters are facing. The toll of their training is seen in hip replacement surgeries, spinal problems and severe foot and ankle problems that in many cases will affect them the rest of their lives. For what? For a chance at a fleeting moment of fame.

At least Olympic medals now are made out of material that is a bit more durable (gold, silver and bronze). In the ancient days, the winner received a laurel wreath – whoopedo! In the Isthmian games, the winners would receive crowns woven from

celery stalks. But time always marches on. Today's heroes are tomorrow's has beens. The super bowl rings will sit on a shelf someday. How many of you have walked by trophy cases at school that were full of dusty pieces of wood, plastic and plaques that meant nothing to the current student body?

By contrast, the races that we are running may not have the fame, but our reward is forever. Our reward is the eternal satisfaction of affecting the lives of others for the glory of Jesus Christ. It is conferred when the Savior shows you the lives who are in heaven because of the testimony of your life. The prize will be worth it.

C. **The Personal example** (26-27)

Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

Tomorrow, after Rebecca returns from the high school winter advance, Cathi and I and the girls will drive to Florida, where we will vacation for a week and then return. It's a nice break, and something we do almost every winter. But, for me, it is also the time when I start up my running again. I have a personal goal of running some day in the Boston marathon. In order to do that, I have to qualify, which I have failed to do, so far. So, this year, marks another running season for me. I will train for the Air Force marathon in September, and will hopefully qualify on that day, for the big one – the Boston.

In order to do that, I have to lace up my shoes, put on my hat and sunscreen and run and run and run and run. I have to stop the M&M's, the ice cream, the French Silk pie, the creamsticks, and start eating rabbit food. It's rather disgusting – actually. There are many times, especially on the early morning runs, when I question my sanity. There are times when I am actually in the race and looking at all of the people sitting in their lawn chairs, sipping their iced tea and saying rather glibly, “you're looking good, only a little more ways to go.” If I die and never get to run Boston, I will not be all that disappointed, because the goal of Boston is not as big as other goals. One of my goals is to live in such a way that I will not disqualify myself from having an effective ministry with you. If I had a spiritual melt down, I would bring reproach upon the reputation of Christ and his gospel, this church and you.

Personal discipline is not that easy for me. I would rather eat donuts than green beans. I would rather watch a football game than read a book. But, there is no shortcut. Running is simply one way of preaching to myself and telling myself that my self-centered desires are not going to rule and they are not going to win. Running is one way that I train myself not to quit. It is easy for me to quit when things get tough. That is always a temptation. The goal is not in the running, it is in cultivating a life of discipline that uses that discipline to pursue Christ, and effective ministry with others.

The truth is, you are running with me. You are not an observer, you are a participant. The way I live my life affects you. The way you live your life, affects me. If you are not growing spiritually, it affects all of us. We can all see that if someone in leadership had a spiritual meltdown that it would affect all of us. But, the truth is, we are all part of the stuff. It is called a family. And every family, every congregation has a choice, we can be either a bag of marbles or a bag of grapes. But, in order to do life together that goes deep, we cannot quit on each other, but show our world by our humble perseverance that the gospel really changes lives.