

The Apostle Paul Disqualified?

1 Corinthians 9

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The following is an excerpt from
The MacArthur New Testament Commentary on 1 Corinthians 9.

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified. (9:24–27)

Liberty cannot be limited without self-control. Our sinfulness resents and resists restrictions, sometimes even in the name of spiritual freedom. It is one thing to acknowledge the principle of living by love; it is another to follow it. Paul followed it because he wanted to be a winner.

The Greeks had two great athletic festivals, the Olympic games and the Isthmian games. The Isthmian games were held at Corinth and were therefore intimately familiar to those to whom Paul was writing. Contestants in the games had to prove rigorous training for ten months. The last month was spent at Corinth, with supervised daily workouts in the gymnasium and athletic fields.

The race was always a major attraction at the games, and that is the figure Paul uses to illustrate the faithful Christian life. **Those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize.** No one would train so hard for so long without intending to win. Yet out of the large number of runners, only one wins.

A great difference between those races and the Christian “race” is that every Christian who will pay the price of careful training can win. We do not compete against each other but against the obstacles—practical, physical, and spiritual—that would hinder us. In a sense, every Christian runs his own race, enabling each one of us to be a winner in winning souls to Christ. Paul therefore counsels all believers to **run in such a way that you may win**, by setting aside anything that might hinder the reception of the gospel.

Holding tightly to liberties and rights is a sure way to lose the race of soul-winning. Many of the Corinthian Christians seriously limited their testimony because they would not limit their liberty. They refused to give up their rights, and in so doing they won few and offended many.

If the Olympic and Isthmian athletes exercised such great discipline and **self-control in all things**, why cannot Christians, Paul asks. **They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an**

imperishable.

In the Isthmian games the prize was a pine **wreath**. The contestants competed for more than that, of course. The wreath represented fame, acclaim, and the life of a hero. Winners were immortalized, much as they are today. But that “immortality” was just as mortal as the wreath itself, and lasted little longer. Both were **perishable**.

Christians do not run for a short-lived pine wreath or for short-lived fame. They already have true immortality. They run in order to receive a “crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award ... on that day” (2 Tim. 4:8), “an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven” (1 Pet. 1:4). That prize is **imperishable**.

But the imperishable requires self-control just as the perishable. No Christian will be successful in witnessing, or in anything else worthwhile, without discipline. Every good thing we accomplish—whether in learning, business, artistic skill, marriage, spiritual living, witnessing, or whatever—is accomplished through discipline and self-control.

If an athlete expects to excel, he voluntarily, and often severely, restricts his liberty. His sleep, his diet, and his exercise, are not determined by his rights or by his feelings but by the requirements of his training. Professional athletes today often are highly paid. But the Isthmian games were amateur, as the Olympics are today. Amateur athletes train rigorously for years, often at considerable expense, for the sake of an inexpensive prize and the brief acclaim that goes with it.

The athlete’s disciplined self-control is a rebuke of half-hearted, out-of-shape Christians who do almost nothing to prepare themselves to witness to the lost—and consequently seldom do.

Paul had a purpose in running. He was **not without aim**. His goal, which he states four times in verses 19–22, was to win as many people to Jesus Christ as possible by as many means as possible.

Changing metaphors, he says that he boxed **in such a way, as not beating the air**. He did not shadow box; he was always fighting the real fight, “the good fight” (1 Tim. 1:18). He was not just working up a sweat, but engaging in a real battle.

A considerable part of that fight was against Paul’s own body. **I buffet my body and make it my slave**. **Buffet** (*hupopiazō*) literally means to hit under the eye. He figuratively would give his body a black eye, knock it out if necessary. **Make it my slave** (*doulagogeō*) is from the same root as “made ... a slave” in verse 19. Paul put his body into subjection, into slavery to his mission of winning souls for Christ.

Most people, including many Christians, are instead slaves to their bodies. Their bodies tell their minds what to do. Their bodies decide when to eat, what to eat, how much to eat, when to sleep and get up, and so on. An athlete cannot allow that. He follows the training rules, not his body. He runs when he would rather be resting, he eats a balanced meal when he would rather have a chocolate sundae, he goes to bed when he would rather stay up, and he gets up early to train when he would rather stay in bed. An athlete leads his body; he does not follow it. It is his slave, not the other way around.

Paul trained rigorously **lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.** Here is another metaphor from the Isthmian games. A contestant who failed to meet the training requirements was disqualified. He could not even run, much less win. Paul did not want to spend his life preaching the requirements to others and then be disqualified for not meeting the requirements himself.

Many believers start the Christian life with enthusiasm and devotion. They train carefully for a while but soon tire of the effort and begin to “break training.” Before long they are disqualified from being effective witnesses. They do not have what it takes, because they are unwilling to pay the price. The flesh, the world, everyday affairs, personal interests, and often simple laziness hinder spiritual growth and preparation for service.

Even good things can interfere with the best. Fulfillment of freedoms can interfere with fulfillment of love. Following our own ways can keep others from knowing the Way. Souls are won by those who are prepared to be used when the Spirit chooses to use them.

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