

IN IT TO WIN IT

1 CORINTHIANS 9:24-27

The Apostle Paul was a deeply spiritual person. He saw visions, worked miracles, spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth - even wrote a part of the Bible.

But Paul was also a fan - a real sports' buff!

You'd be surprised how many people in the Bible loved God *and* were into sports. Here's a summary...

Daniel played a while with the Lions... After a stint on the disabled list, Peter resigned with the Saints...

Silas played basketball for several seasons, but he was lousy at it. He was always traveling... A young lady, Delilah, tried to play football, but after she made a pass at Samson, she was penalized for clipping...

The deacons in Jerusalem played tennis - they had outstanding serves... And I'm sure Paul was a UGA fan. To the Philippians he said - *and here's the chapter and verse, Philippians 3:2... "Beware of (them) dogs."*

And we all know God is a big baseball fan...

The first verse in the Bible, Genesis 1:1, reads, "In the big inning God created the heavens and earth..."

Noah led the league in doubles... The prodigal son made a home run!... David pitched and won against the Giants. He struck out Goliath... And Lucifer played several seasons for the Angels before he got cut...

And we all know that Jesus was a weightlifter. I'm living proof. When He saved me, He lifted a dumbbell!

The Bible is full of sport-related analogies. And none is more vivid than the last four verses of Chapter 9.

Realize, the Greeks were into athletics. The capital, Athens, was the ancient home of the Olympic Games.

But another Greek city, Corinth, 35 miles west of Athens, hosted the Isthmian Games, which at the time was more prestigious than even the Olympics.

The Greek peninsula was a hotbed of athletic competition, and during the nearly two years Paul spent in Greece, I'm sure he checked out a few meets.

Imagine, Paul in the Isthmian Stadium. The sun is high in the sky. Colorful banners flap in the breeze...

He's got a tub of popcorn in his lap - a coca-cola in a souvenir cup. And you're next to him as he compares what you're seeing on the track to the Christian life...

These are valuable lessons. You're taking notes...

Here's what Paul says, verse 24, "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.

And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown.

Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself

should become disqualified.” In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul draws four comparisons between the athlete and the Christian...

First, an athlete exhibits incredible **determination...**

Second, victory hinges on thorough **preparation...**

Third, look into the athlete’s eyes as he competes, and you’ll see a definite and intense **concentration...**

Fourth, to win, an athlete avoids **disqualification...**

Determination, preparation, concentration, and no disqualification... After the Corinthians read this passage, I'm sure they were glad Paul took a day off to spend at the stadium. He challenges them and us, *that like an athlete, every Christian should be in it, to win it!*

First, as followers of Jesus, we need to be full of **determination.** Verse 24 tells us, "Do you not know that those who run in a race run all, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it?"

The modern Olympic creed was composed in 1908 by a man named, *Ethelbert Talbot*. His creed stressed participation over victory. He wrote, "The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win, but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph, but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered, but to have fought well."

Well, that might be a nice sentiment, but it wasn't the spirit of the ancient Olympics. In the original Games, the hometown expected its athletes to dominate.

Winning WAS everything! There were no ancient medals for second or third place. Participation trophies were unheard of - you either went home victorious or disgraced. There was no dignity in mere participation.

The ancient Olympics featured a sport known as **pankration**. It was a no-holds-barred form of fighting - *a human cockfight*. It would make today's UFC and Mixed Martial Arts look like a game of two-hand touch.

Pankration was a vicious sport. Choking, and knee thrusts, and strangling, and limb wrenching, and sand-throwing were all allowed. The only forbidden tactics were eye-gouging and biting. The contest was over only when one contestant surrendered and tapped out or fell unconscious. Often contestants died in the ring.

One year, a warrior named Arrichion won the contest, yet he was so severely wounded he died shortly after being crowned champion... Don't tell Arrichion there's honor simply in *"taking part!"* Here was a man who sacrificed his very life trying to win the prize.

And realize, God doesn't give out consolation prizes either. Life isn't Little League where everybody gets a trophy. *We need to go for the gold - be in it to win it!*

Of course, realize how this plays out in the Christian life. It doesn't mean we're all trying to beat each other out for the one gold medal. *We all can win God's gold!*

There's a first prize for every Christian who is faithful to obey God's calling on his or her life... *Believers are in competition* - but not with each other. Our enemies are not

our fellow runners in the race, but the evil inside and out that's trying to *trip us up* and *tire us out*.

Every Christian who finishes his race faithfully receives a medal - *but none of us will receive it if we don't make obtaining it our utmost desire!* Just being forgiven - just making it to heaven - is not enough!

God wants you and me to have an impact on our world. Too many Christians view salvation as simply fire insurance. We want to avoid hell and go to heaven, but we're not doing anything to make a splash on earth.

We need to adopt the Olympic motto. Three words: "*citius, altius, fortius*" or "*Swifter, Higher, Stronger...*"

This should be every Christian's goal - "*swifter to obey,*" "*higher with our thinking,*" "*stronger in our faith.*"

Over forty years ago, United States Olympic coach, Brutus Hamilton, compiled a list of what he thought would be the ultimate achievements in track-and-field.

No one would ever run a 9.2 second 100 yard dash, or a 3 minute 57 second mile, or throw a shot put more than 62 feet, or high jump more than 7'1", or long jump 27 feet, or pole vault more than 16 feet. *Today, each of these barriers has been significantly shattered...*

And spiritually speaking, you too can *go higher, last longer, be stronger* than you once thought possible.

All that holds us back is *a flimsy faith*. Here in Chapter 9, Paul tells the Corinthians to stop toying with their faith. We need to get serious - be **determined**.

We need to stop blaming our spiritual apathy and compromise with sin on the pressures at work, or our problems at home, or deficiencies within our church.

So often we're like the tennis player who preferred doubles over singles. When asked why, he answered, "When you play with a partner you only have to do half the work, AND you've got somebody else to blame!"

Stop blaming your spiritual shortcomings on stuff other than **you**. God is calling *you* to be an overcomer!

Speaking of tennis, the great Arthur Ashe, once said, "Everything in this game is within." In other words, *success boils down to heart, grit, and determination.*

And the same is true in the Christian life. *Do you hunger and thirst for righteousness? Do you seek after God's truth? Do you love God more than material stuff? Are you tired of getting ensnared by temptation?*

If not, you need to ask yourself if you're a Christian or ask God to light a fire in your heart for Him.

Ultimately, there's only one reason we live defeated. *We're content to do so!* A Christian has to *go for the gold!* Add **determination** to his faith! *Be in it to win it!*

Second, our text tells us that Paul also understood the value of **preparation**. I like verse 25 in the Living Bible, "To win the contest you must deny yourselves many things that would keep you from doing your best."

How many of you guys have ever seen a Rocky film?

I love Rocky. Before each fight, the Italian Stallion would go through an intense season of training and discipline. He tortured his body to get into max-shape.

He was either eating raw eggs - or pounding a slab of beef - or falling trees in Siberia - but Rocky won because he never cut corners. At fight time, he was prepared for battle. He disciplined his body and mind.

In fact, when the first "Rocky" was released I was in High School and involved in sports - and I was so inspired, I started getting up every morning... I'd crack three raw eggs in a glass, and drink them for breakfast like Rock... *My spartan training regiment lasted all of 24 hours. Who in their right mind can eat raw eggs?*

But this is what Paul is all about in verse 25, "Everyone who competes for the prize is temperate (or exercises self-control) in all things." And again, verse 27, "I discipline my body and bring it into subjection."

The Greek phrase translated "*discipline my body*," literally reads, "I blacken my eye." Paul uses severe, intense measures to prepare himself for what's ahead.

Paul was no couch potato. He pushed his body. He got into shape for the battles he was called on to fight.

If you're a Christian, God's Spirit has put it in your heart to obey and love. But you need to discipline yourself to live out what Jesus put in. *Jesus transforms our spirit, but we have to train our mind and our body!*

When I played football, the exercise I hated most was leg-lifts. You laid on your back and lifted your heels six inches off

the ground... While your thighs were burning and aching, your stomach muscles were tightening...

Leg lifts were torture... And then for special effect, the coach made us pummel our belly with our fists. I suppose it was to tighten up the stomach muscles.

I'm not sure it helped us any physically, but it was effective *psychologically*. After a few leg lifts, you could feel *your summer-softened body* hardening into shape.

Paul says, as Christians, we need to beat our bodies into playing shape. The OKJV translates verse 27, "I keep under my body and bring it into subjection."

Keep my body under what?

Under the control of the Holy Spirit! Paul is saying we need to keep our physical impulses under the command of our spiritual priorities and perspectives.

There's a lot of confusion in Christian circles today about the role *discipline* should play in *discipleship*. *Does God or do I supply the discipline? When it comes to victory, does God do it for me or is it up to me?*

Galatians 5 lists "*self-control*" as a *fruit* or by-product of God's Spirit. Thus, on the one hand, it seems *fruitless* to me to focus on disciplining myself. Galatians takes it one step further, "*Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.*" Paul is saying it's our connection to God's Spirit and His power that supplies us the moral elevation to live above our flesh.

Thus, the way we overcome lustful appetites is not by resisting them in our own strength. We need to get caught up

in the flow of the Holy Spirit. It's His *upward power* that transcends the *downward pull* of our sin!

Hey, God gives us *victory over sin* the same way He gives us *forgiveness from sin*. It's not the result of our good works or our extreme discipline - it's by faith in Jesus' work on the cross and His Spirit's work in me.

As in Zechariah 4:6, victory is achieved, "not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord."

Yet, how does this emphasis on faith fit with Paul's call for discipline here in 1 Corinthians 9? How do you square *beating the body and walking in the Spirit*?

How do you reconcile *leg lifts* with *simple faith*?

Here's the answer... The Holy Spirit is the source of an overcoming life, not my own discipline - *but I have to be disciplined to stay at the source of my strength*.

Think of it this way... you're lost in the desert. Your body is dehydrated by the scorching sun. You're dying of hunger and thirst... when suddenly, the ground next to you opens up and a spring of refreshing water bubbles to the surface. A stalk with huge globes of delicious fruit pops out of the ground. It's a miracle!

You've been saved by an obvious work of God!

But what if after satisfying that initial thirst, you decide camping next to the spring and fruit are too restrictive.

You figure there's got to be other sources of nourishment in such a huge dessert, so you move on and branch out. You

explore the cactus in the distance or follow the snake that slithers through the sand.

Well, in the end, don't blame God when you get pricked by the cactus, or the snake leads you astray!

You need the discipline to stay at the source.

This is what it means *to abide in Christ...*

You don't wander off. You stay by the spring day in and day out. You learn to refresh your soul in God.

If I were at death's door, lying in the desert sands, and suddenly God provided me a life-giving fountain - I wouldn't consider it extreme discipline on my part to keep my cup in the water. I would be stupid if I didn't.

This is why, when I hear a preacher imply I need great self-control to be a Christian, I want to give up. *The reason I need Christ is because I lack self-control.*

You don't need *great* discipline to be a Christian, *just enough to stay at the source and abide in Christ.* Cling to the Spirit and you'll receive peace, joy, and power.

When temptation to stray from God raises its ugly head - beat your body back into submission - stay put... Then turn to the Holy Spirit and take a deep, long drink of the life-giving water. He'll prove sufficient.

And the Olympic athlete knew about staying put.

While in training, a world-class Olympian doesn't deviate. He sticks with the diet - he or she stays close to the gym - they keep set hours and a strict schedule.

The athlete is in the habit of foregoing what other people consider acceptable. A competitor-in-training gives up food, pleasures, activities they normally have the right to enjoy to obtain the goal - to win the prize.

Christians likewise need an *in-training mentality!*

Earlier in 6:12, Paul tells the Corinthians, "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful." As a Christian, I have incredible liberty. I'm free to participate in whatever I choose. *"All things are lawful for me..."*

"But all things are not helpful." As a Christian, I have a purpose - to know Jesus and be like Him. I've answered a higher call - so I choose to involve myself in only those activities that'll help me achieve that goal.

An athlete in-training is home asleep, while his buddies are out on the town... He's munching on bananas while others eat dessert... He's hard at work in the gym while his friends are lounging by the pool...

He has the right to eat dessert and lounge, but he's laid aside his rights to pursue a higher call - there's a prize to win!... *The same is true for a serious Christian.*

It reminds me of the kid on the High School track team. He asked his coach, *"Can I smoke and still race?"* The coach told him, *"Sure, you can smoke and race, but you can't smoke and win."* We need to ask, *am I content to just run the race, or do I want to win?*

Hebrews 12:1 tells us, "let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with

endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith..."

Notice, we're warned of two hindrances... not just *the sin that ensnares us* but *the weight that drags us*.

This may surprise you, but in the ancient Olympics, runners ran in the buff. They shed everything that could impede their movement or create wind resistance.

And this is what we should do as Christians... **Not the naked part**, but we need to streamline our lives...

Spiritual weights are activities that aren't *sinful* per se, they're just not *beneficial*. They aren't *bad options* - but if your goal is to win - they're not the *best option*...

I like how Ravi Zacharias defines a "**legitimate pleasure...**" "It's something that refreshes along the journey without distracting from the ultimate goal."

A weight is just the opposite. It might refresh, but in so doing, it takes on a life of its own. It gets in the way of godly priorities. It becomes a spiritual distraction.

Before I know it, I'm toting unnecessary baggage.

Over the last few years, I've traveled quite a bit, and I've learned a principle... **the enjoyment of my trip is in direct proportion to how light I pack.** I scale down. Who needs underwear for every day you're gone. *Turn them inside out and use them another day.*

Hey, there's a reason it's called "**lug-gage.**" It's sheer torture to be on the road *lugging* a lot of *luggage*.

And spiritually speaking, some of us need to unpack.

We need to take a moment to identify what's causing the drag on our spiritual progress... **What commitment or pastime is sucking up our energy and resources without directing us or others to Jesus?... Where are we investing our time without getting eternal rewards?**

When you identify a weight; then, by all means, lay it aside - for there is a prize to be won, far greater than *a gold medal, or a green jacket, or a Heisman Trophy...*

Paul says in verse 25, **"Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown."**

The Christian's reward never fades.

I read something that surprised me. **Did you know that Olympic gold medals are not really made out of gold? They're 92.5% silver and only six grams of gold.**

Olympians make colossal sacrifices all their life long to win a gold medal that's not actually gold!

And the same was true in ancient times. **Olympic champions received a laurel wreath - a perishable vine. It was actually a holly branch that wilted in a few days.**

Yet as Christians we receive eternal rewards - prizes that never tarnish... how much more should you and I be willing to lay aside our rights to follow Jesus?

Well, the third comparison Paul makes between the athlete and the Christian is their need for incredible **concentration. Both need the ability to focus.**

Today's pro athletes hire sports psychologists to help them pursue their goals. **In the world of pressure-packed**

competition, the ability to concentrate at crunch time is what distinguishes excellence from mediocrity.

And the same is true for a Christian...

We need to develop a keen concentration. Paul says, verse 26, "I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus, I fight: not as one who beats the air." The prize is too great - too much is at stake - our witness and God's glory is on the line. We can't waste an ounce of time or effort.

Paul runs "not with uncertainty." He doesn't stray off course. He never loses sight of the prize... Nor does he just "beat the air." Paul was no a shadow boxer - he made every punch count. Paul was surely *in it to win it!*

It reminds me of the exhausted boxer who stumbled back to his corner at the end of the round. He asked his trainer, "Have I done any damage to the guy?"

His cornerman said, "No, but keep swinging and the breeze might give him a cold." Beating against the air isn't the most efficient method of winning a fight!

Years ago, I attended CC Bible College, and a group of us went to Las Vegas to do some street witnessing.

While we were there, I visited Caesar's Palace, which at the time, hosted all the big prize fights. Ali and Tyson were regulars at Caesar's Sports Pavilion.

I'll never forget walking into an empty auditorium. Nobody was there, so I climbed into the ring...*even shadow boxed a bit.* Ever since, I've been able to tell people I fought at Caesar's Palace... *and I won!*

Yet many Christians I know have a spiritual life similar to my boxing career - they're shadow boxing.

They're punching the air. They're taking up space and burning calories, but they're not getting anything done for God and His Kingdom. And it's because they lack the proper focus and the ability to prioritize.

There are lots of distractions in this life that keep us from concentrating on spiritual pursuits. This is why we need to keep our eyes fixed on the prize. Too much hangs in the balance. Eternal rewards are at stake

Did you hear about the cross-eyed javelin thrower?

His eyes would crisscross. He had a hard time concentrating on his throws. It was said of his career, "He never won a medal, but he kept the crowd alert."

Our purpose as Christians *is to know Jesus - it's to be like Jesus - it's to lead others to Jesus - it's to help our church serve Jesus - **we need to focus!***

If we get crisscrossed or distracted from our goal... if we lose our concentration...we'll lose our reward.

It reminds me of another Olympian, Matt Emmons, a master marksman in the rifle competition. Matt was about to sew up a gold medal. All he needed was to just hit the target. He didn't even need a bulls-eye.

Matt was standing in Lane Two but for some reason, he made a rare mistake. He shot at the target in Lane Three. It was a great shot - *good enough to win. **But it was at the***

wrong target. He scored a big fat 0. Rather than win the gold medal, Matt ended up eighth.

And we can also aim at the wrong target. We need to stay **concentrated** on the prize of knowing Jesus.

Finally, a Christian needs *determination, preparation, and concentration* to avoid **disqualification**. In verse 27, Paul warns us, “**Lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.**”

Listen to a paraphrase of these verses, “**I don't know about you, but I'm running hard for the finish line. I'm giving it everything I've got. No sloppy living for me! I'm staying alert and in top condition. I'm not going to get caught napping, telling everyone else all about it and then missing out myself.**” But what a sad possibility, “**Telling everyone else all about it, and then missing out myself...**” We all are in danger of being disqualified.

Don't misunderstand Paul isn't suggesting that a poor performance will cause you to forfeit heaven.

Everyone who trusts in the *work of Jesus* will be saved, but **not everyone who works for Jesus will be called to the medal stand. You can live in such a way that disqualifies you from being used by God.**

Think of the **sprinter** who wins the race, but gets disqualified because he stepped out of his lane... Or a **boxer** who throws a low blow that costs him some points... Or a **swimmer** who would've won handily, but she plunged into the pool a split-second before the gun... *What a tragedy to win, only to be disqualified.*

After 145 years, it finally happened. A horse crossed the finished line at the Kentucky Derby only to be disqualified. In the last turn, the favorite, Maximum Security, ridden by jockey Luis Saez, veered off its line and blocked the horses to its right. The infraction cost owner, Gary West, millions of dollars and a victory.

It was a classic lesson. It's not enough to be the strongest and the fastest if you don't run by the rules.

Likewise, you can be a talented servant of God and do much in His name - but it's not just what we do that matters, it's how and why we do it. God's will needs to be done God's way. The end doesn't justify the means.

What a tragedy to work, and sweat, and train to win the prize - then have it snatched away - because you took a short-cut or veered outside your lane.

It seems that every Olympics lately has been spoiled by PEDs and blood doping. Athletes lose their medals because they choose to cut corners. They cheated.

In every sport, you learn quickly that it's not just about the winning; you have to win within the rules!

And the same is true spiritually. We've been called not only to speak for the Gospel but to live God's truth in our daily life. *We need to practice what we preach.*

It reminds me of the college football star. Sadly, after his first year in school, he was dismissed from the team because he failed to make passing grades. Someone asked the coach, *"This is going to be quite a loss?"*

The Coach answered, "Yep, that boy could do everything with a football except autograph it!"

Great damage gets done by a Christian who *professes* more than he *possesses*. God has no other choice but to disqualify him and put him on the shelf.

I for one, don't want to end up disqualified. I want to keep racing! If you ever say a prayer for Pastor Sandy, pray I'll never do anything that prohibits God from using me! My greatest fear is a disqualification.

On occasion, you hear of a sports team that chooses to tank. Rather than play their best, they settle for mediocrity or worse - by losing, they can get a higher draft choice and potentially better players in the future.

But if you're a fan, this is a tough pill to swallow.

And it's a tough pill for God to swallow when he sees a Christian just going through the motions, not giving it his or her all - content with mediocrity and defeat.

God forbid that any Christian tank. Let's excel. Be all that you can be for Jesus' sake. Let's be in it, to win it.

Let's make up our minds to lay aside the weights that drag us... start training our minds... start building up our faith... Let's fight like we mean it and give it our all.

Certainly, it'll take some *determination*, and some *preparation*, and some *concentration*, and you'll need to *avoid disqualification* - but there is a race to win!

If you're not a Christian, you need to get in the race. And if you are a Christian, you time you raced to win.

For us all, let's be **in it to win it!**