

Sermon Series: The Weak, Foolish, and Victorious Gospel
Sermon Text and Title - 1 Corinthians 9: 24-27: Run To Win the Prize

Sermon Points:

Introduction: Fuzzy Vision

In It To Win It (v.24)

How Should We Run? (vv.25-27)

What do We Win? (vv.25-27)

Application: Be Thou Our Vision

Prayer Points:

- Adore Jesus for running the race set before him so that we could run by his grace.
- Confess where your vision has been blurred and it has been causing you or others to run with a limp.
- Thank God for grace to see our blind spots, for motivation of eternity with him, and for the Spirit to help us run the race set before us.
- Ask God to help us have clear vision and clear purpose as we run at Sojourners Church and to help us keep our eyes on the author and perfecter of faith.

Introduction: Fuzzy Vision

Wednesday morning, as I was walking into the mall to get to church, a huge gust of wind blew a bunch of sand up in the air and right into my eyes. Now, it hurt like crazy and I'm pretty sure I scratched my eyes, But, for the rest of the day my vision was fuzzy. It was hard to do anything, hard to be focused, hard to see clearly.

And, then, this week, was perhaps one of the busiest I've ever had with people. Lots of hurting people. And what I realized, is what we all need most, at any given moment, is clear vision. It is so easy to get distracted in this life. It is so easy to get pulled into sin because we don't have clear vision. It is so easy for suffering to steal our clear vision. And, when our vision is fuzzy, our hearts are distracted, and we are less effective at best and vulnerable at worst.

Paul is calling the Corinthians to run for the prize, but we will not be motivated to run if we've lost sight of the prize. This week, in these situations, I realized, my job, as a pastor, could be described as simply as, "Help people see Jesus so they can run one more day. And then, do it again tomorrow."

So, my prayer, is that as we hear Paul in these four verses, that we would leave here motivated to run another day hard after the prize because we have been reminded of the pricelessness of the prize.

In It To Win It (v.24)

Paul has already shown the Corinthians how he lays down his rights for the sake of spreading the gospel and sharing in the gospel. Paul will do whatever it takes to "gain" brothers and sisters to Jesus and that includes self-sacrifice and becoming all things to all people.

Paul wants the Corinthians to understand that he hopes they will not only hear what he says, but that they will respond and will run the race "to win" with him moving forward. Look at verse 24, this is the main point of the passage:

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.

Paul moves to an illustration that brings this point home and makes it more practical for those he's writing to.

The Corinthian people would have been very familiar with the Olympic games that took place during these times or even perhaps the "Isthmus" games that were held near Corinth during years the Olympics were not taking place.

The goal of each athlete that participated in these games was to win. Nobody enters any kind of serious competition to come in second place. That's what Paul calls their attention to here. The intensity of their focus.

He says, "You all know that when athletes compete, when runners run, only one receives the prize, right?" Of course they knew that.

But, then Paul takes that intensity and points it directly at them. "Therefore, YOU RUN that you may obtain the prize." In other words, Corinthians, there are spiritual lessons to be learned as we watch these elite athletes. There's an intensity to be seen. There's a focus to be imitated. Understand Corinthians, that when I've shown myself an example of laying down my rights, it's because I'm running for a prize.

Paul has a sense with all of the issues that he's had to address with the Corinthians that there is a lack of focus, a lack of intensity that is fitting to the Christian life.

Paul has had point out that sexual immorality is not ok because they are the temple of God, indwelt by the Spirit. Paul has had to point out that they should not destroy their brothers and sister by demanding their rights to eat meat sacrificed to idols because the very logic of the gospel is love that is self-giving and lays down it's rights. Paul has had to point out that they should not divide over which teacher they like best, but instead boast in the cross of Christ. Paul has had to point out that they should not think of themselves as strong and wise in the world, but instead identify with the weak and foolish-looking cross that the world so often rejects.

Paul, in calling them to run in a way to win the prize is saying, "This life is serious. The implications of the gospel are serious. The cross is serious. You can't simply play games. Your actions are showing me that you've forgotten the seriousness of the gospel, which calls us to lay down our rights, abstain from sin as the Spirit-filled temple of God and take the good news out! There is something so much greater at stake than acceptance and affluence in this world, there is an eternal prize at stake that demands your focus and your intensity."

Imagine you saw an interview on television with an athlete. The commentator asks them about their training regimen. What if they responded, "I am training in a way that I hope to finish in the middle of the pack." It would sound so silly, right?

But, how often do we treat our Christian life like that? We squeeze Jesus in on the weekends as long as they don't get too busy.

Instead, Paul would have us ask, "How do I live every moment to show the gospel is the most precious thing in my life?" "How do I live with a Christian intensity and focus that shows that all my hope is in Jesus and that my life is lived to know him, obey him, and help others know him and obey him?"

So, Paul's desire in these three verses is that the Corinthian Church would run this Christian race with intensity and focus that is "in it to win it." To run like people that want to win the prize.

How Should We Run? (vv.25-27)

After Paul admonishes the Corinthians to run with the intensity and focus of an athlete that wants to win, he then reminds them how an athlete trains.

Paul says in verse 25 that every athlete "exercises self-control." The athletes training for the games that the Corinthians would have been familiar with were required to enter into strict training for at least 10 months.

Often, when we think of training, we simply think of the practice that goes into the actual event. But, with the term self-control, Paul is picking up on an important part of the training. There are certain things athletes must sacrifice for the sake of their goals.

It is noted in the literature about the games in the time when Paul is writing that athletes often abstained from certain foods, sexual activity, and adhered to strict curfews during their training. We read similar things from athletes who participate in our present Olympics and other sports. Self-control in areas is almost as important as the training in the sport itself. Athletes know that if they discipline themselves in sleep, diet, and other areas that they can gain an advantage, which serves their ultimate goal of winning.

This relates well to what Paul has been saying the whole time to the Corinthians. Yes, Corinthians, you have freedom to eat that meat, but you will destroy your brothers and sisters in Christ, so exercise the self-giving restraint of the gospel in abstaining from eating it around them. Yes, Corinthians, there is amazing grace, but you are the temple of God, so abstain from sexual immorality that is taking place among you. You cannot run the race of the Christian life and have it filled with sexual sin and selfishness and hope to be a faithful to the gospel anymore than you could eat, drink, and sleep in any way you wanted and be a successful athlete who wins the prize.

Paul says, athletes do this in "all things." There is no area of their life they are unwilling to exercise control in if it will help them win the prize. So, in whatever we do, we should do "all things" to the glory of God, even if it means restricting ourselves for the sake of the glory of Christ.

So, there is a self-control that is involved, but there is more than that in the way Paul wants them to run. In verses 26-27 Paul says he disciplines his body and makes it his slave. Remember, Paul has already said in previous weeks that even though he is "Free" he makes himself a slave to all. He is continuing that theme in this analogy.

Paul says, not only does he give up certain things for the sake of the gospel, but he runs with purpose and he boxes with purpose. He will make his body a slave for the sake of the gospel. So, not only is there self-control involved, but there is intentional purpose involved.

Listen, you can abstain from all you want and then box without a plan and it's not going to do you any good.

I remember watching Floyd Mayweather (49-0) in a recent interview. They were asking him about his success. His answer, "Be disciplined in my training and then be purposeful in carrying out my game plan in the fight." In other words, the self-control in training is necessary and the purposeful execution of the plan is necessary.

Paul says, "Listen Corinthians, the way you have been going about things is like if I you just went into the ring and started flailing around. Or if you started running in a race, but just ran wherever you wanted. Not only have you lacked the intensity necessary, but you've lacked the discipline and purpose necessary. And because you've lacked it, people are getting hurt, the church is dividing, and you are destroying brothers and sisters for the sake of your "freedom" instead of making yourself a slave for the sake of gaining brothers and sisters."

But, how can Paul think a church that has been so off will suddenly begin to run this way? How can he even ask them to? The answer is the Holy Spirit.

Remember, Paul sees the Church as the temple of God that is filled by the Spirit of God (1 Cor.3:16-17, 6:19-20). And Paul expects believers will have the "mind of Christ," because of the Spirit of God (2:16). So, Paul expects holiness like a temple and self-giving love like Jesus, not because of their superior ability but because of the power of God living inside of them. Because the Spirit dwells inside the church as a whole and inside each individual believers, Paul expects that the Spirit will bring about this self-giving love and this self-disciplined life that will help the Corinthian Church.

Paul is trusting that as he reminds them of the gospel and it's implications that instead of beating each other up and being ineffective in their witness, the Spirit of God will bring about the fruit of the Spirit that can help

them overflow in self-control and love for each other and for the world around them that will glorify Jesus Christ.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:22-24)

Paul doesn't expect the Corinthians to do this in their own strength. But, he is hoping the Spirit of God will help them to crucify their selfish passions and desires and instead be filled with self-giving love and self-control that will build up the church and be a witness to the world to gain new brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul expects them to run in the strength God provides by his Spirit.

This is how the whole New Testament talks about the Christian life. The same grace that redeems is a grace that causes Christians to run the race:

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. (1 Corinthians 15:10)

The same Spirit that causes us to be born again and reminds us of our sure adoption in Christ, is the Spirit that causes us to fight sin:

For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" (Romans 8:13-15)

Paul is hoping that as the Corinthians read his words, God will cause his Spirit to help them have self-control and purpose and intensity in their Christian lives that will bring sweet unity in the church and sweet witness to the world, all for the glory of Christ.

What do We Win? (vv.25-27)

So, Paul has called the Corinthians to an intensity and focus that wants to win the prize. He has called them to a Spirit-driven self-control and purposefulness that matches that intensity. He has called them to make their bodies slaves to this purpose instead of simply doing whatever they wanted. This is blood-bought Christian freedom by the Spirit of God living inside of us.

Christian freedom is the freedom to be a slave to Christ and do whatever brings glory to God through the gospel, not the freedom to whatever we want whenever we want.

But, the final thing Paul does in this athletic analogy is to point to the motivation for this intensity and self-control. Paul states it positively and negatively in verses 25-27. Let's start with the negative. In verse 27, Paul says he wants to discipline his body and make it slave, so that, after preaching the gospel to others, he does not find himself disqualified.

Now, every other place in Paul's writing that he uses this word "disqualified" it has the idea of failing to pass a test. In other words, in Paul's mind, he could preach this gospel to others, proclaim this good news to others, but then find out he was disqualified himself.

Jesus says something similar when people come to him and tell him all the great things they have done in his name, and he says, "Depart from me, I never knew you." Paul is not saying that his salvation is dependent on his self-control and his self-giving love. Paul is saying that if he has truly believed the gospel and the Spirit is truly living inside of him, then the evidence of that salvation is that he *desires* by the power of the Spirit to live a life that is "all in" for the sake of Christ.

In the New Testament, there are all kinds of these warnings that are written to churches. For those who are in Christ, these warnings come, and the Spirit uses them as a wake up call to convict and to bring about repentance and holiness that honors Jesus. And for those who are not in Christ, these warnings come and

they simply move on honoring themselves. But, that's just one side of the coin.

The other side of the coin is found in verse 25. Paul says athletes discipline themselves to receive a "perishable" crown as a prize, but Paul says we will receive an imperishable crown as a prize. Let me read you a few other verses that have these words "imperishable" and "prize" and "crown" in them from Paul to see what he's getting at.

*Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the **prize** of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12-14)*

*For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me **the crown** of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:6-8)*

*He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to **an inheritance that is imperishable**, undefiled, and unfading, kept **in heaven** for you, who by God's power are **being guarded** through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3-5)*

This "imperishable crown" is the prize we receive in glory with God forever, it is the crown of righteousness that all who have fought the good fight and have loved the appearing of Jesus will receive on that last day, and it is the imperishable inheritance that is being kept in heaven for those God's power is guarding by faith.

In other words, the crown is our eternal joy in the presence Jesus. Paul's argument here then is from the lesser to the greater. If athletes are willing to sacrifice and be focused in every area of their life for 15 minutes of fame and glory in this life, how much more should we be willing to give up all worldly fame, fortune, and rights for the sake of an eternal glory that will never end and that surpasses all joy that can be found in this life. If athletes will give every area of their life to winning a crown of athletic achievement, how much more should we desire to give every area of our life to running toward Jesus Christ and bringing as many others with us as possible?

For, Paul, the infinite reward of eternity in the presence of God, where there is fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore means that he is glad to give up his rights for the sake of the gospel, because the prize is infinitely precious to him.

Application: Be Thou Our Vision

Now, it's that time of year. It's March Madness. And as a former college basketball player I get chills and joy just welling up in me thinking about this time of year. It's winning time. It's the time of year where every moment of extra practice and every weight lifted and every film session comes into play. The stakes are clear and they're high, win or go home. Play hard or go home. The prize is great.

Listen, you never see someone who just won a big sporting event and is crying tears of joy and think, "I bet they're wishing they hadn't spent so much time on it." No way. When "One shining moment starts" my emotions are right there with them. You train to win. You put your heart into it. And when you get to cut down those nets, it was worth it. I used to get so frustrated with anyone that wasn't "all in" the whole year round because I so desperately wanted to win. No one looks at that kind of commitment and calls it "legalism." The prize is great and so the sacrifices are simply the necessary and fitting steps to get where you want to go.

But, those four years in college we just won perishable championships. And while athletics give us a glimpse of what Paul is saying, I want an even clearer vision for us. I want Jesus to be our vision.

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, **looking to Jesus**, the*

*founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him **endured the cross**, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. **Consider him** who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, **so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.** (Hebrews 12:1-3)*

This passage says that Jesus is our vision. We “look to him” so that we won’t grow weary. We remember his endurance at the cross on our behalf so that we don’t grow weary. We remember that his running before us; his sweat, his blood, and his tears before us is what enables and empowers our running now. And we remember that because he ran his race and went to the cross, because he purchased us by his blood, because our sins are forgiven and his Spirit is within us, we run for the same joy Jesus was running for.

Jesus says in John 17 that he came to earth to die so that we might have his joy in us. And Jesus says that he wants us to come be with him to see his glory. Therefore, the joy set before Jesus, the joy Jesus endured the cross for, was the joy of once again being in presence of his Father, restored to the perfect enjoyment of Father and Son and perfect glory. But, having accomplished his race not only would he be in the joy of his Father, but he would bring with him a bunch of others who would share in that glory and share in that eternal joy. That is the prize Jesus was running for. The eternal glory of God and the eternal joy of all who are there to enjoy it.

And that is our joy as we run. We run to glory. We run to eternal joy. And therefore, we gladly give up rights and give up preferences and give up sin and give up convenience and give up money and give up anything else that would hinder our running or hinder others running. You see, the beauty of the gospel is that there is not only one winner, but in fact, we impact each other's running and we can “gain” or win other runners with us along the way.

And that prize, the glory of Jesus, is exactly what the Spirit exists in us to help us cherish! And so, as Paul holds out the prize of eternity in the glory of Jesus, he expects the Spirit to come and say in the heart of every believer, “Yes, every breath of my life! Every moment of my life! Every dollar of my money! All my resources, all my talents, all my time, it belongs to you! You are worthy! I am running to you and my life now is to bring as many with me as possible from the neighborhoods and the nations!”

And when we get there, full of bruises, bloodied from the fight, but helped by the Spirit, joy will flood our hearts forever, because there won’t be one shining moment that happens once per year, but there will be an ongoing eternity dwelling in the shining, radiant presence of Jesus forever, a prize worth running for and a prize worth sharing with others as we run.