

Whatever It Takes, Part 2

Series: GRAY AREAS: Following Jesus when Things aren't Black and White #4

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. 25Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. 26Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. 27No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

Introduction: I want to tell you a story about the first marathon runners, which is where the NIKE company gets its name.

The battle of Marathon was fought around 490 B.C. when king Darius launched an attack on Athens. Since the surrounding city-states would offer little support to the Athenians, the Athenians were outnumbered by the Persians.

Although the Athenians were outnumbered, they caught the Persians by surprise by running the full length of the plain and catching the Persians unorganized.

The Athenians were able to defeat the Persians by not only striking from the front, but they also flanked the Persian army from both sides. Because of this sudden attack the Persian troops broke ranks and fled back to their ships.

Since the Athenians won, they wanted to send word back to Athens to tell of victory so the city could prepare for the Persian fleet that was coming to attack from the sea.

So, Miltiades sent his best runner Pheidippides to take word to Athens. He ran the whole distance, about 26 miles, and when he arrived, he was able to say one word . . . and then he died. That word – Nike, meaning ‘victory.’

The Athenians ran the whole distance of the plain of Marathon, which is some 26 miles. This could not have been accomplished without hard training and discipline. Vince Lombardi, an iconic figure in NFL history, was not only known for his great

Packer teams of the 1960s but his leadership and unquenchable desire for success and passion for winning, said, "Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing."

Some of you are beginning to wonder whether this is a sermon or coach's pre-game pep talk. Others are thinking, "Pastor, talking about winning mattering so much is not spiritual and can't be biblical." Let me just say that making an all-out effort for Jesus is biblical. Pursuing excellence for the glory of God is biblical.

The problem is that we are too often all-in on things that don't have any eternal value.

RECAP from last few weeks:

1 Cor. 8 is Paul's '**Do as I SAY**' chapter. 1 Cor. 9 is Paul's '**Do as I DO**' chapter.

We learned two things last week from the first part of this chapter, ...

- I. **We Need to Relinquish our Rights to Advance the Gospel. [vs 1-18] {Paul made the case about being paid, but not exercising the right.}**
- II. **We Need to be Intentional in our Relationships to Advance the Gospel [vs 19-23] {3 points: I NEED TO WAIVE MY RIGHTS IN ORDER TO WIN THE LOST... I MUST CONNECT WITH CULTURE WITHOUT COMPROMISING MY CONVICTIONS... I MUST MODIFY MY METHODS WHILE MAINTAINING THE MESSAGE.}**

Today's message is "Whatever it Takes, Part 2," and the third point is:

- III. **We Need to be ALL IN to Advance of the Gospel [vs 24-27]**

Whether Paul was a sports fan or not, he used sports-themed images to make a point. He did so because he knew it would connect with his audience. This is particularly appropriated to the Christians at Corinth. In fact, this passage is written with the backdrop of the Isthmian games.

This event was held ten miles outside the city of Corinth, where people from every part of the Mediterranean came to compete or watch every two years.

Athletes would compete in foot races, broad jumping, discus throwing, wrestling, boxing, gymnastics, and equestrian contests.

They would compete fiercely, each striving for the Isthmian crown - a wreath of wild celery. Winners received a lifetime exemption from paying taxes and serving in the military. They would also receive free tuition at one of their universities. Statues of themselves would be erected along the road that led to the site of the games.

But the real prize was the celery wreath, awarded to the winner at the end of the games. Paul says, ***25Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.***

The athletes that competed in this competition had to provide proof that they had been in training for at least 10 months before the contest.

They had to prove that they had spent the last 30 days doing exercises in the gymnasium. In the Greek games - only one received the prize. But for the Christian - the prize is available to all who run the disciplined race.

Recently I read the Percentage of American's who own running shoes but don't run is 87%. Few there are that ***really*** run the race.

Someone once defined Monday Night Football as "22 million people badly in need of exercise watching 22 people badly in need of rest and refreshment."

Vince Lombardi, former coach of the Green Bay Packers, and the winning coach of Super Bowl I stated in a speech called "What it takes to be number 1":

"Winning is not a sometime thing; it's an all the time thing. You don't win occasionally; you don't do things right once in a while; you do them right all the time. Winning is a habit. Unfortunately, so is losing. Every time a football player goes to play, he's got to play from the soles of his feet up to his head. "

Paul says, 'Your effort and attitude to win people to Jesus needs to match the

effort and attitude of those athletes."

In fact, each contestant, before they stepped to the starting line dipped their hands in blood as a visual sign to the judges, they had prepared themselves to compete with all that was within them. The Corinthians knew the level of commitment/dedication it took to run these races.

The moment you were saved, Jesus entered you into the race. You didn't earn or deserve to be in this race. Jesus put you in the race by grace. He qualified you for the race through His shed blood on the cross.

What's the race? It's the passionate pursuit of internal holiness and external fruitfulness. It's sanctification and service. It's becoming more like Christ on the inside so you can work like Christ on the outside. This doesn't just happen.

You don't automatically or accidentally become like Christ and serve effectively for Christ. Paul says it takes everything you have, and he gives four things about running this race of the Christian life and what it takes to win.

If You're going to do Whatever it takes to Win in the Christian Life...

A. You Must be DETERMINED

V24, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize."

Among those with bloodstained hands there were no walkers, no strollers, no casual joggers. No one said, "I'm just not feeling it today." No. Everyone in the race runs. But not everyone wins. The one who works hard, sacrifices the most, and runs the best gets the prize. Paul says, "Hey Christians, you admire the dedication and determination sports hero so much...you are expected to do the same thing spiritually. Run your race that way!"

Before I say, what Paul IS saying, let me be clear about what Paul is NOT saying...

1. *Paul is NOT saying...We run for OUR SALVATION.*

Salvation is grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. We have won the race *in Christ*, now we must run the race *for Christ*!

2. Paul is NOT saying...We compete against OTHER CHRISTIANS.

You don't have to lose for me to win. I'm not trying to beat you and you're trying to beat me. You are the only one in your race. You have your own unique race crafted specifically for you by God. You might say, "Well, how can I not win if I'm the only one in it?"

God has created you with a certain amount of potential. He's given you a certain amount of ability. He's given you a certain amount of giftedness. All God asks is you run your race according to the potential, ability, and giftedness He's given you. You don't have to do more than you can; just all that you can.

God knows how He designed you. He knows your capacity. He knows your potential. He knows what you can do, and He wants you to live up to it. Some people are going to be faster than you. Some people are going to be slower.

That's why comparisons are foolish. I'm not held to your standard, and you're not held to mine. Your race is perfectly fitted to your potential. God has cut out the course for your life, given you a certain amount of ability, speed, and strength, empowered you with His presence, and He says, "Now run hard, run fast, give it all you got. Go for the win. Live up to your potential."

3. Paul is NOT saying...Only one can win THE PRIZE.

We can ALL win. We can all receive the reward Christ wants to give us because it's based on how each person runs. He's not saying we run for our salvation. We are saved by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, what is Paul saying? **YOU CAN BE FULLY SAVED and COMPLETELY LOSE.** When we all gather in heaven around the throne we will be equally saved, but not all equally rewarded. Some will win the prize; others will not. All will have eternal life, but not all will enjoy eternal rewards. Your eternal reward is earned in this life and given at the Bema Seat of Christ. Your salvation is received by grace.

Your salvation is based on the work of Christ. Your reward is based on your work

for Christ after salvation.

What distinguishes the athletes on the track from the people in the stands? A lot of people in the stands would say, "I'd give anything to have a body like that, or have a crowd cheer for me like that. Really???"

Would you give 40 hours a week to train?

Would you give 10 years of your life?

Would you go through grueling workouts where you thought you'd die?

Would you give up holidays, family time, and other personal interests?

Would you give up food you love, and eat only what is good for you?

Would you give up sleep, promotions, comfort, pleasures, and vacations?

Illustration: I've read that John Wesley traveled an average of 20 miles a day for 40 years. He got up every morning at 4:00. He preached 40,000 sermons. He produced 400 books and knew 10 languages.

At the age of 83, he was annoyed because he couldn't write more than 15 hours a day without hurting his eyes, and at the age of 86, he was ashamed that he couldn't preach more than twice a day. He complained in his diary that there was an increasing tendency to lie in bed until 5:30 in the morning.

I'm not suggesting we all accept that kind of schedule, but it's true that the person who learns the power of self-discipline is going to be the person who accomplishes great things.

You hear people say, "You can do anything you put your mind to. No, it will take much more than that. You'll have to give your life for it. "Do you want to win? Do you want the prize? It requires you give your whole life and do whatever it takes. The race we are in isn't a sprint; it's a marathon. There are times when the race is uphill/downhill, the weather is stormy/sunny, there times when it's fun/frightful. How do we keep going? We fix our eyes on Jesus.

You Must be DETERMINED...Secondly, If You're going to do Whatever it takes to Win in the Christian Life...

B. You Must be DISCIPLINED.

V25, "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training." Strict

training' is extensive self-control or deep discipline. No one goes directly from coach potato to Olympic hero. Discipline precedes reward.

Great athletes in the peak shape of their lives cannot live like everyone else. They are free to live like everyone else, but if they eat like us they'll look like us. If they live like us, then they'll run like us. And that won't win many races.

STORY: There was a woman who had lost a great deal of weight and was very pleased with herself. One of her bad habits had been stopping at a donut shop every morning on her way to work. There, she consumed more than her share of fat grams and calories. Now that she had gotten control of her eating, she was thrilled. On the way to work one morning, she was passing by the donut shop where she had failed so many times. On an impulse, she turned into the shop. She was only going to order a cup of coffee, and nothing else, and prove to herself that she finally had some discipline and self-control.

She ordered her cup of coffee and sat down to drink it. There, across the table from her, was a man drinking coffee and eating donuts covered with powdered sugar. Suddenly, he stood up and left the table-leaving one sugar-covered donut sitting on the table right in front of her. It was too much! She could not let this donut go to waste. She snatched it up and gobbled it down, leaving sugar all over the front of her dress. Then, to her horror, the man returned. He had not left, but only gotten up to refill his cup.

As Max Anders has said, "Only the disciplined ever get really good at anything." Everything in life requires some sort of discipline. Whether it's hitting a baseball, climbing a mountain, playing a musical instrument, or making good grades, it all comes down to a matter of discipline

Here's the key:

If they are going to run like no other, they must live like no other. They must say 'no' to the craving's others give in to. They must say 'no' to the temptations that others say 'yes' to. They must limit what they drink and scrutinize what they eat. They have to say 'no' to late night fun, so they can get up early and start all over again.

Many of those temptations aren't wrong ...they just produce excess weight a

runner can't afford to carry. If you haven't figured this out yet, let me tell you a little secret. Most of what we choose is not between *good and bad*. It's choosing between what's *good and what's best*. That takes intentional discipline, and Holy Spirit guidance.

A life marked by holiness and fruitfulness is always marked by discipline. We've been led to believe that if we come to church 2 or 3 times a month, listen to a 45-minute sermon, give in the offering, and don't complain if the service goes a little long, we're running a good race.

Folks, that's not discipline. That's not strict training. That's giving the bare minimum. Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to McDonald's makes you a big mac.

Godliness isn't accidental. Godliness isn't given to you, and it doesn't just happen to you. Sanctification involves spiritual sweat. You must get to the Gospel gym and work out your faith. The good news is that it won't take MORE than you have...it will just take ALL that you have.

V25b, "They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever." These runners discipline themselves and give up so much so they can have a little wreath, a little circle of celery put around their head. That little crown and the glory it represents won't last very long at all."

But the crown a Christian strives for, works for, disciplines for, the one God bestows to those who run to win, will last forever." The victorious Christian life takes determination, and it takes discipline.

Thirdly, to do whatever it takes to win in the Christian life...

C. You Must STAY ON COURSE.

V26, "Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air." Paul mixes two sports metaphors that mean the same thing. It doesn't matter how determined, or disciplined, or how fast a runner goes if he gets off the track or runs the wrong direction. He can't run aimlessly. He must strategically stay on course.

Similarly, they don't make statues in honor of shadow boxers. No, he must learn

how to land blows and take punches. He can't wildly swing and expect success. Just like a runner must run the right direction, and a boxer must aim his punches; a Christian who pursues holiness and fruitfulness must aim themselves in the right direction. **What does it look like to stay on course?**

1. Please the JUDGE, not the CROWD.

2 Cor. 5:9-10, *"So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."*

A crowd applauds, but a judge awards. A crowd watches, but a judge evaluates. It doesn't matter how great mom, or dad, or Pastor Gerry thinks you are doing as you're running your race.

Hopefully we are encouraging you in your race, but run, and fight as a believer to please Christ, not the crowd. **Secondly, to stay on course means:**

2. Focusing on the FINISH, not the PAST.

Both the successes and the failures of the past must be left behind. You will never run your best looking backward. Always face forward. How many times have we seen runners lose a race at the last moment due to E.C.S.?

Early Celebration Syndrome.

Paul tells us to guard against this in Philippians 3:12: *"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me...But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."*

How you finish is what counts. Remember the true story of the Tanzanian marathoner who fell during the race and was badly and hurt and bloodied? He refused to quit even though he finished so far behind everyone else that only a few spectators remained in the stadium. A reporter asked him why he continued to run. He said those immortal words: *"My country did not send me 5,000 miles*

to start the race. They sent me to finish to it."

You may be just starting your race, or you may be in the middle of your race, or you may be on the last lap...FINISH...FINISH STRONG. Press on! STAY FIXED ON THE FINISH LINE. **To stay on course also means...**

3. Winning the LOST, not gaining the WORLD.

No one wins a race accidentally; no one wins someone to Christ accidentally. It takes desire and heart. Satan will give you everything this world has to offer if it keeps you from running and serving well. Not every financial increase or material wealth is from God. Satan can 'bless' you with stuff to bog you down. **Some of the very blessings you think are from God's hand can keep you out of God's will.**

Paul says our goal is to be rescuing the perishing, and he's willing to do whatever it takes. Are you? **Lastly, staying on course means...**

4. Living to Glorify GOD, not YOURSELF.

1 Cor. 10:31, ***"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."***

Take some inventory of your life. Are you 'aimed' correctly? Are you running with determination and discipline in the right direction? Is your heart's desire to glorify God and not yourself?

Doing whatever it takes means being determined, being disciplined, staying on course, and lastly... Lastly, If You're going to do Whatever it takes to Win in the Christian Life...

D. You Must Keep from being DISQUALIFIED.

V27, "No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."

Understand Paul is NOT saying if you're not determined, disciplined, and running the right direction you can lose your salvation. Only Greeks could run in the games, but if they didn't run well, they weren't stripped of their nationality. They

were still Greeks; they just didn't receive the prize.

Christians who don't run well or live well aren't disqualified from God's family. But a life poorly lived isn't rewarded either. Every Christian gets heaven as a gift of grace, but only those who run to win will be awarded their prize.

Paul says, "I don't want to be someone who preaches to you, and then miss out on the prize." The word 'preach' in the original means **to herald**.

Paul envisions himself as both herald and contestant. At the beginning of the race in the Isthmian games, there was a herald. He was like the announcer. He would introduce the runners to the crowd. He would outline the rules to the runners. He reminded everyone of the prize given to the winner.

Anybody who violated any of those rules was disqualified. That was the herald's job. But Paul says, "I'm not just a herald of the race; I'm also a participant." Paul says it'd be embarrassing and dishonorable to be someone who knows all the rules of the race, heralds them to others but doesn't abide by them himself and gets disqualified from receiving the prize.

Paul says, "I'm determined to discipline myself to run the best race possible." How? By beating my body and making it a slave. Is Paul into self-punishment? No. Old timers called it crucifying the flesh. The part of every person's heart that longs to be selfish, sinful, and rebellious. Even after salvation, we all have that part that still wars against God.

Colossians 3:5 describes it like this, "***So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires. Don't be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world.***" That's the flesh that lurks within us.

Paul says, "I constantly beat up that part of my heart that wants its own way apart from Christ. I will not let it own me. I will discipline myself to master it." Listen, you will either control your flesh or your flesh will control you.

We have all known of ministers who damaged their legacy for Christ because of moral failures. We have all seen believers with great influence for the Kingdom lose it because of moral failure. We have all known of leaders who compromise

the message to further their influence and expand their kingdom.

We can be disqualified. We can bring harm to the church and the cause of Christ.

Salvation is based on the finished work of Christ. It is of grace and faith, not works. The strength of our salvation is determined by the strength of our Savior, not ours. However, because of that, **don't be quick to dismiss the full weight of this warning.**

Listen to these other Scriptural admonitions.

- In Paul's next letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13 verse 5 he says, ***"Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!"***

- James 1:22-24 - ***"But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was."***

- Matthew 7:21-23 - 21 ***"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. 22 Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' 23 And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; leave Me, you who practice lawlessness.'***

CLOSING: In the opening verses of Hebrews 12 we read, ***"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."*** (NIV)

The gospel tells us that Jesus was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for

our iniquities, and by His wounds we are healed. Jesus died a brutal, bloody, undeserved death to pay the price for your sin. Jesus endured the wrath of God in your place so that you could receive the grace of God instead.

Jesus died for you so that you can trust Him and be forgiven of your sins and be made right with God, now and forever. That's the gospel, and that changes everything. The gospel is so big and so great that it should redefine every aspect of your life.

If we had that single-minded devotion to do whatever it takes to win, we would be asking questions, like how can I invest more time, more talents, energy, and financial resources for the cause of Christ?

How can I stir my passion for Christ and deepen my hunger and thirst for God's Word?