

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 - he even wrote a portion of the Bible.

Paul was a brilliant theologian, and a pioneering missionary, and a successful pastor, and a victorious Christian... but he was also a fan - a 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 short time on the disabled list, **Peter** rejoined 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 Georgia 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.

Remember, Paul said in verse 22, "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some."

Paul took an interest in the interests of people.

He built bridges, and found common ground, so he could communicate with the folks he wanted to reach.

This is how he won over the Corinthians. In Corinth he became a sport's fan to reach the sport's fans.

The Greeks were into athletics. The capitol city of Athens was the ancient home of the Olympics 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 the athlete avoids **disqualification...**

Determination, preparation, concentration, and no disqualification... After the Corinthians had 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 conquer.

*Winning **WAS** everything!*

There were no medals for second or third place.

Participation trophies were unheard of - you won or lost. You went home victorious or you went home 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.

Understand, God doesn't give out silver medals and bronze medals. Life isn't Little League where everybody gets a trophy. Never settle for mediocrity!

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 the gold!*

There's a first prize for every Christian who is faithful to 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 ambition!* Just being forgiven - just making it to heaven - is not enough!

God wants you and me to live triumphantly and impact-fully. Too many Christians view salvation as simply fire insurance. They want to avoid hell, but they're not doing anything to make a splash in heaven.

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

This should be the goal of a Christian - "**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 have been significantly shattered...

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

All that holds us back is *a flimsy faith*. At the end of Chapter 9 Paul tells the Corinthians to stop toying with their faith. They need to get serious - get determined.

We need to stop blaming our spiritual apathy and compromises with sin, on the pressures at work, or the demands of family, or the deficiencies of 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 we hunger and thirst for righteousness? Do we seek truth? Do we love God more than other stuff? Are we sick and tired of getting knocked-out by temptation?

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

Second, Paul tells us to invest in some **preparation**.

The Living Bible renders verse 25 as follows, "To win the contest you must deny yourselves many things that would keep you from doing your best."

One Christmas my kids chipped in, and got me the complete, unabridged Rocky Balboa video library... *it's a collection of rich, profound cinematic classics.*

Now that I've watched the collection several times my favorite parts are the training scenes...

I remember when the first "Rocky" was released I was in High School - and since I was involved in sports, I started imitating Rocky's training regiment.

Every morning I'd wake up, crack three raw eggs in a glass, and drink it for breakfast. Then I'd go out for some road work. I even learned one-handed push-ups.

I stayed committed to Rocky's routine for a entire 24 hours. I just couldn't develop a taste for raw eggs...

But the movies make it clear - all of Rock's victories followed an intense season of discipline. The boxer tortured his body to get it into maximum shape.

Either pounding on a slab of raw beef - or jumping rope with Apollo - or chopping wood in Siberia - when Rock won it was because he refused to cut corners.

He prepared himself for the fight. He disciplined his body and mind. Rock always out-trained his opponent.

And this is why Paul states 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.

He pushes his body. He does whatever it takes to make his body do what it doesn't want to do. This is where *fasting* plays a roll in our Christian life - it's good "*training*." The Christian needs a fitness mindset...

If you're a Christian, God's Spirit has put it in your heart to obey. But you need to discipline your body to make it do what we really want it to do. *Jesus transforms our heart, but we have to train 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 supposed it was to tighten up the abdominal 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 OKJ 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 about the role *discipline* should play in *discipleship*.

Does God... or do I... supply the discipline?

Galatians 5 lists "self-control" as a *fruit*, or by-product of God's Spirit. Thus, it seems *fruit-less* 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." It's our connection to God's Spirit that supplies us the moral elevation to live above our flesh.

The way to overcome lustful appetites is not by resisting them in my own strength? I need to get caught up in the flow of the Holy Spirit. It's His *upward pleasures* that transcend the *downward pull* of sin!

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

As 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 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. You're 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.

And 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.

When I hear a preacher imply I need great self-control to be a Christian I want to give up. *That's the very reason I need Christ, 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 - *His control.*

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. An 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 this *in-training mentality!*

Earlier in 6:12 Paul told 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 to be like Him. I've answered a higher call - so I choose to involve myself in only those activities that 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 a 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. 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 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 time without getting an eternal reward?**

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 of gold?* There're 92.5% silver, and only six grams 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 both their need for incredible **concentration**. *The ability to focus is critical.*

Today's pro athletes hire sports psychologists to help them focus on 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 in 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 - the souls of men and the glory of God is on the line. This is why we can't waste a shred of our time or effort.

Paul **"runs... not with uncertainty"**. He doesn't stray off course, or miss the turn. He never loses sight of the prize...

Nor does he "beat the air". He's not a shadow boxer - his every punch counts. Paul is *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 draft might give him a cold." Beating against the air isn't the most efficient method of winning a fight!

In 1980 I was in 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 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.

Perhaps time and energy for you has become scarce. Maybe your hours at work have increased and your budget has tightened... Maybe your kids are little and the demands

are growing... And you just don't have the time for spiritual pursuits like you once did.

There're a lot of reasons to get distracted and lose your concentration 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 crisscrossed. 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 our family 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.

The star at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996 was Michael Johnson - he won the gold in the 200 and 400 meters.

At first I thought it strange that Johnson's double victory was considered such a unique achievement.

I figure if you're that fast, why not win the 100 and 800 meter races too? But evidently, the nuances of each event are so specialized it's hard to compete on a world-class level in more than one distance at a time.

And that's not only true in track-and-field - it's true in all of life. It's difficult for a person to be world-class in more than one or two areas of life at the same time.

That's why you have to choose where you want to concentrate your energies, and time, and focus?

In what do you want to be world class? You've got to decide what it is you really want to be good at - *making money? Coaching Little League? Having a nice lawn? Keeping a clean garage? Staying up with college recruiting? Tinkering with cars? Playing video games?* Or walking with Jesus, and building His Kingdom?

I'm sorry, but you can't be world-class at everything! You have to choose! Paul would say if knowing Jesus, and if growing in your faith, means letting your golf game slip - *let it slip!* We're in a race we need to win!

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... then missing out myself." There is a danger for us 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 and it costs him a fight... Or a swimmer who would've won handily, but she plunged into the pool a split-second before the starting gun... *What a tragedy to win, only to be disqualified.*

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 the 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!"*

What a tragedy to work, sweat, and train to win a prize - then have it snatched from you at the very end.

It seems every Olympics these days are spoiled by steroids or blood doping. Athletes lose their medals because they choose to cut corners. They cheat.

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 preach the truth of the Gospel, but to live out that truth in our daily lives - *to practice what we preach.*

There was once a pastor whose sermons were articulate, passionate, powerful...but the life he lived was inconsistent. Someone summed up his ministry, *"When he was in the*

pulpit, his congregation wished he would never leave - and, when he was *out of the pulpit*, they wished he would never enter it again."

Great damage is done by a Christian who *professes* much more than he *possesses*. God has no other choice but to put that man on the shelf - out of reach.

Never forget, it's not just *what* we do for Jesus that matters, but it's *how and why* we do what we do.

As a Christian the ends doesn't justify the means.

Your *approach and attitude* are as important as your *accomplishments*. You can do great things, but if done the wrong way it disqualifies you from the reward.

I for one, don't want to end up disqualified. Over my 35 years of ministry I've made my share of mistakes.

I've been *beaten-up, knocked-down, tired-out*.

But by God's grace, I'm still hanging-on - and I want to stay in the race! If you ever say a prayer for Pastor Sandy, pray I'll never do anything that'll prohibit God from using me! My greatest fear is to be disqualified.

Speaking of sports teams, the Atlanta Braves are a tough pill to swallow these days. We were once the premier club. Now we're rebuilding. Our best and most popular players are being sold off for prospects.

As a long-time Braves fan, this is hard to watch. The current Atlanta team doesn't have a fighting chance.

The Braves are playing out the schedule, *rather than playing to win!* For a true fan, that's hard to stomach...

And when Christians adopt this same attitude, I'm sure it's tough for God to stomach!... *Some of us are just playing out the schedule.* We've learned to tolerate compromise and sin. We've accepted mediocrity.

Rather than push ourselves to *grow and go farther* in our faith, we've packed it in. We no longer intend to win... Hey, if I'm talking about you, *stop beating the air!*

It's time to make up our minds... to lay aside some weights... to strap on some gloves, climb back into the ring, and fight to be all that God intends for us to be...

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!

There is a prize to obtain! Let's be **in it to win it!**