
Are You a Runner? Discipline and Consistency in the Race of Faith

A sermon on 1 Corinthians 9:19-27 by Coty Pinckney preached at Desiring God Community Church, Charlotte NC, July 27, 2008

What is your favorite biblical image of the Christian life?

- We are soldiers in the army of God?
- We are the bride of Christ?
- We are God's ambassadors, proclaiming His Truth, speaking His Word to the world?
- Or perhaps the image from John 15: Christ is the vine, we are the branches, connected to Him, getting sustenance from Him.

I love all these images – but my favorite biblical image is that of running the race of faith.

As I wrote in [this week's email](#), I love this image in part because of when I grew up. As a 16 year old just beginning my second cross country season, I watched the 1972 Munich Olympic games. There were numerous thrilling moments, especially [Dave Wottle's come from behind victory in the 800](#).

But what most impressed me – the event I can still see most clearly in my head – was Frank Shorter's win in the marathon, destroying an excellent field. Shorter's victory inspired hordes of new runners in the US, all wanting to complete a marathon; for me, the previous, vague idea that one day I might run a marathon became the certainty that I would.

My interest in running carried over to Bible reading. I scoured my Good News New Testament for running images. I well remember underlining 1 Timothy 6:12, which reads in that translation, "Run you best in the race of faith."

I also encountered the other biblical running images, including the 1 Corinthians 9 passage we will consider this morning. I began to see, dimly, that as wonderful as competing in races was, it's major benefit, even it's major purpose, was to display spiritual truth.

Over the next five weeks, I will share with you these biblical truths that I began to glimpse as a teen. Running in and of itself, like God's other good gifts in this life, can be both a blessing and a curse. If we put running right at the center of our lives, if we allow it to dominate our lives, it will become an idol that drinks up our lifeblood, as it diverts us from the only source of true life, Jesus Himself. But if we see this gift, this challenge, as a picture, an analogy pointing us to God, displaying spiritual truths in human form, then running can be the gateway to a closer walk with God. May God be pleased to use this series to that effect.

These 5 sermons break down into two parts: The first two consider analogies between training and the Christian life, while the last three consider racing.

Today: "Are you a runner? Consistency and discipline in the race of faith."

Imagine that you are a High School freshman. You go out for the track team, thinking you would like to run the mile or half mile, although you have never run more than two miles in your life. The first day of practice you join six or seven other new middle distance runners. The coach send you out with an experienced runner, a junior. He takes you through a two-mile warm up off the track, then tells you to go to the starting line. You now run reasonably fast, following him once around, a quarter mile. It feels fine. But after only 90 seconds rest you do it again. And again. And again. Then he takes you to the infield, where you run several 100 yard sprints. Then you go into the stands, and run up the stadium steps twelve times. Afterwards,

he takes you through a two mile warm down. You finish tired, but you seemed to do better than most, and the experience, in a way, was fun.

But the next morning you wake up and can hardly get out of bed. No part of your body fails to hurt. Doubts creep in: "Can I really do this? Maybe I should try some other sport." All day, you hobble around school. In the hallways, you notice that the other new distance runners are hobbling also.

Right at the beginning of practice, the coach calls all the new runners together. He says: "I don't have to ask how you're feeling today. I know you're sore and stiff. And I know that every one of you is asking: Should I keep it up? Should I stay on the team? That's not the right question. Here is the right question: Are you a runner? Will you commit yourself to being a runner? You can walk away today, saying it hurts too much – If you do that, then I'll be glad you're gone. For that will show that you're not runner. But if you make the commitment to stay, I will train you to excel at running. You will become someone to be proud of. You'll be a runner."

That High School freshman faced a choice: Who am I? What is my identity? Am I just testing out this sport? Am I just playing with it – Or is this who I am? And if this is who I am, the question about what I should do is easy. I've got to stay on the team.

We face similar question in the Christian life: Who are you fundamentally? Are you a rebel against your Creator, justly condemned to death, but saved through faith in the Son of God who suffered and died for you? Are you alive in Him because He took on Himself the penalty you deserved? Are you now, by His grace, a child of the King of the universe, purchased by the blood of His Son? Thus, do you owe all you are and all you have to Him? If that's who you are – it only makes sense that you would live to His glory.

Paul applies these ideas to himself in today's text from 1 Corinthians 9. We'll consider this passage under two headings:

- Are you a runner? (verses 19-24)
- Discipline yourself to become what you are (verses 25-27)

Are You a Runner

Earlier in this chapter, Paul has said that ministers of the Gospel, like himself, have a right to financial support. But he explains that he has made no use of this right among the Corinthians. He thinks that receiving financial support from them could obscure his motives, and thus undermine the impact of his preaching. Thus, he says in verse 12 that he does not want to "put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ."

Turn now to verse 19:

Though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, (that is, "I have enslaved myself to all") that I might win more of them.

He now defines in what sense he has enslaved himself to others:

20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak.

He now summarizes his position:

I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel

Who is Paul? What defines him?

- Being a Jew? Elsewhere he's willing to call himself a "Hebrew of Hebrews." That is his ethnicity – but it doesn't define him
- Or is he defined by the Law? He was, prior to his conversion, "as to the law, a Pharisee" (Philippians 3:5). Now he is no longer under the law, he says – but even that does not define him. He's willing to live as one under the law.
- The apostle Paul is anything but weak, yet he even becomes weak.

So, in any way he can, he changes Himself – so that he might fulfill who he really is.

Who is he, really?

He says: "I do it all for the sake of the gospel." That is, "I change all these matters about myself, I subjugate my personal preferences, I don't take financial support from the Corinthians, I do whatever is necessary for the sake of the Gospel" – for the sake of what he calls elsewhere "the gospel of the glory of the blessed God" (1 Timothy 1:11). Or we could put it like this: "I exist to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. THAT defines me! And I am perfectly willing to change anything else about me, so that I can fulfill THAT purpose, so that I can bring glory to Him."

The High School freshman faced the question: Are you a runner? Answering that question made his decision about whether or not to continue running difficult workouts easy.

We all face the question: Who are you? Are you first and foremost an ambassador of Christ? Answering that question makes many other decisions in life easy.

Know who you are! One aspect of knowing who you are is knowing your goal. Look at again at the text, beginning in verse 23. Paul now begins his running image.

23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. 24 ¶ 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.

The runner has a goal in mind: It may be a race. It may be a time over a certain distance. It may be fitness. You've got to know your goal before you can design a training regimen to achieve the goal.

Just so, Paul has a goal in mind. He says if you're in a race, your goal is to win. Thus, in the race of faith, run in such a way that you will win the prize. Keep the goal in mind! Structure your life around achieving that goal.

And what is the goal? He tells us at the end of verse 23, which we can paraphrase: "So that forever and ever I may share in the blessings of the Gospel with all these who come to faith through my witness." Or, "So that redeemed and perfected people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation might praise God together in billion part harmony, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne and unto the Lamb!'"

THAT is Paul's goal. Is that your goal? Are you a runner? Are you running for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:14)?

If so, then consider Paul's next exhortation:

Discipline Yourself to Become What You Are

25 Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an

imperishable. 26 So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air.

Here Paul says that all Christians are like athletes in two senses. First, they all have a goal that defines them – that's what we've already seen. Second, they discipline themselves to achieve that goal.

Paul here elaborates on the goal for the athlete and the goal for the Christian.

- For the athlete, the goal is the Olympic champion's olive wreath and the glory that accompanies it. But eventually that wreath will dry up and disintegrate. Even today's gold medals will eventually perish.
- For the Christian, the goal is the wreath that never perishes, that never dries up: the joy of being in Christ's presence for all eternity with the redeemed.

This greater goal therefore should lead to an even greater level of discipline in our lives than in the athlete's lives.

How do athletes discipline their lives? They exercise "self-control in all things." I'll break down "all things" into three areas, and consider the parallels in the Christian life:

1) Discipline in the Type of Training

Paul says, "I do not run aimlessly." The word translated "aimlessly" means "as one who has no fixed goal." So Paul is saying that he runs with his goal in mind.

This is true for every runner. A good coach considers how every step in training works toward achieving the goal. The athlete does not run haphazardly. He does not go to the track and do whatever he may feel like that day. Every workout is carefully planned.

- Overall distance run increases gradually, so the runner doesn't get injured.
- Each week contains the appropriate blend of endurance training and speed training, with the ratio of speed to endurance increasing as the big race approaches.

The athlete in training never makes the mistake of so many recreational runners: Go out, run hard, get sore, take three days off, then run hard for a week, then skip 10 days. Such running never gets you anywhere. That is running aimlessly.

In March of 1983, near my 27th birthday, while we were living in Kenya, I read in the newspaper that the first mass marathon in the country was scheduled for October 20. I was out of shape. I had been running aimlessly. But that evening I sat down and planned my workouts for every day for the next seven months.

The next day I four miles slowly. It was hard. I was sore the next day. Like that high school freshman, I asked, "Can I really do this?" But within a couple of weeks, I saw noticeable improvement. I stuck to the schedule. And by October I was in the best marathon of my life to that point.

The parallels with living the Christian life are powerful. Once we conclude that our goal is sharing in the glory of God around His throne with those we have influenced, we discipline ourselves, we train with purpose:

- We discipline ourselves to get to know Him better, through personal reading, through prayer.
- We discipline ourselves to sit under solid preaching.
- We discipline ourselves to put ourselves under a coach/elder who can help us.
- We discipline ourselves to speak the Gospel when opportunities arise, and to seek out such opportunities.

We train ourselves with the goal in mind.

2) Discipline in the Consistency of Training

A second aspect of the discipline of training is consistency. This is implied in the first point, but it is so vital that consistency deserves its own heading

After the 72 Olympic Games, we high school runners started reading all we could about Frank Shorter, who he was, how he trained. We discovered lots of interesting tidbits, but what struck me most was his consistency. If I recall correctly, in the seven years leading up to the Munich marathon, he ran every day. He never missed even one day.

Consistency in running is central. One coach puts it this way:

[A runner may say,] "Surely to miss training just this once will not matter? After all, there is a long season of it lying ahead." But to miss training once is to open a breach in the wall of routine. And a single breach will almost certainly be followed by others, to the point where there is no routine left. And then, bang! -- there goes your ambition to be a runner.

The runner's statement actually is true; to miss one day in and of itself is not going to destroy your training. But missing days develops a bad habit; it changes one's perception of what one is about. Running becomes not something you do because of who you are -- running becomes something you do when it is convenient.

Alternately, if you stick to your plan every day, rain or shine, cold or hot, windy or calm, tired or fresh, with every step of consistency, you define more clearly who you are.

Another coach writes, "Run until the question of not running just never arises."

Just so in the Christian life. I can dabble in Bible reading and church attendance and prayer and evangelism. But if this is WHO I AM, then these are central to my life. If I realize that I am a sinner at my very core, that without daily apprehending the cross my mind WILL wander, making me ineffective and unproductive, then I will be sure to get up in the morning, get into the Word, seek God's face, seek His grace; then I will speak the Gospel even if it makes me uncomfortable.

Then, just as with the runner, as you overcome daily the common hindrances, you define who you are that much more clearly. And every day of consistency makes the next day's obedience that much easier.

3) Discipline in Other Areas of Life

But I discipline my body and keep it under control (1 Corinthians 9:27)

The NIV renders this, "I beat my body and make it my slave." The idea is to beat down personal desires that would distract you from your goal. Thus Paul "enslaves" his body in the sense of forcing it to do HIS will, rather than being enslaved by the desires of his natural self.

What desires might enslave us and keep us from achieving our goal?

I believe Paul here is referring primarily to desires outside of running/training.

Consider the athlete again. For training to reap its maximum benefit, an athlete must discipline his entire life, not just his time on the track. A well-trained athlete must avoid distractions, must eat well, must get sufficient rest, and must avoid engaging in activities that could result in injury. A coach may put together a perfect training program, and an athlete may follow that training program to the letter -- but if he is not eating well, he will never fulfill his potential.

In the ancient Olympic Games, all competing athletes had to agree to fulfill a ten-month period of preparation. This commitment was not just to training, but also to diet and social interactions. Then at the opening of the Games, all the athletes

had to solemnly attest that they had kept that vow -- or they were not allowed to compete.

One of my college teammates -- let's call him Tom -- regularly displayed the negative impact of a lack of discipline in other areas of life. Tom probably had more natural talent than anyone on the team. And when he showed up at practice, he ran hard. But Tom was completely lost when trying to manage his time. He wasn't a partier, but he did let other activities interfere with his studying. Then, the night before a test or before a paper was due, he would stay up all night trying to catch up. He didn't discipline his life.

The most notorious example of this was when ten of us were running a 24 hour relay. In this crazy event, each of ten athletes runs a mile, handing a baton off to the next runner. The tenth then hands off to the first, and the cycle continues for 24 hours. This is easy initially, but of course it is impossible to sleep, and legs get stiff and tired by the middle of the night. A good night's sleep the previous evening is mandatory.

The night before the relay, unbeknownst to the rest of the team, Tom stayed up all night writing a paper. After eight or ten hours he could no longer run. He dropped off the team, cutting into the rest for all the rest of us, and shortening our distance considerably.

Every runner must exercise discipline in all of life, or he will never run his best.

Once again, there are strong parallels with living the Christian life. Running the race of faith has to do with much more than Bible study, church attendance, witnessing, and giving. Running the race of faith affects all aspects of our lives.

So, like Paul, we must beat down our bodies and ensure that they serve our goals. We must beat down:

- The desire to be lazy -- to waste time, frittering hours away at mindless activity, at sleep, even at good but less important activities.
- The desire to indulge -- both in explicitly sinful desires, such as illicit sex, drunkenness, and drugs, but also "acceptable" indulgences, such as eating too much, and spending more than necessary on purchases.
- The desire for acceptance -- so we don't speak the Gospel to our friends, our neighbors, our colleagues.
- The desire for entertainment -- so we choose a church on the basis of excitement rather than faithfulness to the Word.
- The desire for privacy -- so we don't take time to share the Gospel with the salesman who shows up at our doorstep, or the checkout clerk in the store.
- The desire for comfort -- so we don't even consider going to a hard place, leaving a good job, learning a difficult language.

If we know who we are, we will discipline these natural desires, we will subjugate them, so that our entire life is arranged to achieve our goal.

What is at stake in all three forms of discipline? Look at verse 27:

I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

Disqualified means "tested and found wanting." Here, Paul has the athlete's vow in view. To be disqualified would be to have violated his vow, and thus to be kicked out of the Games before the competition even begins. Thus he receives no wreath, no victor's crown.

The parallel for us: No celebration around throne. No being in the presence of Christ.

Understand what is at stake. Paul says that if he is not disciplined, he will not be with Christ for all eternity.

Now, note that he is not saying a person can lose his salvation. But he is saying: Who are you? Are you a runner in the race of faith? If so – you WILL discipline yourself – this is your identity, this is who you are. If you are not doing that, if you're not running in such a way that you will receive the prize – well, that's pretty good evidence you're not really a runner.

Conclusion

So are you a runner?

About ten years after my high school coach asked me that question, a very accomplished, older athlete asked it again: "Coty, when you start slowing down, so that you know you'll never set another personal record, will you still run? Are you a runner at heart?

In the quarter century since he asked me that question, I've slowed down a lot. And today my knees limit the distance I can run. Being a runner at age 52 looks a lot different than it did at age 22.

But I still know who I am. I've only missed two days of running in the last four weeks. I will run this afternoon. I am a runner – and will be, as long as I can put one foot in front of the other.

But running the physical race is not central. For all who believe in Jesus and are saved by His blood will run and never grow weary in the new heavens and the new earth.

The central question is: Am I a runner in the race of faith? Are **you** a runner in the race of faith?

Every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ MUST BE such a runner. That MUST BE our identity. That MUST BE what defines us.

Are you one who has had his heart of stone ripped out and replaced by a heart of flesh?

Are you one who was dead in trespasses and sins, lost, by nature an object of God's wrath, who now by His grace has been made alive with Christ, and raised with Him, and seated with Him?

If this is who you are,

- then you WILL discipline yourself.
- You will commit yourself to time in the Word, to a local body of believers.
- You WILL express joy in Christ, and deepen joy in Christ, and spread joy in Christ.
- You will, day after day after day, look to the cross, and pray over God's Word.
- You will control the rest of your life, so that you can be what God intends.

You will do all this for the sake of the Gospel of the glory of the blessed God, so that you together with all other believers will indeed gather around that throne, and proclaim the greatness of our God and King.

Do you know who you are?

Are you a follower of Jesus Christ?

Are you a runner – in the race of faith?

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The quotes from coaches are from Ken Doherty, *Modern Training for Running* (Prentice-Hall, 1964).

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