

## XV. All Things to All People

April 16/18, 2013

1 Corinthians 9:15-27

**Aim:** To live the Christian life as one of self-denial and self-discipline in order to be an example to unbelievers and to win the approval of God.

In this passage, Paul restates (v. 15) and then continues to illustrate the principle that love limits Christian liberty as well as his own policy of not using his right to be supported financially by those to whom he ministered. He gives two reasons why he refused to accept such support. First, he did not want to lose his reward for preaching the gospel without charge (vv. 15-18). Second, and more importantly, he wanted absolutely nothing to hinder his reaching the lost with that gospel (vv. 19-27).

### A. Paul's Reward (1 Cor. 9:15-18)

In this paragraph, Paul explains the reasons that lay behind what the Corinthians probably said was his willful and stubborn refusal to exercise his right to their material support. Paul describes the passion that drove him. He had forfeited his rights to the financial support of the Corinthians. What was the explanation for such an action? Paul says it was all for the sake of the gospel!

#### 1. Rights (9:15)

<sup>15</sup>*But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting.*

'These' are the rights of marriage (9:5), of not working (9:6), and recompense for work, plus expected courtesies on a par with those granted to some unnamed ministers (9:7, 12). The perfect tense inherent in 'have not employed' (*kechrēma*) indicates that he has never insisted on these, his mind having been made up long ago. Further, he has no intention of exerting a touching moral pressure to push the church to hurry through overdue payments.

Paul's thinking has not changed. He was not using subterfuge, hoping that, despite his protest, they would begin to pay him. He had never taken pay from those he served and he never intended to. Nor was he now asking for that in a disguised way. That was Paul's policy wherever he went. Paul received support from the Thessalonians after he left them, but not while he worked among them (cp. 1 Th. 2:9; 2 Th. 3:8). Without doubt that church was among the Macedonian churches that helped support the apostle while he was in Corinth (cp. 2 Cor. 11:8-9).

Paul's refusal to accept wages from those he was serving was the result of a deep conviction. He would rather have been dead than have anyone think he preached and taught for money. He was not a prophet for hire, as was Balaam (Num. 22) or in the ministry 'for sordid gain' (1 Pe. 5:2).

After insisting that all this is not some underhanded subtlety by which he is actually hoping to squeeze money out of the Corinthians in spite of all his protestations, he identified his free preaching of the gospel as his *boast*, which he would rather die than give up. To our ears 'boast' carries the idea of arrogant and conceited claims which one makes about oneself. 'Boast' (*kauchēma*) refers to that in which one glories or to the basis for glorying. It also carries the idea of rejoicing or reveling. Because it is frequently done in pride, boasting is usually a sin; but it need not be proud and sinful. Paul's 'boast' was not intended to convey arrogance but joy. He

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was so glad for that spiritual privilege and commitment in which he rejoiced that he would rather die than contradict it. He had his priorities right, receiving his joy from exercising his privilege to restrict his freedoms rather than from using them. His boasting was far different from boasting of his accomplishments, as he immediately makes clear.

### 2. Necessity (9:16)

<sup>16</sup>*For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!*

What will he point to as he stands before the Judge seated on his throne? ‘Not that I preach the gospel,’ he will say. ‘That cannot be my boast.’ Paul gloried *in* the gospel but not *for* it. He had absolutely nothing to do with the giving or the content of the gospel. He simply received the revelation. Nor was he boasting of his commitment to or ability in preaching the gospel. Paul explains that this ground for personal exultation is not evangelism. Nor does he swell with pride because of his office. This is, because, as he declares, ‘Necessity is laid on me. Woe is me if I do *not* preach the gospel.’ Paul could not accept pay since that would remove his only ‘boast’ to the Lord on the final day.

Perhaps Paul is attempting to forestall criticism that might have accused him of some sort of inverted snobbery in that he separated himself from other gospel preachers by not being supported. He is not boasting about how ‘spiritual’ he has shown himself to be by deciding to be an unrewarded gospel preacher. On the contrary, he did not choose this lifestyle at all. Paul literally says he had no choice in this matter of preaching; he was ‘drafted’ into it. He is under a divine compulsion to devote his life to the work of the gospel, and there can be no escape for him into any imaginable, let alone comfortable, alternative.

The fulfillment of his ministry enables Paul to avert what is termed succinctly as ‘woe’ (*ouai*), lamentation consequent upon the Lord’s disapproval. In effect, he says that failure to obey that call would result in his suffering severe chastisement. Paul has grasped that a life of gospel preaching is inseparable from a life of gospel sacrifice. How can an evangelist of the crucified Savior do anything other than shoulder his own cross and follow Him?

### 3. Stewardship (9:17)

<sup>17</sup>*For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship.*

A conscript does not offer himself; having been recruited, he cannot choose his activity: he yields – or resists – at his peril. ‘Against my will’ does not indicate he was unwilling to obey but that his will had no part in the call itself. It was not his choice to serve Christ, so consequently, he did not receive a ‘reward’ but a ‘stewardship’ (*oikonomia*), and like an obedient slave he must fulfill his owner’s will. He was under obligation to preach, for which he neither deserved nor expected a reward. This means that his office was neither his own idea nor dependent upon his endorsement of God’s will: deemed to be reliable, he accepted the service imposed unilaterally upon him (cp. 4:1-2).

His position was rather like that of the slave whose master gives him a ‘stewardship,’ or a trust to fulfill. ‘Stewardship’ indicates that someone gives us something or some responsibility that is valued to them, which we are to care for properly. The slave is not given any choice in the

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matter; he is simply told what he must do. But he does not imply that he accepted his stewardship passively or that he has served with a grudge.

### 4. Reward (9:18)

<sup>18</sup>*What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.*

However, divine compulsion is not the whole story. There is also a voluntary ingredient in the apostle's response to the Master's commission. Choosing not to be disobedient, he both discharges his trust and also offers his labor. For Paul, freedom means not the right to command a salary, but the right to choose his own satisfaction, which for him is not in terms of positive material benefits, but in a much more gratifying reward. His greatest reward is to deny his right to material support, because that is how he most closely follows in his Master's footsteps. And that explains why he would rather die than be deprived of his 'boast' (v. 15).

Paul explains why he has never demanded support from the church, nor will he do so. While Paul had no choice about whether to preach, he did have a choice regarding the remuneration for it, and this he willingly gave up. He was entirely free to expect support from those he served; but he chose not to be paid because he wanted it that way, not because it was necessary. It became his reward to have no reward. His payment has always been the joy of a clear conscience, knowing that there is nothing about his person that could be an obstacle to others.

The gospel comes from Paul with no strings attached, no price tag. It is Paul's gift to those who will receive it. Paul's controversial decision that his pay is to receive no pay was a dramatic demonstration of the controversial, law-free character of the gospel. The gospel is 'free of charge,' and Paul offered it 'free of charge.' With great happiness and satisfaction Paul forsook a liberty, he refused to take advantage of a right, in order to make a contribution of his very own to the work of Christ.

In a sense, Paul is in a 'no-win' situation. Some may have been saying that he turned down financial support because he knew himself not to be a true apostle. On the other hand, had he accepted money it would have been hinted that he was avaricious. 'Right' (*exousia*) refers to a congregation's obligation to pay its minister, and 'make full use of' (*katachraomai*) indicates that had Paul insisted on being paid by the church, he would have stirred up a hornet's nest; they would not have understood. So he has refrained. In summary, the apostle recognizes that serving his Master has been, and always will be, his reward – even if he has to engage in manual labor.

Does this mean that all preachers should preach without pay? No. Paul went to great lengths to prove the preacher is entitled to financial support. Paul's decision to relinquish his rights may have been his enacted sign that his was a unique apostolicity. He had 'seen the Lord' (v. 1) and had been entrusted with a 'commission' by Him (v. 17). He is an apostle. But he is a different apostle, uniquely so. He was confronted not by the resurrected Lord as the other apostles were, but by the resurrected *and exalted* Lord from heaven, outside the forty day time frame of resurrection appearances. Furthermore, Paul alone was charged with preaching Christ to the Gentiles to include them in the covenant people. The twin facts of having rights but forsaking them by working made Paul a unique apostle.

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But it does mean we all should ask ourselves some very searching questions. Is the gospel as important to us as it was to Paul? Are we giving anything up for the sake of the gospel?

### **B. Paul's Method (1 Cor. 9:19-23)**

In verses 19-27 Paul explains two ways in which he sought to enhance his preaching of Christ: through self-denial and self-control.

Why had Paul given up his right to receive payment for preaching? He says he didn't want to do anything to hinder the progress of the gospel (9:12). He just says it became his reward to preach the gospel free of charge. Perhaps Paul refused money because he didn't want to leave the impression that his preaching was financially motivated. He wanted to make clear that his preaching was due solely to necessity being laid on him. Only then would people judge the gospel on its own merits. Whatever the precise reason Paul had for thinking remuneration would hinder the gospel, one thing is clear as day: he was sold out to the gospel. He was a gospel-dominated man! To demonstrate his allegiance to the gospel, Paul uses two pictures of himself in the following verses. Consider first the slave (9:19-23), in which Paul exhibits the truth that fixed principles give rise to flexibility in relationships, an adaptability that breaks no law.

#### **1. The Slave to All (9:19)**

*<sup>19</sup>For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.*

Because Paul has stood aside from his 'rights,' he is beholden to no one. He is free from obligation to fit in with the expectation that apostles will be paid. He is free from the cultural conventions of Corinth where wealthy people expected to pay visiting lecturers and those lecturers expected to be paid. Because he is Christ's slave and given no choice about serving his owner (cp. v. 17), he is, paradoxically, free from 'all people.'

Yet it is not a selfish freedom. Rather, Paul was 'free' to be the 'slave' of others, whether Jews or pagans. 'I have made myself a slave' is only two words in Greek (*edoulōsa*, 'I enslave,' and *emauton*, 'myself'). That word for enslavement is very strong. But he freely embraced that slavery for one reason, to 'gain' the greatest number of people for the allegiance to Jesus the Christ.

Is there any lower level of living than that of a slave: no rights or privileges; unable to freely come and go; no holidays, fringe benefits, or retirement – only toil, hardships, deprivation, and abuse? No one in his right mind would ever choose to be a slave, but Paul says that is exactly what he had done. Through the gospel of Christ, he had been freed from all forms of tyranny and oppression, but he turned right around and volunteered for slavery!

The stress here is clearly on the voluntary nature of his sacrificial service, something that would occur only very rarely, if at all, in a slave's experience. The paradox is that the gospel freedman is only too ready to commit himself as a slave 'to all.'

What possible incentive could be powerful enough to compel him to do such a thing? Paul simply answers, 'That I might win the more.' Five times in four verses (9:19-23) he uses that word 'win.' Then he changes to the word 'save' in verse 22. Paul is registering his intense desire to see others come to know the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and, at the same time, his desire to see them grow into mature Christians.

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### 2. The Examples (9:20-22a)

In the next three verses, Paul spells out three specific examples of how his becoming the slave of others results in fruitful gospel work. He has adapted, and would continue to adapt, his living in order to help others be more receptive to Christ. The three examples identify different categories of people (within the composite ‘everyone’ of verse 19) to whom he is committed.

#### a) Jews (9:20)

<sup>20</sup>*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.*

Just how far was Paul willing to take this winning and saving business? For one thing, he says he had become as a Jew to the Jews. And because the Jews were those under the law of Moses, he adds, by way of simplification, that he had come under the law, although it is not now his final authority in matters of faith and conduct.

First, within scriptural limits he would be as Jewish as necessary when working with Jews. In Christ he was no longer bound to the ceremonies, rituals, and traditions of Judaism. Following or not following any of those things had no affect on his spiritual life. But if following them would open a door for his witnessing to Jews, he would gladly accommodate. What had once been legal restrains now had become love constraints. His motive was clearly to win Jews to salvation in Jesus Christ.

Paul begins with the Jews, whom he describes as ‘under the law.’ The apostle’s slavery here consists of laying aside his freedoms and his rights so that the gospel might not be hindered by any unnecessary cultural differences. When in the company of Jews, Paul kept their feasts and ate their foods. With Jews he was Paul, a Jew.

After he was saved, Paul didn’t think of himself primarily as a Jew, but rather as a Christian. He still, however, had an intense yearning to see his own people saved (Rom. 9:1-5), and to that end, he was still willing to comply with certain Jewish regulations and ceremonies. We shouldn’t construe this to mean Paul was willing to compromise the essential truths of the gospel. If he was always ready to respect Jewish scruples, he was never prepared to sacrifice gospel principles to Jewish prejudice. He did not believe, teach, or give the least suggestion that following the law was of any spiritual benefit. It could not gain or keep salvation, but it was a way of opening doors to work among the Jews.

We have important examples, elsewhere in the New Testament, of how this worked out in practice. When Paul wanted to take the young convert, Timothy, with himself and Silas, on a missionary journey, he ‘circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek’ (Acts 16:3). Timothy’s circumcision was of no benefit to him and certainly not to Paul. But it could be of great benefit to their ministry among Jews and was a small price to pay for the prospect of winning some of them to the Lord. The reason Paul had Timothy circumcised was nothing whatsoever to do with the gospel *per se*, and everything to do with not causing needless offense to legalistic Jews, who otherwise might never have begun to listen to his message about their Messiah. Similarly, in Acts 21:26, we find him carefully observing the rules of Jewish purification at the Jerusalem temple, along with his companions, precisely to avoid needless offense, even though he knew that he did not need the temple and its rules to bring him to God. He took part in that ritual in order to prove to the Jewish critics of Christianity that he was not teaching Jews to completely abandon Moses and the Old Testament

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law. The special Jewish vow Paul took in Cenchrea (Acts 18:18) may have been for the sake of some Jews. When preaching in the Jews' synagogues, Paul habitually used Old Testament arguments, examples, and quotations, in order to prove the identity of the Lord Jesus as the Christ, to those who were in bondage to the law.

### *b) Gentiles (9:21)*

<sup>21</sup>*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.*

Here he is referring to the Gentiles who were not under the law of Moses. The apostle is aware that Gentiles are people for whom the law of Moses, even if acknowledged by them as a focus of Jewish piety, has no authority. Therefore, 'without law' (*anomoi*) alludes to the status of Gentiles who live beyond the pale of Moses' law. Although he remains 'without law,' Paul is not 'without the law of God' (*anomos theou*); a God-given propositional code has been imposed upon him as his rule, and he aspires to honor it. Specifically, it is 'the law of Christ' 'within' which he finds himself (*all' ennomos Xristou*), meaning that Jesus as Lord has replaced Moses as his legislator.

Paul, of course, spent most of his ministry carrying the gospel to the Gentiles. The very customs that opened the door for him to gain a hearing among the Jews closed the door among the Gentiles. So Paul, as if these customs were a mere garment, removed them and put them aside when he was with the Gentiles. In saying to the Gentiles he was without the law, Paul didn't mean he was under no law at all, but quickly adds that he was under the law of Christ.

When in the company of Gentiles Paul adapted to their cultural behavior, but with the qualification that he did not live a lawless or wicked life. As 'lawless' persons, Gentiles were, for example, given to both idolatry and fornication. Paul is quick to distance himself from those kinds of behavior for even when present with Gentiles he remained subject to God's rule in all things. This however, was not through a life lived under Jewish law, but as one who was now 'under Law to Christ.'

To keep from being misunderstood, he makes it clear that he is not talking about ignoring or violating God's law. The parenthesis of verse 21 clearly explains that while the apostle no longer saw the law as a means of righteousness, he submitted to the authority of his Lord, Jesus Christ, and sought to live in obedience to His commands (cp. Jn. 14:15). In other than moral matters, however, Paul identified as closely as possible with Gentile customs. He ate what they ate, went where they went, and dressed as they dressed. Having made this distinction clear and ensuring that the word of Christ was in no way compromised, Paul was always prepared to adapt to Gentile culture, 'that I might win those outside the law.'

When dealing with the Gentiles, 'those outside the law,' Paul followed the same principle. In all the neutral areas, he was prepared to accommodate himself to Gentile cultural thought and practice so as not to raise unnecessary barriers to the gospel. The book of Acts furnishes examples of this at the historic Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:13-21), where it was agreed that Gentiles did not need to follow Jewish rites and ceremonies, in order to be Christian. Similarly, when addressing the Areopagus in Athens, it was the cultural setting and thought-forms of the Gentiles that dictated Paul's presentation and applications of the good news (cp. Acts 17:16-34).

### *c) The Weak (9:22a)*

<sup>22</sup>*To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak.*

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The third example seems a little unexpected. Suddenly, the weak brother of chapter 8, whose conscience could so easily be compromised by an unloving use of personal freedom, is back in the frame. Rather than asserting his freedom, the gospel slave is prepared to sacrifice his rights so as to win the over-scrupulous and not cause him to stumble.

Paul closes out this section by saying he had become weak to the weak. Very pointedly he takes the readers back to the previous chapter where the issue of behavior towards the ‘weak’ was raised. Here, he comes to grip specifically with the issue at Corinth. Paul is reminding the Corinthians that he did not go to dining rooms in the local temples and eat the idol-sacrificed meat in the presence of a god. As a slave of Christ he was free from any need to visit those temples and he exercised that freedom to gain the weak.

It is obvious that he is going beyond evangelism here. He had been talking about winning Jews and Gentiles to Christ, but those he calls ‘weak’ were already Christians (cp. 8:11). So we must understand his term ‘win’ to mean not only bringing people to know Christ, but also bringing them to Christian maturity.

### 3. The Reason (9:22b-23)

*I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. <sup>23</sup>I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.*

In summary, Paul became ‘all things to all men, that’ he might ‘by all means save some.’ He did not compromise the gospel. He would not change the least truth in the least way in order to satisfy anyone. But he would condescend in any way for anyone if that would in any way help bring him to Christ. He would never set aside a truth of the gospel, but he would gladly restrict his liberty in the gospel. He would not offend Jew, Gentile, or those weak in understanding.

Paul clinches this entire section going back into the previous chapter with this grand statement, which is intended to be a blueprint for his readers to follow. In classic style, Paul finished this section by directing the Corinthians to his own lifestyle and his carefully crafted policies towards Jews and Gentiles. Above all, they are like him, slaves of the Lord Christ, yet set free by His love-inspired death. They, like him, are to exercise their freedom in love for those whose needs are great.

If a person is offended by God’s Word, that is his problem. That person is offended by God. But if he is offended by our unnecessary behavior or practices—no matter how good and acceptable those may be in themselves—his problem becomes our problem. It is not a problem of law, but a problem of love, and love always demands more than law (cp. Mt. 5:39-41).

Verse 23 makes it very clear that the salvation of others is *the* supreme gospel blessing, both now and in eternity, which motivates that type of slavery seen so consistently in Paul’s ministry, and that ultimately produces the harvest, in God’s good time and will. ‘Fellow partaker’ (*sunkoinōnos*) refers to joint participation, joint sharing. The idea here is that Paul wanted everyone else to be a ‘fellow partaker’ with him in the benefits and blessings of the gospel. He wanted them to be with him in the family of God. Although Paul’s salvation is certain, he longs to see a continuous accession of believers, both at Corinth and elsewhere. For this he is prepared to do all that is necessary to please the Lord whose standards have become his rule of life.

Some might be inclined to think, in light of what Paul has said, that he was nothing but a compromiser. Nothing could be further from the truth. What he is talking about here is simply

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common sense in evangelism and in maintaining sound Christian relationships. It is what some call the ‘principle of incarnation’ in evangelism. Christ, in order to save us, had to become one of us, and if we are to win others, we must be willing to identify with them. The great principle of biblical evangelism is the building of bridges to people where they are, not the expectation for them to build bridges to us within our citadel churches.

### C. Paul’s Discipline (1 Cor. 9:24-27)

The second picture we have of the gospel-dominated man is the athlete. Actually, Paul uses two athletes to convey the devotion he felt to the gospel. The first is the runner (vv. 24-26a), and the second is the boxer (26b-27). These athletes have much in common. They both compete for a prize, they both must train diligently, and they both must guard against distraction. Both are, therefore, appropriate emblems for the Christian.

Paul now adopts another strongly Corinthian metaphor, that of the Greek games, and applies it to the gospel lifestyle he has been outlining. The victor’s garland was not won without training, discipline, and hard work. Liberty cannot be limited without self-control. It is one thing to acknowledge the principle of living by love; it is another to follow it. Paul followed it because he wanted to be a winner.

Greece was the home of many athletic festivals, but none more famous than the contests held every four years at Olympia to the south of Corinth. The second most important venue was Isthmia near Corinth where the games were held every two years under the patronage of the Achaian capital; therefore they were intimately familiar to those to whom Paul was writing. The site, the so-called ‘gate’ of the city, was 12 km east of Corinth and near the bottleneck of land that connects mainland Greece and the deep south. Excavations show that the Isthmian running track was about 181 m long. Contestants in the games had to prove rigorous training for ten months. The last month was spent at Corinth, with supervised daily workouts in the gymnasium and athletic fields.

Paul must have had first-hand experience of the Isthmian Games since they were held in the Spring of 51 AD when he was preaching in Corinth. The main contests were chariot races, foot races, wrestling, jumping, boxing, javelin, and discus. These were spectacular festivals attracting thousands of athletes and spectators. Paul the tentmaker may have been indirectly involved, since the multitudes of visitors were accommodated in tents. The race was always a major attraction at the games, and that is the figure Paul used to illustrate the faithful Christian life.

#### 1. As a Runner (9:24-26a)

##### a) *Run with Determination (9:24)*

<sup>24</sup>*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.*

There may be many conflicting motives, but ask any athlete why they are at the Olympic Games and they will tell you, ‘I want to win the gold medal.’ That is what explains the endless training schedules, the disciplined diet, the early nights and mornings. The end is clearly in view. It is undoubtedly a great moment when the athlete mounts the victor’s podium, when their national anthem is played, and the gold medal is hung around their neck, but after a year, or a decade or two, they will just be a name in a record book; the garland fades and the fame with it – it will not, cannot, last. It may be the greatest moment in that individual’s life, but nothing can preserve

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it forever. And if that is true for the winner, how much more for the losers? Remember that there is only one gold.

He is not saying that only one Christian wins the ‘prize’ of salvation so that all other competitors are ‘lost.’ Rather, his point is that everyone should run as if to win, with complete determination. Paul is speaking about thorough self-discipline and single-eyed focus on the finishing line. Many months of self-disciplined training precede the event, without which even the best athlete could not hope to win.

A great difference between those races and the Christian ‘race’ is that every Christian who will pay the price of careful training can win. We do not compete against each other but against the obstacles—practical, physical, and spiritual—that would hinder us. Paul counsels all believers ‘to run in such a way that you may win,’ by setting aside anything that might hinder reception of the gospel (cp. Heb. 12:1-2).

### *b) Run with Self-Control (9:25a)*

<sup>25</sup>*Every athlete exercises self-control in all things.*

Nevertheless, the discipline and determination of the athlete frequently puts to shame the half-hearted, casual nature of much Christian discipleship. If the Christian is to gain the prize, he must, like both the runner and the boxer, train diligently. The runner is ‘temperate’ in all things. This means he exercises self-control.

Paul may have in mind a competitor renouncing a diet that would lessen the possibility of winning. By analogy, the Corinthians must give up meat killed in sacrifice even if in some circumstances it is not wrong to eat it (cp. 10:27). They have to take this step to avoid giving offense to others and thus please their Master.

Although a Christian’s prize is imperishable, it requires self-control to achieve it, just as the perishable. No Christian will be successful in witnessing, or in anything else worthwhile, without discipline. If an athlete expects to excel, he voluntarily, and often severely, restricts his liberty. His sleep, his diet, and his exercise, are not determined by his rights or by his feelings, but by the requirements of his training.

The exercise of self-control probably refers to the necessity for an athlete to train for ten months before being allowed to compete. The whole of life was geared to this single achievement. It is still true today that if you want to win gold, there is a price to pay. And it is this same attitude of dedication and determination at the heart of the Christian’s spiritual life that Paul insists upon. He would not be satisfied by anything less.

### *c) Run for the Prize (9:25b)*

*They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.*

At the Isthmian Games, the winner’s crown was apparently a garland made of pine fronds or dried wild celery. The contestants competed for more than that, of course. The wreath represented fame, acclaim, and the life of a hero. Winners were immortalized, much as they are today. But that ‘immortality’ was just as mortal as the wreath itself, and lasted little longer. Both were ‘perishable.’

Paul contrasts such baubles with the trophies which Christ will hand to His champions. Christians do not run for a short-lived pine wreath or for short-lived fame. They already have

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true immortality. They run in order to receive a ‘crown of righteousness’ (2 Tim. 4:8; cp. 1 Pe. 1:4). That prize is ‘imperishable.’

As far as competing for a prize is concerned, the only difference between these athletes and the Christian is that the latter competes for a prize of far greater value. If the runner is willing to work so hard for something of such little value, how much more should the Christian be willing to work hard! And, whereas only one runner could win a race, every single Christian can receive the imperishable crown!

The prize awaiting the dedicated Christian runner is so much greater, because it is eternal. The reward is not the only incentive. The glory of the heavenly reward is that it is available not just to one winner but to all the faithful servants of Christ, who make the prize their goal. The prize he has in mind cannot be his salvation, for that is already God’s gracious gift. He is thinking, rather, of the heavenly reward for faithful service, of which he has spoken already in 3:12-15 and 4:5.

### *d) Run with Direction*

<sup>26</sup>*So I do not run aimlessly...*

If the runner and the boxer expect to succeed, they must be focused on the goal. If the runner runs aimlessly, wandering first to one side of the track and then the other, he is guaranteed not only to finish last, but to be the laughing-stock of the race. If he is to win, he must, without wasted motion or effort, drive straight towards the finishing-line.

We shall all inevitably drift into comfortable half-heartedness, unless we are actively running the race, putting the gospel first, and bringing our lazy, self-indulgent bodies and our proud, selfish spirits under the daily challenge of Christ’s radical authority.

## 2. As a Boxer (9:26b-27)

### *a) Box with Focus (9:26b)*

*I do not box as one beating the air.*

This focus is the same for the boxer. If he steps into the ring and turns away from his opponent and simply flails at the air, he will find himself flat on his back counting the stars. If he is to win his match, he must focus all his attention on his opponent and hit him hard and often. We see immediately the absurdity of the runner and the boxer going about their business aimlessly. But are we going about the Christian life in an aimless way? Are we not nearly as serious about our Christian living as we are about our other endeavors.

### *b) Box with Discipline (9:27a)*

<sup>27</sup>*But I discipline my body and keep it under control...*

The boxer has to ‘discipline’ himself if he expects to win. Paul portrays this as punching himself black and blue in order to serve the Lord effectively. He literally says he will ‘strike’ his body ‘in the face’ (*hypōpiazō* – ‘to hit beneath the eye’). He figuratively would give his body a black eye, knock it out if necessary. ‘Keep it under control’ translates *doulagōgeō* (‘enslave’); it is from the same root as ‘made...a slave’ in verse 19. Paul put his body into subjection, into slavery to his mission of winning souls for Christ. The body and its various appetites are the weapons sin tries to use against us and we must, therefore, keep our bodies under control. Most people, including many Christians, are instead slaves to their bodies.

## 1 Corinthians – Lesson 15

Whether in the months of training or the actual contest itself, Paul speaks of ‘buffeting’ his body and subjecting it to his control. Once more the vigorous images from the stadium speak vividly of the means by which Paul and other Christians must exercise complete self-control and self-discipline. Just as the athlete must say ‘no’ to himself or herself so, too, the Christian must be prepared to say ‘no’ to the seductive allure of wickedness in all its forms.

c) *Box for Approval (9:27b)*

*...lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.*

The alternative to this kind of discipline is to be ‘disqualified’ or ‘unapproved’ (*adokimos*). No, Paul is not saying he is afraid of losing his salvation. He is simply recognizing that his failure to discipline himself would result in being placed on the shelf as far as any usefulness to God is concerned.

Paul uses another metaphor from the Isthmian games. A contestant who failed to meet the training requirements was disqualified. He could not even run, much less win. Paul did not want to spend his life preaching the requirements to others and then be disqualified for not meeting the requirements himself.

Paul gives a reason for this drastic self-discipline. He uses the word ‘reject’ in the sense of a runner’s *disqualification* from the race. A breach in the rules or a tournament would result in just that, exclusion from the contest. In other words, Paul is saying that if he failed to discipline himself and became an idolater or a fornicator, he would be ‘disqualified’ in the eyes of God. Moral failure must render him ineligible for the prize.

Paul does uphold the sovereign will of God for the ‘perseverance of the saints.’ [Note: we do not compete to win our salvation, so we cannot lose it by disqualification; rather we compete for eternal rewards in heaven.] Yet his words here are meant to be a severe challenge to his Christian readers, past and present, to take spiritual self-discipline with utmost seriousness. We should believe that God’s strong hand holds His children in their salvation, but that he does so by warnings like this. As Peter teaches we have the responsibility to ‘make our calling and election sure’ by godly behavior (2 Pe. 1:10) and by rigorous self-discipline.

These pictures of the slave and the athletes make it easy for us to see how Paul viewed the Christian life. As far as he was concerned, it was such a serious business that it required hard work and concentrated effort. And this is how we shall view it if we are gospel-dominated. How do we measure up against Paul, the slave and athlete? Is the gospel important enough to us that we are willing to waive our freedom and our comfort to carry it to others? Is the gospel important enough to us that we are willing to discipline ourselves and avoid all other distractions? What better epitaph could any of us hope for than Paul’s great motto, ‘All for the sake of the gospel’?

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 10:1-13.