

PREFACE

As we begin our study of this final paragraph of Chapter Nine—which, by the way, serves as an introduction to the *following* passage in 10:1-13—I would like to place a thought, an image in your mind. We have a saying: “Playing with fire,” which, I believe, fits well with what Paul is saying to the Corinthians. When we tell someone they are playing with fire, we mean that they are dabbling in something that may, if not immediately, will ultimately do them harm.

It is at times difficult to see it, but Paul has not lost his place; he has not left his topic of eating food sacrificed to idols. And though in this paragraph he does not once mention banquets at pagan temples or a slab of mutton that has been previously sacrificed on a pagan altar, though his imagery is drawn from athletic contests and the discipline necessary to compete, Paul has not veered off-topic. He sees this business, introduced in v8:1, of eating things sacrificed to idols as downright dangerous—playing with fire. There is a crescendo built into the text from the beginning of Chapter Eight to the end of Chapter Ten; one gets the impression that the longer he thinks about the situation, the more he says about it, the more alarmed he becomes about it. And his words to the Corinthians are full of caution for us today—including the text before us.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.**v24**

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize?

Paul introduces an athletic metaphor that would have immediately struck a chord with his audience, for Corinth was the sponsor of the Isthmian games, held every second year, and second only to the Olympian. Many Olympian athletes would also have competed in the Isthmian games, which were “extravagant festivals of religion, athletics, and the arts, [with] thousands of competitors and visitors from all over the empire” (Fee). There is also an extra twist to this background. The games were held in the spring of A.D. 51, when Paul was in Corinth. And since there were no permanent structures for housing all that came, they stayed in tents. Paul was, of course, a tent-maker, so would have had plenty of contact with the crowd, and opportunities to share with them the gospel.

And there is one more pertinent factor that we may not realize, but would have been in the minds of the Corinthians. It is possible that the occasion of the games was the spark that ignited this exhortation by Paul in the first place.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:10.

As Garland points out, “The games were a prominent occasion for celebrating the patronage of the gods.” So you are at the games and it is lunch time. You see that the local temple to Aphrodite has erected a pavilion where they are serving meals. Their lamb kabobs look pretty tempting, so you take an available stool and a lovely young temple virgin dressed in her sacramental robes serves you a skewer hot off the altar. No harm done, right? That is until someone from the church sees you...

As in Jesus’ parables, one should not press the metaphor too far. If “the race” represents the believer’s life in Christ, we know that there is more than just one who “receives the prize.” What Paul is saying is that Christians are to do more than just join the race; they cannot just wander out onto the track and amble down toward the finish line eating a sandwich. They are to put forth the effort to finish well.

Run in such a way that you may win.

Here is the punchline to the passage; here is the exhortation Paul wants to leave with the Corinthians: *Run to win!*

Note: Here the NASB does *not* have the best translation. The Greek *katalambano* means “to take eagerly, i.e. seize, possess, apprehend, attain, come upon, comprehend, find, obtain, perceive, (over-) take. So the word refers not to the victory, but to *what one receives for the victory*, as the other translations reflect.

v25

Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things.

The training for the Isthmian games was arduous. Each athlete took an oath that he had gone through at least ten months of strict physical and dietary training. If he failed to do this he was disqualified from competition. One could not win the prize without effort, not just on the field, but in preparation for it.

They then do it to receive a perishable wreath,

The “prize” won at the games was a victory wreath, or crown, made from pine or wilted celery. Of course, the real prize was the fame, adulation, perhaps even monetary gain that would come from being crowned the victor.

but we an imperishable.

Now we take our first step into the most challenging aspect of this passage. Just what is Paul referring to when he says that believers compete for an *imperishable* wreath or crown? What is this crown and what does it represent? The answer may not be as obvious as you think. As his time on this earth was drawing to a close, the apostle wrote words heavy with emotion to his beloved son in the faith, Timothy.

Read 2 Timothy 4:6-8.

There Paul refers to his “crown of righteousness.” In his first letter, the apostle Peter refers to the return of the Chief Shepherd, at which time faithful elders will receive “the unfading crown of glory” (1 Peter 5:4). James uses the same phrase as his brother, Jesus, when he writes that “those who love Him,” those who have “been approved,” will receive “the crown of life” (James 1:12).

Read Revelation 2:10.

Even in heaven, any “crown of glory” received by the saints still belongs—as does *all* glory—to the Lord. Whatever reward He has placed on our head we, following the example of the twenty-four elders, give right back to Him.

Read Revelation 4:10-11.

We will develop this further in v27, but the question for which we must seek an answer is this: *Is the “imperishable wreath” he speaks of a singular reward, or eternal salvation itself?* The answer to this question will be important when we examine the word translated “disqualified.” For now, let us press on.

v26

Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim;

Implicit in vv26-27 is Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians to do what he does, to follow his example (in v11:1 his exhortation is explicit: “Be imitators of me”).

Following the athletic imagery, he now makes the point personally. Someone who runs “without aim” is someone who has “lost sight of the finish line,” or runs “as one who has no fixed goal.” If an athlete runs an intense, focused course, always keeping his eye on the goal, for a silly perishable wreath of wilted celery, how could a follower of Christ, supposedly pursuing an eternal crown, run his race haphazardly, aimlessly? That’s not how I do it, says the apostle.

I box in such a way, as not beating the air;

Likewise, for a boxer to get into the ring and not even bother to land a blow on his opponent, just whiffing at the air past his ears, would be just as absurd. No, says the apostle, when I fight I mean to land my blows.

but I discipline my body and make it my slave,

discipline, beat^{niv}, strike a blow to^{niv2011} = *hypopiazō* = from a compound of <G5259> (hupo) and a derivative of <G3700> (optanomai); **to hit under the eye (buffet or disable an antagonist as a pugilist)**, i.e. (figurative) to tease or annoy (into compliance), **subdue (one's passions) :- keep under, weary.**

This is not a picture, as some have espoused, of self-flagellation, but, as the predominant translations state, “discipline.” It is a picture of doing whatever is necessary—predictably different for each believer—to train for the competition at hand.

The Christian life is a full-contact sport. It is not for wimps, for the lazy, for the disinterested. To pursue Christ-likeness is to come up against, at regular intervals, obstacles, road blocks—and Satan’s world, which does all it can to pull us off stride.

so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

Now here, once again, just like in our last session, we have a troublesome passage. Just what does Paul mean by the word translated “disqualified”? The NIV versions add “for the prize,” which Gordon Fee affirms as a correct addition, but is not in the original Greek. If this is correct, we can see how important it is for us to determine just what that “prize” is, for Paul claims one can be disqualified from receiving it.

On the other hand, instead of referring to the prize, whatever it is, does it mean just what it says in English, that “...I myself will not be disqualified”? That is, not missing out on the prize, but being personally rejected by God—i.e., losing one’s salvation.

First of all, we can reject that interpretation. Jesus Himself cleared that up on several occasions, not least one day as He was walking in the temple. To the Jews who asked Him once again if He was the Christ, Jesus said,

“...you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” (John 10:26-30)

If you are truly born again, if your name is written in the Book of Life, no amount of withering before competition and obstacles—no amount of insufficient effort or “discipline”—will suddenly remove your name from that book, disqualifying you from eternal life with God. We can also reject, for the same reason, the interpretation that makes “the prize” synonymous with salvation—or, in Jesus’ words, the “crown of life.” A true Christian *will* persevere to the end.

If neither of those are valid, and if the disqualification is for “the prize,” then what is that prize? If it is a “crown,” which crown is it? I believe Jesus answers this in His parable of the talents, and the slaves to whom they were entrusted.

Read Matthew 25:19-21.

I think we can be distracted by the word “crown” or even “reward”—thinking of either as something tangible placed in our hands. I can think of no reward more precious and irreplaceable than standing before Christ Jesus and hearing the words, “Well done, good and faithful slave.” Those few words, if I am so blessed to hear them, will be worth more than the finest bejeweled crowns of all the kings and queens of Europe. The late Charles Haddon Spurgeon agreed.

Spurgeon: The Greek word, which is translated “a castaway” [disqualified] is *adokimos*. It might better have been rendered “disapproved.” It certainly has no such meaning as that which has been generally given to it. Paul was not afraid of being cast away by God at the last. What he aimed at was this—as he had entered the lists, as a Christian minister, to fight for Christ, to wrestle against principalities and powers, to seek to win souls for Christ, he must keep his bodily powers and passions so in subjection that, at the last, when the prizes were distributed, he would be found to have won his. This is quite another matter from being “a castaway” from salvation and eternal life. Paul was saved and he knew it; and some of us know, to a certainty, that we are saved; but we also know that there is another crown to be won, which the Lord will give to his servants who win in the great fight with sin. To win this crown is our high ambition and we long to hear the Master say to each one of us, in that day, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant, thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”

If one in this world lacks discipline with his money, spending it freely and badly, and then goes to the bank to get a loan, he may very well hear *other* words, something like, “You do not qualify for a loan. You are disqualified.”

If Paul, personally called by the risen Christ into service for Him, had not performed that service to the best of his abilities, running even when tired and sore, fighting against the opposition until bruised and bloodied, he may have heard words from His Lord to the effect, “Enter into your rest, but frankly, I’m disappointed in you.”

The apostle Paul was not afraid of missing out on heaven itself, on eternal life with Christ Jesus. But he was afraid—and wanted those in his charge to be afraid—of hearing on the day of judgment the words, “Frankly, I’m disappointed.”