

August 24, 2014 by Steve Brandon



Run To Win

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

1. Run to Win (verse 24).
2. Seek the Prize (verse 25).
3. Know Your Game (verse 26).
4. Discipline Yourself (verse 27).

I had every intention of preaching Psalm 113 this morning, but yesterday the teens had an "Amazing Grace Race," a fun activity for the youth. I was asked to give a Bible talk at the event to those who were involved. And so, throughout the week, I thought about what to say to challenge the young people in our congregation. I went along with the theme of the "Amazing Grace Race," and spoke about running the race of life.

As I gave my message, I had the thought of how appropriate it would be for all of you to hear. And as there were no adults there to hear my message, I want to preach it this morning. And so, I apologize to those of you who were at the Amazing Grace Race and heard my message already. But, it would do your soul well to listen to my message again. It would do my soul well to hear it again. And, it's going to be a bit more refined this morning. It comes from 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. It is entitled, "Run to Win."

Well, two weeks ago, we had a large family gathering with my parents, my siblings, a bunch of nieces and nephews, and a few family friends. At that gathering, I was talking with my brother and the subject of exercise came up. I told him that I was playing softball with the church's team. He said, "Softball is a difficult sport for older men. It is so easy to get hurt. You go from standing still to giving 100% of your ability. It's a good opportunity to pull a muscle. In fact, I have pulled my hamstring on three occasions, every time it was between second and third base."

I totally agreed with him. And thus, at our games this past Monday evening, I took some extra precautions and was careful to stretch and go easy. In the top of the 7th inning, I was on first. The game was tied. We needed a run to win. If we lost, our season was over and we would go home. The guy at the plate hit one up the middle. The center-fielder charged hard and tried to throw me out at second base. I was safe as the ball got past the second baseman. It also got past the pitcher, who was backing up the play. So, I ran hard toward third base. I thought that there might be a play, and I thought that I might be thrown out. So, I ran hard to third base. I ran really hard. And I pulled my hamstring, right between second and third base.

I limped onto the base, safe. Then, I proceeded to limp off the field, done for the night. Done for the next month or two. For the past week, I have been limping around, going nowhere fast. If I put my leg in the wrong position, I feel some intense pain shooting up my leg.

Now, let me ask you, "Why did I pull my hamstring?" There are many factors that come into it. First of all, I'm aging and my muscles aren't as limber as they used to be. Second, I didn't stretch as much as I should have stretched; that's obvious. Third, perhaps I was a bit dehydrated, which may have played a part. But, the major reason why I pulled my hammy is because I was running to win! If we lose, we go home! I had to get to third base! I had to score the run! I gave it all that I had! Or, in other words, "I was running to win."

Let's read our text this morning.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

My text has four verses. I have four points this morning for us. My first point is this:

1. Run to Win (verse 24).

I trust that you see it right there in verse 24.

1 Corinthians 9:24

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.

Run to win. I encourage all of you in all of life to run to win. In other words, be the best that you can be. For those of you involved in sports: play to win. For those of you students: study for A's. For those of you in the workforce: work to succeed. Work for your sales quota. Work for your full hours. Earn your full salary. For you stay at home moms: work at your duties will all your might. This is an entirely Biblical concept. In fact, right here in this same context, we have that famous statement in chapter 10:31, "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

And God is glorified when we use our gifts to the greatest of our ability. Even if it is something as mundane as "eating and drinking." This is the seed of the Protestant work ethic. Believers in Jesus Christ work hard. As Richard Steele wrote long ago, "He that lent you talents has also said, 'occupy till I Come!' How is it that you stand all day idle? ... Your trade is your proper providence." ^[1] In other words, God has given us gifts to use them.

When talking to slaves about their work habits, Paul writes, "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve" (Colossians 3:23-24). And when you love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, you will labor strong and hard with all your might.

Now, please, realize that in all of your labor, it is the Lord who will give you the strength to fulfill your task. "Those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; They will mount up with wings like eagles, They will run and not get tired, They will walk and not become weary" (Isaiah 40:31). Paul was fully aware of this when it came to his own life and ministry. He says in 1 Corinthians 15:10, "By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me."

You see Paul laboring long and hard for the gospel, working at it with all his might. Yet, at the end of the day, knowing that it was the Lord who was giving him strength. And so, church family, I encourage you, run to win (verse 24). Give it your best shot! Now, I'm not saying that

you should win at all costs. I would advocate playing by the rules. I would advocate complete integrity in the workplace. This is seen in verse 25, ...

2. Seek the Prize (verse 25).

1 Corinthians 9:25

Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

In the days when Paul was writing, he certainly was thinking about the Isthmian athletic games, that were hosted every other year in Corinth. As Paul was in Corinth for 18 months, he may well have witnessed one of these games. And Paul refers to the prize that the winners received. My guess is that one of their prizes may have been like the prize that the athletes received at the 2004 Summer Olympic Games hosted in Greece. Perhaps you remember the wreaths upon their heads. To wear such an ornament on the medals stand was a proud accomplishment. In our day and age, we join up the wreath with a medal, gold, silver or bronze.

If you play by the rules, and you win, such is your prize. Athletes won't get the prize, unless they play by the rules. In our day and age, I think of the steroid scandal. Baseball players, cyclists, Olympic athletes. The number of them who have been caught using steroids are far too many to count. And whatever prize they had won, it was forfeited. But, those who play by the rules win the prize. That's why we work and play with integrity.

Note the turn in verse 25. It's a turn from the physical analogy to the spiritual reality.

1 Corinthians 9:25

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

In other words, Paul here is making a transition from the races that are run at the Olympics to the race that we run as followers of Christ. They receive the perishable wreath (or perishable medal), but our reward is much better. It is imperishable.

In many ways, Paul has been talking about the spiritual analogy since verse 24. The whole metaphor of running a race is a metaphor for our lives. He's viewing all of our life as a race to be run. In fact, such is a motif of Scripture. "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1-2).

God has called us to run the race of this life. He has called us to finish the race as followers of Christ!

Paul was longing to finish his life well. When speaking to the Ephesian elders for the last time, he told them, "I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24). Paul saw his life as a race to be run. He saw it as a race to be finished, faithful to Christ. Walking in His ways. Trusting in His word.

And when we have run the race, there is a prize at the end. "Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13-14).

At the end of Paul's life, the good news was this: he finished. And he finished well. He told Timothy, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7). And with the completion of his race, Paul was expecting the reward: "in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:8).

Paul speaks of the "crown of righteousness" that he will receive. This is far better than any gold medal or ribbon that you might receive. This is the ultimate prize -- righteousness! The righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus Christ!

I guarantee you that in the ages to come, this is the only prize that will matter in your eyes. A hundred years from now, all of your ribbons and all of your trophies and even all of your bank account will seem as nothing and meaningless when compared to the "crown of righteousness" that will be rewarded to all who have trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you believe that?

What is it that drives the Olympic athlete to make such sacrifices with his or her time and energy? Olympic athletes will train tirelessly for four years for their one opportunity to compete. Is it not the prize that awaits that gives them drive? Is it not the recognition of being Olympic champion? Do you have a similar drive? Do you have an all-consuming desire to seek your prize?

Whether you realize it or not, you are in a race. It is not a race of speed; rather, it is a race of completion. It began the moment you were conceived in your mother's womb. It will end the moment you pass from this earth in death. And all that will matter in that day is this question: "How did you run your race?"

Jesus told a story about a rich man and a poor man, who ran different races. The rich man was nameless. The poor man was named Lazarus. Jesus described their lives. The rich man lived a life of luxury, seeking after his own pleasures. The poor man lived a life of hunger and deprivation. Jesus described their lives after the grave. The rich man was in torment. The poor man found relief in Abraham's bosom.

And in that moment, all that mattered to the rich man was to be relieved of any small amount of the anguish he was suffering. His former riches weren't on his mind. His former pleasures weren't on his mind. His awards weren't on his mind. They were irrelevant. His suffering was on his mind.

The opposite was true for the poor man. He was enjoying the comforts of his eternal life. The suffering and agony of his life on earth was all gone. When you piece together the whole of the Bible, the way to win the game is through repentance and faith. It is by turning from your own sins, and trusting in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation.

When Jesus Christ came on the scene, His message was this, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). Paul said it this way, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9). The way to get the prize is through Jesus and His sacrifice upon the cross for your sins.

You will reach that finish line quicker than you ever imagined possible. My oldest son, SR, left for college yesterday. He's not here this morning. He's in Los Angeles. Yvonne went out to drop him off. I gave Yvonne a note to give to SR on the plane, telling him of my love for him and my heart to pray for him. I was seeking to give some final fatherly counsel to him, as he faces the unique challenges and temptations of college life. One of the things that I remember writing was something to this effect, "SR, I can't believe how quickly your 18½ years with us in our home has passed."

The older you get, the faster those years seem to pass by. That's why verse 26 is important. Run to Win (verse 24). Seek the Prize (verse 25).

3. Know Your Game (verse 26).

Paul writes, ...

1 Corinthians 9:26
Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air;

If you are going to gain the prize, you need to know your game. The runner trains so that his running motion will propel him toward the finish line with the greatest speed possible. The boxer trains so that his every movement counts. No energy wasted by fruitless punches that don't land their target.

As many of you know, my daughter, Hanna, is into volleyball. She is pursuing whatever it takes to become the best volleyball player that she can be. Now, coming from two short parents, she knows that her aspirations of middle hitter for a division I college is a bit out of reach. But, she wants to play in college. In fact, she wants to play for The Master's College (where her brother is).

And so, we (as parents) have done everything possible to help her learn about the game of volleyball and develop her skills. For the past two winters, she has played on a club team at Sportscore II. This summer, she attended a volleyball camp at Northern Illinois University, where she received some top notch coaching to help her with her skills. She has watched some Olympic volleyball online to see how the best players in the world play. This fall, we are planning to attend some upper-level volleyball games.

This past week, we printed out her own volleyball schedule, along with the schedules of other universities that we would like to see play. Rock Valley College, Northern Illinois University, the University of Wisconsin, We have arranged some dates in which we might be able to go and see the big girls play. In fact, we are both particularly excited about September 24, 2014 when Penn State is coming to play in Madison, Wisconsin. Penn State is the top college program in the nation, a bit like John Wooden's Bruins in the late 1960's and early 1970's when they won ten national championships. In the last seven years, Penn State has won five national championships (including last year). And last year, University of Wisconsin lost to Penn State in the national championship match. Their match together on September 24 is a bit like a super bowl rematch. We look forward to seeing them play and learn from them.

Why are we doing all of this with Hanna? Because, if you want to be a good athlete, you need to know about your sport. You need to know as much about your game as you possibly can. I would encourage you parents to help your children in succeeding in their areas of interest if at all possible.

This is true of so many areas of life. Are you wanting to be a good pianist? Then listen to the greats play and read books about composers. Are you wanting to be a good water-skier? Then pull up YouTube and watch the greats ski. Are you wanting to be a doctor? Then go to school and learn everything you can about biology. And when it comes to the Christian life, it is the same thing. When you think about the race you are running, you should pursue everything that you can about running that race.

God has given to us a manual to teach us about the race that we are running. It is the Bible! The Bible teaches us about the way to win the race. The Bible teaches us how to run the race. The Bible gives us reasons why to run the race. The Bible tells us how God created a world that was perfect. But, Adam and Eve, because of their sin, plunged the world into sin. We are under the wrath of God, separated from Him. But, God so loved us that He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to take the punishment that we deserved. And so, by faith in Him, our sin can be forgiven and we can be right again with God. And those who so trust Him and love Him will spend eternity with Him. Those who have refused His grace in Jesus will spend eternity apart from him in ever-lasting torment.

And so, here's my question for you all this morning: do you know your game (verse 26). Do you know the game of life? Do you know Jesus Christ? Are you pursuing Him? Are you pursuing the Bible? Are you pursuing God? Are you desirous to learn more?

Remember Paul's great statement in Philippians 3:10? Paul says, "... that I may know Him!" That's the heart of a man who wants to know his game. This wasn't before he was saved. This was long after he was saved. This was after several missionary journeys. This was after several books of the Bible were written. Paul wrote those words from prison, because of His zeal in following Christ. But, He wanted to know Him deeper and greater. In his life, Paul forgot far more than any of us will ever know about the Lord. But, this didn't prevent him from pursuing a knowledge of Christ.

Now, as I look across our congregation, most of you would profess a faith in Christ. It's why you come here week after week. You are to be commended. But, are you pursuing Him? Is your life about knowing God? Are you consumed with running this race of the Christian life with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength?

And sadly, as I told the youth yesterday, I know that there are some of you who aren't in such a pursuit. Your Bible remains dusty. Your prayer life is practically non-existent. Your passions for God are small. Your true passions are elsewhere. You may be in a dangerous situation.

When Christ calls us to come to Him, He calls us to forsake everything to follow Him. Remember His words, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me" (Mark 8:34). Jesus wasn't interested in half-hearted followers. That's why He demanded so much of the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-26). That's why He turned away any who came up with an excuse for following Him. "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." "Let the dead bury their own dead." "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:57-62).

And when Jesus described the Christian life, He described it as a difficult journey in which few really find life. Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matt. 19:24). Jesus said, "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). Jesus said, "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). Jesus said, "No one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions" (Luke 14:33). When Paul was saved, he was told, through Ananias that He would be shown "how much he must suffer for Jesus' name" (Acts 9:15-16). It is appointed to believers, "not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for His sake" (Phil. 1:27).

The thing that is going to carry us through is a pursuit of God through His word and prayer. There are many who walk through this life playing church. There are few who find the narrow gate to eternal life. Do you know your game (verse 26)? Are you pursuing your game?

Well, let's turn to my last point. Finally, ...

4. Discipline Yourself (verse 27).

1 Corinthians 9:27
but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

Now, this is Paul's testimony regarding his life. When it came to personal discipline, Paul willingly subjected his body to the rigors of righteousness and love. Paul has said these words deep in the context of Christian liberty. Chapters 8-10 are all about Paul and his use of his freedom in Christ. Chapter 8 is all about idols. Idols are nothing (1 Cor. 8:4). Yet, for those coming out of idolatry, eating food sacrificed to idols is a stumbling block. It reminds them of their former life. So, for the sake of love, Paul writes, "If food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble" (1 Cor. 8:13).

Chapter 9 is all about the ministry. He has a right to take a wife. He has a right to receive money from those to whom he preaches. But, for the sake of love, Paul writes, "I have used none of these things" (1 Cor. 9:15).

Chapter 10 is again about idolatry and its dangers. "Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry" (1 Cor. 10:14). Finally, he says, "All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable" (1 Cor. 10:23). It is in that context that Paul writes, ...

1 Corinthians 9:27

but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

And the exhortation comes to us as well. Evaluate your life. See what's helpful. See what's profitable. See what's loving. And Discipline Yourself (verse 27) to do the right thing. Teach your body that you won't obey its every desire.

On our summer vacation, Yvonne and I read a fascinating book out loud to each other. It's entitled, "Called Again," by Jennifer Pharr Davis. Jennifer is the record-holder for travelling the Appalachian Trail faster than anybody else (male or female). In June/July of 2011, she travelled the 2,100 miles in 46 days, 11 hours, and 20 minutes. That's an average of 47 miles each day. She is an incredible athlete.

This book tells of how she did it. It tells of how her husband, Brew, supported her during the walk. He would go ahead of her and meet her at various crossings, giving her the needed food and water that she needed until the next crossing. He would set up camp each night for her, cooking dinner for her, so that all she needed to do was roll into camp, eat her dinner, and go off to bed. After she left on her hike in the morning, he would break down camp and meet her along the way. He did this for 46 days! It's a great illustration of a husband's sacrificial love. And, would the truth be known, the speed record on the Appalachian Trail is every bit Brew's record as it is Jennifer's.

But, it is Jennifer's record. To accomplish such a feat, she was up every morning before the crack of dawn. Her alarm was set each morning for 4:45am. Within 15 minutes she was normally up and on the trail. She often finished each night after dark, somewhere around 10pm, averaging some 6-7 hours of sleep each night.

But, here's the thing. She kept plodding along. For 46 days, she plodded along at a pace of about 3 miles per hour. This is not terribly fast, yet she kept walking. She walked through pain in her legs. She walked through rain. She walked through cold. She walked through heat. She kept plodding along. That's discipline.

Now, there were days when she didn't want to get up. There were days when the pain in her legs was so great that she grimaced with every step. But, she forced herself through the pain to keep going.

The Christian life is much like this. It's not a sprint. It's a long journey on a difficult road that takes a bit of discipline to follow through. But, we don't need to do it alone. The LORD is there to support us along our way. And the LORD fully knows our weaknesses.

A few weeks ago we looked at Psalm 103, which says in verse 14, "He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust." God knows our weaknesses. He knows our temptations. And when we fail, He simply wants for us to confess our sin and seek His help.

Now, as it happened, while we were in California, we were looking up information about Jennifer on the internet and found out that she was to be speaking at a library in Council Bluffs, which was right on our way home. Furthermore, she was to speak about 3 or 4 hours after we were planning to ride through the city anyway. So, we slowed our pace and got to hear her speak in the local library. When she finished her talk, one of the questions that I asked her was whether or not anyone has attempted to break her record. Her husband responded by saying that a record attempt was currently under way. A man named Karl Meltzer is currently trying to break the record. He's about half-way through the trail and very much on pace with Jennifer.

Karl Meltzer is the sort of guy who runs ultra-marathons (i.e. 100 mile races). At KarlMeltzer.com, the banner reads, "100 miles is not that far." He tried to set the record in 2008 by running much of the way. It took him 54 days. He said this:

We ran a little bit more than we probably should have last time (i.e. 2008). It just felt good. This time I'll probably walk a lot more. ...

In 2008, my best day was in Virginia. I ran 60 miles and I felt great that day. I totally could have kept going. It wasn't even dark yet. I went nine miles the next day. I totally broke down. I did this nine-mile section and I got in the RV and I was like, "I'm done."

I was just kind of mad and angry, but I mentally broke down. That next week or the next four or five days or something, it was nine miles, 19 miles, 29 miles. ^[2]

See, the race doesn't go to the swiftest. It goes to the one who plods along.

The Hare was once boasting of his speed before the other animals. "I have never yet been beaten," said he, "when I put forth my full speed. I challenge any one here to race with me."

The Tortoise said quietly, "I accept your challenge."

"That is a good joke," said the Hare; "I could dance round you all the way."

"Keep your boasting till you've won," answered the Tortoise. "Shall we race?"

So a course was fixed and a start was made. The Hare darted almost out of sight at once, but soon stopped and, to show his contempt for the Tortoise, lay down to have a nap. The Tortoise plodded on and plodded on, and when the Hare awoke from his nap, he saw the Tortoise just near the winning-post and could not run up in time to save the race.

Then the Tortoise said: "Slow but steady progress wins the race." ^[3]

So it is with God. So it is with the race we all are running called life. God isn't looking for us to be big, flash in the pan sort of people. He wants us simply to plod along, pursuing Him, day after day, month after month, year after year. Do that, and you will "Run to Win."

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on August 24, 2014 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Richard Steele, quoted in "Worldly Saints," by Leland Ryken, p. 27.

[2] Here's a link to an interview Karl before attempting the Appalachian Trail record: http://i-m.fr/MetlzerAT14.

[3] Taken from Aesop's Fables.