

Running for an Imperishable Crown

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Paul gave up his rights and used his freedom to win people to Christ. His qualification for evangelistic ministry is personal holiness which resulted from strenuous discipline. Every person will stand before God and given an account for the life he lived. The Bible requires us to hold salvation by faith alone together with serious discipleship, and grace is the thread that holds these together in perfect harmony.

The Crown

Every three years the Isthmian Games were held at Corinth where athletes would compete for a perishable celery crown. Paul compares the Christian life to a race that has a far more important crown, one that unlike every current record and prize will never fade (v25). This is the crown of righteousness that will be given to him when he finishes the race and goes to be with the Lord (2 Tim. 4:6-8). In the already-not-yet experience of salvation in this life, Paul already has it, and he counts all of his blessings as losses when compared to “the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:8-10). God has already given us everything in Jesus Christ with whom we are joint heirs, but we experience these blessings more fully as we grow in grace, eventually die, and finally receive our glorified bodies in the resurrection. Paul asks the rhetorical question: do you not know how a race works (v24)? We do but have a hard time remembering that this is how the Christian life works. He’s not calling for ungodly competition among the brethren in Corinth, but for single-minded devotion like a professional athlete (v25). The best at their game overlook no detail of diet, sleep, schedule, training and activity. Do we have the same spiritual mindset? Christians are radically confused who approach this earthly life as a waiting room for heaven. We’re in a race not a lobby, heading for a prize not an appointment.

Faith & Works

We tend to take grace and works, or better, grace and obedience, and divvy them up like a pie chart: God does 50% and we do 50%, or God does 99% and we do 1%. But this is not how it works: “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13). God does 100%, and of things we are able to do, we do 100%, and it’s all grace. God owes us nothing but gives us everything, including the opportunity to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Nothing Paul says here contradicts what he says elsewhere, namely that “by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:8-10). We really do have to run a race, and it’s one that God accomplishes in us from first to last. It’s a race we “run with endurance...looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the

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shame” (Heb. 12:2).

The Means of Grace

Paul runs toward a specific finish line, knowing where he’s going. Switching the metaphor, he is boxing, not shadow-boxing (v25). He pummels his body in order to make it his servant in order to not be disqualified (v26). The punches he lands are on specific sins and temptations. It would be hard to state the rigor of what he is doing more severely. He’s not talking about imposing ascetic bodily regulations: “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle.... These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh” (Col. 2:21, 23). And we know he’s not talking about physical training in the athletic sense, which he says is of some value, but godliness is profitable for everything (1 Tim. 4:8). Martin Luther’s first of the 95 Thesis states “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said “Repent,” he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.” Paul disciplines his body so as to not give in to temptations. G.K. Chesterton said that Satan fell by the force of gravity; unless we actively fight against sin, we will give in. Paul doesn’t want to preach the goodness and grace of Christ while failing to believe and put that grace into practice in his own life. The greatest follower of Christ fought continuously to be free of anger, pride, lust, despair, and fear. How much more do we? This can be intimidating, even overwhelming, but the yoke of Christ is light and His burden it easy. The Westminster Shorter Catechism Q88 tell us that “The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption are, his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all of which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.” Notice the word *ordinary*. God ministers to us in countless ways, but His normal ways are easy and available. Think of all the habits you do methodically without much effort or thought. What if reading the Bible ten minutes a day, likely a fraction of the time you spend on your phone or device, was like that? You’d feed every day on the Word and grow up big and strong. Solomon tells us God is in heaven and we’re on earth, so we should keep our prayers short (Eccles. 5:2). Keep your prayers, and keep them short. The sacraments are baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Baptism reminds us of our salvation and grows us up into it, and the Supper assures us with joy every week. All of these blessings we run to receive, and the more we do, the more we want to: “But those who wait on the Lord Shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint” (Is. 40:31).