

Playing to Win - 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Introduction: Today is Football Sunday. They probably didn't play football in Biblical times. But they did have athletic contests. This area is where Olympic Games started. Athletics were important back then as a means of exercise and a way to get away from the stress of life. Today, athletics in many places is big business. Today, people earn their living in athletics.

The Apostle Paul must have either been an athlete in his youth or he grew to love athletics later in life because he loved to use athletic competition to illustrate spiritual truths. Perhaps he did this because he knew that people understood them and because the principles apply to both competition on the field and in real life.

When two teams square off on the field, your purpose is to win. But there is more to winning than what we see on a particular field of play. The outcome of the game will be the result of a process that began many months and even years ago for these athletes.

This is true of the Christian life as well. If we want to be a winner in our Christian life, we must apply the same principles that athletes apply. Our life has been described as a race, and the goal in a race is to win. I hope your goal in your Christian life is to be a winner.

Listen to the advice Paul offers in our text. **1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (NIV)** *“²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. ²⁶ Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. ²⁷ No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”*

The people of Corinth were familiar with the Greek games. They had either seen them or participated in them. They knew about the “prize” which was a garland of leaves fashioned from the branches of trees and placed upon the winner's brow. Here Paul takes this simple concept and makes a spiritual application. He gives us a three-fold plan for success in our Christian race. He tells us how we can play to win. First, you have to:

1. Be Determined (24)

As I said, the Christian race is compared to a race. Do you know why? It's a strenuous activity. Don't let anyone tell you the Christian life is easy. Now it's easy to become a Christian, only believe, but difficult to run. A traveler can and does stop along the way to rest, but as the runner can't stop if he or she is going to win the

race, the Christian has no stopping place in life either. Sure there are times when we get tired and we need to refresh ourselves, but lying down and quitting is out of the question. The Christian must run, strain, fight, and push to the limits if he or she is going to come out on top.

Why is this true? It's true because of our goal - to become more and more like Christ. Being like Christ has eternal implications. Being like Christ is worth the fight. It is not like those perishable wreaths the Greek athletes ran for. They soon wilted and decayed. But this prize will last forever.

You know what a struggle it is just to strive and work to try to get material things here. We do so to make us happy and comfortable, but we have to put it in perspective...these things will not last. They are temporary pleasures. But we receive an eternal reward when we play to win at the Christian race.

The implication is obvious. If we work so hard for the temporary, how much more should we work for the eternal? Our goal is so much more worthy, and we must be determined to attain it. We must play to win. We must desire the things of God so much where we are determined to work for them, not just on Sundays, not just when we feel like it, not only in our spare time, but all the time.

D.L. Moody once heard a man say, "*The world has yet to see what God can do through a man totally dedicated to Him*" Moody responded with, "*I want to be that man.*" How about you? Are you content to just run out the string and gain only what is temporary, or are you determined to be all you can be for Christ? Second, if you're going to play to win, you'll have to:

2. Be Dedicated (25)

As important as determination is, it's not enough to totally allow you to play to win. Some people start out determined with good intentions, but they never finish what they start. We must do what the winning athlete does and be dedicated to the task. We must run with dedication, commitment, and complete surrender to the cause.

When we are in this Christian life, there are going to be those times when we grow weary. That is a natural result of our working hard for the Lord. But what keeps us going even when we don't feel like it? What keeps us going when we're discouraged? Dedication. You and I have all seen those athletes who play through pain, sickness, broken bones, and even a death in the family. We've seen them play for peanuts and for last place teams. What makes them suit up every day? Dedication is what often makes the difference in winning and losing.

When Mickey Mantle was young, he had it all - strength, agility, speed, natural skills, you name it. Injuries

took its toll on his body, but he played through it, and is still considered one of the all-time greats. Even in his later years, he struggled with the effects of alcohol, but he chose not to let it determine who he was. He dedicated himself to quit, and even started a charity center for alcohol abusers before he died. He dedicated himself in his life. And is still a winner in my book because of that.

Athletes train with intense dedication over their athletic lifetime for the chance to win. How much more should we be dedicated to strengthening our spiritual selves in the things of God in order to gain an eternal crown of glory, which will never fade away. Jim Elliot, a great missionary in days past once said, “*A man is no fool to give up what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose.*” How true and inspiring.

Finally, if we’re going to play to win, we’ll have to:

3. Be Deliberate (26-27)

Paul said in vs. 26-27, “*Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air.*” To do that is to run deliberately – with a goal in mind. We must know what and where the finish line is, and everything we do must carry us toward that goal.

What is your goal in life? Is it just to graduate? Is it to retire wealthy, to put the kids through college, to have a big house with a swimming pool, to own your own business? All these are worthy goals, and worth working for. But what is your goal in your Christian life? Have you ever thought of that? If you haven’t, then why not? We plan and work and strive so hard for other things in life; why don’t we put the same hard work and effort in our spiritual lives? Of all the areas in our lives that has worth and value, our spiritual life stands head and shoulders above them all.

One of my favorite sayings is, “*If you fail to plan, then you plan to fail.*” That certainly applies in our Christian life. Failing to plan our Christian life is declaring that we plan to do nothing but settle for being content with just getting by. But winners don’t just get by. Winners don’t settle for mediocrity. Winners have a plan and a goal and a determination to get there. Winners are dedicated to reach that goal at all costs.

And the Bible says here that winners must also be deliberate in this race of life. Winners must know our goal and keep their eyes on it. And what is our goal? Heaven? Fame? **NO!** Our goal is Jesus. Let me explain what that means.

Hebrews 12:2 tells us to “*fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.*” What this means is that Jesus is not only our goal, but He is also the means by which we can attain it. He is both the goal of the race and the power to run it. He is the author of our faith - He gives us the faith by which we run. And He is

the perfecter of our faith. He brings us to maturity so we can finish the race victoriously.

In practical terms, Jesus is our goal in that we must be committed to become like Him. That is the reason we run - to be conformed to His image. That is the purpose of God for every believer, to be molded in character, nature, heart, and will into the image of Christ. Jesus is the only one who is worthy to be the ultimate goal in your life. Nothing else compares.

So guys, as you play out the remaining schedule, and church as you live out your lives, I hope you'll think on these things not only in terms of the competition on a field, but in terms of your own spiritual lives. Ask yourselves, am I determined, dedicated, and deliberately living my life so that I can be more like Jesus? Am I trusting and depending upon His power to get me there, or am I doing it by myself. Let's have a purpose in life. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Be determined, dedicated, and deliberate in your Christian race. Finish the race as winners. Let's play to win.