

Meats and Idols, Knowledge and Love – Part 4

Run in Such a Way – *1 Corinthians 9:24-27*

Introduction – Paul is continuing his argument that he was willing to curtail his rights for the sake of the gospel (Ch 9). He is transitioning back to his main point about foregoing some things for the sake of others (Ch 8) and foregoing some things altogether because they are inherently incompatible with the Christian “contest,” such as eating in a pagan temple (10:20-22). Paul gladly gives up his rights and freedoms for the sake of the gospel, that is, to win people to Christ. He sees that his greatest satisfaction is to be found in Christ and the goal of an imperishable crown. The Christian life is not an orgy of self-gratification, but a disciplined life focused on things that really matter and ends in an eternal and glorious satisfaction (Luke 18:28-30). Seeing this, Paul is driven to see the prize and run in such a way that he may obtain it. “Imitate me” he will write (11:1).

Running for the Crown (vv24-25) – The Isthmian Games were almost as popular as the Olympic Games. They were held every other year about 8 miles from Corinth. Paul most likely witnessed the games and may have plied his trade (tentmaking) at Isthmia where he would have the opportunity to present the gospel to numerous people. With that live illustration right before the eyes of the Corinthians, Paul gets right to the point: all run in a race, but only one receives the prize. His immediate focus is this: run in such a way that you obtain the prize. Then he describes the competitors. They exercise self-control in everything else so that they might win. They are obsessed with this goal (and we can see this just as easily today in athletic training). Now, if they won, their prize, their crown, was a wreath of withered celery. In a “how much more” way, he argues that we should be a people obsessed with winning an imperishable crown (v25). What is this crown? The Bible teaches us that it is the crown of righteousness, of eternal life, and of glory (2 Tim 4:8, James 1:12, 1 Pet 5:4, Rev 2:10). Remember the immediate context is to discipline oneself, to love others above one’s rights, for the sake of other’s salvation. Jesus promises great reward for such faith and action (Luke 6:38). The Gospel is not a call to stoicism (just do what’s right, unemotionally, because it’s right) and to seek such a crown and such blessings is encouraged by Jesus, Paul, and throughout Scripture.

Running with Certainty (vv26-27) – Paul writes that he runs “*not with uncertainty*,” and that can be understood as running with “an inner perception of what is known and believed.” In other words, Paul does not run without faith. Faith about what? Faith in Jesus, yes, but faith in the crown, the reward, the surety that “*For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain*” (Phil 1:21). He doesn’t run without that certainty and he doesn’t waste his effort like a boxer “*beating the air*.” He is fixed on the goal. Sometimes it is said that one can be so heavenly minded that he is no earthly good. But with the faith Paul has he has become so heavenly minded that he is *more earthly* good.

In verse 27, Paul returns to the illustration of a boxer, but now he is disciplining (beating) his own body in order to make it serve his purposes in the gospel. He is not indicating that he literally treats his physical body with self-flagellation or asceticism. He doesn’t think of his body as bad; rather he sees his body as an instrument with which to glorify God (i.e. 1 Cor 6:20) and to prepare it for its true destiny of union with the Lord in the resurrection (6:13-14). And Paul must practice what he preaches, “*lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified*.” He is teaching the Corinthians in this: in their reckless inconsideration and pursuit of self-gratification, they look for how close to sin they can live. Paul, on the other hand, knows he must work out his salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12-13) knowing all the while that nothing could separate him from Christ (Rom 8:38-39). “*The one state of mind is the necessary condition of the other; it is only those who are conscious of this constant and deadly struggle with sin to whom this assurance is given*”- Charles Hodge. Paul will unpack this verse that gives a warning in the next chapter.

Obsessed with Jesus – Whether it is this passage, or Heb 12:1-2, or Phil 3:12-14, we see that Paul is not afraid to use language that screams of pressing on with an obsession to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Nothing here contradicts what he says elsewhere about being saved by grace through faith and not of works (Eph 2:8-10). We really do have to run a race, and it is a race that God accomplishes in us from first to last.

Eyes on the Goal – Time is going somewhere, creation is going somewhere – there is a telos to all of this. God uses and blesses our imperfect faithfulness with eternal blessings. And our ultimate goal is realized in the resurrection (which is dealt with extensively in Chapter 15). But looking ahead, that includes nothing less than the renewal of all creation, the conquest and abolition of death, and the entrance of a deep and glorious reality called resurrection and eternal life. Every Christian is called to live in the present as someone who will make a difference in what that will be like for others, because God has ordained the ends and He has ordained the means.

Winning isn't Everything – *“it's the only thing.”* And the gospel story preaches like that. There is a joy and celebration in winning and our lives ought to represent that. Because Christ has won, we have won in Christ. Because Christ has crushed the head of the serpent, we will soon crush Satan under our feet. Because the battle has been definitively won, these little skirmishes, these short-lived trials, these small sacrifices, these light afflictions, will bring forth victories. Fix your eyes on Jesus.

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