

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 NIV "Receiving God's Grand Prize"

"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.

"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.

"Therefore, I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. 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 Apostle Paul focused on one life-goal.

Paul fervently "ran" toward that objective.

Today, I'd like to do something I rarely do.

I plan to read a section of Scripture that describes Paul's fervor.

Before you moan, thinking that boredom is coming, hear some facts about this passage.

Some of the language might shock you.

It might even sound unbiblical.

That's because this translation is called *The Message* by Eugene Peterson.

You probably know that the New Testament wasn't written with the "thees" and "thous" of the King's English of 1600 AD.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, James, and Jude wrote in language that business people, fishermen, and school children used--"everyday" speech.

Another fact should impress you.

You have likely watched the Olympics, Super Bowls, and Championship games.

Those athletes wanted passionately to win.

That's how Paul viewed life--as an Olympic race or a Super Bowl.

He fully engaged his body and soul.

Paul wrote using everyday language, but he wrote with intensity.

Here's Philippians 3 beginning about verse 8 from this translation that conveys Paul's passionate, but everyday speech:

"Because of Christ . . . all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life.

"Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant-dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him.

I didn't want some petty, inferior brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ-Gods righteousness.

"I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself. If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I wanted to do it.

"12-14 I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me.

"Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward-to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back.

"16 So let's keep focused on that goal, those of us who want everything God has for us. If any of you have something else in mind, something less than total commitment, God will clear your blurred vision-you'll see it yet! Now that we're on the right track, let's stay on it.

"Stick with me, friends. Keep track of those you see running this same course, headed for this same goal. There are many out there taking other paths, choosing other goals, and trying to get you to go along with them. I've warned you of them many times; **sadly**, I'm having to do it again. All they want is easy street. They hate Christ's Cross. But easy street is a dead-end street. Those who live there make their bellies their gods; belches are their praise; all they can think of is their appetites. (Caseys & 7-11)

"But there's far more to life for us. We're citizens of high heaven!

I think you'll agree; Paul was saying, "I'm doing everything I can to live for Jesus. Follow my example and the example of others whose eyes are strongly fixed on Christ."

"Whose life-example do you follow?"

Some of us imitate celebrities or preachers of old.

"That's the way my parents did it and it's good enough for me."

"Mr. Jones or Mrs. Smith is my idol."

Following someone else's example can be risky.

Perhaps you've heard the Jewish fable about a young man who went to a famous rabbi. He asked the renowned leader how he might become a rabbi.

The young man listed his qualifications:

"You see, rabbi, I always go dressed in spotless white like the sages of old. I never drink any alcohol. Only water ever passes my lips. I live a plain and simple life. I have placed sharp-edged nails inside my shoes to mortify the flesh. Even in the coldest weather, I lie naked in the snow to torment my flesh. Each day, I take a whip and strike it forty times across my bare back, to complete my holy penance."

Looking out the window, the old rabbi noticed a white horse being led up to a water trough. It drank, then rolled in the snow, as horses sometimes do.

"Look!" cried the rabbi. **"That animal, too, is dressed in white. It also drinks nothing but water, has nails in its shoes and rolls naked in the snow. Also, rest assured, it gets its daily ration of forty lashes on the rump from its master. Now, I ask you, is it a saint, or is it a horse?"**¹

- **What life-example are you following?**
- **Are you sure the example you follow will lead you to God?**

Three vital decisions Paul made.

1. He aimed at modeling Jesus' life.

Paul kept saying, **"Jesus is my example."**

I think it was the Christian psychiatrist,
Herbert Holt, who said,

**"If you don't know where you are going,
how will you ever know
once you get there?"**

Many of us haven't really decided where we are going and have no clearly defined life-goals.

We know we don't like restrictions, and we don't like discipline.

The Lord's way seems restrictive—old fashioned.

We want our freedom.

Nobody should tell us how to live.

Think of slalom skiers on a downhill slope.

They eye the finish line, and want to cross as quickly as possible.

They must ski within the course marked by the flags.

Those flags keep them on course.

Keep them from wasting time.

Going off course even a few inches might mean they'll lose valuable time and also hit unfavorable terrain.

The Lord's way resembles like flags on a ski course.

Get off of that course, we'll waste time and even lose our way.

That's why Paul said:

¹ From Emphasis Magazine

“I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself. If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I wanted to do it.

Paul focused on Christ's life example so he could share in it.

Here's the second thing.

2. Paul passionately kept singleness of purpose, and he didn't look back: “My eye on the goal, ‘where God is beckoning us onward-to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back.’”

The N.T. scholar Charles R. Erdman noted Paul's singleness of purpose “forgetting what is behind.”²

You can't look back.

Happens a lot in football games, doesn't it?

Paul sounds like a serious runner, doesn't he?

Many Christians follow written creeds.

They perform a few external rites, attend church most of the time, have communion, and say a few prayers, and “hail Marys.”

They're content with that.

Here's what happened with Paul.

When Jesus stopped him on the Damascus Road,

Paul's life wasn't going anywhere.

Many of his peers thought otherwise.

They saw Paul as a rising young star.

He enjoyed status and power with everything going his way.

Paul wouldn't admit it at the time, but a few things greatly bothered him:

Paul spent all his life trying to do enough to earn God's approval—to prove himself as righteous.

- He never felt like he'd done enough.
- He'd heard about Jesus, who was crucified, whose followers said he was raised from the dead.
- Paul thought Jesus' followers were heretics; he tried to eliminate them like you'd kill rats and flies.

When those Jesus people died in Paul's presence he kept seeing three things:

- A) Christians died with Jesus' name on their lips;
- B) They died with forgiveness in their hearts;
- C) They died in hope of resurrection on the last day.

Paul saw it in the eyes of Stephen, the first martyr, and he saw it again and again.

Remembering those innocent, loving people willing to die for Jesus had to keep Paul awake at night.

² Notes from Charles R. Erdman, *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians*, pp. 120-130.

On the road to Damascus, Jesus himself appeared to Paul and everything changed.

Paul finally understood that keeping a law or human religious traditions would not save him.

On the cross, Jesus had already paid for his sins.

Paul also then knew that, as unworthy as he was, God loved him and wanted to give him resurrection-life.

3) In addition, until Resurrection Day, the Lord wanted Paul to grow toward full maturity.

That's why Paul humbly wrote:

"12-14 I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me."

Did you ever have someone that you highly esteemed really love you?

That person knew all your zits and flaws, yet still accepted you and patiently tried to help you.

When that happens, you try to be more worthy of that love, don't you?

We tend to forget that God loves us like that.

Those of you in this church do a good job.

You all act responsibly, accept assignments, and cheerfully do the work of the Lord.

Yet in some ways, we get our eyes off of the Lord, his love, and his resurrection.

We get out of bounds at times.

I pray that when we do that, we'll refocus, and that we'll stay close to Jesus' "flags."

Doing that secures our future, as the conclusion of *Philippians 3* describes it:

"We're waiting the arrival of the Savior, the Master, Jesus Christ, who will transform our earthy bodies into glorious bodies like his own. He'll make us beautiful and whole with the same powerful skill by which he is putting everything as it should be, under and around him.

"My dear, dear friends, I love you so much. I do want the very best for you. You make me feel such joy, fill me with such pride. Don't waver. Stay on track, steady in God."

What is your main goal today?

Are you running in such a way as to receive the prize of resurrection to eternal life?

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