

Paul's intent to become all things to all men so that by all possible means he might save some (9:22) demands tremendous dedication. How great is our dedication to walk with and in Christ? Do our daily and long-term priorities show our Christian life to be central or merely something like an "add-on" or "garnish"? For Paul living for Christ demanded his all, and he instructs the Corinthians to do likewise. Taking an illustration from the realm of sports he applies it to the Christian life.

The general principles:

1. *Live the Christian life like a runner who wants to win.*
 - a. The illustration of a runner would have been familiar from the Isthmian games. To win demanded much and only one could win.
 - b. The application is to our Christian life. All should run, Paul says, like he intends to win. There is not just one prize for which all are competing and not just one winner. The emphasis is for all to run in way that demonstrates they each wish to be a winner. "The prize" has been added by the NIV and "you" is plural. The parable of the talents confirms that we are not measured against others but against that which God wants of us.
2. *Running to win requires self-control.*
 - a. The phrase translated by the NIV as "goes into strict training" is literally "exercises self-control in all things." Preparation for the games included for the athletes both strenuous self-denial in areas of diet and activities as well as arduous and painful training.
 - b. Self-control goes beyond the period of training and into the competition. Rules must be kept and emotion controlled. Self-control begins with the training and continues right to the finish line.
3. *Live the Christian life with eternity in view.*
 - a. The winning athletic received a wreath to be worn like a crown on the head. It was of no material value and was destined to perish.
 - b. The believer's reward will not perish. It is implied that the believer also looks for a crown.
 - Some crowns represent salvation (e.g., James 1:17; Rev 2:10 cf. 2 Tim 4:8). A crown of glory (1 Peter 5:4) seems to relate to service. People are crowns in Phil 4:1 & 1 Th 2:11 and this might be in Paul's mind here since he had been talking about winning people to Christ. (The crown of life is not "won". Salvation is not earned but given by grace. Self-control, which is necessary to run the race well, is only possible when one already has the Spirit of God, cf. Gal. 5:23.)
 - The athlete shames the mediocre Christian. The athlete puts out extreme effort to obtain a perishable crown, but Christians are offered a prize that will never perish. What effort is put out to obtain this?

Paul's personal application

1. *Two figures from sports emphasize Paul's exertion to be a winner.*
 - a. The runner runs with a clear goal in front of him. He runs with purpose, having the goal clearly in mind. He runs also with motivation. The boxer accomplishing nothing by shadow boxing. Neither will he accomplish anything by swinging at his opponent and missing.
 - b. Paul is neither like the runner who runs aimlessly nor like the boxer who just flails the air. He is moving toward a goal. He is motivated. He is taking effectual steps to get there. He lives the Christian life like an athletic who wants to win.
2. *In contrast to these Paul "buffets" or beats his body to make it his slave.*
 - a. Paul is still speaking figuratively and not referring to any type of self-flagellation. It is also doubtful if this is a figure for similar ascetic practices against which he warns in Colossians 2:23. Asceticism does not make the body our servant.
 - b. Since Paul is addressing the question of eating meat offered to idols and has expressed his purpose to become all things to all men in order to win some, he probably means generally forcing upon his body unpleasurable experiences or denying it acceptable comforts in order to serve his purposes.
3. *Strict discipline has the purpose of preventing his disqualification.*
 - a. Two suggested meanings are less probable since they require understanding "beating his body" to refer to controlling sin. Neither disqualification from preaching or leading in the church nor struggling for salvation are adequate. The latter reads more into "disqualified" than necessary.
 - b. The word "disqualify" means simply to "fail the test". The context must supply which test is meant. Earlier Paul wrote that the quality of each man's work will be tested, which, if it survives, will be rewarded. If not, he will be saved but the work will be burned up (3:13ff). The Lord will also judge the hearts and motive of men (1 Cor 4:4f). Paul is concerned that he would have spent his life preaching to others and then himself fail to receive any reward because he led an undisciplined Christian life.

Professionals often struggle to obtain excellence. But such achievements are perishable "crowns". Believers struggle to obtain crowns that will not perish. Have we disciplined ourselves to win for eternity? Do we practice self-control in those areas that matter for eternity? Are we mastering "the basics" to living the Christian life?

We need to strive for excellence in our Christian walk, We should truly discipline ourselves to be winners. We should look toward eternity. Then we will stand unashamed and enjoy the praise of our Lord and Savior: well-done.