

**Expositor's Bible Commentary**  
**1 Corinthians 9:24-27**

**NOT ALL WHO RUN WIN**

IN the preceding part of this chapter Paul has proved his right to claim remuneration from those to whom he preached the Gospel, and he has also given his reasons for declining to urge this claim. He was resolved that no one should have any ground for misapprehending his motive in preaching the Gospel. He was quite content to live a bare, poor life, not merely that he might keep himself above suspicion, but that those who heard the Gospel might see it simply as the Gospel and not be hindered from accepting it by any thought of the preacher's motives. This was his main reason for supporting himself by his own labour. But he had another reason, namely, "that he might be himself a partaker of the benefits he preached" ([1Co 9:23](#)). Apostle though he was, he had his own salvation to work out. He was not himself saved by proclaiming salvation to others, any more than the baker is fed by making bread for others or the physician kept in health by prescribing for others. Paul had a life of his own to lead, a duty of his own to discharge, a soul of his own to save; and he recognised that what was laid before him as the path to salvation was to make himself entirely the servant of others. This he was resolved persistently to do, "lest that by any means, when he had preached to others, he himself should be a castaway."

Paul had evidently felt this danger to be a serious one. He had found himself tempted from time to time to rest in the name and calling of an apostle, to take for granted that his salvation was a thing past doubt and on which no more thought or effort need be expended. And he saw that in a slightly altered form this temptation was common to all Christians. All have the name, not all the reality. And the very possession of the name is a temptation to forget the reality. It might almost seem to be in the proportion of runners to winners in a race: "All run, but one receiveth the prize."

In endeavouring to warn Christians against resting in a mere profession of faith in Christ, he cites two great classes of instances which prove that there is often ultimate failure even where there has been considerable promise of success. First, he cites their own world-renowned Isthmian games, in which contests, as they all well knew, not everyone who entered for the prizes was successful: "All run, but one receiveth the prize." Paul does not mean that salvation goes by competition; but he means that as in a race not all who run run so as to obtain the prize for which they run, so in the Christian life not all who enter it put out sufficient energy to bring them to a happy issue. The mere fact of recognising that the prize is worth winning and even of entering for it is not enough. And then he cites another class of instances with which the Jews in the Corinthian Church were familiar. "All our fathers," he says, "were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptised unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea." All of them without exception enjoyed the outward privileges of God's people, and seemed to be in a fair way of entering the promised land; and yet the majority of them fell under God's displeasure, and were overthrown in the wilderness. Therefore "let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall."

The Isthmian games, then, one of the most ancient glories of Corinth, furnished Paul with the readiest illustration of his theme. These games, celebrated every second year, had in ancient times been one of the chief means of fostering the feeling of brotherhood in the Hellenic race. None but Greeks of pure blood who had done nothing to forfeit their citizenship were allowed to contend in them. They were the greatest of national gatherings; and even when one State was at war with another, hostilities were suspended during the celebration of the games. And scarcely any greater distinction could be earned by a Greek citizen than victory in these games. When Paul says that the contending athletes endured their severe training and underwent all the privations necessary "to obtain a corruptible crown," we must remember that while it is quite

true that the wreath of pine given to the victor might fade before the year was out, he was welcomed home with all the honours of a victorious general, the wall of his town being thrown down that he might pass in as a conqueror, and his statue being set up by his fellow citizens. In point of fact, the names and deeds of many of the victors may yet be read in the verses of one of the greatest of Greek poets, who devoted himself, as laureate of the games, to the celebration of the annual victories.

But however highly we raise the value of the Greek crown the force of Paul's comparison remains. The wreath of the victor in the games was at the best corruptible, liable to decay. No permanent, eternal satisfaction could result from being victorious in a contest of physical strength, activity, or skill. But for every man it is possible to win an incorruptible crown, that which shall always and forever be to him a joy as thrilling and a distinction as honourable as at the moment he received it. There is that which is worthy of the determined and sustained effort of a lifetime. Put into the one scale all perishable distinctions, and honours, and prizes, all that has stimulated men to the most strenuous endeavours, all that a grateful nation bestows on its heroes and benefactors, all for which men "scorn delights and live laborious days"; and all these kick the beam when you put in the other scale the incorruptible crown. The two are not necessarily opposed or incompatible; but to choose the less in preference to the greater is to repudiate our birthright. As victory in the games was the actual incentive which stimulated the youth of Greece to attain the perfection of physical strength, beauty, and development, so there is laid before us an incentive which, when clearly apprehended, is sufficient to carry us forward to perfect moral attainment. The brightest jewel in the incorruptible crown is the joy of having become all God made us to become, of perfectly fulfilling the end of our creation, of being able to find happiness in goodness, in closest fellowship with God, in promoting what Christ lived and died to promote. Must we say that there are men who have no ambition to experience perfect rectitude and purity? Are we to conclude that there are men of so grovelling, besotted, and blind a spirit that when opportunity is given them to win true glory, perfect expansion and growth of spirit, and perfect joy they turn away to salaries and profits, to meat and drink, to frivolity and the world's routine? The incorruptible crown is held over their head; but so intent are they on the muck rake, they do not even see it.

To those who would win it Paul gives these directions:-

1. Be temperate. "Every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things." Contentedly and without a murmur he submits himself to the rules and restrictions of his ten months' training, without which he may as well not compete. The little indulgences which other men allow themselves he must forego. Not once will he break the trainer's rules, for he knows that some competitors will refrain even from that once and gain strength while he is losing it. He is proud of his little hardships, and fatigues, and privations, and counts it a point of honour scrupulously to abstain from anything which might in the slightest degree diminish his chance of success. He sees other men giving way to appetite, resting while he is panting with exertion, luxuriating in the bath, enjoying life at pleasure; but he has scarce a passing thought of envy, because his heart is set on the prize, and severe training is indispensable. He knows that his chances are gone if in any point or on any occasion he relaxes the rigour of the discipline.

The contest in which Christians are engaged is not less, but more, severe. The temperance maintained by the athlete must be outdone by the Christian if he is to be successful. There are many things in which men who have no thought of the incorruptible prize may engage, but from which the Christian must refrain. All that lowers the tone and slackens the energies must be abandoned. If the Christian indulges in the pleasures of life as freely as other men, if he is unconscious of any severity of self-restraint, if he denies himself nothing which others enjoy, he proves that he has no higher aim than they and can of course win no higher prize. The temperance here enjoined, and which the Christian practises, not because it is enjoined, but

because a higher aim truly cherished compels him to practise it, is a habitual sober mindedness and detachment from what is worldly in the world. It is that temper of spirit and that sustained attitude towards life which enable a man to rule his own desires, to endure hardness and find pleasure in so doing. No spasmodic, occasional efforts and partial abstinences will ever bring a man victorious to the goal. Many a man denies himself in one direction and indulges himself in another, riles and macerates the flesh, but pampers the spirit by vanity, ambition, or self-righteousness. Or he denies himself some of the pleasures of life, but is more besotted by its gains than other men.

Temperance to be effectual must be complete. The athlete who drinks more than is good for him may save himself the trouble of observing the trainer's rules as to what he eats. It is lost labour to develop some of his muscles if he do not develop all of them. If he offends in one point, he breaks the whole law.

Temperance must be continuous as well as complete. One day's debauch was enough to undo the result of weeks during which the athlete had carefully attended to the rules prescribed. And we find that one lapse into worldliness undoes what years of self-restraint have won. Always the work of growth is very slow, the work of destruction very quick. One indiscretion on the part of the convalescent will undo what the care of months has slowly achieved. One fraud spoils the character for honesty which years of upright living have earned. And this also is one of the great dangers of the spiritual life: that a little carelessness, a brief infidelity to our high calling, or a passing indulgence suddenly demolishes what long and patient toil has been building up. It is like the taking out of a pin or a ratchet that lets all we have gained run down to its old condition.

Beware then of giving place to the world or the flesh at any point. Be reasonable and true. Recognise that if you are to succeed in winning eternal life, all the spiritual energy you can command will be required. So set your heart on the attainment of things eternal that you will not grudge missing much that other men enjoy and possess. Measure the invitations of life by their fitness or unfitness to develop within you true spiritual energy.

2. Be decided. "I run," says Paul, "not as uncertainly," not as a man who does not know where he is going or has not made up his mind to go there. To be among those who win as well as among those who run, we must know where we are going, and be quite sure we mean to be there. We have all some kind of idea about what God offers and calls us to. But this idea must be clear if we are to make for it straight. No man can run straight to a mere will-o'-the-wisp, and no man can run straight who first means to go to one house or station and then changes his mind and thinks he should go to another. We must count the cost and see clearly what we are to gain and what we must lose by making for the incorruptible prize. We must be resolved to win and have no thought of defeat, of failure, of doing something better. It is the absence of deliberate choice and reasonable decision which causes such "uncertain" running on the part of many who profess to be in the race. Their faces are as often turned from the goal as towards it. They are evidently not clear in their own minds that all strength spent in any other direction than towards the goal is wasted. They do not distinctly know what they mean to be at, what they wish to make of life. Paul did know. He had made up his mind not to pursue comfort, learning, money, respect, position, but to seek first the kingdom of God. He judged that to spread the knowledge of Christ was the best use to which he could put his life. He knew where he was going and to what all his efforts tended. Every life is unsatisfactory until its owner has made up his mind what he means to do with it, until it is governed by a clearly conceived and firmly held aim. Then it flies like the arrow to its mark.

What, then, do the traces of our past life show? Do we see the straight track of a well-steered ship, which has deviated not a yard from its course nor wasted an ounce of power? Has every footfall been in direct advance of the last, and has all expenditure of energy brought us nearer the ultimate goal? Or are the traces we look back on like ground trodden by dancers, a confused

medley all in one spot, or like the footsteps of saunterers in a garden backwards and forwards, according as this or that has attracted them? Has not the course of many of us been like that of persons lost, uncertain which direction to pursue, eagerly starting off, but after a little slackening their pace, stopping, looking round, and then going off in another direction? For some weeks a great deal of ardour has been apparent, the whole man girt up, every nerve strained, the whole attention directed towards spiritual victory, arrangements made to facilitate communion with God, new methods devised for subordinating all our work to the one great aim, everything gone about as if now at last we had found the secret of living; and then in a surprisingly short time all this eagerness cools down, doubt takes the place of decision, discouragement and failure breed distrust of our methods, and we lapse into contentment with easier attainments and more worldly aims. And at length, after many false starts, we are ashamed to begin any arduous spiritual task for fear of ceasing it next week. We think that the surest way to make fools of ourselves is to adopt a thorough-going Christian practice, so much do we count upon ourselves flagging, wearying, altering our course. How many times have we been rekindled to some true zeal, how often have we gathered up our scattered energies and concentrated our efforts on the Christian life, and yet as often have we gone back to a dreamy, listless sauntering, as if we had nothing to secure, no end to reach, no work to accomplish.

Are we likely ever to reach the goal thus? Will the goal come to us, or how are we ever to reach it? Are we nearer to it today than ever before? Are not our minds yet made up that it is worth reaching, and that whatever does not help us towards it must be abandoned? Let us be clear in our own minds as to the matters which tempt us aside from the straight path to the goal and are incompatible with progress; and let us determine whether these things are to prevail with us or not.

3. Be in earnest. "So fight I, not as one that beateth the air," not as one amusing himself with idle flourishes, but as one who has a real enemy to encounter. What a blush does this raise on the cheek of every Christian who knows himself! How much of this mere parade and sham fighting is there in the Christian army! We learn the art of war and the use of our weapons as if we were forthwith to use them in the field; we act over and learn many varieties of offensive and defensive movements, and know the rules by which spiritual foes may be subdued; we read books which direct us about personal religion, and delight in those which most skilfully lay open our weaknesses and show us how we may overcome them. But all this is mere fencing school work; it kills no enemy. It is but a species of accomplishment like that of those who learn the use of the sword, not because they mean to use it in battle, but that they may have a more elegant carriage. A great part of our spiritual strength is spent in mere parade. It is not meant to have any serious effect. It is not directed against anything in particular. We seem to be doing everything that a good soldier of Jesus Christ need do save the one thing: we slay no enemy. We leave no foe stone dead on the field. We are well trained: no one can deny it; we could instruct others how to conquer sin; we spend much time, and thought, and feeling on exercises which are calculated to make an impression on sin; and yet is it not almost entirely a beating the air? Where are our slain foes? This apparent eagerness to be holy, this professed devotedness to the cause of Christ—are they not mere flourish? We do not mean to strike our enemies; we for the most part only wish to make ourselves believe we are striking them and are zealous and faithful soldiers of Christ.

Even where there is some reality in the contest we may still be beating the air. We may be able to say that we have apprehended the reality of the moral welfare to which every man is called in this life. We may be able honestly to say that if our sins are not slain, it is neither because we have not recognised them, nor because we have aimed no blows at them. We have made serious and honest efforts to destroy sin, and yet our blows seem to fall short; and sin stands before us vigorous and lively, and as ready as ever to give us a fall. Many persons who level their blows at their sins do not after all strike them; spiritual energy is put forth; but it is not brought fully,

fairly, and firmly into contact with the sin to be destroyed. In most Christian people there is a great expenditure of thought and of feeling about sin; their spirit is probably more exercised about their sins than about anything else: and a great deal of spiritual life is expended in the shape of shame, compunction, penitence, resolve, self-restraint, watchfulness, prayer. All this, were it brought directly to bear on some definite object, would produce great effect; but in many cases no good whatever seems to result.

Paul's language suggests that possibly the reason may be that there remains in the heart some reluctance quite to kill and put an end to sin, to beat all the life out of it. It is like a father fighting with his son: he wishes to defend himself and disarm his son, but not to kill him. We may be willing or even intensely anxious to escape the blows sin aims at us; we may be desirous to wound, hamper, and limit our sin, and keep it under control; we may wish to tame the wild animal and domesticate it, so as to make it yield some pleasure and profit, and yet be reluctant to slay it outright. The soul and life of every sin is some lust of our own; and while quite anxious to put an end to some of the evils this lust produces in our life, we may not be prepared to extinguish the lust itself. We pray God, for example, to preserve us from the evils of praise or of success; and yet we continue to court praise and success. We are unable to sacrifice the pleasure for the sake of the safety. Therefore our warfare against sin becomes unreal. Our blows are not delivered home, but beat the air. Unconsciously we cherish the evil desire within us which is the soul of the sin, and seek to destroy only some of its manifestations.

The result of such unreal contest is detrimental. Sin is like something floating in the air or the water: the very effort we make to grasp and crush it displaces it, and it floats mockingly before us, untouched. Or it is like an agile antagonist who springs back from our blow, so that the force we have expended merely racks and strains our own sinews and does him no injury. So when we spend much effort in conquering sin and find it as lively as ever, the spirit is strained and hurt by putting out force on nothing. It is less able than before to resist sin, less believing, less hopeful, inwardly ill at ease and distracted. It becomes confused and disheartened, disbelieves in itself, and scoffs at fresh resolves and endeavours.

Finally, Paul tells us what that enemy was against which he directed his well-aimed, firmly planted blows. It was his own body. Every man's body is his enemy when, instead of being his servant, it becomes his master. The proper function of the body is to serve the will, to bring the inner man into contact with the outer world and enable him to influence it. When the body mutinies and refuses to obey the will, when it usurps authority and compels the man to do its bidding, it becomes his most dangerous enemy. When Paul's body presumed to dictate to his spirit, and demanded comforts and indulgences, and shrank from hardship, he beat it down. The word he uses is an exceptionally strong one: "I keep under"; it is a technical term of the games, and means to strike full in the face. It was the word used of the most damaging blow one boxer could give another. This unmerciful, overpowering blow Paul dealt to his body, resisting its assaults and making it helpless to tempt him. He thus brought it into subjection, made it his slave, as the winner in some of the games had a right to carry the vanquished into slavery.

It was probably by sheer strength of will and by the grace of Christ that Paul subdued his body. Many in all ages have striven to subdue it by fasting, by scourging, by wakefulness; and of these practices we have no right to speak scornfully until we can say that by other means we have reduced the body to its proper position as the servant of the spirit. Can we say that our body is brought into subjection; that it dare not curtail our devotions on the plea of weariness; that it dare not demand a dispensation from duty on the score of some slight bodily disturbance; that it never persuades us to neglect any duty on the score of its unpleasantness to the flesh; that it never prompts us to undue anxiety either about what we shall eat or drink or wherewithal we shall be clothed; that it never quite treads the spirit under foot and defiles it with wicked imaginings? There is a fair and reasonable degree in which a man may and ought to cherish his

own flesh, but there is also needful a disregard to many of its claims and a hardhearted obduracy to its complaints. In an age when Spartan simplicity of life is almost unknown, it is very easy to sow to the flesh almost without knowing it until we find ourselves reaping corruption.

Probably nothing more effectually slackens our efforts in the spiritual life. than the sense of unreality which haunts us as we deal with God and the unseen. With the boxer in the games it was grim earnest. He did not need anyone to tell him that his life depended on his ability to defend himself against his trained antagonist. Every faculty must be on the alert. No dreamer has here a chance. What we need is something of the same sense of reality, that it is a life-and-death contest we are engaged in, and that he that treats sin as a weak or pretended antagonist will shortly be dragged a mangled disgrace out of the arena.