

# THE RACE

## Introduction

Paul was a master at using relevant word pictures to teach the Early Church some vital truths of the Christian faith. One such word picture is found in 1 Corinthians 9. The Church in Corinth was very familiar with athletic events, as the Isthmian Games were held in the city every two years. Organised in 591BC, the Isthmian Games were second only in popularity to the Olympics. Paul chose to use a race as a word picture, knowing that it would relate to the Corinthians, to exhort and encourage them to live for the ultimate prize and goal...Heaven.

## 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

*<sup>24</sup>Remember that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize. You also must run in such a way that you will win. <sup>25</sup>All athletes practice strict self-control. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. <sup>26</sup>So I run straight to the goal with purpose in every step. I am not like a boxer who misses his punches. <sup>27</sup>I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified. **1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (NLT)***

## Run in such a way that you will win

*<sup>24</sup>Remember that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize. You also must **run in such a way that you will win.** **1 Corinthians 9:24 (NLT)***

There are two types of athletes in the world today: casual athletes and committed athletes. Casual athletes take up a sport for the enjoyment, social benefits, and of course to keep fit. Committed athletes live for their sport. Their whole life is dedicated to their game. You will never see a casual athlete win any medals at the Olympic Games. The only athletes that will ever win any competitions at a national/international level are committed ones.

Similarly, there are two types of Christians in the world today; casual Christians and committed Christians. Casual Christians take up Jesus Christ for the enjoyment, social benefits, and of course the added bonus of receiving an insurance policy against hell. Committed Christians live for Jesus Christ. Their whole life is dedicated to their Saviour. The only Christians that will ever make a lasting difference in this lifetime are committed ones.

Paul instructs us to run the race to win... which means that we must be committed, as only committed athletes win races!

## Which are you? Casual or committed?

*A winner says, "Lets find out." A loser says, "Nobody knows."*

*When a winner makes a mistake, he says, "I was wrong"; when a loser makes a mistake, he says, "It wasn't my fault."*

*A winner works harder than a loser and has more time; a loser is always "too busy" to do what is necessary.*

*A winner goes through a problem; a loser goes around it.*

*A winner makes commitments; a loser makes promises.*

*A winner says, "I'm good, but not as good as I ought to be"; a loser says, "I'm not as bad as a lot of other people."*

*A winner listens; a loser just waits until it's his turn to talk.*

*A winner respects those who are superior to him and tries to learn from them; a loser resents those who are superior to him, and tries to find chinks in their armor.*

*A winner explains; a loser explains away.*

*A winner feels responsible for more than his job; a loser says, "I only work here."*

*A winner says, "There ought to be a better way to do it"; a loser says, "That's the way it's always been done here."*

*A winner paces himself; a loser has only two speeds--hysterical and lethargic.<sup>1</sup>*

## All athletes practice strict self-control

<sup>25</sup> **All athletes practice strict self-control... 1 Corinthians 9:25a (NLT)**

*It is not only a matter of concentrating while he is racing, but in all areas of life, because his whole life impacts on the race. The runner religiously follows a rigorous program within a rigid schedule each day: He rises at a certain hour, eats a breakfast of certain foods, fills his morning with exercises, and works on his technique. After a planned lunch, he continues training, eats a third planned meal, and goes to bed at a specified hour. Throughout, he not only avoids sensuous indulgences, he must also abstain from many perfectly legitimate things that simply do not fit into his program. An athlete who is serious about excelling in his chosen sport must live this way, or he will not succeed except against inferior competitors. He will suffer defeat by those who do follow them.<sup>2</sup>*

## They do it to win a prize that will fade away

<sup>25</sup> **...They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. 1 Corinthians 9:25b (NLT)**

Why do athletes sacrifice so much to win? Recognition, a sense of achievement, at the very best, a gold medal, which is nothing more than a piece of gold plated metal, some fame, and a note in the history-books. In reality, it's a prize that will fade away. Even the memory fades away, and all is forgotten by the world. For example, do any of us remember who won the gold medal in the Women's 200m butterfly final in the 1996 Atlanta Olympics?

## But we do it for an eternal prize

<sup>25</sup> **...They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. 1 Corinthians 9:25b (NLT)**

We as Christians do not train for a prize that will fade away; we do it for an eternal prize. What is this prize?

- To receive an embrace from the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and to hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"
- To receive a crown of righteousness, and many more rewards in heaven.
- To receive eternal life, in paradise, where there will be no more pain, suffering, sin, or sickness forever and ever and ever.

If we were as serious about our eternal prize as athletes are about a piece of gold-plated metal, this world would be a very different place.

## So I run straight to the goal with purpose in every step

<sup>26</sup> **So I run straight to the goal with purpose in every step. I am not like a boxer who misses his punches. 1 Corinthians 9:26 (NLT)**

God has a phenomenal destiny for every one of us! Our educational institutions and media immerse us in an evolutionary world-view. We grow up believing Darwin's theory is fact, that we are a product of many series of mistakes, and that our existence has no purpose. No wonder people lose all hope! The truth is very different...

**We have been chosen for such a time as this. We must live like we've got a purpose!**

*<sup>1</sup>For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. **Jeremiah 29:11 (NLT)***

We only have one shot at this life to make it count for God and He has got a mission for us to complete! Let us run with purpose in every step!

*<sup>10</sup>For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago. **Ephesians 2:10 (NLT)***

**I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should**

*<sup>27</sup>**I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified. 1 Corinthians 9:27a (NLT)***

The responsibility for training to become great spiritual athletes rests upon us! It is our responsibility, to discipline ourselves to become all that God wants us to be. I dare say that the only difference between great men and women of God, and Christians that will leave no legacy, is how much effort and importance is placed on spiritual self-discipline and running to win the prize!

*<sup>5</sup>Examine yourselves to see if your faith is really genuine. Test yourselves. If you cannot tell that Jesus Christ is among you, it means you have failed the test. **2 Corinthians 13:5 (NLT)***

**Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified**

*<sup>27</sup>**I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified. 1 Corinthians 9:27b (NLT)***

Every sporting event has rules. To win a race, the athlete must obey the rules. Breaking the rules and being found out, means disqualification, even if they win the race, their medal can be stripped from them.

*The first track medal of the Olympic Games went to the second man to cross the finish line in the 20-kilometer walk. Bernardo Segura of Mexico, world record holder in the 20-kilometer walk, was disqualified moments after finishing first. The disqualification sent the gold medal to Robert Korzeniowski of Poland, who was just one second behind Segura. Segura was accused of improperly breaking contact with the ground three times during the race, all in the final 20 minutes. Olympic officials rejected an appeal by Mexico. Segura denied breaking any rules.*

As Christians, we are running the race of life, and to win the race and receive the prize, we must run according to the rules. If we break the rules we will be disqualified.

We are living in a bizarre time where people believe that they can change the rules of the race to suit themselves. They believe that the One who created the race won't mind at all if the rules are modified, and that He even encourages the change. Some denominations are ordaining homosexual ministers, professing Christians are encouraging same-sex relationships, and the catastrophic rule-breaking goes on. When these 'Christians' stand before the Great Judge one day to receive their medals, they will hear one word, 'disqualified' instead. What a terrifying moment that will be for them.

Many athletes perform well, look the part and are esteemed by all, but they are pumping performance enhancing substances into their bodies, drugs that are illegal, believing that they will not be discovered and will win the race.

*In 1988 the Olympics were held in Seoul Korea. An international dual took place at the 100 meter finals race. Ben Johnson from Canada and Carl Lewis from the United States would face off as two of the fastest men on earth. At that time Ben Johnson was known as the fastest human ever, but Carl Lewis had many Olympic gold medals to his name already. It was obvious as the men came to the starting line, that Johnson was extremely muscular for a sprinter, almost to body building proportions. The race was set, the gun went off and the Olympic athletes blazed down the 100 meter track. The Canadian broke the tape, then Lewis. A new world record was set and the old one shattered by Johnson. Johnson came in*

at 9.79 seconds and Lewis with 9.92 seconds. As Ben Johnson ran his victory lap, he seemed proud, but not happy. Perhaps it was his own guilt that stole away the joy of victory. For you see, Ben Johnson was about to be found out. Shortly after the 100 meter final, word came back to the Olympic officials that Ben Johnson had tested positive for steroid use.

<sup>21</sup>“Not all people who sound religious are really godly. They may refer to me as ‘Lord,’ but they still won’t enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The decisive issue is whether they obey my Father in heaven. <sup>22</sup>On judgment day many will tell me, ‘Lord, Lord, we prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.’ <sup>23</sup>But I will reply, ‘I never knew you. Go away; the things you did were unauthorized.’”

**Matthew 7:21-23 (NLT)**

This passage could be re-written...

**“But I will reply, ‘Your prize has been stripped from you. Go away. You have been disqualified!’”**

The good news about the spiritual race we are running is that if we confess that we have been breaking the rules, if we are genuinely sorry, ask the rule-maker for forgiveness, and determine to obey the rules with His help, our disqualification is nullified, just as if it never happened, and we can once again run the race to win!

<sup>9</sup>But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong. **1 John 1:9 (NLT)**

## Hebrews 12:1-4

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily hinders our progress. And let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us. <sup>2</sup>We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from start to finish. He was willing to die a shameful death on the cross because of the joy he knew would be his afterward. Now he is seated in the place of highest honor beside God’s throne in heaven. <sup>3</sup>Think about all he endured when sinful people did such terrible things to him, so that you don’t become weary and give up. <sup>4</sup>After all, you have not yet given your lives in your struggle against sin. **Hebrews 12:1-4 (NLT)**

## Surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, since **we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses** to the life of faith... **Hebrews 12:1a (NLT)**

The writer to the Hebrews (probably Paul) paints an amazing picture of us in an Olympic-like stadium filled to capacity with the great men and women of faith that have gone before us, from every age, encouraging us to keep on running to win, to not give up.

*Since we have such a huge crowd of men of faith watching us from the grandstands, let us strip off anything that slows us down or holds us back, and especially those sins that wrap themselves so tightly around our feet and trip us up; and let us run with patience the particular race that God has set before us. Keep your eyes on Jesus, our leader and instructor. **Hebrews 12:1-4 (The Living Bible)***

Hebrews 11 tells us who are cheering us on. Heroes and Heroines of the faith like Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, David, Samuel, the prophets, the martyrs, and that’s just the people in the Old Testament. How many more millions of people are shouting at us to endure and finish the race that have lived since the Bible was written? The 160,000 martyrs who die for the gospel each year are present too, spurring us on...

<sup>35</sup>But others trusted God and were tortured, preferring to die rather than turn from God and be free. They placed their hope in the resurrection to a better life. <sup>36</sup>Some were mocked, and their backs were cut open with whips. Others were chained in dungeons. <sup>37</sup>Some died by stoning, and some were sawed in half; others were killed with the sword. Some went about in skins of sheep and goats, hungry and oppressed and mistreated. <sup>38</sup>They were too good

for this world. They wandered over deserts and mountains, hiding in caves and holes in the ground. <sup>39</sup>All of these people we have mentioned received God's approval because of their faith, yet none of them received all that God had promised. <sup>40</sup>For God had far better things in mind for us that would also benefit them, for they can't receive the prize at the end of the race until we finish the race. **Hebrews 11:35-40 (NLT)**

**These winners have yet to receive their reward as we will all take part in the awards ceremony together at the end of this age!**

Let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin...

<sup>1</sup>**...let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily hinders our progress. Hebrews 12:1a (NLT)**

**There are two areas that will greatly hinder our effectiveness in this race...**

- **Every weight that slows us down**

A finalist in the 100 metre sprint would look very smart in a three-piece suit, but he would be insane to race in one as it would drastically slow him down. Athletes wear as little as they possibly can so that they can run as fast as they possibly can.

*At times we must even give up something good in order to do what God wants. Each person's special duties determine the discipline and denial that he or she must accept. Without a goal, discipline is nothing but self-punishment. With the goal of pleasing God, our denial seems like nothing compared to the eternal, imperishable reward that will be ours.<sup>3</sup>*

**Remember how athletes live...**

*Throughout, he not only avoids sensuous indulgences, he must also abstain from many perfectly legitimate things that simply do not fit into his program. An athlete who is serious about excelling in his chosen sport must live this way, or he will not succeed except against inferior competitors. He will suffer defeat by those who do follow them.<sup>2</sup>*

- **Especially the sin that so easily hinders our progress**

Little do we realize that sin is always detrimental to us winning the race. Absolutely no good comes from doing things that God disapproves of.

Richard Baxter, who lived in the 1600's, said the following which is only too relevant to us today...

*It is a most lamentable thing to see how most people spend their time and their energy for trifles, while God is cast aside. He who is all seems to them as nothing, and that which is nothing seems to them as good as all. It is lamentable indeed, knowing that God has set mankind in such a race where heaven or hell is their certain end, that they should sit down and loiter, or run after the childish toys of the world, forgetting the prize they should run for. Were it but possible for one of us to see this business as the all-seeing God does, and see what most men and women in the world are interested in and what they are doing every day, it would be the saddest sight imaginable. Oh, how we should marvel at their madness and lament their self-delusion! If God had never told them what they were sent into the world to do, or what was before them in another world, then there would have been some excuse. But it is His sealed word, and they profess to believe it. **Richard Baxter***

**And let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us**

<sup>1</sup>**...And let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us. Hebrews 12:1b (NLT)**

We must realise that this race is not a 100 metre dash, it is a marathon. So many people start off so well, and have every intention to win, but we must always remember that it is not how we start the race that matters... it is how we finish the race that ultimately matters.

We have talked about disqualification; let's look at another way we can lose in this race...

## DNF – Did Not Finish

*One of the most admired athlete of the 1996 Atlanta Olympics was an Italian runner named Stefano Baldini. He ran the 10,000 meter race, which is 6.2 miles, and he finished not first, not second, not even third; but dead last. In the 10,000 meters, seven of the 25 runners in the race did not finish. Some pulled out with muscle cramps and some were simply so far out of contention that they gave up. Next to their names were the letters DNF: Did Not Finish. But not Baldini. After the first few miles, he was clearly in last place. He had no chance of winning a medal. And that's when it happened. The field of runners began to lap him. The lead runners lapped him once, and then twice, until every runner in the entire field had lapped him at least two times. He ended up finishing more than two full minutes behind the gold medalist. While Baldini was running the last mile, the times of the other runners were already being tabulated. But as Baldini went around the track, the stadium announcer told everyone that he was actually running the last mile faster than he had run any of the other miles in the race. And when he finally crossed the finish line - knowing he would not get a medal and not get his name in the paper - the entire crowd in the Olympic stadium simultaneously burst into loud applause.<sup>1</sup>*

There are countless people who have started so well, only to have been sidetracked and distracted by the pleasures and trappings of this world, they have forgotten about the prize and simply stopped running! Others, out of discouragement, simply give up. Yet others start the race having been told that it is a race of ease and comfort... they become disillusioned at the level of stamina and determination required, and give up.

What a day Judgement Day will be, when mankind stands before God to each receive their reward. To so many He will say, "Disqualified." To many more He will say, "You didn't even begin the race." To another group He will say, "DNF – you gave up on Me, you pulled out of the ultimate race... you lose." Remember that there are millions upon millions witnessing our race and our life in the stadium right now, shouting at us with every ounce of their being...

*"Don't give up!"*

*"Don't be discouraged!"*

*"Keep going!"*

*"Pick yourself up!"*

*"You can make it!"*

*"Keep your eyes on the finishing line!"*

*"Don't give up!"*

*"DON'T GIVE UP!"*

Instead of having DNF beside our name on that great day, we should all have the letters DNGU beside our name... Did Not Give Up!

## His prize

Among such great a cloud of witnesses to our race, there is one spectator that is different from the rest. His name is Jesus Christ. He is not waiting to receive a crown of righteousness like the rest of the stadium spurring us on... He is looking forward to receive a far greater prize, us. You see, Jesus ran His race to receive mankind as His reward. He went to the cross for us, to redeem us back from the clutches of sin and death. He is desperately looking forward to us as His prize, and He is shouting with everything within Him...

**"I ran My race for you... You are My prize... DON'T GIVE UP!"**

## The Race

*"Quit! Give up! You're beaten!"*

*They shout at me and plead.*

*"There's just too much against you now.*

*This time you can't succeed!"*

*And as I start to hang my head*

*In front of failure's face  
My downward fall is broken by  
The memory of a race.*

*And here refills my weakened will  
As I recall that scene  
For just the thought of that short race  
Rejuvenates my being.*

*A children's race: Young boys, young men  
How I remember well.  
Excitement, sure! But also fear.  
It wasn't hard to tell.*

*They all lined up so full of hope  
Each thought to win that race.  
Or tie for first, or if not that  
At least take second place.*

*And fathers watched from off the side  
Each cheering for his son  
And each boy hoped to show his dad  
That he would be the one.*

*The whistle blew and off they went  
Their hearts and hopes afire.  
To win and be the hero there  
Was each young boy's desire.*

*And one boy in particular  
Who's dad was in the crowd  
Was running near the lead and thought:  
"My dad will be so proud."*

*But as they speeded down the field  
Across a shallow dip  
The little boy who thought to win  
Lost his step and slipped.*

*Trying hard to catch himself  
His hand flew out to brace  
And 'mid the laughter of the crowd  
He fell flat on his face.*

*So down he fell and with him hope  
-- He couldn't win it now --  
Embarrassed, sad, he only wished  
To disappear somehow.  
But as he fell his dad stood up  
And showed his anxious face  
Which to the boy so clearly said:  
"Get up and win the race."*

*He quickly rose, no damage done.  
-- Behind a bit that's all --  
And ran with all his mind and might  
To make up for his fall.*

*So anxious to restore himself  
-- To catch up and to win --  
His mind went faster than his legs:  
He slipped and fell again!*

He wished then he had quit before  
 With only one disgrace  
 "I'm hopeless as a runner, now;  
 I shouldn't try to race."

But in the laughing crowd he searched  
 And found his father's face.  
 That steady look which said again:  
 "Get up and win the race."

So up he jumped to try again  
 -- Ten yards behind the last --  
 "If I'm to gain those yards," he thought  
 "I've got to move real fast."

Exerting everything he had  
 He regained eight of ten  
 But trying so hard to catch the lead  
 He slipped and fell again!

Defeat! He lay there silently  
 -- A tear dropped from his eye --  
 "There's no sense in running anymore"  
 "Three strikes; I'm out; Why try?"

The will to rise had disappeared  
 All hope had fled away  
 So far behind; so error prone  
 A loser all the way.

"I've lost, so what's the use," he thought  
 "I'll live with my disgrace"  
 But then he thought about his dad  
 Who soon he'd have to face.

"Get up" an echo sounded low  
 "Get up and take your place,  
 You were not meant for failure here  
 Get up and win the race."

"With borrowed will get up," it said  
 "You haven't lost at all  
 For winning is no more than this:  
 To rise each time you fall."

So up he rose to run once more  
 And with a new commit  
 He resolved that win or lose  
 At least he wouldn't quit.

So far behind the others now  
 -- The most he'd ever been --  
 Still he gave it all he had  
 And ran as though to win.

Three times he's fallen, stumbling,  
 Three times he rose again  
 Too far behind to hope to win  
 He still ran to the end

They cheered the winning runner  
 As he crossed the line first place  
 Head high, and proud, and happy

*No falling; no disgrace.*

*But when the fallen youngster  
Crossed the line last place  
The crowd gave him the greater cheer  
For finishing the race.*

*And even though he came in last  
With head bowed low, unproud,  
You would have thought he won the race  
To listen to the crowd.*

*And to his dad he sadly said  
"I didn't do so well,"  
"To me, you won," his father said  
"You rose each time you fell."*

*And now when things seem dark and hard  
And difficult to face  
The memory of that little boy  
Helps me in my race.*

*For all of life is like that race  
With ups and downs and all  
And all you have to do to win  
Is rise each time you fall.*

*"Quit! Give up! You're beaten!"  
They still shout in my face.  
But another voice within me says:  
"Get up and win the race!"* **By D. H. Groberg**

## Conclusion

Let us run our race with endurance and let us live to be able to say with Paul at the end of our race, when the finishing line is in sight...

<sup>6</sup>As for me, my life has already been poured out as an offering to God. The time of my death is near. <sup>7</sup>I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. <sup>8</sup>And now the prize awaits me—the crown of righteousness that the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that great day of his return. And the prize is not just for me but for all who eagerly look forward to his glorious return. **2 Timothy 4:6-8 (NLT)**

### References:

1. Source unknown
2. The Forerunner Commentary on 1 Corinthians 9
3. The QuickVerse Life Application Bible, Copyright ©1997 Parsons Technology, Inc. All rights reserved.

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