

“Just Run—why don’t you?”
1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Introduction

- In the 1660’s Antonio Stradivari of Cremona, Italy, started making violins. By the time of his death in 1737, his violins were already some of the most prized in the world. Fast forward 300 years.
- Andrea Mosconi has the task of keeping precious instruments in shape. For the past 30 years, six days a week, the old musician has gone to the museum in Cremona’s city hall where the 300-year-old violins are stored in display cases. Each morning, before the museum opens to the public, Mosconi plays each violin for 6–7 minutes. He starts with basic music scales and then makes his way to Bach, Tchaikovsky, and Bartok. Over the course of an hour, he plays three violins by the Amatis, two by the Guarneris, and four instruments—3 violins and a cello—by Stradivari.
- Why does Mosconi do this day after day after day? Because a violin needs to be played to perform at its best level. “The wood gets tired,” explained Karl Roy, a German violinmaker and one of the field’s top experts.¹ Violins are made to be played not sit on the shelf.
- It’s no different for the Christian. Christians are made to be played, if you will—they have a purpose beyond collecting dust and rusting out on the shelf. Christians are made for mission—for reaching out to and serving lost people who do not yet know that Jesus Christ is the *power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes*.
- I’ve entitled this series from 1 Corinthians as “Lessons from a Failed Church.” There is one obstacle that is more like a landmine than a turtle in the road. When a church hits this obstacle it’s more than slowed, more than derailed, it’s destroyed. When lost people fail to matter the church ceases being the church.
- Last week we talked about how lost people matter and this morning continues that theme. This passage really is an extension of the argument Paul started in 9:12. Paul is concerned about behaviors actions on the part of the Corinthian church that were hindering the spread of the gospel. And so he reminds them what it takes to effectively serve as Christ’s witness.

Transition

Here’s what I think God is trying to communicate to us through the words of 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

Proposition

- **Effectively reaching lost people requires the discipline and rigor of an athlete in training**
- The structure of this passage is very clear and straightforward. There are...

¹ Bill Norman, Toronto, Ontario, Canada; sources: David Yoder, "Playing Italy's Finest Violins," New York Times (6-3-07) and Ian Fisher, "Keeping treasured violins forever young," International Herald Tribune (6-3-07)

Organizational Sentence

- **Two word pictures used to describe what it takes to effectively reach lost people**
- And Paul pulls these word pictures from the world of athletics. The first picture is that of a runner. The second is that of a boxer. Through these pictures God is saying to us, “you want to know what it takes to effectively reach lost people? This is what it takes. Look at the specialized, highly trained, disciplined, world-class athlete. That kind of dedication, that kind of discipline and rigor is essential to effectively reaching people for Christ.”

Transition

Listen to [verses 24-25](#). Listen to how Paul describes what it takes to effectively reach lost people for Christ. First the picture of the runner. *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. 25 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.* What does it take? **The runner training to win exemplifies self-sacrifice, self-control, and self-denial.** That’s what it takes to effectively reach lost people for Christ.

Main Points

- I’m almost certain Paul uses this picture of an athlete, a runner undergoing strict training, to make his point because it’s something the Corinthians would have understood. Corinth, more than most cities of the ancient world, valued athletic competition. They were fanatics. Think Packer Backers of the ancient world. Corinth hosted what’s called the Isthmian Games, second only to the Olympics in importance in the ancient world.² In this particular case, Paul has in mind the standard Greek race—the 600-foot race.³
- Fortunately, this picture of a foot race is an image that we get. Even if we’ve never been a serious athlete we at least understand or have heard stories of what it takes, the self-discipline, the self-control, the self-denial needed to compete at a world-class level. In the ancient world, the strict training of an athlete lasted for 10 months and they competed, at least in the Isthmian Games, for a wreath of parsley, wild celery, or pine. Pretty lame prize, huh?
- Paul’s point with this athletic imagery is pretty clear. The Christian also is in a race. “Paul compares the lifestyle we’re supposed to live as believers, a life of witnessing to who Christ is and what he’s done, to an athlete who sacrifices a normal life to go into strict training in order to gain a competitive edge and win.”⁴ We’re urged to act and train and live and run like the one who wins. *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.*
- Paul’s concern here is not with effort.⁵ His point isn’t that in order to be effective in reaching lost people all it takes is a lot of effort. That’s not what he’s saying. What he is saying is effectively reaching lost people has everything to do with preparation and self-discipline and internal commitment to not let self rule. His point is that runners who win act a certain way. They live differently than normal people. They eat differently. They discipline themselves to train every day. And they train their tails off. They subject self for the sake of a goal.

² Thistleton, p. 710.

³ Constable, *1 Corinthians*.

⁴ Blomberg, p. 189.

⁵ Fee, p. 435.

The runner who runs to win exercises self-discipline, self-control, self-denial. In the same way, the Christian who's in the race to win, the Christian who effectively reaches lost people with the good news of the gospel, lives a life of self-discipline, self-control, self-denial all with the finish line in sight—the goal of spreading the good news of Christ.

- The point Paul's trying to make with this metaphor of running is this; are you and I, are we running in the Christian life in such a way as to win the prize? Or are we just running aimlessly in our Christian service? Are we running in such a way, are we living in such a way that all we do or don't do is done for the purpose of helping us reach our goal, reaching lost people for Jesus? Or have we just entered the race as one who hasn't trained a lick, who has no self-restraint, no self-discipline, no goal to guide us?
- If we're going to be effective, individually or as a church, in bringing the gospel to people who will otherwise die in their sin without our witness then its going to take self-discipline, self-control, self-sacrifice. Simply entering the race doesn't qualify you as a winner. In the words of [Leon Morris](#), "The strenuous self-denial of the athlete as he sought a fleeting reward is a rebuke to half-hearted, flabby Christian service."⁶
- We just don't take the hard work of reaching people for Christ seriously enough. We dabble in it here and there but we're not as disciplined or diligent as we could be at making evangelism the front and center of everything we do. We maybe do the weekend warrior kind of thing every once in a while. But we don't live the life of an athlete in training. What kind of serious athlete dabbles at her trade and then expects to win? Not a one.
- [Lance Armstrong](#), 7-time Tour de France winner, one of the world's greatest athletes, tried to run the NYC Marathon with a training regiment that included "Coronas and nightclub hopping" as one paper put it. His longest run was only 16 miles before running the race. He made it to the finish line, but barely. In Armstrong's own words, "Even after experiencing one of the hardest days of the Tour nothing has ever left me feeling this bad," he said at a post-race news conference. Armstrong called the race "the hardest physical thing I have ever done. I think I bit off more than I could chew."⁷
- In the same way, this passage asks us what kind of Christian runs aimlessly, runs without training and expects to live a life as an effective witness to Christ? Not a one. Lost people matter. Living in such a way that they hear and see what they need to hear and see from us is hard work. That's the hard race we're in. The word translated as *compete* in verse 25. Listen to how it sounds. *Agonidzomai*. Any idea which English word we get from this word? Agonize. Running, training, denying self, exercising self-control and self-restraint so that other people see Christ when they see our lives is agonizingly hard work—like the work it takes to compete as a world-class athlete. **Effectively reaching lost people requires the discipline and rigor of an athlete in training.**

Transition

Look at [verses 26-27](#). The first part of 26 continues the image of a runner but then suddenly switches to that of a boxer. *Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. 27 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.*

⁶ Morris, p. 137.

⁷ http://www.nycmarathon.org/news/story_27

- If effectively reaching lost people requires the discipline and rigor of an athlete in training, what is Paul saying with this comparison to a boxer? Again, I don't believe his point is all that different from the one made with the runner. Like the boxer **who exemplifies rigorous, purposeful self-discipline** that's how we're to approach the Christian life and effectively reaching lost people.
- Boxing in the ancient world was brutal. It was more like those pay-per-view ultimate fighting events you see advertised on TV than 12 civilized rounds in a ring with gloves. Ancient boxers devastatingly punished one another with bare knuckles that were often bound only with leather.⁸ With this metaphor of boxing, Paul's pretty clear. What kind of fool steps into the ring but is so ill-prepared he can't even land a punch? That's Paul's point. Not aimless running. Or aimless punching. If we're going to be effective at what we do, and what we do is witness to the good news of the gospel, then it's going to take some purposeful, rigorous self-discipline. Don't box aimlessly—with no fixed goal.⁹ Don't just step into the ring and beat the air. Instead, God wants us to box "with real purpose."¹⁰
- And the way to box with purpose is spelled out in **verse 27**. *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.* Again, it goes back to the behind the scenes training. The event, the match, the race is a life of witness. But behind the scenes there is rigorous training and self-discipline. And in the case of verse 27, the discipline Paul refers to is that of *beating my body* or more literally giving a black eye to my body.¹¹ Or as it's alternatively translated, "I am beating my body black and blue."¹²
- What's Paul talking about? This idea of pummeling one's body is something I think every competitive athlete understands. In order to be a successful in any athletic pursuit there comes a point when your body will just say no—no more. No more training. No more sacrificing. No more protein shakes. No more getting up at the crack of dawn. No more shin splints. I'm tired and I just want to be a couch potato. And at that point you literally have to subdue your body, bring it under your control, *make it your slave* as it says in **verse 27** so that your body does what it doesn't want to do.
- That, right there, is a snapshot of the kind of internal fortitude and focus it takes to effectively reach lost people with the good news of Jesus Christ. It takes rigor. It takes discipline. It takes strict training. You are simply going to have to, with the help of the Holy Spirit, make yourself do some things, give some things up, say some things to people, make tough choices that you just won't want to do. Otherwise the default is couch potatoes for Jesus. A whole lot of munching and chewing and feeding but not a whole lot gets done in the areas that really matter. No kingdom witness. No races being won.

Transition

I really think we need to repent of our warped view of what it takes to live the Christian life. I hope these words are a corrective. There's a lot at stake in living this way; there's a lot to gain and there's even more to lose. I think this passage ends with a warning.

⁸ Mare, *1 Corinthians*.

⁹ Fee, p. 438.

¹⁰ Fee, p. 438.

¹¹ Morris, p. 138.

¹² Garland, p. 442.

Conclusion

- In [verse 27](#) Paul says, *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.* What's Paul's fear? Disqualification. That word is significant. It's used six times in the New Testament, including once right here in verse 27, and in all but one case the context refers to eternal disqualification.¹³ Paul's fear is that if he is unfaithful in carrying out his commission of preaching the gospel, of living as a witness for Jesus, if he fails to run in such a way as to win the prize, it will disqualify him from receiving the prize altogether. What's the prize?
- Again, the goal we run for is an everlasting crown, verse 25. That image of a crown that lasts forever is intended to impress upon us that the race we run and the way we run it carries with it consequences of an eternal nature. As [David Garland](#) put it, "The immortal crown to be won is not a good job-approval rating as an apostle, but salvation. It can be won only if one exercises self-control and abstains from many things that may bring physical delight but ultimately will doom success in the contest."¹⁴ That's why Paul can say in 2 Timothy 4:7 *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.* He equates the race with keeping the faith.
- Let me be very clear here. Listen carefully to what I'm about to say. I don't believe you can lose your salvation. Once saved always saved. But there are some verses in scripture, and this is one of them, that really challenge my understanding of the perseverance of the saints and what that means. What I'm about to say to you, I say to myself also. If you're not living this way, like an athlete in strict, rigorous training with all your focus on living as an effective witness, which is what it means to compete for this everlasting crown, you just might not be a Christian. I don't know how else to put it. *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you--unless, of course, you fail the test?*¹⁵
- If those words make you uncomfortable, good. That either means the Holy Spirit is right now drawing you and asking you to submit to Jesus Christ or you're being convicted that you're not persevering and living the life God has called you to in Christ Jesus. In either case, your response is the same. Flee to Jesus.
- As [C.S. Lewis](#) put it, Christ says, "Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there. I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think are innocent as well as the ones you think are wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you myself: my own will shall become yours."¹⁶
- And that's the only way for us to run this race marked and finish in a way that we get the prize. Will you pray with me?

¹³ Romans 1:28, 2 Corinthians 13:5-6, 2 Timothy 3:8, Titus 1:16, Hebrews 6:8

¹⁴ Garland, p. 444.

¹⁵ 2 Corinthians 13:5

¹⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 196-7.