

**Running to the finish line** I Corinthians 9:23-27 7/21/02

I think one of the most difficult tasks in following Christ is to address mistakes and misunderstandings with those that you are closest to. One would think that there would be a direct correlation between the ease of the reconciliation and the closeness of the relationship, but the reality too often is that the closer the relationship the more difficult and stressful the reconciliation is. If one were to pick up *The Message* and read through the whole first letter to Corinth you would pick up the depth of the tension that exists between Paul and the believing community in Corinth. Most of the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter is taken up with Paul trying to set a major misunderstanding right. Here is the jist of it. All the other apostles traveled with their families when they were out in ministry and on church planting journeys. It was understood that apostles received financial assistance from their sponsoring church as well as those who hosted them in the city. In Corinth, Paul had not taken that route but rather supported himself through the making of tents. It seems that this has led the church to conclude two things. One, Paul must have felt uncomfortable being perceived as a real apostle and therefore did not asked to receive their financial support and secondly, his doing this type of manual labor lowered his status significantly in their eyes as only lower class and uneducated would make tents. How would you answer that kind of sentiment? And so Paul lays out for them the legitimacy of his apostleship and his right to receive wages for his ministry but then also his right to refuse that right because he was in fact a full apostle who preached not because it was his job and how he supported himself but rather as verse 16 says, “Yet when I preach the Gospel I can not boast because I am compelled to preach. Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel.”

Let's pick it up in verse 23. READ

It seems to me that Paul has come to one of those bottom line sections where he lays it all out for his readers. Where he says, "this is what it is all about. This is the main thing that we must keep the main things." And through several metaphors he tells us what this life of discipleship is all about.

1. Run to win – verse 24 *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.* Now, we must be careful in understanding what Paul is saying here in light of everything else Paul writes about a life in Christ. Paul is speaking of intention and desire. He is speaking of priorities. Many years ago a German pastor who had gained recognition for his scholarly abilities returned from the safety of the US to preach and train leaders for the Lutheran Church under the heel of Adolph Hitler. His most famous book is one on the Sermon on the Mount. He titled it "The Cost of Discipleship." He spoke of total devotion that cost everything because it cost God the life of His only Son. That is what Paul is speaking of here. You cannot enter into Discipleship half-heartedly. Discipleship is not a one-day a week for 90 minutes. When you enter into a personal relationship with Jesus it is everything. You are not entering just to get a number, or just to get a shirt. You are entering to run, to win, to finish the race.

2. Train to run: Paul also understands something else. It is the difference between trying and training. You have heard me say this before but I believe it bears repeating. Paul doesn't tell us to try to be a good Christian. He calls us to train to be Christ reflectors. Look back at verses 19-23 *Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.* <sup>20</sup> *To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the*

*Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. <sup>21</sup> To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. <sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. <sup>23</sup> I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.*

That is why we talk so much about taking on the character and choosing the priorities of Jesus. It is building into your life a grid that evaluates all of life through those two principles. How did Jesus handle strife between people? How did he handle conflict? What was his view towards possessions? These and many other questions are what it means to train yourself to run the life of faith. It means making choices before hand that prepare you to make choices in real situations. How do you prepare to share your resources with those in need when they approach you or the need becomes known, by giving away your resources before? So you get in practice. So it becomes natural. Perhaps no segment of society does this as well as the training we provide doctors. Medical school, residencies and internships do everything they can to place them in situation where they can be trained to respond properly so that when they are faced with them alone, they know how to act automatically. That is what it means to train to run.

3.Live to train- lastly we are to live to train. How unlike the philosophy of so much of our culture. Some live to eat, others live to buy, others live to obtain, others live to arrive. Others live to enjoy, to relax, to retire whatever your motive is. Paul says I get up every morning to train. He says in verse 26 we don't run just for the heck of it and then he

changes metaphors and says that if I am going to box I don't just flail away and hit the air. No, I train every day. Why. So I can compete. But more than that. So I can finish.

Conclusion- Over the past ten years there has come onto the scene a growing amount of material in both the business/professional world and the world of church ministry. The focus is on finishing well. It comes about for a couple of reasons but primarily because of some horrendous crash and burns among top leadership and leading companies. How do you finish well and pass the reigns on to the next generation of leaders? That is so much a part of what Paul says at the end here. He says I want to run and train and live in such a way that I am never put on the shelf. That is one of the greatest challenges for every Christian. To keep growing in their walk so that there is never a time when God says I love you but you know what, you are no longer teachable, you are no longer willing to try new methodologies to communicate the same message. You are frozen in time or you are so living in the past that you have no effectiveness for the future.

For all of my life Dr. Billy Graham has served as an example of a man who has taught the same truths but has always been conscious of how to communicate to the person of today's world. And I believe that God has honored him for that by continuing to use his ministry to reach lost people for Jesus Christ. You see, it really isn't about where you place, but that you complete the race and that you are still racing whenever you cross the finish line.