

Title: RUNNING TO WIN IN THE RACE OF FAITH

Text: I Corinthians 9:24–27

Intro: Perhaps the most remarkable scene in sports is the marathoner's last lap at the end of a tough 26-mile race. As the exhausted runner presses to the finish line, the crowd in the Olympic stadium cheers him on. With eyes focused on the finish line, the runner fully exerts whatever remaining strength he has and run full speed toward the tape. Before the watching world, he is finally awarded the prize. From this sports imagery, Paul compares the Christian life to a hard marathon, a famous event to 1st-century Christians.

Writing the Corinthian believers who lived just 10 miles from the famous Isthmian Games, Paul challenged them not merely to join the race of faith but to be serious about it and run to win. God wants winning believers! In our present sports-crazed world, nothing better illustrates the principles of living for Christ. What are the keys to spiritual victory?

1. DETERMINATION (v.24). One can't win a marathon with half-hearted effort. The runner must have a will to win, a strong resolve. It isn't enough to be in the Christian race but rather, once entered, we must be serious in our spiritual life, do all we can for God's glory. Recall, however, that our entrance into said race is NOT referring to our salvation. It is a call to make whatever sacrifice is necessary to win the incorruptible crown at the end. The most coveted prize of the Roman Empire was the "**stephanos**," the laurel-like wreath crowned on the champion by a high official. Made of leafy greenery, the victor's crown brought instant fame, tax-exemption, free education, and other privileges (**Col. 3:24**).

2. DISCIPLINE (v.25). In the ancient games, victory depended on the athlete's meticulous training. Every runner trained under a strict trainer. Marathon runners were known to work out hard for years—lifting weights, running miles, regulating sleep, restricting their diet. Discipline means we must learn control and mastery of our own physical bodies, foregoing some pleasures & convenience, pursuing spiritual

growth to succeed in the Lord. We must commit ourselves to the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life like serious Bible study, fervent prayer and serving (**I Tim. 4:7–8**). Urging for our full faithfulness, Paul writes, “**Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible**” (**v.25b**). If a pagan athlete would be that zealous as to win a fading crown and a moment of earthly fame, how much more must we be resolute to gain the incorruptible crown?

3. DIRECTION (v.26). The marathon route was filled with marks and signs, winding through the countryside. The runner stayed on course, his eyes fixed in front, and his mind focused on the finish line. Paul said that he wasn't running uncertainly and without a purpose. The route we run into, designed by God, is clearly marked by His word and will. It is a narrow path that includes every aspect of our lives (**Matt. 7:13-14; Acts 14:22**). To gain God's reward requires closely following the required path (**Phil. 3:13-14**).

4. DENIAL (v.27). We know that professional athletes deny usual comforts to their bodies. The same self-denial is necessary for the Christian disciple (**Luke 9:23**). Paul now shifted illustration from Running to Boxing, admonishing us that we must control our bodies by giving a series of knockout punches to sinful, fleshly desires. We must resist temptation, put down sensual lusts that would enslave us, and remain pure. Even Paul feared that after having preached to others, he would be disqualified, referring not to the loss of salvation but of reward (**Phil 2:16; II Tim. 4:7**).

Conclusion: After the race, each runner was made to stand on a high platform in the midst of the track where the “Bema” or Judgment Seat was. The judge would then either crown or disqualify contestants based on the game rules. So it will be for believers in Christ (**II Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10, 12**). Every step of the Christian life has eternal importance. Our present thoughts, words, and acts will have eternal consequences! May we run with godly resolve in light of that moment when we shall stand to give an account to Christ.