

**Sixth Sunday of Epiphany**  
**February 12, 2006**  
**1 Corinthians 9:24-27**

*Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke*

**Run to Win!**

1. Run with purpose
2. Run with self-discipline

*NIV 1 Corinthians 9:24 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.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air.<sup>27</sup> 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.*

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

There are 84 events in the Winter Olympics being held now in Turin, Italy. That means there are 84 gold medals to be won. While training to win one or more of those gold medals, American Alpine skier Bode Miller does 200-yard sprints while pushing 600-pound roller—on an incline! Another American, Nordic-combined skier Johnny Spillane, has put off surgery for a separated shoulder. He's willing to train and compete through the pain of his injury in order to have a chance at the gold.

The apostle Paul could have cited similar examples from the lives of athletes who competed in the games of his day. He and his readers would have been familiar the Isthmian games that took place near Corinth. The athletes trained intensely for those games, too. It's not surprising, then, that Paul would use terms borrowed from athletic competitions to encourage Christians to be goal-oriented and self-disciplined on their way to the heavenward. A key difference is that far more is at stake for us Christians in our race. The prize for the victorious Greek athlete was a laurel wreath crown that soon dried out and eventually crumbled to dust. The prize for the victorious Christian, however, is a crown of righteousness that lasts forever. Wouldn't you have to conclude, then, that we Christians have even more reason than Olympic athletes do to single-mindedly pursue the prize? That's why the apostle says to us in our epistle lesson today, **Run to Win!** Running to win, where Christians are concerned, means running the race heavenward with purpose and with self-discipline.

**1. Run with purpose**

Paul begins this section by writing, "*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.*"

Olympic athletes have nothing on the apostle Paul when it comes to single-minded pursuit of his goal. Paul was single-minded in carrying out the duties of his call as the apostle to the Gentiles. Here in chapter 9 of 1 Corinthians he asserts that he has a right to expect that those to whom he preached the gospel would support him with their gifts. More than that, he has the right to take a believing wife along with him on his missionary travels. But Paul didn't make use of either of those rights. He made tents and sold them to support himself, rather than taking support from those he served. And he had no wife, meaning that he could focus exclusively on pleasing the Lord and not have to give consideration to pleasing a wife. Listen to what Paul writes earlier in this chapter and you can't miss his dedication. He says, "**We put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.**" (9:12) And later, "**Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.**" (9:19) And again, "**I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.**" (9:22) And anyone familiar with the life of St. Paul knows that this wasn't just theory; these were the principles by which Paul lived.

Here at the end of this chapter, Paul is encouraging us to be similarly single-minded in pursuit of the heavenly prize. He says, "*Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air.*" If you hope to win a race, you've got to run straight for the finish line. And if you intend to win a boxing match, you'd better land some blows. Similarly, if you want to get to heaven, keep your eye on the prize.

What is your ultimate goal with the time God gives you here on earth? Is it to accumulate possessions? Is it to live as comfortably and as enjoyably as possible? Is it to obtain wisdom through formal and informal education? What is it? Why are we here? Here's how Paul himself answered these questions in his New Testament letters. To the Philippians, he writes, "**Forget-ting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.**" (Php. 3:13b-14) A chapter later here in 1 Corinthians, he writes, "**So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.**" (10:31) And at the end of chapter 15, the resurrection chapter, he says, "**Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.**" (15:56) You could sum it all up by saying that God put us here so that we can come to faith in Jesus, so that we can live our faith in Jesus, and so that we can share our faith in Jesus.

Let me anticipate an objection: "What are you saying, Pastor? Are we to have no life besides prayer and Bible study and church attendance, with the possible exception of an occasional timeout for acts of Christian service? Are we to have no hobbies? Take no vacations? Indulge in no entertainment?" No, that's not what Paul is saying. But he is cautioning us against the aimless—and ultimately, empty—way of living that focuses on the things of this life almost to the exclusion

of things eternal, that lavishes all kinds of attention on the body but ignores the soul. And he is cautioning against the complacent way of living that simply presumes we'll get to heaven, but fails to recognize the many pitfalls and obstacles between here and there. Before he went to the cross, Jesus told us that he was going to prepare a place for us. He was going to his Father's house, he said, and he'd come again and take us to be with him. He wants us to be ready on the day he comes again. In fact, he wants us to make getting to heaven and helping each other get to heaven our primary focus in life.

It may be that the best way to answer the question, "Why am I here?" is to begin by answering the question, "Who am I?" And rather than identifying yourself by your appearance or your occupation or your family tree or ethnic background, I would encourage that you find your identity in what the Triune God tells you about yourself. Go, for example, to the explanations to the three articles of the Apostles' Creed in the *Small Catechism*. There you confess that God the Father created you. And in the Second Article you confess that Jesus Christ, true God and true man, redeemed you from sin and death by shedding his precious blood for you. And in the Third Article you say that God the Spirit has used the gospel of forgiveness to call you out of unbelief to the new life of faith in Jesus. When we know that we have been lovingly created by our Father in heaven, freely redeemed by his Son, Jesus Christ, and graciously called from death to life by the working of the Holy Spirit, then it doesn't take a whole lot more to arrive at our purpose for living. In the words of Dr. Luther, "All this he did that I should be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness."

If you're going to win, Paul has been saying, you have to run with purpose. But he also speaks in this passage about running with self-discipline. One American athlete in this Olympiad is a member of the luge team by the name of Tony Benshoof. He is 30 years old and has been training at luge since he was 13—more than half his life. This is his first chance to compete for a medal. As we continue, St. Paul is encouraging us to apply a similar self-discipline in our race heavenward.

## **2. Run with self-discipline**

Paul says here, "*Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training.*" That strict training involves a lot of self-discipline. A little later, Paul mentions his own training regimen: "*Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. 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.*" Could it happen that someone as devoted to the cause of Christ as the apostle Paul could ultimately fall short of obtaining the crown that lasts forever? Paul knew better than to say that it couldn't happen. Just a chapter later he's going to sound that famous warning, "**So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!**" (1 Cor. 10:12) History shows, Paul says, that people do fall from faith. He has in mind the children of Israel, who, in a way, were "baptized" when they crossed the Red Sea, and who ate and drank of

Christ, as he accompanied them on their travels. Yet, Paul writes, **“God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.”** Why did this happen? Because they set their hearts on evil things, Paul says (10:6). They engaged in idolatry, immorality, and grumbling. They tested the Lord who redeemed them.

So what preventive measures does Paul recommend? Answer: Beating his body and making it his slave. At first glance, that brings to mind some of the monks of the Middle Ages, like Martin Luther in his earlier years, resorting to harsh treatment of their bodies—denying themselves food and sleep and simple comforts in order to purge themselves of sin and draw closer to God. But that is blatant work-righteousness. No one is more outspoken than Paul is when it comes to the truth that our salvation is entirely by God’s grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ alone. In this letter he has said that **“Christ Jesus...has become for us wisdom from God, that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.”** (1:30) He has assured us that whatever sinful and sordid things might have taken place in our past, **“You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”** (6:11) And he says, **“I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”** (15:3-4)

No, when Paul speaks of beating his body and making it his slave, he is not talking about earning his way to heaven. He is instead addressing us as people who are already the saints of God through faith in Jesus Christ, but also as people who must contend every day with the stubbornness and rebelliousness of our sinful nature. Paul wants us to know that even while we live under the gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, there is still a place in our lives for God’s law. Just as an Olympic athlete will use a stopwatch or a measuring tape to compare herself with the standards for her event, so we Christians compare ourselves with the standards of God’s law. When the law shows us our sin, it reminds us of how desperately we need a Savior. And the law also serves as a guide for us Christians, showing us what attitudes and words and actions please God. Through faith in Jesus Christ we have been freed completely from the curse and coercion of the law. But that doesn’t mean we discard the law. On the contrary, we have been redeemed precisely by the Son of God so that we might exercise ourselves every day in the law of God. Psalm 119:1 says, **“Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD.”** Rather than saying, “Ah, I’ve been redeemed by the blood of Jesus; now I’m free to do what I please,” a Christian will say, “I’ve been redeemed by the blood of Jesus; now I’m free to do what pleases God.” So the self-discipline that Paul speaks of here is the Christian’s daily training regimen of admitting our sins, renouncing them, and then taking refuge in the sacrifice that Jesus made for our sins at the cross.

In the next two weeks, many of us may spend some time watching the Winter Olympics. As we do, we're likely to hear about the rigorous training the athletes underwent and the effort they went to just to get to the Olympics. As you hear those things, I hope it will remind you that we, too, are in a race, a race heavenward. God wants us to run in such a way as to win the prize. That means running with the purpose and the self-discipline that God produces in us through his Word and Sacraments. Amen.