

The Conditioning in Discipleship

1 Corinthians 9: 24-27

Over the past several weeks we have been discussing discipleship and what the Scripture reveals about being a disciple of Christ. I am convinced the Lord desires every believer to be a disciple, but discipleship is not immediate following salvation. Some live for years following salvation and yet never fully surrender to the Lord and His will for their lives. One thing is certain: if we are to be a disciple, a learner and follower of Christ, we must be willing to submit to His leadership in our lives and follow His divine direction.

I think you will agree, based on our previous studies, that discipleship is not for the faint of heart or unprepared. Being a genuine follower of Christ requires commitment, sacrifice, and preparation. Our Christian journey is never referred to as a life of ease, but often a battle in which we are engaged. The enemy seeks to defeat and oppose every believer who determines to follow the Lord.

Paul understood the struggles of discipleship and the conditioning required to be successful. Our text today is familiar to the Bible student, and it is a great passage to consider regarding discipleship. Paul uses a competitive race to illustrate the believer's walk, conditioning, and preparation to endure and finish the race we are engaged in for Christ. Let's examine the [observations](#) of Paul as we consider: [The Conditioning in Discipleship](#).

I. The Ambition Required (24) – [Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain.](#) Paul discusses the ambition of a disciple of Christ. Consider:

A. The Participation (24a) – [Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize?](#) Really this should be apparent to each of us, but I fear we fail to comprehend the urgency of our time. Every runner in the race is expected to run if they have any chance of obtaining the prize. Merely contemplating running or dreaming of a prize will never provide success. If one is to obtain the prize, and win the race, he must be engaged in the race.

➤ This is also true in our efforts for the Lord. We cannot expect to be effective disciples if we are not engaged in service to the Lord. Simply being aware of people who need the Lord, or those who need someone to come alongside them in support, is never enough. We will never become devoted disciples of Christ if we are not following Him, actively walking with the Lord and pursuing His will for our lives. If you want to be an effective disciple, you must enter the race!

B. The Prize (24a) – *Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize?* Paul also reveals the reward for finishing the race in first place. There is a prize awarded to the victor. In the games to which Paul referred, many would enter the race, and run the race, but only one would receive the prize. If they were to have any hope of winning the prize, they had to prepare for the race, enter the race, and endure until the end.

➤ Our Christian journey for the Lord is not a “winner take all” race. We are all running the same race, and yet it is possible for every believer to obtain a prize. We are not in competition with each other, but we must all pursue the prize. What is the prize? First and foremost, when we run in obedience, we glorify the Lord. Second, we have the opportunity to win those who have yet to receive Christ. Third, we have the privilege of investing in fellow believers and strengthening the body of Christ. These treasures are eternal. Being obedient in service to the Lord may not pay much in this life, but there is an eternal reward waiting for the faithful.

C. The Pursuit (24b) – *So run, that ye may obtain.* This is simple, yet profound. There is a prize to win, but it will never be obtained by those who fail to enter the race. Paul urged the Corinthians to pursue the prize, to run in order to obtain!

➤ There are a lot of races being run today, but few seek to obtain an eternal prize. Most have temporal ambitions for material things, but few are committed to serving the Lord. In fact, regarding service for the Lord, most are content to be spectators rather than pursuing the prize themselves. They are content to watch others run for the Lord, but fail to get involved. If we are to be effective disciples, we must pursue the Lord and His will for our lives!

II. The Affection Revealed (25) – *And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible.* Here Paul discusses the passion of the runner, his commitment to winning the race. Consider:

A. The Discipline (25a) – *And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things.* This reveals the determination and disciplined commitment of every serious runner. Striving literally speaks of *being in agony, pushing until exhausted*. The mastery speaks of *the struggle, the competition, or fight in which one is engaged*. Being temperate speaks of *self-restraint*. This reveals the discipline of the runner. He makes every effort to be successful, preparing himself mentally, physically, and emotionally to endure the difficulty of the race.

➤ Successful athletes train relentlessly for success. They are constantly practicing, pushing themselves to reach greater heights. They are disciplined in their diet, avoiding foods and

practices that hinder their success. As believers we must be active in service to the Lord daily. We must feed on the Word of God, ensuring our spiritual health and strength. A disciple who lacks discipline will not be an effective servant and will eventually abandon the race.

B. The Desire (25b) – *Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible.* Paul used a runner as an illustration, but he wanted to emphasize the difference in the desires. The worldly runner sought to obtain a physical crown, a trophy or prize of earthly value. These might bring satisfaction and momentary praise, but they would not endure for eternity. Eventually the trophy would lose its luster or the runner would spend the prize earnings. These corruptible crowns would not bring lasting satisfaction and they lacked eternal value.

➤ Little value or emphasis is placed on serving the Lord in our day. Few see the importance of a life lived for Christ. Paul assures us that commitment to the Lord holds eternal value. The pleasures and compensations of life will eventually fade, but a genuine disciple has the potential to gain an incorruptible crown, an eternal reward in heaven. We have the privilege of sharing the Gospel of Christ with the unsaved. We have the honor of serving the Lord and investing in the lives of fellow believers. These acts bring satisfaction to the believer in this life and eternal reward in heaven. We must focus on the incorruptible crowns instead of being consumed with that which will fade away.

III. The Assurance Reflected (26) – *I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air.* Paul never implies our service to the Lord will be easy, but he reveals we can labor for Him with confident assurance. Notice:

A. The Confidence (26a) – *I therefore so run, not as uncertainly.* Bear in mind Paul is referring to a race with many competitors. He is running against those who seek to hinder him, striving to prevent a successful finish. He was well aware of the competition, but he was also confident in the Lord's ability to equip him to endure. He was not running in uncertainty, but in full confidence and assurance.

➤ The race of discipleship is tough. There are struggles along the way and a determined adversary who seeks to sideline every runner for Christ. Our lives and service will never be void of these, but we too can run with certainty. We are not asked to serve the Lord in our own ability. We are not depending on mere human strength and wisdom. We have the power and guidance of the Spirit working on our behalf. We are more than conquerors through Him that loved us! If He has called you to it, He will bring you through it!

B. The Concentration (26b) – *so fight I, not as one that beateth the air*. Here Paul switches to a boxer as an illustration. He knew his service to Christ guaranteed a continual fight. He would stand against the enemy with the same confidence he had while running the race. He was focused on his opponent, not throwing wasteful punches in the air. He knew the target and was determined to engage the enemy, by the help of the Lord. He refused to allow the enemy to divert his focus through engaging in pointless endeavors or struggles. Paul chose his battles carefully and was well prepared when he stepped up to fight.

➤ Discipleship requires this type of concentration and discipline. The enemy would like to keep us so busy with pointless skirmishes that we fail to accomplish anything of value. We must continually prepare ourselves for the fight we are engaged in, while making every effort count. Time is too short and lives are at stake. We must determine to make our efforts effective through the help of the Lord. We are not here for show or man's applause, but to serve the risen Lord and His church.

IV. The Abstinence Required (27) – *But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway*. Paul was also aware of the temptations he faced and the weakness of the flesh. He knew he must refrain from certain activities while constantly submitting to the Lord's will. Consider:

A. The Discipline (27a) – *But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection*. We have considered much that requires discipline. Being an effective disciple requires constant discipline. Paul knew the sinful tendencies within the flesh. In order to experience victory, he had to bring his body in submission to Christ. He could not follow the desires of the flesh and be effective in serving the Lord. He refused to be controlled by his desires.

➤ Becoming a genuine disciple of Christ is a natural progression for the believer. We will never become a true disciple of Christ until we learn to control the appetites of the flesh. This body of flesh in which we dwell is our greatest hindrance. We must be willing to submit every area of our lives to the Lord if we are to serve Him. There can be nothing off limits. We cannot refuse to deal with specific areas that hinder us. Discipleship requires total abandon of the flesh and complete surrender to Christ!

B. The Disgrace (27b) – *lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway*. Paul started well and he was determined to finish well. He had encountered many who had abandoned the faith or brought disgrace to the Lord and His church. Paul understood what

the flesh was capable of, and he feared failing the Lord. He was determined to keep his life in subjection to the Lord in order to avoid becoming a disgrace.

➤ That spoke volumes to me. Perceived hypocrisy is likely the greatest hindrance to the church. We cannot be an effective witness to the Lord, or serve Him in power, if our lives are lived according to the desires of the flesh. We can't win others to Christ or encourage another believer with unconfessed sin in our lives. I started well and I want to finish well. I too understand what I am capable of apart from the help and grace of the Lord. You know your weaknesses and sinful tendencies. If we are to become fishers of men, we must be willing to crucify the flesh. You can destroy a life time of effort and influence in a single moment of sinful activity.

Conclusion: I mentioned that the Lord never promised following Him would be easy. Being a disciple of Christ requires constant conditioning. We must be willing to prepare for the race, and run the race in order to obtain the prize. If we are to be successful, we must deny the flesh as we seek sanctification in Christ.

How are you preparing to serve the Lord? Are you putting forth any effort? Does being an effective disciple ever cross your mind? Are you battling the flesh, constantly giving in to that one besetting sin? If so, come to Christ and find direction and help to run effectively. If you have never repented of sin and received salvation, respond to Him by faith.