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Andrew M. Davis

Sermon Notes

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The Self-Denial Required to Win the Prize

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

The greatest race in the world is the marathon... a distance race that requires the greatest dedication in training and in actually competing.

Right now, the greatest marathoner in the world is 34 year-old Eliud Kipchoge from Kenya. He holds the world record for the 26.2 mile distance at 2 hours, 1 minute and 39 seconds... an amazing average pace of 4:38 per mile. He trains in a very simple way, with absolute dedication to his sport... running twice a day at high altitude in his native Kenya on soft dirt roads generally about 110-120 miles per week, with occasional speed and tempo workouts. He never takes a day off. This fall, his goal is to achieve the almost superhuman feat of running a marathon in under two hours.

He has been training as a distance runner since he was a boy in Kenya... putting in years of hard running to get where he is. The kind of dedication required for such a world-class athlete is well-known... Every Olympic athlete has their own version of extreme self-denial, including diet, sleep patterns, and thousands of hours of training at his or her sport – figure skating, archery, cycling, whatever

The Apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, utilizes this image to call on all Christians to a similar pattern of self-denial for the sake of the Kingdom of God... the upward calling for the HEAVENLY PRIZE

In our day and age of constant alluring bodily temptations, of a lifestyle that tends toward comfort and ease, we need to hear this call so that we can make progress in BOTH the internal journey of holiness and the external journey of evangelism and missions

Without learning to beat our bodies and make them our slaves, we might well be disqualified for the heavenly prize

There is no better coach to yell at us on the practice field than the Apostle Paul

There is no better drill instructor to whip us into shape than the Apostle Paul

I. Giving Up Rights and Privileges for the Sake of the Gospel

A. Context: meat sacrificed to idols

1. Paul has been speaking of the topic of meat sacrificed to idols and what Christians should do about that
2. Some more doctrinally mature Christians in Corinth understood properly that idols are nothing, and that there is only one God, and that meat is just meat, and that you can eat whatever you want
3. BUT they were flaunting their freedoms and harming weaker Christians whose consciences would not allow them to partake
4. So Paul gave a clear principle: LOVE LIMITS LIBERTY
5. He then used himself as an example concerning his salary... he had the right to receive money for his work as an Apostle; but he voluntarily laid down that right for the sake of the gospel
6. Then, he extended that to the issue of evangelism... the way he was willing to forego his preferences when it came to food or other rituals so that God could use him to win the lost to faith in Christ

1 Corinthians 9:19-23 Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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. ²² 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. ²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

B. Basic Principle: Love Limits Liberty when it comes to evangelism

1. If you want to be fruitful in winning lost people, it's going to cost you your freedoms
2. If you live for your personal preferences, you will not be very effective as an evangelist... you will not have much fruit
3. If you asked Paul, "Which do you prefer... Jewish food or Gentile food?" he would answer, "I prefer whatever would be most effective for winning lost people to Christ at that moment." He has become crucified to his own preferences

George Muller: "There was a day I died, utterly died, to George Mueller, his opinions, preferences, tastes, and will; died to the world, its approval or censure; died to the approval or blame even of my brethren and friends – and since that day have studied only to show myself approved to God."

4. We all have preferences, tastes, desires... God gave them to us... there are foods we like and those we don't

Patrick Lai, who wrote a book on tentmaking, spoke of the food issue when it came to missions:

"In seminary, we learned the slogan 'Where he leads I will follow; what he feeds, I will swallow.' Food is a major issue. Many argue that eating the local cuisine is not a big deal. But consider, if foreigners come to your country and reject your national dishes, how do you feel? As Americans, if we invite an international for Thanksgiving dinner, and they say they hate turkey and mashed potatoes and pumpkin pie, are we likely to

invite them again next year? To reject a person's food is to reject the person. Having grown up in a midwestern American city, I never ate spicy food. But when we moved to Asia, I quickly realized that the people loved hot chili peppers on every dish. What did I do? Stop eating? No, I simply trained myself to eat spicy food by going out and eating the hottest food I could find for several weeks. It was hard; I hated it and I felt sick. However, within a month, my taste buds adjusted and my body adapted. Nowadays, I truly enjoy spicy food."

All over the world, missionaries face these same kinds of challenges... for me, it was somehow learning to tolerate seafood while we lived in Japan. I actually like sashimi, the raw fish... because it had almost no flavor. But I never got used to tako (octopus) with its tentacles and suction cups

5. The issue is BIGGER THAN FOOD! How much are you willing to be inconvenienced and put at a disadvantage to win lost people?
6. If we continue to stay safe in our bubbles of personal preference and comfort, choosing what we eat, and what we watch and what music we like, and what climate is best, and what clothing looks best on us... if we live a life of ME, we won't win many people to Christ
7. We Americans are used to one of the highest standards of living in the world... we're used to air conditioning or central heat; we're used to very comfortable beds; we're used to electronic entertainment and being continually connected by our smartphones; we're used to personal transportation (automobiles) that enable us to travel wherever we want, whenever we want; we're used to top-notch medical care, and 911 for emergencies, and roads continually cared for by the government so there are few potholes or washed out sections of the road; we're used to credit card swipers, and convenience stores, and super Wal-Marts nearby with almost anything you could ever need at your fingertips
8. Most of the world doesn't live that way... if we are going to be fruitful in global missions, we'll have to give up our preferences
9. Beyond that, just in our own culture, evangelism is the same

- a. If we want to meet non-Christians and get involved in their lives, we have to make sacrifices
- b. Hospitality... having lost co-workers or neighbors over for a meal
- c. Hobbies: joining a garden club or a soccer league or a YMCA spinning class expressly to meet lost people and befriend them for the gospel
- d. Life habits: choosing certain stores and haircutting places and coffee shops and restaurants so you can develop friendships
- e. MAKING FRIENDS for the gospel... Jesus commanded it

Luke 16:9 I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

- f. But if you do, it will take an entirely different way of thinking about your life... giving up your preferences and desires and tastes

Paul likens the sacrifices needed to running in a race; he reaches for an image that the Corinthians would have been very familiar with, even proud of... running a race in the games

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.

II. What is the Race?

A. Cultural Context: The Isthmian Games

1. There were two competitive games in Greece at the time; the larger and more famous were the Olympic Games in Athens
2. But the second most well-known and popular were the Isthmian Games held in Corinth, held every third year
3. There were many contests, including chariot races, wrestling, boxing, and running
4. Paul uses two of those images here: running and boxing

B. The Central Command: Run So that You May Win

1. Paul says everyone competes, but only one gets the prize
2. He is appealing to their competitive nature, a desire for excellence and achievement
3. Amazingly, though, when you realize that, in heaven, we will be celebrating everyone's honors as though they were our own

1 Corinthians 12:26 if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

... then we realize that we are not competing against each other... we are each competing against the same enemies: the world, the flesh, and the devil

4. We should help each other be as rich as possible in rewards

C. What Is the Race?

1. Here in this context, Paul has been speaking of evangelistic fruit... of WINNING THE LOST!
2. He often likens his life calling to a race that he is running

Acts 20:24 I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me-- the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

3. BUT the whole Christian life is likened to a race as well

2 Timothy 4:7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Hebrews 12:1 Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

4. The race is BOTH the internal and external journey
 - a. Internal journey of holiness, of Christlikeness, of putting sin to death and becoming more and more like Christ
 - b. External journey of winning lost people to faith in Christ

D. Merely Running is Not Enough; Calling Us to Run With All Our Hearts

1. The enemy here: halfhearted Christianity
2. Like the Laodicean Church in Revelation 3... lukewarm

So Paul is calling us to run so as to win the prize

III. What Is the Prize?

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.

1 Corinthians 9:25 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.

A. Isthmian Games: The Prize was a Crown Given to the Victor

1. It was a garland made of pine or olive branches or some other living vine woven into a wreath that was put on their heads to the cheers of the adoring crowds
2. Paul calls it a corruptible wreath... it begins to fade the moment it is cut and probably didn't look like much the very next day
3. It WILL NOT LAST! Now obviously, the disciplined Greek athletes that won the crown knew very well it would fade; but the real prize was the HONOR that went with the victory; the fame, the glory, of being a champion
4. However, even this does not last; more contests are held, and the next champion is crowned, and the 15 minutes of fame is gone
5. Since the modern Olympic movement started in 1896 in Athens, there have been 18,553 Olympic champions crowns... almost 19,000! The glory is fleeting

B. Paul Contrasts This with OUR CROWN

1. He says our crown will LAST FOREVER!!
2. It is eternal... it is not fleeting

Matthew 6:19-21 *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

3. If Paul has in mind eternal life, that fits with the next chapter... the warning from Israel's history to not go into sin... that warning seems tied to eternal life itself. So the prize is your SOUL won eternally through the grace of God, but kept through the endurance of the Christian race

James 1:12 *Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.*

4. HOWEVER... concerning the crown, the PRIZE: the context here is winning lost people to Christ; and Paul often spoke of the people he won to Christ and the churches he planted as his CROWN:

1 Thessalonians 2:19-20 *For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? ²⁰ Indeed, you are our glory and joy*

- C. So... the Crown you will win is your soul, won for all eternity, and your rewards of lost people you lead to Christ

IV. How Should We Run?

Paul gives the secret to winning the prize: self-control in everything, stern self-denial of the body

A. Self-Control in All Things

1 Corinthians 9:25 *Every athlete exercises self-control in all things.*

1. World-class athlete: There is no area of life that does not need to be brought under discipline
 - a. Everything they eat is carefully monitored
 - b. Amounts, nutritional value, caloric intake... fats, sugars, carbohydrates, proteins, green vegetables

Tom Brady is famous for his avocado ice cream. NBA Hall of Famer Hakeem Olajuwon said that when he first entered the league, he ate a lot of ice cream; but it was when he denied that pleasure and changed his entire diet that he reached his peak as a basketball player

2. So also sleep patterns, how you spend every waking moment is monitored by your trainer... everything matters... everything is brought under the discipline of strict self-control
3. For Christians, it is a matter of the BODY but also a matter of the MIND and the SOUL as well

B. Paul's Violent Approach

1. Paul actually combines two athletic images: running and boxing

1 Corinthians 9:26-27 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

CSB 1 Corinthians 9:27 Instead, I discipline my body and bring it under strict control, so that after preaching to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

Greek: "beat my body" = literally "to strike beneath the eye" or "give a black eye to"; metaphorically "to browbeat" ... to "annoy greatly, provoke, irritate". Paul ANNOYS his body... he irritates it when it comes to its overpowering fleshly drives. "FRUSTRATE THE FLESH"!! When your body wants an extra helping of dessert, IRRITATE IT by pushing away from the table! When your body demands another hour of sleep beyond the sufficient hours you've already enjoyed, IRRITATE IT by getting up! When your sex drive demands to be satisfied in some illicit way, IRRITATE IT by fleeing sexual immorality!

"Make it my slave": Greek literally to "lead into slavery" ... Paul leads his body into servitude to his mind... to his new nature in Christ; his body WILL SERVE JESUS and not sin!

This is a WAR!

Romans 7:22-23 For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.

Galatians 5:17 For the flesh desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; these are opposed to (WAGING WAR AGAINST) each other, so that you don't do what you want.

2. Paul is actually BOXING while he RUNS A MARATHON; a strange combination sport
3. But he is very clear... he has a clear GOAL in mind... completing the race God laid out in front of him:

Acts 20:24 However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me-- the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

4. His goal is the GLORY OF CHRIST in the SAVING OF THE ELECT... through the testifying to the gospel

2 Timothy 2:10 I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

5. His goal is THE ETERNAL GLORY FOR CHRIST and for the ELECT of salvation for the unsaved elect
6. He is not running like there's no finish line, no goal... not AIMLESSLY

Illus. Roomba... vacuuming robot... it meanders around and seems to have no idea where to go next

So are many people in this world... they seem rootless drifters without a purpose in life; Paul is calling on all of us to get on board with God's purpose

Luke 19:10 the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.

Matthew 6:33 seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

7. So Paul is running a clearly marked race... but he is also BOXING the entire way
 - a. He does not fight light a man beating the air... like SHADOWBOXING
 - b. He has a very real opponent... and it is HIS OWN BODY
8. Paul's body, with its relentless demands for food and drink and rest and sensory pleasures and luxuries and sleep... this is his enemy; he has to BEAT HIS BODY and MAKE IT HIS SLAVE... not yield to what his body wants, because its drives and desires will lead him off the path of righteousness

Think of the three close disciples to Jesus in Gethsemane, Peter, James, and John... Jesus told them "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation." But their bodies DEMANDED SLEEP and Peter slept rather than "Watch and pray" ... and he fell into sin; Jesus said "**The spirit is willing but the body is weak.**"

This is what Paul means by beating his body and making it his slave

I will not be enslaved to my body's demands for food and drink and sleep and sensory pleasures; I will USE my body to serve God's purpose in this world

So, if you want to achieve great things for Christ, you also must learn to say NO to your body and make it your slave

V. What Is the Danger?

1 Corinthians 9:27 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.

A. Disqualified for the Prize

1. In the context, it means if you don't discipline yourself for godliness, then some sin patterns will overtake you and disqualify you for evangelistic fruitfulness, for service to Christ

2. This is a VERY REAL THREAT!
3. Many pastors have been disqualified from ministry because of sexual immorality or financial dealings or power and control issues in which they dominated other people
4. These are all SIN ISSUES
5. If we want to be useful to the Master, we have to deny the flesh
6. Richard Baxter in his Reformed Pastor, urged all pastors to Keep watch over themselves specifically in the area of their own sin patterns

Take heed to yourselves, lest your example contradict your doctrine, and lest you lay such stumbling-blocks before the blind, as may be the occasion of their ruin; lest you unsay with your lives, what you say with your tongues; and be the greatest hinderers of the success of your own labors.

B. Deeper Issue: Final Salvation

1. Next time, Paul will extend the image to speak of Jewish people that began the journey to the Promised Land but never made it because of sin... like sexual immorality and idolatry
2. So the disqualification here seems bigger than the issue of Christian usefulness or rewards
3. The flesh is constantly there to take us away from the path of eternal life... we MUST MORTIFY the deeds of the flesh if we want to be saved in the end

VI. Applications

A. What Areas of Your Life is Holy Spirit Speaking to You About?

B. For HOLINESS:

1. Are there ways your body is ruling you that you need to bring under self-control?

2. Is it your diet? Sleep patterns? Entertainment habits? Other aspects of your lifestyle?
 3. How can you “discipline your body for godliness?”
 4. What is your prayer life like? Are you able to discipline your body to spend extended time in prayer?
 5. What do Paul’s words “I beat my body and make it my slave” say to you about your lifestyle?
- C. For Evangelism: How Can You Make Sacrifices In Order to Win the Prize?
1. Paul was willing to deny himself to go to city after city to win the lost
 2. We have thousands of unchurched people pouring into our region every year... it will take self-denial to reach them
 3. What are you willing to change about your pleasant American lifestyle in order to reach lost people?