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**Sermon Title: *Run to Win: Success God's Way***

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**Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (2011).**

**Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.**

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## ***Run to Win: Success God's Way***

### **Introduction:**

In his letters to the Corinthians, Paul must repeatedly counter the charges of those who, under the influence of Greek philosophers, claimed that he didn't measure up as a spiritual leader because of his lack of oratorical power, philosophical credentials, and impressive appearance. But Paul nevertheless affirmed his authority as their spiritual leader and focused on the power of the gospel through the message of the cross. He called these immature believers to exercise discipline in the church, moral purity, and faithfulness to the marriage commitment in the midst of an ungodly, mixed up culture.

In chapters 8 and 9, Paul addresses additional controversial issues, and says that as an authentic, God-called apostle of Jesus, not like the pretentious super and superficial apostles, he was willing to relinquish personal rights and freedom in order to serve the needs of others. Even though converts from Judaism were free from the requirement to observe Jewish ceremonial laws, and those converted from paganism no longer had to fear eating food that had been sacrificed to idols, their Christian freedom, Paul says, is not one of independence. Rather, theirs is a freedom to obey Christ and to follow his example in meeting the needs of others and not offending the conscience of weaker brothers and sisters in the church.

Critics claimed that Paul was not an authentic apostle since he, unlike a group of self-proclaimed apostles, was not asserting his rights. Paul countered by saying he

was, on the other hand, showing his freedom as an apostle and spiritual leader by voluntarily choosing to relinquish his personal rights to receive financial support and to have a wife, in order to maximize his life in serving the Lord Jesus. Paul's critics were asserting that his life and ministry were not successful as measured by their standards. This apostle of the cross countered these accusations by replying that what matters is not success by their standards but by the standards of God.

Follow as I read... **1 Corinthians 9:19-27**.

This afternoon the grand finale of the 2012 Olympic Games will be the running of the men's marathon, a 26.2 Km race through the streets of London. Legend says that the marathon was first run by a Greek soldier in 490 BC. He ran the 25 miles from Marathon to Athens to bring news to his countrymen of their victory over the Persians. In the London Olympics of 1908, the marathon was stretched to 26.2 Km in order to place the finish line in front of the Royal Box, a distance that was later standardized (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marathon>).

Paul employed images and illustrations from the world of sports, and the most popular sport of his day in Corinth was running, particularly in the bi-annual Isthmian Games, hosted by the city of Corinth, and second only to the Olympics in importance (Mohrlang, 1,940). No doubt Paul's use of athletic imagery for the Christian life was written with his familiarity with these popular games that featured distance running. Paul makes it quite clear that the way God measures champions is not at all like the way the world measures them. In fact, not even the way church folks sometimes measure champions. Paul was always being compared with those who called themselves "super apostles," as we see in passages like 2 Corinthians 11:5, and 12:11, and their claims were based on their superior charismatic gifts, and more impressive public rhetoric and oratory. They were also, obviously, quite good at self-aggrandizement, and had convinced the people in the church that Paul, even though he had evangelized them, just didn't measure up to their standards for success.

In Acts and in several of his letters, Paul describes his life and his God-given ministry as the running of a race, and his intention is to run to win. I participated for 19 consecutive years in an annual mini-marathon, 10-kilometer race in our former city of residence. (My running in even mini-marathons is a thing of the past!). In community running events that often attract thousands of runners, there is an elite group who run to win, who finish in little more than half the time it takes participants like me. There is also a category that participates in the run as a fun social event.

To Paul, every believer has been enlisted to run a race of faith and faithful service, and we are to run to win! We are to be successful in God's sight by running life's race to please him, and are not in the race just for show, as were some of Paul's critics. The church in Corinth was under the dark influence of the sophists and super apostles who denigrated Paul because he didn't measure up to their worldly standards of success. They were influencing the church to measure success by the world's standards and not by God's. Christians today are also being duped by Satan and the fallen world into thinking they must measure up to their standards of what makes a person successful and important. To these false prophets, financial gain, and putting on an impressive display of intellect and oratory, and popularity with the world's people and worldly people in the church was all that mattered. Paul's description of success God's way was a message needed by the church in the first century. It's also a message needed in the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It's a message needed not only by businessmen and women on the fast track of the

corporate “rat race” world, but one needed by students, educators, homemakers, pastors and missionaries. We need to understand God’s measurement for success.

Paul says the Christian life is like a race. And our text essentially asks the question, “What are you running for?” And, “Are you running to succeed by God’s standards?” The race God has for us is run successfully, first...

### **By winning people**

In verses 19-23 Paul expresses his focus on people, and his all-consuming desire to win them to Christ. Paul told the Thessalonians they were his hope, joy, and crown in which he will glory in the presence of the Lord Jesus when he comes (1Thessalonians 2:19). People, to Paul, were a crown to be won. In his desire to win people to faith in Christ Paul was...

#### *Reflecting the Son of Man*

Paul is talking like the Savior, who said at the house of new convert Zacchaeus “...the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). Paul expressed his great sorrow and unceasing anguish for the people of Israel. He said he could wish he could be cursed and cut off from Christ for their sake (Romans 9:2-3), which sounds like the lamentation of Jesus as he wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41), and his prayer of intercession from the cross (Luke 23:34).

Wherever Paul went, his focus was upon people, just like Jesus, who related to people individually. Paul was moved by his vision for people, as he was by the vision of the man of Macedonia (Acts 16:9), and Paul’s ministry and reason for being was tied into his reaching others for the gospel. His agenda was doing whatever it takes, and being whatever he needed to be in order to win as many people as possible.

We live in a time and culture of self-centeredness. Just about everybody, and sometimes the church, as Paul would lament, is “looking out for number one.” But if you want to run the race of life successfully God’s way, your concerns must be with the infinite value of others, these precious souls God has placed in your daily “traffic patterns.” Your spouse, and the children around your dinner table are those God has called you to win to faith. Your work associates, your competitors, and even your enemies are “fair game” to be won to Christ through your prayers, your actions of loving concern, your willingness to forgive, and your faithful witness and seizing every opportunity to expose them to the good news of Jesus.

#### *Renouncing personal rights, privileges and freedom*

In chapter 8:1-9:18 that precede our text, we see that in order to win as many as possible, Paul was willing to renounce his personal rights and privileges. In chapter 8, Paul says he is willing to renounce something as harmless as eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols in order to not offend a weaker Christian. Paul is thinking about those who were converted from idol worship who had not yet learned that eating meat that had a pagan worship association was morally neutral and spiritually harmless. He accommodated himself to the conscience and need of others, and was willing to relinquish his personal freedoms and legitimate indulgences for the sake of others. 1 Corinthians 8 & 9 are a challenge to us to become “world Christians,” who are ready to relinquish our cultural preferences and

prejudices in order to relate the gospel to people in other cultures and lands (Carson, 115-137). This willingness on his part seems extraordinary in our Western culture of self-assertion. Yet, to be like the Savior, we have to be willing to deny the self-centered self, and follow the cross way of self-denial.

Those of us in the ministry profession can find ourselves accustomed to being given preferential treatment. We who are leaders run the risk of thinking we deserve special treatment. An airline flight attendant friend told me that among her colleagues, a certain well-known television preacher has a horrible reputation for being rude, unreasonably demanding and downright obnoxious. He thinks he should be treated like a king, whereas Paul was content to be “the scum of the earth” for the sake of the gospel (1 Corinthians 4:13). Paul endured all sorts of trials and abuse, because his focus was not on his needs, rights, and privileges, but on the eternal prospects of people, and their urgent need for the gospel.

To win people in our self-serving world, we’re going to have to renounce our rights, freedom, and privileges in order to gain a hearing for the gospel. This means that at times we will feel like we’re being taken advantage of and exploited and cheated by the very people Christ has appointed us to win to himself. This means we will seek to win people by...

#### *Relating at a point of contact*

In verses 19-23, Paul expressed his life principle of making any concessions and accommodations necessary to win people to Christ. He knew, however, the difference between accommodation and compromise. He took Peter and others to task when he thought they were compromising in their faithfulness to the gospel (Galatians 2:11-14). But Paul was not only willing, he was committed to doing whatever he could to eliminate artificial barriers that kept people from coming to faith in Christ.

We are to care, as did Paul, for those who are religious but lost. Paul writes that he sought to identify with the Jews by relating to them from his background and upbringing as a Jew (Verse 20). In his witness to them he spoke their language and shared common experiences and religious rituals and requirements as long as he did not compromise the integrity and witness of the gospel. In Acts we see how Paul would observe some of their rituals and accommodate himself to their expectations in order to not impose unnecessary barriers to their accepting the gospel (Acts 16:1-3; 18:18-19; 21:20-26).

Paul often went first to the synagogue in his mission and evangelism strategy because the people in the synagogues were already exposed to the Scriptures. And even today sometimes the religious are the most receptive, and the reason they are going to church is to satisfy a deep need for peace with God. And God knows the churches are filled with many who have no personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Billy Graham once said that the church membership roles contain our greatest evangelistic mission field.

We are to not waste our time with those who are unaware of their need because of their self-righteousness (Calvin, 196). Even Jesus couldn’t win the Pharisees! We are to go, like some of our missionaries, to the religious who are lost but also receptive to the gospel.

Evangelical missionaries in Israel observe Jewish holidays, share their Kosher diets and worship on Saturdays to relate to the Jews. We need to avoid offending the religious, even those of other world religions. Missionaries to the Moslems are observing fasts during Ramadan, and adopting their postures for prayer and their architecture in order to remove artificial barriers to the gospel.

There are Roman Catholics all around us who are steeped in their traditions and family ties to their traditional religion, even if they are not actively practicing their faith. We should be willing to learn about their beliefs and traditions, and should seek to understand how they perceive us as evangelicals. And their impression of us may not be very complimentary. But we must make concessions even to their misunderstanding of us, and not be offended and defensive if they perceive us as a cult or a sect. Paul was willing to make concessions, like taking some men with him to undergo temple purification rites to appease some legalists (Acts 21:26), in order to gain a hearing for the gospel.

Paul says that success God's way is a life of people winning, and he sought to relate also to the pagans, who today are the non-church, synagogue or mosque-attending. He related as a Gentile outsider when he was sharing the gospel with those outside Judaism, expressing his desire to win "those not having the law," the Gentiles (verse 21). In fact, Paul was the great Apostle to the Gentiles. He was acquainted with Greek and Roman culture, and was well read in their philosophers and poets, as we see in his preaching in Athens (Acts 17:16-34).

Paul followed the example of Jesus, who engaged the religious teacher Nicodemus in a discussion of the rebirth (John 3:1-16), and who met the Samaritan woman at her point of need and on her level of understanding, which was far from religiously sophisticated (John 4:1-26). We too need to be "downwardly-mobile" (Nouwen, 29ff), which is exactly what the incarnation of Christ was all about (Philippians 2:5-11). We should, though not "of the world," be nevertheless "in the world," with awareness of popular culture and in contact with unbelieving pagans (John 17:15).

Missionary friends in Hong Kong are relating to grassroots Chinese by attending their pagan celebrations. This they are able to do to show interest and gain a hearing for the gospel, without compromising their moral convictions or the gospel. The early church in a pagan Roman culture decided to use Winter Solstice in December to be an occasion to celebrate the birth of the Savior, and turned pagan symbols like evergreen trees into symbols for the gospel.

The tragedy of many Christians is the longer we are Christians, the fewer unsaved friends we have. In the spirit of Paul we must relate to people who are different from us, value them, seek to understand them, and be faithful friends to them in order to win them to Jesus. God has giving IBC a concern for unsaved, un-churched neighbors who are being enlisted for church-sponsored activities, such as our Bible studies, Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPs), Alpha and English language classes. I pray the church will have the same reputation that Jesus had. His religious enemies tried to denigrate him and sully his representation by calling him a friend of sinners who intentionally socialized with them in order to win them to himself. May IBC Brussels be known as a friend of the lost, of the outsider!

If you want success God's way, you must focus on others and away from self. People have eternal significance, and winning them to Jesus Christ is God-glorifying,

kingdom work. And this race of life is run successfully by not only winning people but also...

### **By winning the prize**

Paul goes on to say he is seeking also to win a prize (verses 24-27). This athletic imagery was well received by the Corinthians, who were proud of their Isthmian Games, which their city hosted biannually, and event second only to the Olympics. The crown awarded to the winners of these games was a wreath of celery worn on their heads! These past two weeks, the best athletes from around the world have given their best to win the coveted Olympic medals—the gold, silver and bronze.

Paul throughout his letters speaks often of seeking the prize. In verse 23 he says his seeking to win people by any means possible is in order to share in the blessings of the gospel. And he goes on in the following verses to describe these blessings as his prize and crown.

#### *Description of the prize*

Probably thinking about the garland of celery leaves worn on the heads of the champions in the Isthmian Games, Paul says we are running to win a prize that is of far greater worth than wilted vegetables! Paul speaks highly of the prize that God gives to all who run the race of life successfully, his way.

It is not only permissible, but even commendable to seek after God's rewards. "Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak," says CS Lewis. He explains that rewards promised in Scripture are not mercenary and self-centered. For example, if the reward a man sought in marriage was a girl's inheritance, he would be venal. But to win a woman's love through marriage is the proper reward for his courtship. To fight in battle and risk one's life with deep patriotic love for one's country, and then be awarded and promoted in rank is not mercenary. It is the proper reward for service rendered (Lewis, 2f). We believers look for the rewards the Lord himself has promised us, for which he has given us a longing, the reward of pleasing God.

It's appropriate we seek heavenly reward, primarily because Jesus taught us to do so. We are to lay up heavenly rewards and treasures that outlast the earthly, even Olympic gold medals (Matthew 6:19)! God is blessed and glorified when we seek his reward for us, the crown of glory (1 Peter 5:4). The prize for which Paul sought was the upward call of God in Christ, which was to fulfill his work and will, and to be like Jesus in holiness (Philippians 3:14; 2 Timothy 4:8)). I believe also it included winning everyone appointed to salvation to whom Paul preached the gospel (Acts 13:48), who became his glory and joy, and whom he said would be his crown on the day of Christ (1 Thessalonians 2:18-19). The prize is to hear Jesus say, "Well done, you good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21), and to be like him in perfect holiness, reflecting perfectly his holiness and likeness.

God alone will judge us and reward us infallibly and graciously. If we could only comprehend something of the prize awaiting us, we would be stirred on in the race of

faith and faithful living! There will be degrees of reward in heaven (like the Olympic gold, silver and bronze), just as there will be degrees of punishment in hell. All is of grace, and we deserve nothing good, but God in his grace will reward us in degrees of our godly living and faithful serving. And he will keep perfect records of our thoughts, desires and deeds. And he will give us fruit we will never see till we get to heaven.

I do not understand the mindset of those who claim to be followers of Christ, yet who are in pursuit, not of godliness and of people won to Christ, but are in the corporate rat race for the almighty dollar. This temporal success is even to the neglect of their walk with God and their God-given responsibilities. Many marriages and families are being sacrificed on the altar of personal ambition. How tragic that many are neglecting everlasting rewards and eternal consequences for success as measured by this world! Paul is not going to be duped into such a tragically wasted life. He is paying the price of...

### *Discipline for the prize*

Paul knew he could not gain the prize, that he could not be God's champion, unless he went into strict training (verse 25). Even the Isthmian games required strict training for 10 months, without which athletes would be declared ineligible. The athletes who have competed in the Olympic Games in London these past two weeks paid the price of years of rigorous training. They all sought to win some kind of medal, whether gold, silver or bronze.

Paul was one who disciplined himself at least as seriously as an athlete, only he was playing for much higher stakes than even a gold medal. That's the point he was making with Timothy when he exhorted him to train himself to be godly, saying bodily exercise has limited value for this life, but godliness is essential for this life and the next (1 Timothy 4:7-8).

Paul was one who disciplined himself like a serious athlete, and used the spiritual disciplines for growth in godliness. How much more do we need to avail ourselves of the disciplines upon which not only the Apostle depended, but also our Lord Jesus depended, such as worship, prayer, the word, fasting, silence and solitude, evangelism, giving, learning, and perseverance.

We grow and are made clean by abiding in Jesus, the True Vine (John 15:1-17), and we grow by the way we respond to life's trials, which are God's way of disciplining us. The athletes that mounted the awards platform in London got there by tough discipline.

Rereading John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, I have been recently reminded that this godly pastor did this, perhaps his best and certainly most far-reaching work in the Bedford jail. Similarly, Jonathan Edwards did his most significant writing after being fired from a long and fruitful pastorate in Northampton, and virtually exiled to an Indian settlement in the frontier village of Stockbridge in western Massachusetts.

We need to rise above our cultural measurements of success, and have a soft view of Christian living, and realize that God often sends his best servants through the fires of tribulation, to develop the discipline of perseverance that leads to maturity and godliness (James 1:2-4).

I used to run mini-marathons each year, just to hold myself accountable to stay in decent shape. And there have been times when, about a third of the way through the race, I gave serious thought to ducking out of the race, and walking through a wooded, secluded, obscure pathway, back to my car (or faking a leg cramp, or whatever). God has called us to persevere in the race, and run to succeed!

Paul was disciplining himself to win the prize, and he was aware of the constant...

*Danger of misleading others*

Throughout this section of 1 Corinthians, Paul says he is careful not to do anything that would cause his weaker brother or sister to stumble (1 Corinthians 8:13). Jesus himself warns us against causing "little ones" to be offended and stumble because of us (Mark 9:42-49). James 3:1 tells those of us in leadership/teaching positions to be especially careful to not lead others astray, saying we will receive a stricter judgment.

Paul says, mixing his metaphors a bit, that he doesn't shadow box, but rather, literally, gives himself a black eye (verse 27) to subdue his passions and bring his appetites under the control of the Holy Spirit. He's not talking about self-flagellation, but rather self-discipline. He cannot afford to let his passion go unchecked for even a moment, else he do something he would regret. He must, as Jesus warned, always watch and pray and be vigilant against the tempter. I'm afraid I could give you a sordid list of my fellow seminarians whose ministries were destroyed because of moral failure.

Several years ago a distance runner who was in the lead in a marathon took a wrong turn and was disqualified from the race. This seems to be the thought in Paul's mind about not running like a man running aimlessly (26). When the lead runner gets off course, the ones behind him, those who are pacing themselves by him, are also likely to get off course. Paul was keenly aware, from the negative example of the sophists and "super apostles," of the potential for a leader to get off the track of God's truth and to lead many others astray. The apostle said he was fearful of straying off the right track and leading others in the wrong direction, thus forfeiting the prize.

I may be speaking to some parent who stands in danger of causing a "little one" to stumble by misleading this child placed in your care. If you are living outside of God's will, and have strayed off course in the race of faithful living and serving, you are endangering the spiritual well being of your family and friends and work associates who are looking to your example. Paul was aware of the impact of his example on others, and also he had a...

*Dread of being disqualified.*

In verse 27 perhaps Paul was thinking about the herald, who at the Isthmian Games would call out the names of the winners, but also the names of those disqualified from the contest. Even this year in the Olympics, athletes who made a false start, ran outside their lane, or who failed to pass drug tests were disqualified.

Paul knew the false apostles were deceiving the church just as some athletes try to deceive the Olympic officials. But God is not mocked. Paul didn't want "the herald" to call out to the "Olympic" crowd, "Paul, Servant of Jesus Christ, disqualified!" He

wanted to hear Jesus say, “Paul, my Servant, in you I am well pleased! You have run a good race!”

Paul was not talking about losing his salvation. The truly converted are secure in Christ. But the believer who has strayed from the course is forfeiting his or her *assurance* of salvation. It's by growing in godliness and fruitfulness that Peter says makes our calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:5-11). And Jesus said we are not identified by or assured of our eternal salvation by our talk but rather by our walk that produces fruit (Matthew 7:21-23). The believer who strays from a life of obedience forfeits assurance and also loses the joy of salvation and a fruitful life and testimony that glorifies God. And of course that means also the loss of reward.

Paul was fearful that he would experience the disgrace of not finishing the race, of being disqualified as a spiritual leader. I know of too many ministers and active church members who have had to drop out of the race, and couldn't finish as winners. Because of a moral failure, they had to relinquish the prize of a race run well. They'll go to heaven, but have had to forfeit so much of the eternal reward, that which comes to those who finish well, who are faithful to the end, and whose lives cause no embarrassment to the Kingdom.

We will all of us stand before the judgment seat of Christ (Romans 14:10; 2 Corinthians 5:10). If we stray from the course or drop out of the race of obedient faith we will not lose our salvation. But we will lose rewards because of unfaithfulness. We are saved by grace, but will be judged by our works, and will be held accountable for our faithfulness with what God has entrusted to us. (Luke 12:48; 19:11-27; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15).

### **Conclusion:**

Every one of us here today can run successfully. Some of you are in the midst of the pursuit of your career and perhaps are wondering if your life can have any significance. You may have been told by your boss you're a failure in business, or Satan may be telling you you've failed as a spouse or parent or that you're a failure in life itself. I'm here to tell you, on the authority of God's word that you can be successful in God's eyes because of his grace through Jesus Christ.

Paul spoke of seeking to reach the goal and win the game for which Jesus Christ had captured and enlisted him (Philippians 3:12). Christ enlists and then he enables us to run successfully. To run to win, all you need is the grace of God in your life, received when you believe, repent, and follow Jesus as Lord. Immediately he puts you into the race of your life! He also takes us believers who might have grown weary in the race and he encourages us to continue on with joyful and successful running.

We who are believers need new resolve to run, not to win by the world's standards, but to please God. In a race, there is only one winner. In God's race, he gives the prize to all who finish the race. That's what Paul told Timothy he had done, at the close of his life: “I have finished the race” (2 Timothy 4:7).

Kent Hughes tells the story of Bill Broadhurst, who in 1981 entered the Pepsi Challenge 10,000-meter race in Omaha, Nebraska. “Surgery ten years earlier for a

brain aneurysm had left him paralyzed on his left side. Now, on that misty July morning, he stands with 1,200 lithe men and women at the starting line.

“The gun sounds! The crowd surges forward. Bill throws his stiff left leg forward, pivots on it as his foot hits the ground. His slow plop-plop-plop rhythm seems to mock him as the pack races into the distance. Sweat rolls down his face, pain pierces his ankle, but he keeps going. Some of the runners complete the race in about 30 minutes, but 2 hours and 29 minutes later Bill reaches the finish line. A man approaches from a small group of remaining bystanders. Though exhausted, Bill recognizes him from pictures in the newspaper. He is Bill Rodgers, the famous marathon runner, who then drapes his newly won medal around Bill’s neck. Bill Broadhurst’s finish was as glorious as that of the world’s greatest-----though he finished last. Why? Because he ran with perseverance” (Hughes, 160f).

The greatest award awaits those who run to win, God’s way!

### **Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:**

1. What are some of the standards for success upheld by the world? How do these contrast with God’s standards?
2. Is it possible for the world’s success standards to find their way into the church? Can you give any examples?
3. The Apostle Paul had a people focus, seeking to do everything possible to win them to Christ. In what way does the drive for success, such as in a career, jeopardize our focusing on people and our seeking to win them to Christ?
4. Think about some of the people in your sphere of influence, and in your normal “traffic pattern” of your daily routine. In what ways do you need to adjust or accommodate yourself in order to be an effective witness to them? How does the approach you might use to witness to a devout Jew, Muslim or unconverted Roman Catholic differ from your witnessing approach to someone who is totally secular with no religious beliefs?
5. What is the prize Paul is seeking to win (verses 24-27)? And, is it proper for a Christian to seek after rewards? Why or why not?
6. Can you say you are now “running the race” of faith and faithfulness in a way that God would deem to be successful? What evidence is there that you are or are not running to succeed God’s way?
7. Prayerfully list some areas of your life that ought to be adjusted in order for you to discipline yourself the race of winning people and the prize of hearing Jesus say to you, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

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