

Fruitful and Free

After 21 Days, What's Next?

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Today as we come to the end of our 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting, we are going to consider the passage that was just read, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. Since Paul encourages us to approach the Christian life the way an athlete approaches a competition, I decided to interview the serious athlete that I know better than anyone else: my son Riley. Many of you know and love him. In 2017 he completed an Ironman competition in Madison, Wisconsin. An Ironman is a triathlon in which you swim 2.4 miles, then you ride a bicycle for 112 miles, and then you run a marathon which is 26.2 miles.

Simply finishing an Ironman is an accomplishment for anybody. But it was an especially significant accomplishment for Riley because a year and a half earlier he had torn his ACL (playing basketball behind Farmhouse). He had to have ACL surgery and all the rehab that goes with it. While he was recovering from his injury, he watched a couple of friends compete in an Ironman. Even though he had never in his life run more than 4 miles at one time, he decided that he would push himself and compete in an Ironman. He wanted to prove that he could fully recover and be a better athlete than he was before his injury.

Riley did some reading online about how to train for an Ironman, but he mainly just started running, biking, and swimming. He didn't really follow a structured plan and he didn't train as long as recommended (only 6-7 months). But he did enough to compete and finish that Ironman. He has since competed in quite a few triathlons, the OKC Marathon, and an ultramarathon (50 miles). Now when he trains for an event, he creates a very structured plan and follows it to a T. When I see the way he trains, I think, "Who is this child? Where did he get all this discipline and drive?"

I talked with Riley this past week to quiz him about how he trains for a competition. A couple things stood out to me. First, he talked about being ***singleminded***. You have to keep your eyes on your goal and be willing to make sacrifices. Riley mentioned that one Friday night when he was training for his ultramarathon, his friends were hanging out. But since his training schedule said that he had to run 20 miles the next morning, he had to sacrifice that time with friends. A good athlete is willing to make such sacrifices for the goal.

Second, he said that you have to ***know your "WHY."*** If you don't have a compelling reason WHY you're training, it's a lot easier to compromise and/or give up. Some people run to see what they're "made of"; some people compete to raise money for a cause that they believe in; some people compete in honor of a family member. Knowing your WHY is motivation when the training gets tough.

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 Paul writes that ***we should approach our walk with God the way an athlete approaches competition***. Walking with God doesn't happen by accident. We have to be intentional and disciplined, willing to make sacrifices. And we will need to know our WHY (why it even matters that we walk with God). [By the way, if

you don't really connect with the athletic imagery in this passage, that's okay; look over in 2 Timothy 2 sometime. There Paul also used the imagery of a soldier who's willing to suffer hardship and a hard working farmer. Every worthwhile endeavor requires discipline and intentionality.]

Notice the challenge in verse 24:

24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.

In a race only one runner crosses the finish line first; everybody else loses the race. Paul is saying, "Look at the person who wins the race. Run like that person. Run in such a way that you may win!"

Of course Paul isn't implying that there's only one winner in the Christian life. He is simply saying that we should approach the Christian life the way a successful athlete approaches a competition. Just as there are wise and foolish ways for an athlete to train and run, so too there are wise and foolish ways to walk with God.

In verse 25 Paul explains more specifically what he's thinking:

25 Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

Athletes evaluated every aspect of their lives with a view toward winning their competition. They asked questions like: What is the best diet for a distance runner (vs. a boxer)? What is the best strength training for a javelin thrower (vs. a wrestler)?

Paul points out that if athletes discipline themselves for a wreath/medal/prize that's perishable, we should be willing to discipline ourselves for something that is imperishable! He probably has in mind both the "prize of godliness" that we receive in this life and also the spiritual rewards we receive in the next life.

In verse 26 he continues this imagery:

26 Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air;

Good runners and boxers don't expend a lot of energy doing things that don't produce results. Therefore Paul was very intentional in the way he lived and very focused on the prize.

The apostle Paul was one of the most spiritually mature, godly persons who ever lived. Yet listen to his concern for himself in verse 27:

27 but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.

The word “buffet” carries the idea of bruising someone or beating someone black and blue. Paul is speaking figuratively here; he didn't literally beat himself up. The idea, though, is that he consciously trained and disciplined his body so that it would be his slave. He wanted to be able to tell his body what to do instead of having his body telling him what to do.

Unless we discipline ourselves for godliness, our bodies will carry out the desires of the flesh instead of the desires of the Spirit. Our tongues will say sarcastic and unkind things, our feet will run toward evil, our eyes will look at things they shouldn't. If we don't make our bodies our slaves, we will become enslaved to our bodies. In Romans 6:13, Paul wrote that we should present "the members of our bodies to God as instruments of righteousness" instead of presenting them to sin as "instruments of unrighteousness." Our bodies aren't evil; but the members of our bodies can be used for good or for evil. Paul knew that well.

Paul was well aware of the possibility that he could be greatly used by God and still “lose the race” by being disqualified. After investing the best years of his life telling others how they should get into the race and run the race, Paul knew that if he didn't maintain his own discipline that he could be disqualified. We aren't told what types of sins or disqualifiers Paul had in mind here; it could be about any sin or careless habit. I'm intrigued by 1 Corinthians 13 where Paul essentially says that a lack of love disqualifies a person in God's kingdom. It doesn't matter your gifting or how much knowledge or faith you have or how much you sacrifice; if you don't have love those things are spiritually worthless.

If someone like Paul approached his walk with God like an athlete approaches competition, surely **we** need the same attitude. I just want to ask you straight up, “Is it your settled conviction and commitment to approach your walk with God this way? Are you running to win or are you careless and aimless about the way you seek God?”

The feedback we've gotten from many of you is that the last 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting been spiritually beneficial because it has helped you approach your walk with God in a disciplined, intentional way. You've practiced disciplines related to Scripture, prayer, and fasting. Some of you have been very clear about your WHY; you've identified specific areas of your life in which you need freedom and fruitfulness.

What is your plan for the next 21 Days (and for the rest of the year)? Our strong encouragement to you is to settle in your heart and mind that you will continue walking with God in an intentional, disciplined way, keeping your eye on the goal. Some of you might return to the plan and disciplines you practiced before this 21 Days experience. If you need input and ideas, we have prepared some resources. Tomorrow we will send these resources to everyone who registered for the 21 Days; we will also include a link to these resources in the eBlast on Tuesday. You'll find some simple plans and ideas for Scripture, prayer, fasting, and seeking God in community.

Here's the perspective: ***Spiritual disciplines are time-tested ways to approach our walks with God the way an athlete approaches competition.*** When I was talking with Riley this week, it occurred to me that if you are internally motivated to compete and do well, you move toward discipline and training. You don't bellyache and ask, "Do I really have to have a plan and pay attention to nutrition and sleep and physiology?"

In a similar way, if we really want to be disciples of Jesus who experience freedom and fruitfulness, we will move toward spiritual disciplines because they help us abide in Christ. We won't ask, "Do I still **have to** fast after this 21 Days are finished? Do I **have to** give up food or something else I enjoy for periods of time?" Rather, we'll ask, "Will fasting help me humble my soul before God? Will fasting help remind me how desperate I am for God to do what only He can do?" We'll see fasting as an asset in the race we're running. Mark Batterson says that if prayer is walking on a sidewalk, prayer and fasting is walking on a moving sidewalk; it helps you get there faster. That's the mindset of an athlete.

We won't ask, "Do I have to read my Bible every day?" We'll ask, "Will reading and pondering Scripture help me abide in Jesus' words so that I experience freedom and fruitfulness?" Of course it does if we approach the Word with faith and with a spirit of repentance.

We won't ask, "Do I have to join a life group? Or Rooted? And do I have to pray with other people?" We'll ask, "How can I best live in community like Brian talked about last week? How can I live out the one anothers of Scripture?" Since community is a tremendous asset in the race, we'll move toward community as opposed to thinking about groups or relationships as an obligation.

One other thing you will notice is that people who engage in these basic spiritual disciplines ***experience so much grace*** that they eventually become ***gracious people***. You don't have to beg them to encourage and serve others; they experienced so much grace that they natural give grace to others and help others run their race.

Let me illustrate this point by telling you what Brenda and I experienced when we went with Riley to his Ironman in Madison, Wisconsin in September of 2017. It was actually an awe-inspiring day. The competition began at 7 a.m. The professional triathletes and elite athletes started in the first group; every five minutes another group started. The elite athletes were impressive; some of them finished the entire Ironman before others even started their marathon. But I was more impressed at what else some of these elite athletes and some of the middle-of-the-pack athletes did.

One group of triathletes was so well trained and so compassionate that they paired up with a "disabled athlete." The fully abled athlete swam 2.4 miles pulling the other on a raft, biked 112 miles pulling the other behind them in a cart, and ran a marathon pushing the other in a runner's stroller. One reason you and I need to approach our walks with God like an athlete is because *there will be times when we need to be spiritually strong and fit for others.* It's not just about me.

The other group that impressed me were those who had crossed the finish line mid-afternoon but who stayed or came back late at night to cheer on those who were trying to beat the cut-off time of midnight. The last few blocks of the course in downtown Madison were lined with competitors who cheered on those who hobbled to the finish line at 11:30, 11:45, and midnight. They knew much better than I did how much it costs a person to compete in an Ironman. One reason you and I need to approach our walks with God like an athlete is because there will be people in our lives who need our compassion and encouragement and need to know that it's worth it not to give up and drop out of the race.