

The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
February 12, 2012
I Corinthians 9:24-27
Run in Such a Way
As to Get the Prize!

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. 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. 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.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

What do Eli Manning, Jackie Joyner-Kersey and Ronald Reagan all have in common? Take a moment to think about it. The answer is that each of those individuals is recognized as being the best at what they do. Last Sunday Eli Manning was voted to be the Most Valuable Player as he led the New York Giants to victory in Super Bowl XLVI. Sports Illustrated for Women voted Jackie Joyner-Kersey as the greatest female athlete of the 20th century. And a Gallup Poll taken in February of 2011 revealed that Ronald Reagan was voted to be the greatest American President. How did these individuals reach those goals, my friends? Did it “just happen” all on its own? Was it because they had it “easier” than everyone else? Of course not! Whether it’s being voted the MVP of the Super Bowl or the greatest female athlete of the 20th century or the greatest American President it takes **focus** and it takes **discipline**!

The portion of Scripture that we have before us this morning employs an analogy that was very familiar and very clear to God’s people in Corinth. God the Holy Spirit led the apostle Paul to compare the life of a child of God to a race— not a sprint mind you, but a marathon race. As we study this portion of Scripture today and as we strive to apply these words to our own lives let’s listen very closely as the Holy Spirit says to us: **Run in Such a Way as to Get the Prize!** There are two things we want to emphasize from this text. First, let’s see that running in such a way as to get the prize requires **focus**. Then let’s see that running in such a way as to get the prize requires **discipline**.

As you may know, the modern Olympic Games began centuries ago in ancient Greece. By the time of Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) the Olympic Games were hugely popular all across the Hellenized world. Second only to the Olympic Games were the Isthmian Games— held right here in the city of Corinth. Since the Christians in Corinth were very familiar with the Isthmian Games they understood exactly what Paul was talking about when he wrote these words to them, “*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. 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.*”

In the modern Olympic Games athletes from all across the world come together to

compete against each other for a medal— either gold or silver or bronze. The goal for going to the Olympics, however, is always the same— to win a gold medal and perhaps even have your name memorialized in the book of world records! In both the ancient Olympic Games and in the Isthmian Games only the person who came in first place received any recognition at all. Everyone else who competed in the Games was quickly forgotten. And the best, the very best, these ancient athletes could hope to receive was a crown that was made out of a wild olive branch— a crown which dried up and withered away in just a matter of days.

Is that the “*prize*” that you and I are focused on receiving, my friends? Are we to run our “race,” are we to live our life focused on receiving a “*prize*” that is destined to wither up and waste away in a matter of days? Not at all! The “*prize*” that you and I are running to receive is “*imperishable*”! The “*prize*” that you and I have focused our entire life on receiving is “*a crown that will last forever*”! What is this “*prize*”? What is this “*crown*”? I think Jesus put it best when He said, “*Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life*” (Revelation 2:10). Yes, my friends, our “*prize*,” our “*crown*” is a glorious perfect eternal life in our heavenly Father’s Home!

Why do we need to consciously strive to make sure that we stay **focused** as we “*run in such a way as to get the prize*”? Where do we begin! This sinful world in which we live has all kinds of “prizes” that it offers to each and every one of us— including our children! There is the “prize” of money. There is the “prize” of possessions. I’m sure we have all heard the saying, “He who dies with the most toys wins!” There is the “prize” of pleasure. There is the “prize” of power— and the list could go on and on and on couldn’t it. What we must always remember is that each and every “prize” that the world offers to us is no different than the crown of olive branches given only to the winner of the ancient Games. Each and every one of these “prizes” “*will not last.*” Each and every one of these “prizes” is as temporary as the morning mist. The **only** “*prize*” that is “*imperishable*,” the **only** “*prize*” that “*will last forever*” is the “*crown of life*” that Jesus won **for** us on the cross of Calvary’s hill. That’s why we need to say **focused** as we “*run in such a way as to get the prize*”! Paul emphasizes this very same truth when he tells us in his letter to the Philippians, “*But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 3:13, 14).

Because this world is constantly trying to distract us by dangling these false worthless “prizes” in front of our eyes and because Satan is always trying to trip us up as we run our race, we need to remember that running in such a way as to get the “*prize*” requires not only **focus** but it also requires **discipline**. Paul emphasized this point when he reminded God’s people in Corinth that “*Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training.*” Very literally the Greek here reads, “*Everyone who competes exercises full self-control.*” Olympic athletes train for years to attain and then maintain the best physical and mental condition they can. They exercise strict control over every aspect of their lives— from what they eat and drink to how much rest they get to the amount of time they spend training, etc.

The transition from the “*full self-control*” of an Olympic athlete to our lives as the children of God is not difficult to make, my friends. For us exercising “*full self-control*” as we “*run in such a way as to get the prize*” includes being very careful when it comes to what we allow into our minds and the spiritual food that we use to feed our souls. The sinful world is constantly trying to fill our minds with images and thoughts, desires and ideas that are anything but pleasing to the Savior who was willing to die in order to save us from such things! (Pointing to the cross) At the very same time both the world around us and even some churches are trying to feed us things that are poisonous to our souls! The silly notion that it doesn’t make any difference what you believe as long as you believe in something, the arrogant attitude which puts “Well, what **I** think..” over what **God** says here in His holy inspired Word, the false teaching that says that there is something **you** need to do **before** you can be saved, or there is something **you** can do to make up for your sins, or there is a way that **you** can at least help yourself get into heaven— this is all poison to our soul!

And while that is bad enough, while it does indeed take “*full self-control*” to protect our minds and to protect our souls from what the world parades in front of us each and every day, what makes it so much more difficult is that we all have that old sinful nature inside of us, that sinful nature which wants absolutely **nothing** to do with exercising “*full self-control*” as we “*run in such a way as to get the prize*”! Paul had his own sinful nature in mind when he wrote in our text, “*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.*”

That’s the key right there, my friends! The purpose of exercising “*full self-control*” in our life as a child of God is so that we do not render ourselves “*disqualified for the prize.*” How tragic it would be if our old sinful nature convinced us that instead of striving to exercise “*full self-control*” in our lives we can simply do whatever “feels right” for us! How tragic it would be if due to a lack of “*self-control*” we allowed the world around us to fill us with all kinds of unscriptural ideas and all kinds of false teachings— only to find out at the end of our life that we are “*disqualified for the prize.*” Exercising “*full self-control*” over what we let into our minds, exercising “*full self-control*” over the spiritual food that we use to feed our soul, exercising “*full self-control*” over our bodies so that our sinful nature is kept “in check” will result in us receiving “*the prize for which God has called (us) heavenward in Christ Jesus.*”

When we look at people such as Eli Manning, Jackie Joyner-Kersey and President Ronald Reagan the thought might cross our minds that we will never be able to achieve in our lives what they have achieved in theirs. But when we look at what God has done **for** us, when we look at the “*prize*” God has guaranteed **to** us then, my friends, then with God’s guidance and by God’s grace we can indeed follow the encouragement that the Holy Spirit gives to us today, “*Run in such a way as to get the prize*”— the “*crown that will last forever*”!

My prayer then this morning is that you remember. Remember that running in such a way as to get the “*prize*” does indeed require **focus**. Remember that running in such a

way as to get the “*prize*” does indeed require **discipline**.

To God be the glory!

Amen