

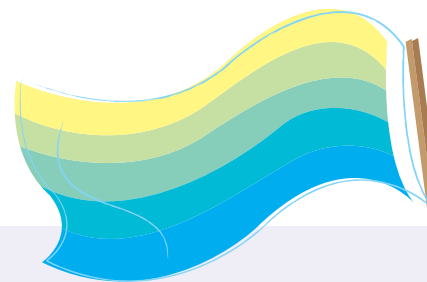
Run to win

An alternative approach based on 1 Corinthians 9.24-27

As a contrast to the exploration of hospitality in the first part of these resources, we offer a Bible study here and at www.rootsontheweb.com/run_to_win we offer a range of other materials focused on 1 Corinthians 9.24-27.

In 1 Corinthians 9.24-27 we are reminded by Paul that being Christians does not allow us to rest on our laurels. The wreath that really counts can be conferred only in the future of God, 'who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Corinthians 15.57).

Paul uses the metaphor of an athletic contest to illuminate the Christian life. This Bible study explores it to make connections between our understanding of our faith and our interest in the Olympic Games.



Bible Study

Bible notes

Paul concludes his defence of his apostleship by likening his willing surrender of his privileges – his choosing not to be accompanied by a wife to share his ministry, his stepping down the social ladder to work with his own hands – to the self-discipline with which an athlete prepares to win a contest.

Inviting his readers to consider his analogy of an athletic contest, Paul suggests they apply it to themselves. He counters the complacency of those tempted to rest on their laurels now they are baptised, by reminding them that entering the Christian life is but the beginning of a contest that must continue until it is won.

Images of the Games were particularly vivid for Paul and the Corinthians, since Corinth hosted the biennial Isthmian Games that drew participants from all over the Graeco-Roman world. And Paul and his readers would also have been very familiar with the almost commonplace use of athletic imagery in moral exhortation. While many teachers and philosophers used the language of athletics to describe the life of the sage, they combined this with criticism of the physical competitions themselves. Cynics and Stoics in particular spoke of the self-control of the moral athlete, whose victory surpassed that of the 'those rotten boxers' at the Isthmian games.

Paul certainly contrasts the Isthmian 'perishable wreath', which was made from withered wild celery, with the 'imperishable' wreath of ultimate salvation. When Paul uses athletic imagery to describe the Christian life, he sounds as though he actually admires the dedicated participants in the physical games, as they compete according to the rules, straining to finish their race and take first prize.

Make connections

The Isthmian Games and the Olympic Games were religious festivals as well as athletic events, one held in honour of Poseidon and the other in honour of Zeus. In AD 393 they were suppressed by the Emperor Theodosius I, whose attack on the traditional pagan rituals was part of his project to establish Christianity as the official state religion.

We may follow Paul in enjoying the Games and admiring the competitors, but what values do we think the great festival of the modern Olympics celebrates? Paul makes the point that entering a race is not the same as winning it. Ancient competitors, like their modern counterparts, were known for their commitment to their rigorous training, and those who succeeded at sports were as famous then as they are now.

Perhaps Paul's point is more about perseverance than competition. Without an ongoing commitment to preaching the gospel, particularly in concern for the weak with whom Christ identified, even an apostle may be disqualified from the race he has entered, but not yet won.

Explore

Beating the air

- Reflect on the image of ill-directed blows in a boxing match. What aspects of your own life, or the life of your congregation, does it suggest to you?
- What sort of training would help us as Christians to aim in the right direction?

Enslaving my body

- Do you find Paul's emphasis on bodily discipline and self-control negative or positive?
- Can this image help us to live well with consideration for those around us?

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Week by week

You will find a wide selection of additional material linked to 1 Corinthians 9.24-27 on the ROOTS website at www.rootsontheweb.com/run_to_win, including drama scripts, modern stories, sermon ideas, prayers and much more.

Contributors to these resources were
Anna Baker, Arnold Browne,
Jonathan Cotton OSB, Janet Nicholls,
Peter Privett.

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