



FIRING ON ALL CYLINDERS

1 Corinthians

Winning More by Giving Up

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 9:19-27

[In our cultural moment], many questions have to be addressed before folks can even begin to take Christianity seriously. How do you reconcile Christianity and science? A loving God with pain, Hell, and the terrible track record of the church? Are the Bible and the resurrection of Jesus historically credible? What do we make of Christianity's exclusive claims in a relativistic world? What impact does the gospel have on civil society in a pluralistic one—on politics, economics, peacemaking, neighboring, and the public sphere? These are the issues that need to be addressed winsomely and apologetically; otherwise people will have difficulty taking Christianity seriously. Unless these are addressed, many things Christians say and do, no matter how well intentioned, are simply exercises in “aimless running” and “beating the air” (v. 26). Are we thinking deeply about them, and are we listening and learning to communicate in ways people can understand? It's tough to do this without help. Tim Keller's *The Reason for God* can be very useful. Not only does he raise a lot of the right issues, but he also speaks in ways people can understand.

Now it's true that we don't have to do any of this. We're free not to. We're free to keep doing business as usual. An athlete doesn't have to subject herself to rigorous training. She's free to reach for that slice of cake instead of an apple or to skip that morning session for an extra hour of sleep. But she doesn't because there's something that's more important, something worth the discipline. The same is true with our witness. Sure, we're free to do it on our terms. We're free to ignore the deepest questions of our neighbors and to speak in ways that are easier for us. But we don't because there's something that's more important, something worth curbing our freedom for.

And that's love. If a Christian is unwilling to discipline himself then something has gone terribly awry. It means that he might have something that might look like love but is really just sentiment cloaked in a thin veneer. This was the thing that Paul fought with all of his might to avoid. He says in verse 27, “But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” The word translated “disqualified” literally means “to be shown counterfeit.” And this is precisely what will become of our love if we're not willing to do the hard work of training ourselves. Our love will be shown counterfeit, a charade, a façade if we don't discipline ourselves to stay in.¹²

¹² Hughes, Kent R., Um, Stephen T., 1 Corinthians: The Word of the Cross (Preaching the Word) Article: An Effective Witness (1 C orinthians 9:19-27) Crossway, 2015.

BREAK THE ICE

Cross-cultural experiences can be a lot of fun! Share a time you visited another country or communicated across a language barrier. How did you make it work?

READ IT

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-27

EXPLORE IT

1. Why did Paul make himself a servant of all? (v.19)
2. How many times does Paul use the word “win” in our passage? (v. 19-27)
3. Paul tells us to “run” like the athlete who will finish in which place? (v. 24)
4. What kind of prize will Christians receive? (v. 25)
5. What two things does Paul do with his body as he keeps his eyes on the prize? (v. 27)

APPLY IT

Win More by Serving All (9:19-23)

As the passage moves into its next section (9:19–23), it is the word “free” that stands out with dramatic emphasis. Paul is “free” (ελεύθερος), and yet now he will demonstrate from personal examples how he has been prepared to relinquish this freedom and his “rights” so that more people may be won for Christ. Since people come to faith through the preaching of the gospel, Paul uses examples of different groups of people he has worked among and for whom he has been prepared to sacrifice his rights. After the introduction in v.19, which looks both backward and forward, Paul will talk specifically about his work among the Jews (v. 20), among the Gentiles (v. 21), and among the “weak” (v. 22). Verse 23 then reminds his readers of his purpose in relinquishing his rights. It is all “for the sake of the gospel.”¹³

6. What barriers have been overcome to bring the gospel from the resurrected Jesus in the first century AD to you today? See if you can think of three or four.

7. What have you given up or sacrificed in order to better minister to someone?

8. Paul sounds willing to do just about anything to help advance the gospel of Christ. What kind of flexibility for the gospel is helpful?

What kind of flexibility is unhelpful?

¹³ Gardner, Paul. 1 Corinthians (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament). Zondervan. 2018.

Paul has used the word “weak” to describe a people who have been made to feel inferior because they are not exercising certain rights related to gifts of the Spirit, such as wisdom or knowledge. These people are looked down upon by the elitists or “knowers” and so have been made to feel weak. Yet, in God’s eyes the so-called “weak” belong to him even without these (merely) human markers, and Paul can happily identify with that! ...Therefore, the word “weak” should not be seen as a derogatory term or even a description of a people who are basically inadequate in one way or another.¹⁴

9. How can we actively combat marginalizing a fellow believer who lacks worldly status?

10. How can you be all things to the people in your spheres of influence?

11. What bridges are you willing to cross to serve others at home, at church, and at work or school?

¹⁴ Ibid.

What Athletes Teach Us about Self-Discipline (9:24-25)

As today, there were numerous athletic competitions in Paul's day. In the Roman Empire there were both international and local "games." Among the better known were the Isthmian Games held in the city of Corinth, which would have included running and boxing and other sports. Murphy-O'Connor suggests that these games ranked below the Olympic games but above the games at Delphi and Nemea. They were a huge event held every two years, and Paul may have been in Corinth during one of these festivals since they took place in AD 49 and 51. Like the modern Olympic Games, though on a much smaller scale, wealthy patrons would sponsor the games at huge expense, even giving free food and drink to the crowds. The games also brought in a great deal of money for the local economy, as visitors poured into the city from all over.

Paul's use of the analogy of running a race is designed to make one simple point: "run" for the prize. In v. 24 the "runners" are the image Paul uses for all the people in the church. They are running toward a "prize" and should be running in a way designed to obtain it. They are to remember that there is only "one prize." This, of course, does not mean that only one Christian will ever receive a prize. Rather, the one prize is the inheritance of eschatological glory and is attained by all who complete the race (cf. 1 Thess 2:19). This means learning from the athlete (v. 25), whom Paul describes as exercising self-control in all things.¹⁵

12. What are some practices you know are needed to excel at a sport that might also show up in our Christian walk?

13. What does running the race of the Christian life in order to win the prize look like?

14. Is there any part of the 'Christian race' you feel you are doing half-heartedly?

¹⁵ Ibid.

Paul is still addressing the rights that he has given up and the rights that the elitists should be content to give up. Not to give these things up for the sake of the gospel may lead to a forfeiture of the race itself. Exercising self-control (ἐγκρατεῦομαι) as an athlete will be hard and sacrificial work. Yet athletes will put themselves through great deprivations and painful practice simply to receive a “perishable crown” of celery, [what the wreaths given to athletes were made of]! How much more should “we” (Paul and the Corinthians) be prepared to exercise this self-control in restricting “rights,” whether legitimate or not, for the sake of the imperishable prize.

- 15. We gain so much when we become a forgiven follower of Jesus. Why should this truth help us hold our “rights” with an open palm?**

Paul’s Example of Self-Discipline (9:26-27)

We have already seen at work in Paul’s life the principle of sacrificing one’s rights, especially in his consenting to have Timothy circumcised so as not to scandalize the Jews. We saw it also in his willingness to quote Greek poets in Athens at the Areopagus, but then to reason from the Scriptures when he visited Jewish synagogues. Again and again, Paul makes concessions to others for the sake of the gospel—not concessions striking at the heart of the gospel (he refused to circumcise Titus, for instance) but concessions preventing upfront revulsion. If the world recoils from him, Paul wants such revulsion to be because of the message of Christ and him crucified, not because Paul has insisted on some “right” of his own.¹⁶

- 16. James 1:12 says, “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.” How would you use that verse to encourage a fellow Christian living faithfully despite challenges?**

- 17. Write a two or three sentence prayer to God asking Him what you can give up to win others, and for the power to take that bold step of faith.**

¹⁶ Gilbert, Greg. *ESV Story of Redemption Bible: A Journey through the Unfolding Promises of God*. Crossway, 2018. Studies were compiled and questions were written by Pastor David Wood (Aurora Campus Pastor)