

SDG

*Grace and peace to you all through the victory of our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.*

### **1 Corinthians 9:16–27 (NKJV)**

**16** For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel! **17** For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship. **18** What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel. **19** For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; **20** and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; **21** to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; **22** to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. **23** Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you. **24** Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. **25** And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. **26** Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. **27** But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

## **Seeing the Finish Line**

*In Jesus Name, dear fellow Olympians,  
dear runners who have gained the victory through Christ,*

So will it be Tom Brady and the hurry-up offense of the New England Patriots or the dynamic New York Giants and Eli Manning – or do you even care? Professional football players spend their whole career striving for just this event – a trip to the Super Bowl. For some, your teams are a long way off from seeing this end in reach. Others, like the Green Bay Packers, were so close after having such a great year, only to have it snatched away from them. And now these two teams are less than 24 hours away from seeing that ultimate goal realized.

How far away is our ultimate goal? What is our ultimate goal? Are we focused on the finish line? Teams like the Patriots and the Giants have made it this far because they have that focus, that motivation, that commitment.

### **1. See the necessity of the gospel**

When it comes to the race of faith, is it really a matter of self commitment, personal focus, individual effort that will get anyone to that heavenly finish line? (**v.16**). Of all people we would think the Apostle would have a reason to brag, to exert his authority.

Just prior to our text, the Apostle Paul addresses the question of whether the Corinthian Christians should be financially or physically supporting their pastors. He shows why those who benefit from the preaching of the gospel should support those who labor in the full time ministry to bring this message to them.

Yet in all this, Paul never made use of this right. He says in v.18, he has presented the gospel “without charge” – “that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel.” Or as another translation puts it – “that I may not make full use of my right.” Paul wanted the skeptics to have no reason to twist or distract from the gospel. He wanted to allow no reason to plant the idea that he had concocted this gospel of Jesus Christ for personal gain. Rather his ministry was one of self sacrifice and giving. He worked a job as a tent maker to provide for his ministry and never asked anything of his congregations.

Yet he says, “I have nothing to boast of.” Paul, who faced imprisonment, beatings, persecution, abandonment from fellow Jews, and made his own living from a second job, has no reason to boast. Paul says this because he knows it is the necessity of the gospel that drives him. It was not his will, focus, commitment, or effort that made his ministry profitable or possible, it was God’s will, God’s focus, God’s commitment, and God’s effort that brought about this ministry of the gospel. “Yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!”

This is the necessity of the gospel. **2 Corinthians 5:14 (NKJV) — 14 For the love of Christ compels us.** The idea here being, the love of Christ captivates us. It is as if we a prisoner to His love, held captive, constrained, compelled to share this love with others. Paul indeed had nothing to boast of, for it was of necessity that he preached and labored for the gospel.

Indeed, a pastor should never be in this just to get a pay check. And members likewise should never be doing outreach for the sake of more members so we can have bigger offerings. The gospel itself is what motivates us. The love that God has shown to us – that “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5).

**(v.17)** We too have been entrusted with a stewardship. **1 Corinthians 4:1–2 (NKJV) — 1 Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.** You have been entrusted with a stewardship. It was not your will, your focus, your commitment, or your effort that makes the gospel something worth sharing; it is all God’s doing. It was God who decided to rescue you from darkness, to pay for all your sins, and to use you as an instrument in the competition of His kingdom. Yes, we are competing. We are competing against great and powerful forces. The world is seeking to distract you, to lead you off course, to get you disqualified. Your flesh would like you to take some credit, to make you think you have a reason to boast. “Well, I have done my part” or “I definitely have sacrificed a lot more than those other Christians.” No – we have just been handed a stewardship; we care for the gifts God has given us.

This is the necessity of the gospel that keeps us moving toward and focused on that finish line.

## 2. See your fellow runners

This race is not about beating the Patriots or the Giants, it is about beating Satan and sin. This is not about me vs. you, it is about us vs. them – you and me against Satan and the world. This is a team effort. Satan would love to have you go it alone. He would love to have you be focused just on yourself and getting yourself to heaven. As Jesus said, **Matthew 12:25 (NKJV) – 25 But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them: “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand.** Satan and the world are united, and let us be also. See your fellow runners.

**(v.19)** The word for “win” here literally means “to earn, to gain, or to make a profit.” It is related to business transactions, as one suggestions says, “to acquire by means of investment.” How much do we invest in each other or in those we reach out to with the gospel? Paul says, “I am free from all men.”

The liberty of the gospel is a powerful thing, but a dangerous thing if misused. I mean by this, you have been entrusted with freedom. You have been freed from the law. You are free from the constraint of a merit system, free from anyone telling you you must do this or that. Because your Savior kept the law perfectly for you, you are no longer under a contract – you are a free agent.

Let’s think of this race with the law still in place. If the law were the path laid before us, we would never get off the starting line. The law lays before us the following rule: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. It also says, if you don’t, you are disqualified. This means every step we take must be out of perfect love toward our fellow man. This means we do nothing . . . and God means it – not one thing that would harm our neighbor physically, emotionally, financially, or spiritually. I can’t even leave my house without getting frustrated with someone else’s driving, I can’t go to the store without thinking about how I can get to the checkout before all these other people, and I especially can’t seem to make a mistake without first thinking of why it was someone else’s fault. We are totally disqualified for interference.

This is why God sent you a substitute. Someone to run the race while you sit the bench. Some one to set you free from this burden. **Matthew 20:28 (NKJV) – 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”**

The Spirit is now our coach – He has changed us from “investing” in our own outcome, to “investing” in the outcome for others. Free, yet as v.19 says, servants of all. Just as Jesus did, we let everyone else finish ahead of us.

Luther put it this way, “A Christian is perfectly free, lord of all, subject to none.” And then he followed by saying, “A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

And thus Paul writes, “To the Jew I became a Jew.” In Acts 16, Paul journeys to Lystra and Iconium, and he wants to take along Timothy – a fellow minister. However Timothy was 1/2 Jew, 1/2 Greek. He knew that the fact that this 1/2 Gentile, Timothy, being not yet circumcised would be a stumbling block to the Jews in that region. So rather than having this obstacle, for the sake of the gospel, he had Timothy circumcised – not by compulsion, but in order to “serve all men.”

Every situation comes with its own set of circumstances. We always should stand for the liberty of the gospel, and for the truth of God’s Word. But let us do all things out of love for our fellow runners and for the sake of the gospel. **(v.23)**. – this is a joint finish. None of us really finishes alone. I don’t know if you have ever seen the Disney movie “Cars.” But in the final race, we find one of the famous race cars breaking down just before the finish line. Yet here is the lead character, Lightning McQueen, who sacrifices his own victory to push this old race car to the finish.

What do we do when a brother is slowing down, getting tired, showing weakness . . . do we slow down? Do we wait for them and help them along? “To the weak, I became as weak” Paul says. This means when your brother or sister is carrying a burden of sin and seeking rest, we do everything we can to take her up two by two and carry her to the finish line. This means trying to understand each other, and when someone struggles with a particular teaching or practice, to slow down and wait, rather than just moving on ahead. We see our fellow runners.

### **3. See the crown of victory**

The most successful athletes in the world have vision. They can visualize the finish line, the trophy, the crown. Look with me now dear Christians to that finish line. Do you see it? Can you look to the finish line and see your Savior waiting, cheering you on?

**(v.24-25)** There is a reason they call it “prize fighting.” The boxers fight for the prize. As Paul describes the crown, it is likely he had in mind what the Olympians were awarded upon victory – a wreath on their head. I don’t know about any of you, but we just recently threw our Christmas wreath into the garbage because it was fading. How long does the joy of earthly victories or temporal accomplishments last?

Even if it were possible that the joy of winning the Superbowl would last a whole lifetime, you still cannot take that ring with you when you leave this world. Do you see it now? Can you visualize that imperishable crown?

What awaits the Patriots and the Giants? They are probably right now visualizing what that Superbowl ring will look like on their finger. But will they get it? Even with the greatest of odds, still there is uncertainty. Either team might win. **(v.26-27)** The vision that God has given us of the joy that awaits us is even more than a vision. It is reality.

It is certainty. There is no question about the outcome of this competition. Christ has conquered. We are just trying to finish the race.

But what things might disqualify us? Interference – we try not to drive other runners off the track. False start – we let Jesus take the lead, run for us, rather than going it alone. Below the belt – we seek a good reputation, honor among those on the outside. We train our spiritual senses, presenting ourselves disciplined, self-controlled, “temperate” in all things. And we look endlessly toward not our own accomplishments, but the forgiveness that has been won for us through our Savior’s life and death.

Look again. Oh there it is. **1 Peter 5:4 (NKJV) – 4 and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.** Jesus has already won the race for you. You are not running in order to beat your other racers. This is like when my sister ran a marathon. It was not so much to place here or there. It was not to beat this person or that – it was simply to finish. It was a race against herself. So here we are, arm in arm, seeing the finish line, striving toward the goal.

We become all things to all men. Don’t think of this life as a chance to step over the next guy as you reach for the goal line. We all finish as one. Indeed, only one receives the prize. Really that was Jesus, who ran that perfect race. But it is also all of us together. “You are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3). We finish as one, as Christ through faith. Seeing the finish line means seeing that Christ has done it all for you already. See the finish line. Amen.