

Go for the prize

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A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 16th January 2005

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. (1 Corinthians 9.24 – 27)

Introduction

In this passage the apostle Paul urges his readers, and us as well, to "run" in our Christian lives so that we may obtain the "prize" that God wants to give us. If we are to understand this passage aright there is an issue that we must settle in our minds right at the outset: What is the "prize" that Paul is speaking about? Is it salvation, or is it something else? Sometimes indeed salvation is spoken of as a prize or a crown, but I do not believe the apostle is speaking of salvation here, for two reasons.

Firstly, because the reward that Paul is speaking of here is a reward for effort, as a result of training hard for the race of the Christian life, and running hard in it. Salvation, on the other hand, is a gift of God, entirely by God's grace, which is given to us solely on the basis of the work of Christ upon the Cross, which is received by faith alone.

Secondly, because Paul says that the reward that he is speaking about here is a reward that one can fail to attain to, or can be disqualified from, even as a believer. By contrast, salvation is a gift of God which can never be taken away from those who are truly saved because it depends ultimately upon the promise of God. Those who are saved are saved because God has sworn on oath to save

those who trust him, and nothing can undo God's promise.

So I believe that the apostle here is speaking about the reward which God gives, over and above the gift of salvation, to those who true believers who make real progress towards becoming like Christ.

Do we have any support elsewhere in Scripture for this interpretation? The answer is, yes. A few chapters earlier in this same letter of 1 Corinthians, in chapter 3, verses 11 to 15, the apostle likens the Christian life to building a house. The foundation is Christ, and we are building on that foundation. We can either build with good materials, with gold silver and costly stones, or we can build with bad materials, wood, hay or straw. In other words, either we build a life that is based upon obedience to God, or one that is based upon disobedience to God. Paul says that the judgement day will bring the quality of our workmanship to light. The work will be tested with fire. If a person has built his life using poor materials, then what he has built will be burned up. He himself will be saved, but "only as one escaping through the flames." Whereas the person who has built his life with quality materials will "receive his reward."

Peter also in his second letter chapter 1 urges believers to use the means that God has provided to become like Christ, and to make every effort to become the sort of people God wants us to be. He lists the sort of qualities that we should seek to cultivate, and then he says, in verse 13, "For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." If we grow in grace and become more like Christ, we shall be rewarded with a rich welcome into everlasting glory.

So as we look at this passage I am interpreting the prize as that special reward which God will give at the last day to those who made good progress to becoming like Christ in this life. The Christian life is a race. The length of time for the race is the length of the rest of your life. The finishing line is perfection, being like Christ. The aim is to get as far along the track towards the goal of perfection as you can in the time that you have available. The closer to perfection you reach, the greater the reward.

So how do we gain this prize? There are four things that Paul urges his believers, and us, to do that we might gain that prize.

1. Run

The apostle says, "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." We are called to run as Christians, not amble, and still less stay still or go backwards.

Imagine an Olympic race, and the runners line up. There is great excitement as the race is about to begin. Then finally the gun is fired and the race begins. But one "runner" slowly leaves the starting block and shambles down the track. After a few hundred yards, he lies down in the middle of the track to have a snooze.

Not only will he not get any prize, he is likely to be reprimanded for bringing the games into disrepute. Yet is this perhaps an illustration of your Christian life? Do you show a lackadaisical, "couldn't care less" attitude? Do you shamble along, occasionally reading the Bible a bit, sometimes coming to church, sometimes offering the odd prayer, sometimes making a bit of an effort to become more like Christ, but most of the time not really bothering. Is that what God wants of you, or of me? Can you expect to get the prize that this passage speaks about if you have that approach? The writer to the Hebrews writes, in chapter 12 verse 1,

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

2. Be disciplined

Paul says in verse 25, "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last. We do it to get a crown that will last for ever."

We are all familiar with the very considerable discipline with which athletes control their lives, with a view to being as effective as possible in the competition for which they are training. Their diet is closely regulated. The amount of sleep they have, the amount of exercise they take, and the different sorts of exercises that are carried out – all of these are subject to the tightest discipline, with one goal in mind only: being as effective as possible in the race for which they are training.

As Paul says, they do it to get a crown that will not last. In Paul's day it would have been for a wreath that would have been made out of wood. Now the reward is a gold, silver or bronze medal. As Paul points out, they show such

great zeal for a piece of wood or a lump of metal that will be destroyed. But we who are believers are working towards a reward which will last for ever. Surely then we should learn from the athlete, and be every bit as disciplined as him in the way we conduct our lives. How should we exercise this discipline as believers?

By guarding what we “eat” - not our physical food so much as food for the mind. Just as the athlete needs to guard his food intake carefully, we need to guard our mental intake carefully. We need to avoid harmful influences, and we need to give priority to reading and meditating on God’s Word.

By doing our “exercises” regularly. The athlete has many regular and arduous exercises to undertake. What is the equivalent for us? Our spiritual exercises; our times of personal prayer; our times of personal Bible reading; times of prayer with other family members and friends; meetings of the church. If we miss out on these exercises we shall become poorly equipped for the race.

By controlling our enjoyment of pleasure. The athlete does not cut it out altogether, but he is careful, in case his enjoyment of pleasure should hinder his ability for the race. So we need to be the same. Jesus warned us that the pleasures and cares of this world can choke the seed of the Word of God in our lives. We need to live in this world but not be engrossed by it.

By being self-controlled about our sleep pattern. The athlete is very careful about sleep. We need to be as well. If you go to bed late you will be up late, and you will miss out on the opportunity to pray and read the Bible before you start the day, and you are likely to be much less effective in your service of Christ the next day.

3. Be focussed

Paul says in verse 26, “Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air.”

Go back to the picture I drew a little while ago of the man who strolled along in his race, and then after a while stopped and went to sleep. Suppose, instead of this, the man did set off at a run, but he went off in completely the wrong direction! And then, after a while, sensing his mistake, he then ran in another direction....and then another...and then another. He is running, yes, but all over

the place. He will not get any prize.

We must not be like that. We need to be very focussed on where we are heading for. We are heading for perfection in Christ. All of our attention needs to be on Christ. This is what the apostle says in Philippians 3 verses 12 to 14:

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. 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 3.12 – 14)

I have already quoted Hebrews 12.1 which speaks about the race that we are to run as Christians. The writer goes on to say:

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12.2 – 3)

It is so easy to take our eye “off the ball” as Christians, and to become absorbed with worldly concerns, or to become full of self-pity if we consider our life to be a hard one. We need to take our minds off the pleasures and concerns of this world, and off ourselves, and deliberately focus them again and again back on to Christ.

4. Be brutal with sin

Paul says in verse 27, "I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified." The apostle is using very strong language here. What does he mean? Is he talking about the sort of punishments that monks used to put themselves through, like rolling in nettles or whipping themselves, in order to try to get rid of sin? No. He is talking about putting sin to death. Why does he speak then about beating his body? Because the body, or the “flesh” is where our sin resides. What the apostle is saying is that he ruthlessly goes about destroying sin. He does not compromise with it, or allow it any space in his life.

The wonderful thing about being a true Christian who has been born again by the Holy Spirit is that God gives you the power to overcome sin in your life. He has given you the promises of his word, and also the Holy Spirit, so that you have the resources you need to conquer sin. But this is not automatic. You have to use those resources to fight sin your life, otherwise sin will master you.

What is more, you need to fight sin on every front. It is no good fighting sin in one area, and leaving it unchallenged in another. Just one weak area will be relentlessly exploited by the devil until it brings ruin to your life, unless you deal with it.

In other words, in this race which we are running, we have to compete according to the rules, according to the laws that are in God's Word. If we break the rules we shall be disqualified for the prize. Hence the apostle says verse 27 that he makes his body his slave so that, after he has preached to others, he will not be disqualified for the prize.

Nearly every Olympic games session there is a high profile case of someone who won a gold medal who is subsequently stripped of his medal because he was discovered to have cheated by using a banned substance. Why do people cheat? Because they think they will get away with it. But with God you cannot get away with it, because God sees everything. He knows if you secretly harbour sin in your life, and he will deal with you. He will not ignore it. Paul says something very similar in 2 Timothy 2 verse 5, "If anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules." And again, he says in Galatians 6 verses 7 to 10,

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

We can observe in life how hard it is to build up something positive in life, and how easily it can be destroyed. Gerald Ratner spent years building his jewellery business, and then by one remark in an after dinner speech, where he cracked a joke at the expense of the jewellery he sold, his business was destroyed. How long does it take you to knit a jumper? But how quickly will that jumper be unravelled if you allow it to be? How long does it take to make a nice piece of furniture? But how quickly can you destroy it with a hammer? How long will it

take you to roll a boulder up a mountain? But how quickly will it roll back into the valley if you let go of it?

It is frightening the ease with which we can bring disaster to our Christian lives if we do not keep a tight control on sin. The speed with which things can degenerate is quite staggering.

It is frightening the effect that just one sin can have upon us, and how that one sin can effectively undo many years of growth in grace. One adulterous affair, after many years of faithfulness, can set a man right back. One dishonest deal; one bout of violence; one episode of drunkenness; one denial of Christ – just one of each of these, and many other sins, can take years to recover from.

We need to watch ourselves very closely. In Acts 20.28 – 31, some very sobering words from the apostle Paul to the elders at Ephesus are recorded:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!

Watch out! If even elders in one of the strongest churches of the New Testament were not exempt from this danger, you and I certainly are not.

So we have seen that the apostle Paul has been speaking about the prize that God will give to those true believers who use the means that he has given to become like Christ. We have seen what we need to do to obtain that prize. We need, firstly, to run, to put all our effort into becoming like Christ. Secondly, we need to be disciplined in our training as believers, watching our spiritual food and carrying out our spiritual exercises. Thirdly, we need to be focussed as we run the race, with your eye fixed on Christ, not letting our attention stray to the things of this world. And, fourthly, we need to be brutal with sin in our lives. We must stamp out sin, wherever it is found, as otherwise sin will overtake us and ruin us.

Now, I realise that a wide variety of people will read this booklet. Some will not yet be Christians at all, some will be young Christians, some will be Christians of some years' standing, and some, perhaps, will be those who have failed badly as

Christians. Let me now address each group.

Firstly, those who are not yet believers. What is the message for you as you read this? The message for you is simple: you must be born again. If it is hard enough for those who have the Holy Spirit to become what God would have them to be, what hope do you have? Answer: none at all, unless God changes you. You cannot begin to live as God would have you to live unless you have the Holy Spirit. Come to Christ. Ask him to save you.

Secondly, those who are young believers. Perhaps you are thrilled with your first love. You are amazed at God's kindness to you in saving you and giving you eternal life. Do not think that believing in Christ is all there is to the Christian life. Now you must live it! God wants you to strive to become perfect. Your old non-Christian ways must be done away with. Read your Bible, get to church, pray with other Christians, so that you may run the race that God has got marked out for you.

Thirdly, those who have been Christians for some years. May be you have been serving Christ for many years. May be you have built up a reputation for yourself as a "strong" Christian. You are held in high regard in your church. Be careful. Do not become complacent. Sin could creep up on you unawares and overwhelm you. Be on your guard, lest you lose what you have gained.

Fourthly, those who are believers but have fallen badly. What should you do? Should you wallow in the bog for the rest of your life? Are you condemned to being disqualified for ever for the prize? You do not need to be. Pick yourself up off the floor, get washed in the blood of Christ, and start running again. Remember Jesus' words to the church which had lost its first love: "Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent, and do the things you did at first." (Revelation 2.5). If you do so there will still be a reward. It may not be as big as it would have been if you had not fallen, but it will be bigger than it will be if you wallow in self-pity for the rest of your life. Stir yourself again. Come to Christ, get back on track and start running again.

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