

The Real Race

by Erlo Stegen

The sermon encourages Christians to run the Christian race with self-control and discipline, setting their sights on the imperishable crown of eternal life.

Duration: 1:19:25

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 9:24

Topics: "Spiritual Discipline", "Christian Perseverance"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of running the race of life with certainty and according to the rules. He uses the analogy of a sword fight to illustrate the need for focus and direction in our spiritual journey. The speaker also highlights the dedication and preparation required to participate in the ancient Greek games, comparing it to the discipline needed to follow God's word. He concludes by reading from 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, which encourages believers to run the race in a way that they may obtain the imperishable crown. The sermon emphasizes the need for self-control and discipline in order to avoid disqualification.

Transcript

Lord, thank you for this opportunity to meet here. Please be in our midst. Speak to us through your holy word.

Touch our hearts and work. May a great work take place that many may be helped. Amen.

We'll read from 1 Corinthians chapter 9. And it will be from verse 24 to 27. 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. Now 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. Therefore I run thus, not with uncertainty. Thus I fight, not as one who beats the air.

But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified. I was very blessed this morning when I considered this portion. The Bible is a book with such great wealth in it.

We who have God's word sit upon a huge treasure. We should be filled every day, filled to overflowing. One can never get to the end of these riches, and we can take so much from it.

There are so many treasures in here. Every Christian should read the Bible every day. And if you have the strength, read it on your knees.

And allow the Lord to reveal His mysteries and secrets which are found in His word. And if we fill our lives in such a way with God's word, that it's filled to the brim with God's word, then the world and the devil wouldn't find place in our lives because it would be full of God's word. And the only reason why the devil gets into us is because we are empty tins.

If you take a bottle that's filled to the brim, you can put it anywhere and even into water. None of that water will penetrate that bottle because it's filled to the brim. But if you put an empty bottle into water, you can hear it absorbing all the water, filling itself up with that water.

Or if we take just timber, wood. If you take one that is saturated with moisture and with water, you can put it into more water. It doesn't absorb any more water because it's saturated.

Now in verse 24 here it says, Do you not know? Do you not know? It's a great pity when people are filled with ignorance where they don't know. I thought of some Christians or many Christians that become Christians and for a week they're on fire for the Lord or maybe for a month. But after a while, it just fizzles out.

Nothing is left of their spiritual life. And I wondered what causes it that people are so useless as Christians. You know why? It's because they are so foolish.

It's because they're ignorant. They don't know. And that's why they're swept away by every tide that comes.

Paul here writes to the Corinthians. Now he had founded this church in Corinth but he was no longer there at this time. Corinth was a big wealthy city and very famous.

It was a glittering city and it was a city that attracted people from all over the world. And Paul got there, he preached the gospel and the church mushroomed there. It's amazing because if one thinks of city life, you could take a child that grew up here, went to school here at Domino's Savita for 10 or 12 years, but they just need to go to the city, maybe Durban or Joburg for one day and they will be swept away by the current there.

Or a child that grows up in a Christian home. Christian parents taught the Christian way, the Lord's ways. And after years of being in that home, the child leaves and in no time it's swallowed by the world.

And you just hold your head and you say, but doesn't that child know any better? How can such a thing be possible? Corinth was a big city in Greece. So here we find this Greek city, this big city full of the glory of this world with everything that it offers. And of course with all the evil that happens in a city too.

The Samaritan woman, that whole city was brought to the Lord in an hour. And so it was with Paul when he got there, the church, the congregation, it just mushroomed and blossomed. And then Paul moved on to other places to found churches there.

But as a wise servant of the Lord, involved in the Lord's work, he didn't, even when he was traveling, he didn't forget those Christians in Corinth. And he wrote to them regularly. And he would get reports from people that would come to him and tell him, report to him what was happening in Corinth.

And then he'd write to them. And he'd teach them, instruct them, and even reprimand them. Correct them and discipline them through God's word.

But also comforting them according to their need. So he also wrote this letter and also this text which we read. He was encouraging them to be faithful to the Lord.

To fight the good fight of faith, to stand firm and be steadfast, immovable. Not that they move forward a few steps and then move back a few again, up and down, backwards and forwards, but that they should be steadfast. That they should be men of faith, standing firm.

And Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, also said that even though we can be very active and very involved, but if we don't play according to the rules, then we can do all these things but be disqualified at the end. We won't get and receive a crown. We won't get and receive a crown.

And that you who are lukewarm Christians, you who change according to the times and the situation, that you're like a chameleon. When you're on a green leaf, you turn green. When you're on a red one, you turn red.

It's for you that you should find help. It's for you that you should find help. And as he's instructing and teaching them, we can find help as well, that as Christians we can become steadfast, upright, and that we stick to our guns.

That anyone who meets us, even if it's after 10 years, that they'll find us faithful in that which God has put us. And so he used an illustration, something which was familiar to them, which happened often there in Corinth. Corinth was a city where all of Greece met once in three years.

Outside of the city there was a huge plain, a huge ground, sports field or field. So every three years they'd have a huge sports meeting there. And so they'd all meet there.

Everyone was represented, old and young, male, female, children, all ages. And they'd meet there, sometimes hundreds of thousands would meet there. So many would come to take part and many would come as spectators to watch these people taking part.

And they would start with the running events. And there were different events, long distance, short distance, the sprint events, and you're familiar with athletics meetings where you have field and track events. Now, these games didn't just take place over one day, it would go over a number of days.

They even had chariot races and it was all about taking part to see who would win the race. And there were the archers, all those events. They would see who would be able to hit the bull's eye.

They also had wrestling events, a huge battle to see who would win and who would be the loser. Others had their different pieces of equipment like shields and they would fight. It was a fight between life and death.

And at the end of the games, there would be a huge prize giving and only those who won the events got the prize. Now, they would receive a wreath that perishes, that just withers. There was a certain tree which they would use the branches or the leaves and the twigs and they would weave a wreath out of that and that's what the winner would receive.

If you really think of it, that wreath was really worth nothing, something that just withered away, after a short while there would be nothing left of it. But for them it meant a lot because they knew nothing better than that. When they got this perishable wreath, it was a huge honor for them.

Sometimes the emotions ran so high that if a child, a son received a prize, that the father sometimes died of a heart attack on the spot because he got so excited about this honor bestowed upon his son. And then that athlete would go back home, it was like a victory procession. He was greatly honored in his hometown.

Well to this day you still get these games. Today we know them as the Olympic Games. These games aren't just held in Greece, but over the whole world in different places.

Just like recently with the World Cup, the soccer World Cup, the Italians won it and they say when they got home it was about midnight when they arrived in Italy, but they got a heroes welcome there, taken in a bus to the leaders palace. So they were greatly honored and of course the whole country was celebrating like they celebrate there. They were drinking until the early hours of the morning, there was a lot of noise around.

So they were received to be honored and to receive their reward. The whole nation rejoiced. And of course no one regretted being there at this great occasion.

And of course to take part in these games is not an overnight thing. You don't just decide one day you're going to be there the next day, it takes many years to prepare for it. So it was also in Greece where these games people would chastise themselves, they would work hard over many years forfeiting many luxuries just because they one day wanted to take part in that event.

So God's word says, and everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. They exercise self-control and also their own body they control strictly. And over a long period of time they practice, they go through a rigid training exercise.

While you are fast asleep, they are busy training for that great day. Even when it gets to eating, they exercise self-control. They don't just eat anything, they sacrifice much.

They say, I can't eat this, I just put on extra weight and I can't afford that. So they do all that for that great day. People are even prepared to leave home, they go away, they go through that training program and it's tough, very difficult, but they are prepared to do it.

Because they say after three years or maybe even after six years, I want to take part there. And while others go and party, they say, I cannot go there and booze and smoke and get involved in drugs. They say no to those things and they do all that for a perishable crown.

And they're not ashamed to do it. Not like many Christians who are ashamed to stand for what they believe. But they do it for that perishable crown, knowing that maybe they'll win the race this year.

But after three years, someone else breaks that record and what you've achieved is forgotten. I wish you all understood German, that I could speak to you in German. Don't those heathen Greeks put us Christians who are so slick in our Christianity, don't they put us to shame? They do it for a perishable crown, but we are doing it for an imperishable crown in heaven.

They do it for a glory that is just temporary, it's passing. We do it for that glory which is eternal, which is forever. But they put us to shame.

I don't know why we Christians are so slick. We want to sit there in our comfort zones, be comfortable and we don't want anyone to upset that comfort zone we're in. But they go all out.

There's no lukewarmness, no coldness. There's no slackness. There's no getting tired and weary.

There's no slackness. There's no getting tired and weary. For them nothing is too much.

So I've tried to portray this picture to you and for us as Christians, nothing should be too much for that heavenly prize and for heaven. The Bible makes it clear to us that we'll never receive that heavenly prize in heaven one day if we haven't overcome here on earth. Now in that race which we could say you're taking part in something which really isn't worth much at all because it's something that perishes.

That race that one received, the winner received was really a very poor attempt. And the glory one received, the honor one received was temporary because after three years your achievement was forgotten. But they sacrificed much.

They exercised self-control. They said no to many other things. And they did it just for a perishable crown.

But we should be doing it and are doing it for one that never perishes. And many took part in the race, but only one received the prize. But for us Christians we can all win the prize.

Everyone that runs the race faithfully will receive the prize. But we just despise it. They knew only one would receive the prize, so they laid off anything that would be a hindrance to them.

If anything that would weigh them down, they'd put a sign. They didn't want to be distracted by anything. They didn't want anything to weigh them down.

They wanted to run the best they could. Like on air. And they did it knowing that only the one that wins the race would get the prize.

But we know that every one of us, if we run the race faithfully, we will receive a reward. And I wish you could take your hand and get hold of your heart. Take hold of it, inspect it and see whether you're running this race wholeheartedly or not.

Take these Greeks and take yourself and put yourself on the scale with them. Compare yourself with them and could you say, oh you Greek, you do it for a perishable crown, but I do it for one that never perishes. You Greek, you do it for a perishable crown, but I do it for one that never perishes.

And his whole life is totally focused on this one goal and that is running that race. So everything revolves around that one goal. Even when he's sitting at table with all the food in front of him, he will discern what will be good for him and that which will just add weight and which will just be a hindrance to him.

He's temperate, he exercises self-control in all things. Do you understand what this means in a spiritual sense? Just one example. If people are sitting in front of the TV and you are there and things are shown there that one says, I cannot, if I want to run the race, look at these things.

They will have an effect on me, they will weigh me down. It will bring lust into my life and the world into my life and I cannot afford that. I cannot afford that.

I cannot afford that. And that's where you see those who are just Christian by name, they're not genuine ones. So in verse 23, everyone who takes part, he is temperate in all things, exercising self-control in all things.

Like some people who use the Lord's name in vain, just easily using his name while they're talking and then they say, oh, that's just a minor thing. Well, you may think it's a minor thing, but it's something from the devil. And then one says, oh, it's just a small thing.

Oh, I wasn't really, I wasn't careful, you know, just at that moment, I didn't really take note. Well, it's because of those things that you'll end up in the wrong place. Those small things before the Lord are not small at all, they are big.

You will be careful what you do, your actions, you'll take careful note of, and you'll even be careful what you think. And a person running in a race will take off anything that will weigh him down. This jacket that's so heavy, or these gumboots that he was in the cow shed or the pigsty with, those things he'll take off because they'll weigh him down.

And a young person, a girl and a boy runs the race with all those things on and the pockets filled with photos of the opposite sex. Of a boyfriend or girlfriend, and all these things weigh that person down. It's obvious that person doesn't know what it means to be running in the Lord's race.

And that's why you are the way you are. Like we read in Hebrews chapter 12, And there is nothing in this race which is such a great hindrance as sin itself. That is what ensnares us.

Sin is the greatest hindrance in this race. So anything that's a hindrance to you in running this race, That which weighs you down, which holds you back, which slackens your pace, anything. And then the sin which ensnares you, lay those things aside.

So anything that's a hindrance to you, whatever sin it is, also the lust, the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, Those things you must annihilate in your life. You must get rid of them totally. I'm going to be preaching in German.

I'm going to be preaching in German over there, so a lot of the things that are coming to my mind, I'm thinking in German terms already. And unfortunately even here in the school they don't teach German anymore. And if you don't learn to speak German, how can I take you along? Because how will you communicate with the people over there? And don't say, well I'll get someone to interpret for me.

And may God give us the grace that there will be no indifference in our lives, this cursed indifference where it doesn't matter to us. And these heathen Greeks who took part in these games in those times, they will stand up and they will condemn you on Judgment Day. They'll condemn the lukewarm Christians saying, Lord we did more for our perishable crown than they did for the crown that never perishes.

Do you see how much? Do you see what depth there is in this portion? And that's why I eventually had to put down my pen. I said the service will get too long. Now let me just ask, what is then this prize? What is this imperishable crown? What is this crown? Moses grew up as a prince in Egypt.

The son of Pharaoh's daughter, everyone took him as he was going to take the place of Pharaoh one day. What made him turn his back on all those things? He turned his back on all that he was doing. All that worldly inheritance that he was to receive, all that honor and that glory, he turned his back on it.

Because he had his eyes set on that imperishable crown. That reward, that is what he had his sights on. That's why he chose to suffer with the slaves at that time.

You see, if you set your sights, your eyes on the goal, nothing will hold you back. Then the devil won't be able to pull you around like a bull with a ring in its nose. If you speak of a crown, of a reward, we could say so much.

When your last day comes and Jesus comes to you and he says, today you will be with me in paradise. Is there a greater reward than that? Imagine to hear those words which that criminal on the cross heard. On your last day to hear the Lord saying to you, today you will be with me in paradise.

Wouldn't you like to hear those words? Do you rather choose? Do you choose rather to go with the world, to join up with prostitutes, to go that way and to end up in hell one day? Would you rather have that? Lazarus suffered, he had those sores all over. He went through a difficult time, but my how glorious when he was fetched by the angels to be taken up to Abram's bosom. Isn't that a wonderful reward? What a reward, and that's why Moses said, I'd rather suffer with these slaves.

The children of Israel for a short time, so that I can reach and achieve and attain to that eternal reward. There are no tears, no pain there, no diseases, nothing to make you sad or to make you fear. Just eternal genuine joy and peace, and that is real genuine joy and peace, not like that which you get here on earth.

And it's eternal, imperishable. Would you really be put off by something just temporary and small? We never hear of it. We never hear of it.

We never hear that Lazarus complained and he said, Oh Lord, what have I done to deserve to live in this way here on earth? Why should I suffer like this? What did I do to deserve it? We never hear that. No, he has his sights on that eternal crown and glory, and he waited for the day where the Lord spoke to the angels and said, now it's enough. Now go and fetch him into the eternal glory, and there he could be in Abram's bosom.

But we are short-sighted, and it's because we don't know. Our reward, our crown. If you think of that, it should be enough to carry you through even the most difficult times.

We think of people who were burned at the stake, and while they were burning there, they were singing choruses and hymns, praising the Lord, saying we don't even feel these flames. One who burned at the stake, while he was burning there, he said, It is like I'm lying on a bed of roses. He said, I'm on my way home.

We know that the Lord is returning at any time. We're expecting him soon. It could be today, even before the sun sets.

It could be before tomorrow. It could be while I'm in the airplane. But oh, what glory that will be, to be with him in a moment.

And that you won't just run like it says here, like those that run with uncertainty or they fight as one who beats the air. But oh, what glory that will be, to be with him in a moment. Now you may be clever, you may even be fast.

But you need to run with certainty towards the goal and according to the rules. Otherwise you'll be disqualified and your cleverness or your speed, even your sweat won't help you because you'll be disqualified. Remember how I spoke about those sword fights where they had to fight for their lives.

Imagine if you're in a sword fight and you just wave your sword around in the air and people won't even know what you're actually trying to achieve. You don't even know who and where your enemy is. It could be one of two things.

Maybe it's because you're in total darkness. You don't know where you are, you don't know where your enemy is and that's why you're just waving your sword around aimlessly. It's one possibility.

The other possibility, you feel sorry for the devil and your sins and then you just do this. You don't want to kill your enemy, you don't want to kill your sins. So you won't be taking part in that prize giving one day.

No, you'll be part of the devil's group. You'll be part of the devil's group. But the winners will be with Christ on that day.

And my, what an experience that will be. What won't they experience on that day where heaven and earth will pass away. Everything will be destroyed by fire.

The devil and his angels and all that belong to him will be cast into that lake of fire. What an experience that will be. What a reward to be able to experience all that where everything will be destroyed and will pass away but we will be with the Lord.

Is there a greater reward than that? Now if this doesn't touch you and doesn't move you, then I say to you German, Englishman, Afrikaner, Zulu, whoever you are. If this doesn't move you, then you're like a stupid donkey, as one says in German. You're foolish.

And then you deserve to burn. And then there will be no compassion anymore. For then you will have deserved what you're getting because you will have heard so often, been in the service at Sisyphus, maybe even gone to the school here.

You will have experienced and heard so much but you've chosen not to accept it. So you deserve what you get. Paul said to him, he said to Corinthians, I'm going to tell you what I'm going to tell you.

I'm going to tell you what I'm going to tell you. I'm going to tell you what I'm going to tell you. So if we run, as Paul says, with our eyes on the goal, running to win that prize, to win the race, then no matter whether we're in Durban and Gauteng and Egypt or wherever we are, we won't be distracted and put off and go off the track because we'll have our eyes on that eternal goal.

Do you understand? The Lord Jesus said, if you have the strength to hear this, and he said, some people, they go through circumcision because they want to become eunuchs so that they may enter heaven. They take the knife and use it and castrate themselves to enter heaven. Then to live like a wild bull and be not satisfied by your own wife.

You still want others and you still look at others. Just recently, someone came here to look at the game and I said, we've got a problem. We've got a problem with cats here.

And he said, well, cats are the worst things around. You need to get rid of them or they need to be castrated. Otherwise, they are a huge problem.

Don't waste any time. Just kill them. Just kill them.

Now sin is worse than a cat. Sin. S-I-N.

The worst things. Our greatest enemy. We've got enemies.

We've got the devil, Satan. We've got his demons. We've got the world, the rest of the flesh, rest of the eye, your own heart may be your greatest enemy.

Kill, kill, kill, or they will kill you. We've got the devil, Satan. We've got his demons.

We've got the rest of the flesh, rest of the eye, your own heart may be your greatest enemy. Kill, kill, kill, or they will kill you. We've got the devil, Satan.

We've got his demons. We've got the rest of the flesh, rest of the eye, your own heart may be your greatest enemy. Kill, kill, kill, or they will kill you.

Now maybe you're lenient on your sin and the sin in your life. Why? Because you actually quite like it. And so you're soft on it.

Like in that sword fight, just beating the air because you don't really want to do damage to the enemy. Let us stand and pray. Lord Jesus, as you sent your word directed to the Corinthians at that time, may it not be in vain to us today.

Help us, Lord, to be winners, to be conquerors, people who overcome that we may attain to that imperishable crown. Amen.

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