

Freedom & Rights pt. 3

1 Corinthians (CGS#18) – 9:24-27

INTRODUCTION – If you’re reading straight through chapter 9, these verses can feel like they come out of nowhere. Paul has been talking about how he’d rather give up his rights than put up a barrier to the gospel, and now he’s talking about athletes. How does that follow? Well, if you track his argument, you’ll see that he’s employing a powerful analogy to communicate a profound truth. Let’s parse it out.

Paul is an apostle (verses 1-2), which means he has been sent by Jesus to share the gospel, plant churches, and lead people to salvation. He loves doing this. In fact, he can’t help it (verse 16)! And God has established the expectation that people will financially support their apostles (verses 4-11), so Paul has every right to request this financial support from the Corinthians, but he doesn’t. Why? Because he’s not willing to do anything that threatens to put up a barrier to the gospel, and apparently asking for financial support could be a barrier in Corinth (verses 12-15). Paul has an intense desire to pursue the Corinthians for Christ, and he won’t let anything get in his way. And now in verse 24 he uses athletic imagery to communicate the intensity of that pursuit.

Paul knew his audience well. He’s emphasizing his argument using an analogy that fits their cultural context. Corinth was the home of the Isthmian games, which, like the Olympic games, were celebrated every few years and awarded athletes for their physical prowess. He could say something like, “I really want you to pursue Christ and those around you,” but instead he says, “You know how runners are desperately trying to win their races? That’s how intensely I want you to pursue Christ and others.” (verse 24) This is his first concern: Reaching the lost with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

His second concern is that believers will faithfully endure through the trials and struggles of this world. In verses 26-27, he again uses athletic imagery, but this time he uses it to highlight the absurdity of giving up pursuit of Christ for pursuit of the world. It would be like running aimlessly or boxing the air. In other words, chasing after temporary prizes like fame and fortune is meaningless. There’s no finish line. You don’t actually win anything because you’ll always want more.

In the middle of these two concerns (verse 25), he puts his analogy into an eternal context to remind his audience (including us) what’s at stake: “Those athletes run to receive a perishable prize, but our prize is eternal.”

And this is really the core of why Paul is so intense in this passage. His two concerns--reaching the lost and faithfully enduring to the end—are wrapped up in eternal significance. He’s not saying, “Love God and love your neighbor because I said so,” or even, “Love God and love your neighbor because it’s the right thing to do.” He’s saying, “You’ve been given the words of eternal life. Words that will set prisoners free from captivity to sin and death. Don’t keep them to yourself! Don’t get distracted and self-absorbed! Don’t get off course! Get out there and run as hard as you can for as long as you can in order to obtain the prize for yourself and others!”

In Sunday’s sermon, we heard some pretty startling statistics: 26,000 people in our community are not connected to a gospel believing church. 40% of pastors in our district will retire in the next 7 years. Regular church attendance is defined as only 3 out of every 8 weeks. This is definitely concerning, but instead of becoming fearful and throwing up our hands, let’s ask God to give us eyes to see the needs in our community, the passion to pursue the lost, and the strength to endure faithfully to the end.

GETTING STARTED – As you begin your group time, take time to answer this question together: What excites you about Paul’s level of focus and devotion in pursuing the lost for Christ?

IN THE WORD – Let's dig back into the passage. It is important to strengthen our muscles in reading God's Word. On Sunday, we walked through the passage in the sermon. Hopefully, that helped you to see the landmarks of the passage with fresh eyes. Now, with your group, go back through it and see what God is saying to you specifically.

First, before you read the passage, take a moment to ask God's Spirit to quiet your mind and heart and to illuminate the text to you. Second, read the passage aloud to the group. Then, follow the simple method below. (O.P.A)

Observe: Make 8-10 observations from the passage. Pay close attention to observe and note repeated words and phrases, names, places, and themes.

Principles: From your list of observations, what patterns or big ideas do you see emerging? Can you distill it down into 2-4 big idea truths?

Apply: Moving from your list of principles, it is time to apply God's Word. Remember, we believe that God's Word is living and active and that it can change the way we live Monday-Saturday. What is one tangible way to apply a truth from your list above?

Note: Another way to approach your time together is to talk through the following questions about the passage we are studying that week.

1. What did you hear God's Spirit say to you through the passage this week? How does it encourage you? How does it sharpen you?
2. How have you seen God at work in your life this week? Have you enjoyed him? Have you heard his voice and the leading of his Spirit? Big ways or small ways.
3. Do I daily meditate on the love that I have received from God? If so, how does that impact my day? If not, what would change about my day if I did?
4. We order our lives around the things we value. What things might need to be reordered for the values of Christ to be seen and experience in my life in increasing ways?
 - a. Consider emotional, spiritual, physical, relational, and cultural values.
5. What would need to change in your life to become all things to all people so that more would come to know Jesus?
 - a. Consider rhythms, practices, daily structures that might need to shift or change in order to reach my friends and neighbors with the gospel.