

2 Timothy 4:7 (NKJV)

⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

INTRODUCTION

This week's lesson falls right in the middle of a long discussion about whether Christians should eat meat offered to idols. Last week we determined that we ought to be careful how we conduct ourselves in our freedom in Christ so that we don't cause a younger Christian to fall. In our text this week, Paul is urging us to discipline ourselves in our Christian "race". Paul will often use illustrations such as soldiers in an army or athletes in competition to compare to our Christian lives. If you've been a Christian for any length of time, you've realized that both types of illustrations really hit home, just as the Corinthians could relate to these illustrations in their day.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (NKJV)

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.

There's an old joke that tells of two men running in the woods from a bear. The first man begins to tire and says to the second man, "We'll never be able to outrun this bear!" The second man replies, "I don't have to outrun the bear, I just have to outrun you!" That's how some Christians view the 24th verse. They compete with fellow Christians in thinking their reward will be greater than others. This is not what the Holy Spirit is trying to convey here at all. The emphasis is on the second part of the first verse: *run to obtain the prize*. If you're in a race, you can't control how fast the competition will run, but we can control how well we run our race if we don't allow anything to hinder us.

Every athlete has a training regimen to properly prepare, not just to participate, but to win. However, every serious athlete knows there is only one winner. If the athlete sticks to the regimen, no matter what the outcome, the athlete should be satisfied with the effort. In ancient Corinth, the reward for victory in the games was a wreath of olive leaves; a crown that would eventually perish. The ancients practiced all year before the games to receive this flimsy crown. How much more should the blood bought children of God discipline their lives to run their race to obtain a crown which neither moth nor dust can corrupt; a crown that is incorruptible, imperishable, and eternal?

Victory in sports requires concerted, concentrated effort in training, not with a hit or miss, devil-may-care effort. Believers are to train with vigor so that we are able to face any spiritual challenge. What does our training consist of that will allow us to finish the race? See Ephesians 6:10-18, Heb. 12:1, Pr. 27:17. We must keep our bodies under control so that neither bad habits nor lust of the eyes and lust of the flesh and the pride of life weaken our witness lest we become disqualified.