

THE CHRISTIAN RACE

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In the Corinthian correspondence from Paul the apostle he makes an analogy between Christianity and the Isthmian Games. These games were second in worldwide prestige only to the Olympics, but to the Greeks they symbolized the pride of the Hellenic race. To the Greeks these games were fully a half of human education. Interest in the games was so high that if Greek states were at war with each other they would call a truce in order to attend the celebration. Enormous crowds were present. A winner was immortalized by his people. These games took place at Corinth. Paul alludes to the ten month training period for athletes in these games which also included a month of exercises at the gymnasium prior to the games. To the Christians at Corinth Paul wrote, "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway" (I Cor. 9:24-27).

The context of chapters eight through eleven may correctly receive the heading:

"The Sphere Of Christian Liberty Must Include Self-Denial"

The major application of this section deals with eating or refraining from eating meat that had been offered in sacrifice to pagan idols. Involved is not only one's conscience and a respect for his brother's conscience but also the principle of self-denial as the way to act on the convictions of the conscience. It does not take the common sense of a Will Rogers to observe the need for this teaching in the church today. The large problem areas of worldliness, spiritual indifference, a lack of Bible knowledge, and disunity among brethren can often be resolved down to selfishness. One commentary styles the section of chapter nine mentioned above:

"Enforcement Of The Duty Of Self-Denial By Reference To Grecian Games"

Self-denial is a Christian duty that when spurned may thrust one headlong into one of these large problem areas. Like an athlete in training who sets aside personal

desires so he can tone his physical body to reach its maximum potential, the Christian must strive to maintain his spiritual standing before God and man.

The verses immediately preceding the analogy to the Grecian games tell of the preaching of the gospel and Paul's efforts to seek and save the lost. Those verses which follow urge Christians to remember how that many of the Israelites who were "baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea" at their release from Egyptian captivity fell away from God's favor in the wilderness. A balance between a sincere desire to bring the lost to Christ and to personally express faithfulness in every area of Christianity is strongly suggested by these Scriptures. One who wishes to remain faithful but who has little or no desire to bring others to Christ is out of balance spiritually. Conversely, one who endeavors to bring the lost to salvation but who places little or no effort toward remaining faithful himself is also spiritually imbalanced. How much of what Christians do merely is shadow boxing done for the sake of onlookers without real conviction?

Paul ran the Christian race with certainty and fought away the desires that might have distracted him from obtaining not the perishable crown of leaves won at the games but the incorruptible crown given by the Master himself. Toward the close of his life and efforts here Paul stated with confidence gained from long standing practice the anticipation of the rich reward of his life's labors. He wrote, "For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (II Tim. 4:6-8).

The Christian race requires dedication, diligence, and discipline. The thrill of participation overcomes every obstacle. The promised rest at the end of the way among glorified saints provides eternal satisfaction for the saved. Therefore, ". . . let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:1-2).