

1 Corinthians 9 (Part 2): 24-27 • It's All About Faithfulness

Teacher: Pastor Paul LeBoutillier
Calvary Chapel Ontario

1 Corinthians 9, skip down to verse 24, it says,

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” (ESV)

Let's pray.

Thank You, Lord, for giving us this time to come together this morning to open our hearts to the ministry of Your Spirit and the ministry of Your Word. And I pray that You would speak to us today, wherever we may be. And I thank You, Lord, that you are speaking today through Your Word, through the power that is resident in the living Word. And we just really pray that our hearts would be open to receive all that you have to say. We ask it in Jesus' name, amen. Amen.

Today's passage, these last 4 verses, is all about rewards. It's not about salvation; it's about rewards. Paul's talking about rewards. And I don't know how much you think about rewards?

I polled my wife aside yesterday and I said, I asked her personally, I said, how much do you think about the rewards that you will receive at the end when you stand before the Lord? And Sue says, well, I think about it quite a bit. And I was, I don't know if I'm surprised by that or not.

I'm not sure how many Christians think about it that much. Think about the rewards that you're going to get when you stand before the Lord? I mean, I think all of us would say, I want to be able to hear, *“Well done, good and faithful servant.”* (Matthew 25:21)

But how much exactly do you think about the rewards in terms of how you're living your life today, what you're doing, and what you're not doing? And that sort of thing.

This passage, these 4 verses, I want to just tell you here up front, we're going to talk about rewards. We're not going to talk about salvation. This is a message then, you see, for believers because rewards are only eligible—or available, as a better word—for believers, okay? Unbelievers aren't going to be rewarded, though they're going to be judged because they refuse to allow Jesus to be judged for them. So there's no rewards for an unbeliever.

But for you as a Christian, and I'm talking about people who have put their faith in Christ for the forgiveness of sins, you are eligible for rewards, and you might be surprised to learn that the Word of God talks a lot about this subject of rewards. There's a lot in the scriptures. And one of the things that's interesting to note about rewards is that not everybody's going to get them. Yeah, I'm going to let that one sink in just for a sec. Not everybody's going to get them.

Do you remember earlier in this very letter of 1 Corinthians, Paul was talking about those who build on the foundation of Christ? And he talked about the fact that you can use different kinds of materials to build on that foundation, some which are perishable and some which are imperishable. And he talked about how the fire of God's presence is going to go raging one day across the foundation of our lives. Now, the foundation is Jesus, but what we've built on that foundation will be tested by the fire. Let me put this up on the screen for you to remind you. Here's what he said. He said,

1 Corinthians 3:14-15 (ESV)

If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward (there's our reward, he said, but) . If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

There are going to be people who are born-again Christians, who will be saved, but will have nothing to show for their lives in the sense of what they've built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ.

Now, I trust for better things for those here at Calvary Chapel, Ontario, and those within the sound of my voice. There are several people watching us live

this morning on the internet. People will be watching this later on from our website or from our YouTube channel.

My prayer is that all who hear this will receive a reward one day, but it's not automatic, which is why Paul says, if you look with me again in verse 24, he says, *“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize?...”*

And what he means by that is he's contrasting the Grecian games, which, by the way, some of them occurred right there in Corinth, so these people were very aware of this. They were not the Olympics, but they were like second to the Olympics, and they were very similar to the Olympics. And he's saying here that in every event, there's only one person who wins.

He's contrasting the fact that in Christ, there's going to be a lot of winners. There's going to be a lot of people who are going to receive a reward, but the last few words give the point of what he's saying here in this verse.

Look at the last few words of verse 24. He says, *“...So run that you may obtain it.”* Awards are going to be given out, but you and I still have to run. We have to run the race. We have to be in the race. We have to run the race, right? To get a reward. That's the point of what he's saying here.

What follows in these last 3 verses of the chapter is the apostle Paul exhorting you and I on how to run, okay? And he says, verse 25, *“Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. (He says) They do it to receive a perishable wreath...”*

They didn't get gold medals back in those days like we do for the Olympics. Well, some do: gold, silver, or bronze. They got a leafy wreath they put around their head.

And talk about perishable. I mean, the thing is going to get brittle eventually and probably fall apart. He said, man, they work. I mean, they exercise self-control and discipline, and they do it to get this wreath to put on their head that is only going to perish with the passing of time.

But he says, *“...but we (do it to receive) an imperishable.”* Reward, right? Something that's going to last. And so he goes on to say, *“²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air.”*

Rather: *“²⁷ ...I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”* And he means disqualified for the

prize, not talking about being disqualified for salvation. This isn't about salvation right here, okay? So that disqualification is not losing one's salvation, okay?

If I had to distill these four verses down to the essence of what Paul is saying and put it into one idea or concept, it would be self-control. Self-control! I can't tell you how much I hate those words. And yet, there they are. He says in verse 25,

“Every athlete exercises self-control...” And what that means is they've learned as athletes that there are things in life that aren't going to be good in the preparation of the competition that they are involved in. Some of you, you were athletes. Some of you may still be athletes. For some of us, it's a distant memory. But there was some discipline that was involved. The more serious the athlete, the more serious the discipline.

I've got one, one of my four kids; all of them played in sports of one kind. And I can talk about Tim because he's not here this morning; he went out of town. But he is my absolutely most dedicated athlete of the entire family. I mean, that kid puts the rest of us to shame.

He's constantly working out, constantly running, constantly playing basketball wherever there's people with a hoop and a basketball. I mean, the kid is just crazy about sports, and yet I see this discipline in his life, and I'm drawn to the essence of it, probably because I lack it so much in my own life.

These people, these athletes, have to be concerned about nutrition—what they put in their mouth. They have to be concerned about rest, getting enough, and they have to be concerned about training, and they have to be dedicated to training. And so, they have to exercise self-control in order to be faithful to the goal of competition, okay? That's the goal.

The goal is to compete, and they want to do a really good job of competing. They want to win, and so that's since that's the goal, they're going to be faithful in what they put in their mouth, how much rest they get, and how much training they do in order to reach that goal.

And you know what? Being faithful is our goal too. We're not being faithful to competition. We're being faithful to the Lord. That's our goal. Our goal is to be faithful to God. Now, that's what it's all about. Earlier in this letter, in fact, 1 Corinthians chapter 4, Paul said:

1 Corinthians 4:2 (ESV)

Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.

Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.

That's what, and we're stewards of the gifts that God has given us; and it is required of all stewards, which is someone who uses the resources that belong to someone else. It is required of us to be faithful. Let me give you an example here from Luke chapter 19.

Luke 19: 12-13, 15-17 (ESV)

He said therefore, “ A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return. Calling ten of his servants, he gave them ten minas and said to them, ‘Engage in business until I come.’ When he returned, having received the kingdom, he ordered these servants to whom he had given the money to be called to him, that he might know what they had gained by doing business. The first came before him, saying, ‘Lord, your mina had made ten minas more.’ And he said to him, ‘Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities.’

He said therefore (this is Jesus speaking), “ A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return. Calling ten of his servants, he gave them ten minas and said to them, ‘Engage in business until I come.’ When he returned, having received the kingdom, he ordered these servants to whom he had given the money to be called to him, that he might know what they had gained by doing business. The first came before him, saying, ‘Lord, your mina had made ten minas more.’ And he said to him, ‘Well done, good servant! (Look at this. Look at this line right here.) Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities.’

Now, the reason I share this example with you is because it's one of many where God's Word talks about the fact that faithfulness is the key. It's really not even all about what you've produced in terms of quantity; it's really faithfulness that is the major issue. What God is looking for out of you and I is faithfulness.

So, here's an important question: What does faithfulness look like? What does faithfulness look like? Well, let me show you how Paul expressed it in Philippians chapter 3. He says:

Philippians 3:13-14 (ESV)

...one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

...one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Do you see how, in this passage, these verses are just full of descriptive words? I mean, what is he? He says, “...*forgetting what lies behind...*” Oh, we could talk on that one for a while, couldn't we? Do nothing, dog somebody's faithfulness more. I got to be careful to make those all-inclusive statements. I'll say that it's a big fat bummer when the past dogs you and you keep living there.

Paul says, he says, forgetting what lies in the past; straining to what lies ahead, pressing on, he says, toward the goal. Don't you get tired just hearing those phrases? It's draining and pressing. Sounds like a lot of work to me and it is a lot of work, but do you know what that work basically is? It's basically staying faithful. It's staying on course, keeping to the task, pressing on, not getting distracted.

And if you want to know what it takes to stay faithful, we know what faithfulness looks like. Now, what does it take to stay faithful? Look at verse 27 here in your Bible: “*But I discipline my body and keep it under control...*”

There you go. Aren't you glad you came today? What a big fat drag. He says, “...*I discipline my body and keep (to keep) it under control...*” That phrase, “*keep it under control.*” Do you know what that literally means in the Greek? It means to lead around as a slave. It's what it means. They would use it when they led around a slave with like a leash. You like that? That's the picture that Paul is talking about related to his body. He says, I lead it around like a slave.

And what Paul knows, that I think sometimes we forget, is that slavery is going to happen in your life one way or another. One way or another, slavery is going to happen in your life. Either you are going to be a slave to your body, or your body is going to be a slave to you.

One of those two things is going to happen, and there's no avoiding it. The only question is, who will serve who? Will you serve your body, or will your body serve you? Paul says, I lead my body around like a slave so that it will always serve me.

We started the Book of Esther last Wednesday. We're going to—we're doing this marathon thing through Esther. We're doing it in two sessions, 10 chapters. We're doing five chapters a week. I told everybody first service—or I mean last

Wednesday—that I was going to cover 5 chapters, and everybody just kind of rolled their eyes at me, but we did it.

And one of the things we learned in those first 5 chapters of Esther is that there was a king during the time of Esther named King Ahasuerus of the Medo-Persian Empire, also known as Xerxes, who is a man who ruled over an immense kingdom, something like made up of like a hundred and twenty-seven provinces, of course, and Israel was one of them at that time. So they were the world-dominant power at that time, and King Ahasuerus was a man who ruled over that entire kingdom.

But what we learned in those first 5 chapters of Esther is that he did not, in fact, could not rule over himself. He had absolutely no power to rule over himself. He was actually a man who was easily swayed and manipulated by others. And he made some really foolish decisions, and he was manipulated by people into writing edicts and commands and things that were not good for his kingdom ultimately, and that sort of thing. And so Ahasuerus found it very difficult to stay on course as the king because of all the things that he ruled, he could not rule himself.

Makes me think of a proverb. Let me show you this, Proverbs chapter 16. It says,

Proverbs 16:32 (ESV)

Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.

Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty (and look at this phrase), *and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.*

And that, I think in one of the more loose translations it says, and he who keeps himself under control is really better than somebody who can take a city. A commander who commands a great army. The basic idea of this passage is it's better to rule over your heart and yourself than to rule over an army. Right?

When Paul speaks of discipline here, he's talking about living in such a way that his body is not the one who's in charge; rather, he's in charge of his body. Because when the body is in charge, we become slaves of our fleshly passions, and frankly, we lose all ability to walk in faithfulness to God. Do you want to be faithful to God? Do you want to hear “*Well done, good and faithful servant...*” (Matthew 25:21)? So do I.

You know what the key is? Staying in control. Controlling your body, rather than your body controlling you.

And Paul describes the life of someone who is ruled by his body in verse 26. Look with me in your Bible. He says, *“So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air.”* He's talking about the person who's ruled by their flesh. There is an aimlessness to their life.

Oh, I got to tell you this. This is a really challenging passage for me to teach. I don't know why I just decided to focus on this for one whole Sunday. I should have just blown past it and said, yeah, be disciplined. There, good. Goodbye.

Here's why. My life has been the epitome, in my younger years, of a lack of self-control. I could teach beating the air 101 as an expert. And I cringe with embarrassment when I think about my younger years. And the way that I lived growing up, I had no time, I had no patience for anything that was difficult or challenging, or unfun. I never had time for homework. I was a lousy student. I really was. I don't think it was necessarily because I was dumb. I think there's some of that going on. But I just didn't have any time. I didn't have time to do my homework. Which is a little embarrassing since my dad was the superintendent, but that's another issue.

But I just, I was completely and totally undisciplined, and I had to be forced by my parents to do the simplest of chores, cleaning my room. I went to more trouble to fake taking a bath than it would have been to take a bath. Some of you guys remember. I started a million things and I completed none of them when I was a kid. All my life, I have struggled to stay on course and finish what I've started, so I know what it is to be dominated by your flesh. I understand. I understand what it is to be dominated by fleshly impulses, fleshly appetites, fleshly desires that can so easily take control of our lives if we allow them to.

And the result is what Paul says here in verse 26, it's this aimlessness. It's this aimless meandering rather than a focused serving of the Lord with what he's given me with which to serve Him. We wander aimlessly in and out of church, in and out of service, in and out of faithfulness, in and out, and I'm good for a while. It's like, oh, Lord, and then I'm back to my own thing, and then I'm up and I'm down, and I'm all over the map, because there's a lack of discipline, and there's a lack of order in my life.

I got to be honest with you, when I read through the Bible, which I try to do yearly, but because of a lack of discipline, I don't always make it. Sometimes it takes a year and a half. I come to the Book of Judges and I have to tell you

something, I have a hard time reading the story of Samson. And the reason I struggle reading through the book of or the story of Samson is because of all the reminders that I see in it. Frankly, that highlights some of the weaknesses of my own life.

Samson was the strongest weakling in the Bible. Do you know that? I mean, he was a man who had incredible physical strength as a gift from the Lord, but inside, he was very much a slave to his passions, very much a slave to his appetites, whatever it might be. Whether it was women, or, and it was mostly women, or whatever the situation might have been.

And in the end, he basically frittered away the blessing of God to the point where his life ended in tragedy, rather than victory. You might think, well, gee, I thought his life ended pretty well considering he killed all those Philistines. Think how much more he could have done had he been a man who was really given over to the Lord, and disciplined in his attention, and so forth. But he was a man out of control.

And although some of you were born with an innate sense of self-discipline, I hate you, by the way. I'm just kidding. No, I don't hate you. I actually respect you. I just can't relate to you because I think you're the minority, frankly. I know that some of you exist. You're mutants and you're just not normal, like the rest of us. The rest of us struggle in the area of discipline and order and stuff like that.

The apostle Paul, I love the apostle Paul, but I can't relate to the man. He and I don't know how we would have gotten along. I mean, we have the same first name and that's about where the similarities end. I mean, I love his beliefs. I love his passions. He was not a man like I am, and I am not a man like he was.

He was a driven man, type A personality, disciplined. Disciplined, and that is an enigma to me largely, I'm learning. God has shown me wonderful things. And, I don't mean to suggest that I'm still a big fat mess because God's grace being what it is. There've been some things He's actually given me victory over. Thank you, Lord.

But I still can't relate to the innate, the inside sort of self-discipline that some of you have. I wish I was more like you. I frankly married someone like that, which is a wonderful gift for people like me to be close with someone who is more disciplined and more ordered in that sort of thing.

So reading the life of Paul challenges me. So what's the answer? And you were probably hoping I was going to get to this eventually. What is the answer to the majority of us who recognize that our lives lack self-discipline and lack some of that order, but we still have the heart and desire to be faithful to God? Well, the answer is found in one of the most, I think, amazing passages in the Bible, it's in Philippians chapter 2, and it goes like this: Paul writes,

Philippians 4:12-13 (ESV)

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Leave that up for just a minute, if you would please. What I love about this passage is that it dares to strike a balance, and that balance is between our part and God's part. And our part, Paul says, work out what God has already— and this is His part— worked in you, okay? If I had to paraphrase this passage, that's what I would say: work out what God has already worked in you.

God did the work in you for all the self-discipline and order that you need. Now, work it out, walk it out, right? Live it out. That's the tough part, but that's the part. That's the balance of what we're talking about here. I could probably talk about this for hours or even days.

But here's the point of what I'm saying here, and this is very, very important that you see it. Whenever we talk about obedience, okay, and that's what we're dealing with here when we talk about a disciplined life: walking in obedience to God, walking in order and stuff like that.

Whenever we talk about obedience, living the life that God has wanted us to live, we have to forget— or excuse me— we have to be careful never to forget that we can't do it. We can't do it. It's not possible, in and of ourselves, in our own power, we can't offer up one single speck of obedience in and of ourselves.

Christians, it is so important that you hear me today. I'm sitting here talking about going for it so that you can get the reward. I'm here to tell you that

obedience is not possible in and of yourself. Here's how Paul said it, you ready for this? From Romans 7, he said,

Romans 7:18 (ESV)

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. (Look what he says) *For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.*

I don't possess it. And the old King James is: “...*in my flesh dwells no good thing...*” Right? Which is a very simplistic way of saying, I look at who I am all by myself, and I say there's nothing good in me because I see that the desire to live right is there, but I can't do it. I can't carry it out. I can't live it out. There's nothing I can do.

And so, this is one of the first things we have to admit: I have no ability in and of myself to do these things. And this is where we remind ourselves about the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. God's—Oh, aren't you just so thankful for the Holy Spirit?

He is so cool. I love the Holy Spirit. I love what He does. I love what He says. I love His job because His job is to reveal Christ and to strengthen me to serve the Lord, to enable me in areas that I am not able in and of myself. That's His job and He's good at his job.

And, but let me tell you something I've learned about this amazing power that is resident within us. You ready for this? We can choose whether or not we want to walk in it. It's not automatic. You come to Jesus, you make Him Savior of your life, you receive the Holy Spirit, right? Holy Spirit comes to live inside of you, takes up residence within you. The power of God now resides in you through his Holy Spirit. Boy, you'd think that we would just be moving mountains all over the place, wouldn't you?

And yet, I have found in my own Christian walk, I'm sure you have too, I can shut it off. I can turn it off. I can say no to Him. I can actually grieve God, and that means to restrict. I can restrict His work in my life. I can restrict His power in my life, which is why Paul says earlier, “...*work out your salvation with fear and trembling...*” Walk it out.

He's saying it's not automatic you guys. Now, listen, it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose, but you walk it out. You have to walk it out. You have to be involved in the process of saying, okay, God, this is me walking. I am now walking out this power that is inside of me because I know that I can't just sit here on my hands and expect to have victory over these areas of my life. I have to walk out the power that is resident within me. Let me, in fact, put that passage back up with the highlighted portion of that.

Philippines 2:12-13 (ESV)

*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, **work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you**, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, **work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you**, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

That's the balance, guys. That's the balance. You work it out because God works it in you. Work it out. God already worked it in you. He already did it. So work it out, that's the balance that we're talking about. All right.

The best way to probably finalize this picture of what it means to walk out, what God has already worked in you, is by looking again at Paul's amazing statement in 2 Corinthians chapter 12. It says this:

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 (ESV)

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

But he said to me (Jesus said to me), "My grace is sufficient for you (Paul), for my power is (actually) made perfect in (your) weaknesses." (So Paul went on to say,) Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, (In fact, he goes, I've actually come to the place where) I am (even) content with weaknesses, (with) insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. (Because I found something out that's really powerful, Paul says at the end of this passage,

I found out that) *for when I'm weak, then I am* (I'm actually very) *strong*. Because I've learned I can't do it in and of myself. I can't do it.

Some of you might even been a little bit uncomfortable with me earlier here in this message; confessing to you how undisciplined and disorderly my life was before Christ. But it was. But I have learned like the apostle Paul that when I'm weak, I'm strong when I come to the Lord and say, I can't do this.

Okay, so let's summarize here: I want to be faithful to God. I want to be faithful. I want to earn the prize. I want to win the reward, right? But I understand what Paul's saying in this passage; to get the reward takes discipline, takes self-control. And I go to God, I don't have that. Whenever they were passing out self-control, I must have gotten a different line because I never got it. Oh, wait a second. Then I go back and I read the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

And the last one is self-control. Oh, I guess I have that one then. Don't I? Well then why am I not seeing more of it in my life? I'll say. This apostle Paul says to me, Paul, he's talking to me now, work it out. Work it out. God's placed it in you. He's given you everything you need. Now work it out.

Part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit: self-control. I can choose to say no, not today, and be like a dope-headed Samson and fritter away the blessing and the anointing of the Lord. I can do that, so can you.

We can fritter it away if we want to, just for the delight of eating some honey out of a carcass or enjoying a passionate night with a harlot. We can be like that Samson character running after the pursuits of the flesh. Or we can choose to work it out, because God has worked in us through His Spirit everything we need to be able to walk out self-control that says, Jesus, I'm going to live for you. And that means I'm going to say no to some things.

Before I met Christ, I didn't have the power to say no to my flesh. Now I do. Now you do. Now we can. The power is there. Now walk it out, work it out with fear and trembling. It's not about you. It's not about your power. It's about His power working within us.

I hope this is encouraging to you, especially for those of you like me, who just don't come naturally to this whole idea of self-control and a disciplined life. God is working in us, and He desires to do that work. He's done that work so that you and I will hear one day, well done. Well done. You took what I gave you and you didn't just bury it. You didn't fritter it away. You didn't ignore it. You took it and you used it for my kingdom and multiplied. Well done.