

The Imperfect Church – 17  
The Disciplined Church  
1 Corinthians 9:24-27

### Introduction

Since 2008, the cinematic world has been dominated by comic book superhero movies [[pic of Avengers: Endgame](#)]. This one, in fact, is being re-released with a whole 7 minutes of bonus footage, thus enabling it to surpass Avatar as the most successful movie in cinematic history. Once the original Iron Man proved to be so highly successful, we have been inundated with more. Captain America, Thor, Hulk, Avengers, Dr. Strange, Black Panther, Captain Marvel, Guardians of the Galaxy, X-Men (now rebooted with a younger generation of actors), Spiderman (multiple reboots), Batman (and yet another Batman coming), Superman, Batman v. Superman, Green Lantern, Suicide Squad, Deadpool, Wonder Woman, Justice League, AquaMan, and more. And countless more are already slated in the next few years.

When a new superhero is being introduced, there is all the setup information to show us how they got to this place in life (Tony Stark is kidnapped and becomes Iron Man; Bruce Wayne loses his parents as a child and becomes Batman; Bruce Banner gets exposed to radiation and turns into Hulk). By the time all the setup happens, we are ready to see these heroes fight crime and fix the injustices in the world. So the hero's training is often skipped over or sped up with a montage. Tony Stark [[pic](#)] builds his first Iron Man suit in a cave with bomb scraps. Steve Rogers gets a shot, packs on 75 pounds of muscle, and is ready to fight the bad guys immediately. Though Wonder Woman has trained her whole life, we see a mere few minutes of it, then she's taking on Nazi evil. Peter Parker climbs a couple walls and figures out how to shoot his webs [[pic](#)]. Not much time at all. Why skip over the training? Why rush through it to get to the good stuff?

Craig Gross - "The training is boring. But also, the training is everything. Nothing happens without the training. Without the training our hero is just a person with a bunch of cool powers he doesn't know how to harness. Without the training the world isn't saved and the bad guys aren't thwarted. Without the training we don't have a story—instead, we have a hero who gets squashed with hardly a thought on the villain's way to total victory."

Training has a daily grind to it that fails to capture our attention. We need the drama of the background to know how we got here, and then we want to skip to the end for the glory that comes from being a hero.

But we don't want to see what it took to get there. We don't want to see the grit, the grind, the setbacks, the discipline, that are all necessary to get to the place of being the hero. It all seems so boring, so ordinary, so hard. But that daily grind and discipline is absolutely essential.

So it is with our faith. We like the background of all that God has graciously led us through to get us to Jesus. And as we look at the reality of spiritual growth and its results, we like to look at how great it is to be more Christ-like, to be someone who can quote Scripture, a prayer warrior, someone who is more patient with their children, someone who exudes grace, someone who doesn't succumb to gossip when all the coworkers gather together, someone who blesses others with their generosity.

But what we don't like to look at is the hard work that it takes to become someone like that. We like generous people, but we don't like to see how hard it is to choose to sacrifice, so they can be able to give that amount. We like people who exude grace, but we don't like talking about the pain they've endured and how hard it was to choose to forgive. We admire those who can quote Scripture, but we neglect to focus on the hours they've spent not watching TV or scrolling on social media to make that a reality.

TS – this reality of discipline is at the heart of what Paul now says to the Church in Corinth.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 - <sup>24</sup> Don't you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! <sup>25</sup> All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. <sup>26</sup> So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. <sup>27</sup> I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified.

These are some of the most well-known verses in 1 Corinthians, some of the most well-known in the New Testament. As we walk through them for the next few minutes, we have to be very careful. It is easier than we think to pull verses out of context and use them in a way that the author never intended. Paul has been giving a lengthy answer to one of the questions they wrote to him about. What about eating meat sacrificed to idols? As we've mentioned the last couple weeks as we've reminded ourselves of the context, this doesn't seem like an issue for us today. Nobody is going to ask their server at lunch today if their meat was sacrificed to a pagan goddess this morning. No one is going to look for signs of idolatry at Morgans Meat

Market. We don't face this issue. Though there are many countries and cultures that face things like this every day, 21<sup>st</sup> century America is not one of them. Here is what we do have in common: how do Christians (God's called-out ones) rightly separate from the sinful world around us and live holy lives in an unholy world?

Yes, there are clear, black-and-white, moral commands from God that help us. We don't have to make those decisions; our Lord has made them for us. There are things that are always right, and things that are always wrong. God's moral law dictates what those are. But then we have to deal with those things that are not black-and-white, but instead are a little more gray. These are the things in life that God has not spoken directly about, so we have to make decisions based on conscience, what we think is best. And this is where Christians are free to disagree. How Christians handle technology, clothes, entertainment...these are all mostly up for debate on what it is ok to participate in, and what it is not ok to participate in.

That is what is happening in Corinth. To be involved in any social gathering, to climb the social ladder, to be involved in business, to go to work, to hang out with friends, to eat food...if you want to do those things, you are going to have some form of exposure to pagan idolatry. All food at home or bought at the market came from the pagan temples and the sacrifices to the false gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome. All social interaction involved the public gathering places in the temples. How can a Christian interact with an idolatrous world, yet pursue holiness? This is where they disagreed. Some of the Christians didn't have a problem at all going to a friend's birthday party at the pagan temple. Some didn't hesitate to eat the food at their friend's house, knowing where it came from. Others, however, could not comprehend how a Christian, who has been saved out of that idolatry, could then waltz right back into it and participate.

So they ask Paul to weigh in. He affirms the correct theology...idols are not real, so eating meat sacrificed to something that isn't real, doesn't seem like as big of a deal as you are making it (though he will offer a follow up to that in chapter 10). But the end of chapter 8 and all of chapter 9, his focus has not been on having the right knowledge of this issue. His focus has been on how these brothers and sisters in Christ are treating each other. Those who are "strong" are to willingly and lovingly set aside their freedoms, their rights to eat that meat, in the name of helping those with a "weaker" conscience, lest they be led astray. After using himself as a personal example of setting aside his rights and freedoms for the sake of others, he now calls them to personal discipline in following Christ.

He relies on the very familiar image of being a competitive athlete. This is an image the Corinthians understood better than most. Though Athens was home to the Olympics, Corinth was home to the Isthmian Games, the second largest athletic competition in the world. The Games ran every two years and featured individual competitions like racing, boxing, and wrestling (no team sports). As was common in their city, athletes were known for their elite training. Restricted diet, conservative social involvement, rigorous training. The average athlete in the Games trained for a minimum of 10 months prior to the Games. So all these athletes were either actively training, competing, or recovering from competition (which is its own form of training).

v. 24 – <sup>24</sup> Don't you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win!

He is not making the point that the Christian life is an individualistic pursuit where you are looking to defeat the Christians who are running alongside you. Again, the Games only hosted individual sports, not team sports. He is simply declaring, you are in the race of faith, and you should run in such a way that you win. That last phrase in v. 24 is the first imperative (command) Paul has given in a long time, and it guides the entire text...Run to win! This image of successfully running the race of faith is common to Paul's writings, and the NT in general.

Philippians 3:14 – <sup>14</sup> I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.

2 Timothy 4:7-8 – <sup>7</sup> I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. <sup>8</sup> And now the prize awaits me—the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on the day of his return. And the prize is not just for me but for all who eagerly look forward to his appearing.

Hebrews 12:1 – Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.

We are called to run with endurance, to not falter before we cross the finish line. And how do we do that? With training.

v. 25 – All athletes are disciplined in their training...

The word he uses for "athlete" is *agonizomai*, where we get 'agony.' Those who run, who struggle, who fight...they do so with disciplined training. When he describes the athlete's training as "disciplined" he is using a very familiar word...it is translated elsewhere in the NT as "self-control." In fact, he has already used it earlier in 7:9 saying that single people should get married if they cannot "control themselves" sexually. It is a word that comes from the root word for "power, rule, or authority." It means to have "rule within." Authority over yourself. Hold on to that, we'll come back to it in a minute.

All of this, Paul says, all of this discipline and rigorous training that dominates the lives of athletes...it's all for what? End of v. 25 – "They do it to win a prize that will fade away..." If you won your competition at the Games, they only real prize you got was the winner's crown, a wreath that was made sometimes from olive leaves, and sometimes from withered celery. All that work to get a crown that will literally rot in a few days. Notice what he says next...v. 25 – "but we do it for an eternal prize." All the effort we put in as Christians, all the discipline we exert, all the sacrifices we make...it's all worth it.

Therefore, Paul says in v. 26-27 – "So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should." Runs with purpose, towards the finish line, not meandering around the track. He isn't striking the air in his boxing match, he is landing each blow with precision. What's he saying? I'm not a rookie. I train. I'm here to get the job done. I'm here to win. I don't want to collapse in exhaustion halfway through the race. I don't want to get the tar beat out of me because I was too lazy to train. There is an eternal reward for our sacrifice, for our faithfulness. Whatever you have to give up to cross the finish line, you will never regret it. Jim Elliot, the famous martyred missionary wrote in his journal, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Not only is there an eternal, worthwhile reward, the consequences of failure are staggering. V. 27 – "Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified." Now, here is what he is not saying. He is not saying that if he messes up somehow that he is going to lose his salvation. That would directly contradict other NT passages. Earlier in chapter 9 he spoke about his commission as an apostle to preach the Gospel.

9:16-17 - <sup>16</sup> Yet preaching the Good News is not something I can boast about. I am compelled by God to do it. How terrible for me if I didn't preach the Good News! <sup>17</sup> If I were doing this on my own initiative, I would deserve payment. But I have no choice, for God has given me this sacred trust.

It is this commissioning as an apostle that he is afraid he could be disqualified from, not his salvation. God has given him this sacred trust to go into the world and preach the Gospel...he doesn't want to do anything that could ever mess that up. This is why he is so disciplined. This is why he trains. This is why he...and now we come back around to the issue in context...this is why he willingly, lovingly, sacrifices his freedom for the sake of taking the Gospel to the world. How could he ever consider participating in anything that could ever compromise his faithfulness to Christ, or anyone else's faithfulness to Christ?!

Richard Hays writes, "We should take care here not to lose the thread of Paul's argument and slip into thinking of spiritual discipline in an individualistic way. The self-control to which Paul is calling the "strong" is precisely the discipline of giving up their privileges *for the sake of others in the community*. They are to exercise self-discipline by giving up their rights to certain foods—and perhaps some of their privileged social status as well. This is a minor consideration, Paul suggests, in contrast to the prize set before us."<sup>1</sup>

He is calling Christians to sacrificial faithfulness. To be so committed to the task at hand, of sharing the Gospel with the world, of loving our brothers and sisters in Christ so much, that we would adopt the self-control modeled by elite athletes. Why? Why give up so much? Why sacrifice so much? Why train so rigorously? Because the prize is worth it. For a church that has the motto that "I am allowed to do anything" self-control is the antidote. For a culture such as ours that embraces anything and everything, making it so easy for Christians to accommodate that, and participate in that, self-control is the answer.

Can we be honest for a minute and acknowledge that this hardly ever gets talked about? In church world we talk a lot about the gospel (and rightly so!). We talk of grace and God's undeserved love. We talk about the importance of reading our bibles and prayer. Again, all good. But self-control...it hardly gets a mention, if acknowledged at all. Think about it, when you see godly character in someone and think of complimenting them, we enjoy saying, and hearing, "She is so forgiving," or "He really listens well and shows he cares," or "Their generosity is amazing." But have you ever given (or received) a compliment about someone's self-control? It's not really the most sought-after compliment. It's the Christian version of "She's got a great personality." You just don't want to hear it. Why? Why does self-control seem less spiritual than grace, generosity, or love?

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<sup>1</sup> Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 156.

Courtney McLean - "In a culture of "gospel-centered (fill in the blank)" and grace-filled (again, fill in the blank)," have we bypassed perhaps the supreme virtue of Christianity: a gritty, unwavering control of our passions, thoughts, words, and behaviors for the sake of Christ? This isn't to say that a gospel-centered, grace-filled life and ministry is unbiblical or even "sub-biblical." However, neither of these is obtained without the costly lifestyle of humble and vigorous self-control."<sup>2</sup>

Self-control is hard work! It is gritty, rigorous, and costly. And while we may entertain visions of being more Christ-like or more generous, or more knowledgeable, the effort that it takes to get there is more than many are willing to commit themselves to. Running a marathon is inspiring, until you have to lace up your running shoes before the sun comes up. Having a body that lands you on the cover of a magazine is nice, but those donuts look good too! Godliness seems amazing until that temptation arises and you really want to give in. Generosity looks fun until you have to give up a weekly meal out.

1 Timothy 4:7 - "Train yourself to be godly."

No one just wakes up one day and decides to run a marathon that day. They have to train for it. No one decides on a whim they are going to enter a bodybuilding competition. They have to train first. Godliness is quite the same...it takes training. And when it comes down to it, training is a matter of choice. Self-control boils down to choice.

Romans 6:12-14 - "Do not let sin control the way you live; do not give in to sinful desires. Do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin. Instead, give yourselves completely to God, for you were dead, but now you have new life. so use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God. Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace."

In speaking about a person who unites with Jesus by being immersed in baptism, Paul now writes about the results of a new life in Christ. A Christian is no longer under sin's control. You are under God's grace. You've been set free from the power and penalty of sin, so now choose to use your body, your life, as an instrument to do right, not to do evil. Notice what he says next:

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<sup>2</sup> <https://biblicalwoman.com/gritty-grace-filled-virtue-self-control/>, accessed on 6/25/19.

Romans 6:15-16 - "Well then, since God's grace has set us free from the law, does that mean we can go on sinning? Of course not! Don't you realize that you become the slave of whatever you choose to obey? You can be a slave to sin, which leads to death, or you can choose to obey God, which leads to righteous living."

There it is...you can choose. That is the power of the gospel! You don't have to give in anymore. As the Corinthians are so concerned with their freedom, Paul's yelling at them...yes, you are free. You are free to choose NOT to sin. You are free to choose to obey God, because obedience to God is now possible. You aren't under sin's power anymore. Self-control is the daily, moment by moment, decision by decision, thought by thought, choice to obey God.

Galatians 5:16-17 - "So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions."

There is a war waging in your soul between our sinful nature that wants to fulfill your every sinful desire, and the Spirit who gives us the desire to faithfully follow Jesus. Self-control is the choice whereby we choose the Spirit's direction over our sinful cravings.

- Honesty over a lie to make ourselves look better.
- Humility over thinking we are a bigger deal than we are.
- Purity over sexual immorality.
- Faithfulness to our spouse over another (real or on screen).
- Generosity over greed.
- Bible reading over sleeping in or TV.

Self-control is the daily grind of moment by moment, decision by decision, thought by thought, choosing the Spirit's leading. And that ongoing, daily grind is truly a battle to fight.

D.A. Carson - "People do not drift toward holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated."

For those of you who are Christians because of what God has done for you, right now in this very moment, the Holy Spirit is giving you the desire to honor God with your life. He is faithfully guiding your life. And you will have to choose each moment who you are going to obey...yourself and your sinful cravings, or the God who loves you, has chosen you, has saved you, gave his life for you, and lives in you right now. As you navigate those gray areas of life, this is how we do so faithfully. We choose Him.

Believe/Repent/Confess/Baptize

Communion