

# Coach House Church BEACONS

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## RUN TO WIN

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Am I healthy and fit? It's a bit of a horrible question isn't it? And to be honest, it's a bit irrelevant. I could say 'yes' and show 10000 steps I did on a smart watch and I'd nod my head and say it's good going. Without context it doesn't mean much. I can do a decent 5K, but if you asked me if I'm fit enough to run an Olympic 5k with Mo Farah, who was estimated to have run 217KM a week in the lead up to the 2016 Olympic games, I'd have to say no! I'm fit for purpose which is generally keeping on top of things and running to relieve stress, but I'm definitely not training enough to be a pro. The Apostle Paul fits together the ideas of training and purpose with similar imagery in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

Get a load of this:

24 Don't you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! 25 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. 26 So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. 27 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.

Let me be upfront with why I think this passage is difficult: If Christianity is all about grace, this passage makes it look like we have to earn our way in with hard graft and discipline instead – but this isn't the case, Paul wants to help us focus on the things that really matter now that God has rescued us from our old lives

Paul had the tiring task of justifying his leadership over the Christian church in the midst of a lot of wrangling, conflict and false teachers that wanted to discredit him. He could have defended himself and put in energy for doing that. But he doesn't. Instead, he boasts about being able to preach the Gospel for free!

The one thing he has against these charismatic false teachers is that he values the message above himself, the messenger – and is willing to spread it at any cost. He is like an athlete focused on one goal alone.

In the chapter afterwards he goes on a long warning spree. His problem with some Corinthian believers is that they think that general association with the church is the same as a flourishing relationship with God. In reality, they were just like the ancient

Israelites who God freed from Egyptian slavery...and who then just did their own thing, lived their own way and cared nothing about God. The problems are not just structural, but the believers actively have to stand against the corruption that the world around them, and their own desires, encourage. They're like trainee athletes who have to refuse the second helping of cake when everyone else around them is taking thirds!

If we look back at Paul's passage about spiritual athleticism, we can see that the one command, in verse 24, is "run to win!", just as an Olympian would in a critical race. So, how do we understand this? What does it look like if we take Paul's words seriously and 'run to win' as Christians? It's a strange analogy, because we know we don't compete against other believers in the faith. However, looking at Paul's life example we see that he's willing to forego anything that does not correspond to living for God.

Just listen to these verses peppered throughout chapter 9:

9:23 "I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings."

9:19 "Even though I am a free man with no master, I have become a slave to all people to bring many to Christ"

9:12 "We would rather put up with anything than be an obstacle to the Good News about Christ."

Paul's training and discipline are built around his purpose which is to know God and make him known to others. So, he's happy to adapt to other people, preach for free and do everything he can to spread the Good News about Jesus. To use a slightly different analogy, it's like a regular car being kitted out for a race. You chuck out the sound system, padded leather chairs, heating and all the stuff that's going to weigh it down. The purpose is a race, so you just remove anything that hinders it from racing. The car is then fit for purpose and ready to go.

Here's the thing. Discipline is not a concern because we don't know God and we need to improve ourselves to reach him, but rather, because God has kindly saved us from a futile life by his grace alone, we should put in every effort to live for him. It only sounds bad if we don't realise just how much God has rescued us from. In a way, we can all breathe a sigh of relief because the biggest problem – separation from God – has been solved if we are believers. Therefore, like Paul, why wouldn't we make every effort to leave our rubbish old lives behind and bring the great Good News of Jesus' rescue to other people? Comparatively, we have little to worry about and everything to be encouraged by.

Hear these words of encouragement from Hebrews 12:1-2 which say it better than I could:

"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. 2 We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith." Take a look at your life: what can be cut out and changed as you follow Jesus, who has cleared the way ahead of you, and as many generations of believers cheer you on in the race.



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