

Press On to the Prize

Scripture: [1 Corinthians 9:24–27](#): 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. 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. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

Introduction: Perhaps the most dramatic scene in sports is the marathoner's last lap at the end of a grueling 26-mile race. As the fatigued figure presses to the finish line, the crowd in the Olympic stadium cheers him on. Straining every muscle, the runner pushes through the tape and, before the watching world, is awarded the prize. Drawing from this athletic imagery, the apostle Paul compared the Christian life to a grueling marathon, an event well-known to first-century Christians. Writing to Corinthians, believers who lived only ten miles from the famous Isthmian games, he challenged them not merely to enter the race of faith, but to go "all out" and run so as to win. God wants winners! In our present sports-crazed society, perhaps no biblical metaphor better illustrates the reality of living for Christ. What are the keys to victory?

1. **Determination** (v. 24). One can't win a marathon with halfhearted effort. The runner must have a will to win, a strong resolve. It isn't enough to be in the Christian race. Rather, once entered, we must take our spiritual life seriously, pushing to the limit, deeply committed. This is not speaking of salvation or earning entrance into the race; it is calling us to make whatever sacrifice is necessary to win the victor's crown at the end. The most coveted prize of the Roman Empire was the *stephanos*, the laurel-like wreath placed on the head of the champion. Made of leafy greenery, the victor's crown brought instant fame, tax-exemption, and free education. Calling for our total commitment, the apostle Paul writes, "They do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown." If a marathoner would be so dedicated to win a withering pine wreath and short-lived fame, how much more ought we be determined to gain the eternal, imperishable crown?
2. **Discipline** (v. 25). In the ancient games, victory depended on the athlete's rigorous training. Every runner entered strict training under the watchful eye of an official. Marathon runners were known to work out for years—lifting weights, running laps, regulating sleep, restricting their diet. Self-control means we must exercise mastery over our lives, foregoing some pleasures, pursuing other disciplines, all for the sake of winning. We must be committed to the basic spiritual disciplines of the Christian life—Bible study, prayer, and meditation (see [1 Tim. 4:7–8](#)).
3. **Direction** (v. 26). The marathon course was clearly marked, winding through the landscape, and the runner needed to stay on course, his eyes on the goal. Paul said that he wasn't running aimlessly or uncertainly, without a goal. The divinely designed track of God's will is clearly marked by His Word. It is a narrow path that includes every aspect of our lives. Winning the prize requires seeking direction from Scripture and following the course it requires.
4. **Denial** (v. 27). Athletes had to give up certain comforts and to "punish" their bodies, foregoing a life of ease and bodily impulses. The same self-denial is necessary for the Christian. After making that point in verse 27, Paul shifted metaphors from running to boxing, saying that we must beat our bodies, wielding a series of knockout punches to fleshly desires. We must resist temptation, mortify sensual lusts that would defeat us, and remain pure. Even Paul feared that having preached to others, he would be disqualified, referring not to the loss of salvation but of reward.

Conclusion: After the race, every runner was brought to stand before the raised, wooden platform in the middle of the track that supported a throne-like seat for the judge. Each athlete would be crowned, passed over, or disqualified. So it will be for us as believers in Christ ([2 Cor. 5:10](#)). Every step of the Christian life has eternal importance. Right now counts forever! Let us run with growing anticipation of that moment when we will stand before Christ.