

## Running to Win [Slide 1] 1 Corinthians 9:19-27

Today is Father's Day. What does it mean to win as a Father? Our passage isn't specifically about fathering. It is about winning at ministry. However, being a godly father is a very specialized form of ministry so what we learn about ministry in general from Paul, we can also apply to your ministry as a father. Paul compares ministering to running a race and so what I hope to show you is how to run the Father race to win. First, we will understand the ministry principles Paul lived out and taught and then I will apply them to fathering. I would add that they apply equally to mothering.

I invite you to turn to 1 Corinthians 9:19-27. 1 Corinthians is in the New Testament. It is the seventh book in the NT after the four Gospels, Acts and Romans. 1 Corinthians 9:19-27. I have listed for you what I think is the main idea of this passage on your sermon outline. Paul exercised self-control in his ministry race by accommodating himself to lost people when he could, so that he would gain the rewards of ministry without being disqualified from receiving them.

[Slide 2] In verses 19-23 we see that Paul accommodated himself to lost people so that he could enjoy the rewards of gospel ministry. Let's read those verses. Read.

[Slide 3] To accommodate to someone means to adjust yourself to someone else's way of thinking and believing so that you do not unnecessarily offend them. It means to adjust your vocabulary and your speech so that you don't confuse them. Let me give you some examples. If I were in a banquet full of graduates from the University of Texas and I wanted to accommodate them, I would not say "Gig 'em, Aggies or proclaim Texas A&M as the greatest university in Texas, if I wanted to accommodate them. A more serious example is what Greg Welte, Rickey Williams and I am doing to prepare to teach in Kenya. We have to remove all jokes or references that are specific to American culture. We have to simplify some of our words because they will have to be translated by translators and heard by people who probably will not have as large an English vocabulary as we do. We have to accommodate to the education level and experience of Kenyans, if we want to effectively minister to them.

[Slide 4] Accommodation is a way of being gracious to other people and more effectively communicating with them. That is when accommodation is a very good thing. Healthy accommodation; however, does not mean adjusting my beliefs or convictions or morals to match those of my audience. If someone says there are many ways to God, I cannot accommodate to his belief because my Jesus says there is only one way to God and that is through Jesus. If someone slanders and vilifies a government official, I cannot adjust my behavior to match theirs because the Bible commands me to respect those who are in authority. If someone says there are multiple genders instead of two, I cannot agree because biological reality proclaims there are only two genders. There may be many wacked out, confused feelings, but only two genders.

[Slide 5] Whether accommodation is a gracious act or a cowardly compromise depends upon what you are accommodating and why you are doing it. Let's consider what Paul was doing.

[Slide 6] In verse 19 Paul says that even though he has freedom in Christ to be many things, he has chosen to make himself a slave to the feelings and wishes of others so that he might win more people to Christ. That is his motivation: winning people to Christ, seeing people place their faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul was willing to limit himself and adjust what he did so that he could better win people to Christ.

He became as a Jew to the Jews that he might win the Jews. He became to those under the Law like one under the Law so that he might win those under the Law. For the most part he is describing Jews in both cases, but he is probably referring to the cultural aspects of being a Jew in one and the religious aspects of being a Jew in the other.

[Slide 7] How did Paul accommodate himself to the Jews? Whenever Paul arrived at a new city the first thing he did was to find the city synagogue and attend on the Sabbath. Then he would use the Hebrew Scriptures to talk about Jesus. Paul was a Jew. He knew their history and culture well. I'm sure he had no trouble accommodating to the Jews. He probably already dressed like them, talked like them, knew all the rabbi jokes. As long as he did not have to compromise the truth of the Gospel or any of God's word, he did the same things the Jews did so that they would listen to him when he spoke.

[Slide 8] With the Gentiles, those without the Law, Paul also accommodated himself to them in order to win them. Paul would eat with Gentiles, even meat offered in their pagan temples, as long as no weaker Christians saw him and stumbled in their faith because of his example. Paul visited Gentiles in their homes, something no pious Jew would ever do. Paul quoted Gentile poets and philosophers when he was in Athens to demonstrate he had made the effort to learn Gentile culture. Paul was a Roman citizen and made use of that fact in gaining a hearing with Romans. Paul treated Gentiles with respect unlike many Jews who looked upon Gentiles with disdain, referring to them as dogs.

[Slide 9] To the weak he became weak that he might win the weak. Elsewhere in Romans 15:1 he wrote, "Read." Paul mentioned earlier in 1 Corinthians that he did not come to Corinth as some powerhouse of a man. This is what he wrote in chapter 2:1-3. Paul experienced much of what it means to be economically and socially weak. In chapter 4:9-11 he wrote these words. Even Paul's choice to be a self-supporting missionary put him right in the class of being a blue collar working man, unlike the privileged Pharisee he had grown up as. Whenever he could, Paul identified with his audience so that they might identify with him and listen to him.

[Slide 10] In verse 23 Paul says he does all things for the sake of the gospel that he might become a fellow partaker of it. What does he mean by a fellow partaker of the gospel? He is referring to a fellow-partaker of the benefits of the gospel. Paul already enjoyed the benefits of salvation, but are there other benefits for those who proclaim the Gospel? The most obvious benefit is the joy of seeing someone trust Christ as the result of your faithfulness. I have had the privilege of leading several people to Christ over the years, and it is a joy, a deep pleasure to take part in someone's salvation. You also don't know how that person might turn around and bless you in your life. One man whom I was discipling in Clear Lake City years ago who was a pawn broker provided me with my wedding ring for free so Julie did not have to pay for it.

There is no way to track how many things we experience in this life are God's blessing for sharing the Gospel. Your good health may not be the result of your good genes or diet. It may be God blessing your witness at school or work. Your financial windfall may not only be result of a generous boss. It may also be because you shared the Gospel with a neighbor. I can't prove how many benefits of the gospel exist, but I trust they do indeed exist based on what Paul says. And, I believe many of the benefits of gospel ministry will consist of rewards in Heaven for proclaiming God's truth.

[Slide 11] In verses 24-27 Paul said he exercised self-control in his ministry race so that he would not be disqualified from the rewards of ministry. Read.

Paul uses the image of race to illustrate what it means to persevere well in ministry. Corinth was the host every two years of the Isthmian Games, which was a major public event similar to

the Olympics. The Isthmian Games included five contests: leaping, throwing the discus, racing, boxing, and wrestling. The victor received the admiration of the whole Greek nation.

[Slide 12] First you need to have the passion to win. Paul makes the point that in a race only one runner wins the prize and so the runners go all out to win. Since this is an analogy, the analogy breaks down at the point of only one winner because anyone who ministers for Jesus can be a winner. The point Paul is making is that you should have the same zealous commitment to succeed that a runner has who knows that only one receives the prize and she wants to receive it.

Paul is primarily thinking about rewards in heaven because you can see from verse 25 that he is thinking of an imperishable prize, a prize that will last forever, and thus a prize that you will receive in heaven.

[Slide 13] Do you have a passion to succeed in ministry? Are you driven to win for the Lord?

However, you need more than just passion to win. That passion has to be channeled into self-discipline or self-control, verse 25. Paul has already provided examples in verses 19-23 of his self-control in putting aside his own interests and desires in order to become all things to all people in order that he might win some. That is one form of self-control.

We know the self-control that athletes exercise in practicing their skills to become better. Whether you're talking about gymnasts or basketball players or tennis players, athletes put hours and hours into physical exercise and training in order to win. They control their eating, sleeping, physical exercise in order to be competitive. For Christians we need to exercise self-discipline in matters of character, you acquire wisdom and knowledge, and to learn ministry skills. To do so we have to turn off the TV or cell phone, unplug the computer and devote ourselves to learning. You live in an age where your access to resources is incredible. Books, podcasts, audio books, sermons on tape, internet resources, and You-tube videos exist where you can learn all sorts of things about the Bible, how to minister to people, and how to defend the faith. Do you have a regular practice of improving yourself and continually learning so that you have more to offer other people?

I took four years of Seminary training to prepare for a lifetime of ministry and then I determined to always be learning after I left Seminary. I felt that if I was going to spend my life teaching God's word then I needed to be fairly comfortable and proficient at working with the original languages of Greek and Hebrew. Dallas Seminary requires 3 years of Greek and 2 years of Hebrew in its Master of Theology Course, some of the most demanding language requirements of all the seminaries. I wanted to be good enough to be able to evaluate how the commentaries explained the original text, whether they were handling it accurately or not. You can't just learn a language. You have to constantly maintain it, so I determined that I would spend each day for the rest of my life working in the Greek or Hebrew text of the Bible. I felt that if I was going to stand before people and dare to explain to them the Word of God, that I needed to be an athlete in lifelong training.

God may not call you to that level of preparation, but you are his tool and it is your responsibility to make sure that the tool gets sharpened and that it is maintained at a high level.

[Slide 14] A third thing you need in ministry to be effective is a clear focus or purpose. Paul says he does not run without aim or beat the air in his boxing in verse 26. When you run you have to stay in your lane and you have to know where the finish line is. You have to have a strategy for how you are going to run your race. When you box, it is not enough just to fling your fists in the air. You need to know how to parry, how to hit for maximum effect, when to jab, when to throw a full punch. Your goal is not just to box. It is to beat your opponent. You have to know your ultimate goal or purpose.

In ministry you need to find your sweet spot and stay in it. Your sweet spot consists of those activities in which you excel, where you see the most results, and where you are most energized. Your sweet spot corresponds to God's purpose for you. For me, my sweet spot is teaching God's word and more specifically teaching people how to teach God's word. This is also why churches have mission statements and visions because no church can do everything, so you have to find those areas in which you do your best and focus on those areas. To be effective in ministry, you have to be intentional and purposeful.

[Slide 15] Finally you have to play by the rules lest you be disqualified. The participants in the Isthmian games had a prescribed 10 month diet they had to stick to in order to compete. If they did not follow the diet they got disqualified. Athletes today get disqualified for cheating or not following the rules. If you are caught with performance enhancing drugs, you get disqualified and you can't compete for the prize. If you run out of your lane you get disqualified. If you doctor your boxing glove, you get disqualified.

You can get disqualified in ministry too. If you have an affair, or you embezzle money, or you violently attack someone or you plagiarize, you can be disqualified. You can lose your opportunity to minister to others and therefore also lose future eternal rewards. Paul made his body a slave to him and not to sin lest Paul be tempted, sin, and be disqualified from gospel ministry. Even being an apostle not protect him from being disqualified. He only had to look at the example of Judas to see that being one of Jesus' chosen apostles did not guarantee his safety from disqualifying himself.

[Slide 16] Before I apply this passage to fathers, I want to point out how this passage is commonly misused. I know the Church of Christ and other groups use this passage to teach that you can lose your salvation. They point to verses 24-27 and say that Paul is talking about the Christian life and that to be disqualified from the Christian life means to lose your salvation. This is an example of ignoring the context. All of chapter 9 has been about being a minister of the Gospel. The first half of the chapter has been about the right of those in ministry to be financially supported but how Paul voluntarily gave up that right in order to get a reward from God. As we have seen today, the last half of the chapter is about Paul accommodating himself to his audience so that he might win them to Christ and exercising self-control so that he not be disqualified from winning the prize. The chapter has been about the rewards of ministry. It has not been about salvation or how to stay in the faith. You can protect yourself from a lot of people's foolish ideas if you will just observe what the passage really is about and not try to make it say things it is not even talking about.

Let's talk about ministry principles that we fathers can apply to the specific ministry of being a dad. What does it mean to win the Father's race?

[Slide 17] Paul accommodated himself to win people to Christ. How can you accommodate to win your children to Christ? You have to become a student of each child and recognize how each is different from you and from the others and with that knowledge you encourage God's unique design in them.

We dads have dreams for our kids, right? We envision them being the star athlete, the serious scholar, the respected leader, etc. Often we envision them following in our footsteps and enjoying the things we enjoy. Often that doesn't happen. Then you are faced with the choice of letting go of your dream or trying to force shame into what you want. One of the saddest things is to see a father berating his children or making fun of them because they are not like him, don't value the things he values.

I am bit of an explorer. I like to go to new places. I like to camp. Growing up, all three of my children were homebodies. I love to fish. None of them really got into fishing. I was an Eagle Scout. Stephen didn't make it past Webelos Cub Scouts. He had no interest in scouting. They were all artists. Where did that come from? Melanie enjoyed dance and the Belles. I have no interest in dance. Stephen was a band student. I'm musically challenged, to say the least. Leslie swam in High School. I had no interest in swimming.

I learned to appreciate and root for my kids in things that I did not particularly like. I had to accommodate my desires to theirs. I made sure that I never, ever made any of them feel like they had to go into the ministry. Rather I encouraged them in the fields they chose. As a bonus, Stephen designed my Chronicles of Altaran web page and did my second book cover design and Leslie did the book cover design for books three and four.

I had to accommodate to their personalities in discipline. All three were compliant children so my greatest mistake was that I was too harsh. I didn't think I was being loud or harsh, but to them I was.

Then in seventh grade Melanie lost a lot of weight and we were afraid that she was getting anorexic. That got my attention as a dad real quick. I made a major big time change. I made it my goal to say I love you every day to each of my kids and to hug them. I realized I had to step up my game big time in giving affection and affirmation to my children.

However we did not accommodate on issues where we needed to hold firm. When one of the children didn't want to come to church, there was no negotiation on that issue. I listed the many things God had done for our family and said the least we owed him was to worship him with the body of Christ like he asked us to and how dare we cheat him or rob him of what he was due after he had done so much for us.

Paul's goal was always to challenge people to follow Jesus and that should be your greatest goal as a father.

[Slide 18] How do you run to win the race? By being faithful to God, to your wife, and to your children. You don't have to be a star athlete to be a winner. You don't have to make a lot of money. You don't have to be famous, but you need to cross the finish line without disqualifying yourself. Stay married. Be there and be involved with your kids. Listen to them. Tell them you are proud of them and you love them. Be a good example to them. Give them your best counsel when they ask for it.

[Slide 19] What does winning look like? It looks like this: When all your children thank you for being a godly father and when they say, "I want to be like you," that's winning. You can die happy when you achieve that.