



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of Dan Duncan

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

“Winning the Wreath”

1 Corinthians

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Thank you, Larry. As Larry said, we’re in 1 Corinthians. We’re studying through this great book and we are now in chapter 9, and we’re going to finish it this morning. We’ll look at verses 24 through 27.

“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but *only* one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then *do it* to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.” May the Lord bless this reading of His Word. Let’s bow together in a word of prayer.

Father, we do thank You for this time together this morning. This is an opportunity for us to worship together and learn together, and I pray that we’ll do just that. It’s an important time for us, a time that You have set aside for us, the Lord’s day, when we come together and we worship and we study and we grow close to You. It’s a time in which by the work of the Spirit we are sanctified, we’re drawn close to You. It’s not the only time that that occurs during the week. We should spend our time daily in Your Word and daily in prayer. This should be an exercise that we do all week long, and yet this is a special day and a special time when You have urged us to come together to worship and to learn.

And this morning, Father, we learn about the race. We learn about the Christian life. We don’t learn about how to enter the Christian life. That’s by grace through faith. It’s all Your work. But we have our responsibilities first, of course, to believe, to trust in Christ, but then to live a life of earnest and diligent service to You.

It’s so easy, Father, to become distracted. We live in a busy age. There’s nothing unique about that. There have always been distractions. There were distractions in Paul’s day. The author of Hebrews talks about that in chapter 12, about the things that encumber, that hinder in the race of the Christian life. But certainly today we are a busy people. We have so many interests and things that pull at us. And they’re all, or many of them, certainly legitimate and can be distracting. So Father, help us to see things clearly in this text and understand the urgency of the moment in which we live, that we are to be living for You every day, continually. Help us to do that.

And not living with a sense of grudging obligation. It’s not that at all. We’re to be joyful and eager in the race that we run. But, Father, we pray that You would give us a sense of the urgency and teach us the things that motivate us to live a life that is devoted to You and to obtaining the most important things in life, things of eternal value. So we look to You to bless us, teach us, build us up in the faith. May this be a profitable time for us spiritually.

But we also think of the material concerns that we have. We have many. And as Larry reminded us, there are many prayer requests in this bulletin, and those are just a few of the requests. We all have our needs. And we pray that You’d bless. We pray that You’d bless those who are sick, those who are recovering from surgeries or medical procedures, and some are going through very, very difficult times, Father. We pray that You would extend healing mercy to them and encouragement and use the time of affliction to awaken within them a sense of their spiritual need, and may they lean upon You. May they find help and strength in You.

So bless, Father, in the midst of affliction, and for those who aren’t afflicted, those who are experiencing the pleasant things of life, as so many of us are, we pray that You’d bless with a sense of gratitude for what we have. Bless those who are traveling. Give them safety. Bless those who are away. Bring them back to us safely. And Father, bless our time now as we turn our thoughts to this passage, as we turn our thoughts to You, may that be turned to You in worship and may our hearts be open, our minds be open to your truth, and we pray that You

would teach us and build us up in the faith. Make this a profitable time for all of us. May this be a time that benefits each one of us, and we pray these things in Christ’s name, Amen.

In 1950, UCLA football coach Henry Russell Sanders told his team, “Men, I’ll be honest. Winning isn’t everything.” There was a long pause and then he said, “Men, it’s the only thing.” Well, we’ve heard that before. Winning is everything. Now, publicly, we’re more comfortable with sports writer Grantland Rice’s statement that it’s not that you won or lost, but how you played the game. But while the game is on, most of us have Mr. Sanders’ sentiments in our hearts. Paul did. For him, winning was the only thing. He did not put any stock in second place. That’s his lesson in the last paragraph of 1 Corinthians 9. Now, he’s not teaching unfettered competitiveness of a kind that walks over rivals or flaunts rules. In fact, Paul lived the opposite of that. He considered every aspect of his life an opportunity to glorify God and be a witness for Christ. And so he followed the rules inflexibly and always put other people first. He said that earlier in our passage in verse 19, that he makes himself “a slave to all, in order that he may win more” to the gospel.

He knew his rights. He knew his Christian liberties. He knew his freedom as a Christian, but he willingly laid all of that aside when he thought that using those freedoms, those liberties would injure a weaker Christian’s conscience. He refused as he explained his right to receive financial support from the churches in order to relieve them of every burden and to prove his commitment to the gospel. Now that made life more difficult for Paul, but he did whatever was necessary to guard the integrity of the gospel and to guard his ministry from any kind of reproach, and to bring the lost to salvation. He did whatever was necessary to do that at cost to himself.

Now, to many around the apostle, and I’m sure many of those in Corinth, that seemed soft. He seemed like he was soft. Him letting people rob him of his liberty like that, that he didn’t demand his rights the way many of those in Corinth felt that he should or they should. But Paul was anything but soft. And when the truth of the gospel was on the line, he would fight like a lion. In fact, Augustine called the apostle Paul the “lion of God.” He lived a life of self-denial with the single minded purpose of winning souls and winning the prize, winning eternal blessings. Paul was all about winning the things that really count. That’s the way the Christian life is to be lived. There’s no other way to follow Christ. That’s the lesson of text here at the end of chapter 9 with verses 24 through 27.

It’s a passage completely of athletic metaphors that Paul selected, no doubt, in order to make a connection with the culture in which he ministered. We think that we are a nation of avid sports fans, and we are, but we don’t have anything over the first century Greco-Roman world. It was equally enamored of sports and athletes. They loved games and gladiators. Edward Gibbon wrote in the *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, how people would gather at the circus maximus to watch the horses run. He called the circus “their temple.” They would arrive at dawn to get their seats. They’d spend all day in the sun or the rain, whatever the elements were. They were there watching their favorite horses and charioteers and worrying about the victory of their heroes. Gibbon wrote that the “happiness of Rome appeared to hang on the event of a race.” Sounds familiar.

Now people have always followed sports. It’s always been an interest. It was in Corinth. In fact, it was one of the great sports towns of the ancient world. Every two years, the Isthmian games were held there. They were second only to the Olympic games held just down the road. They attracted thousands of athletes and spectators from all over the empire. Even today, you can walk over the field where the contests were held and you see the lanes where the races were run.

I won’t say that Paul was a great sports enthusiast, but he knew sports. He’s certainly very familiar with athletics and the games that were played, and he knew people’s enthusiasms for the games. It’s very likely, in fact, that he was present at those Isthmian games when they were played in the year A.D. 51. There were no permanent facilities for visitors when they would come. There weren’t enough hotels in the city of Corinth to house everyone, and so what people did was stay in tents. So Paul may very well have been busy at his trade making tents for people.

But regardless, he was in touch with the times. He knew what was going on. He knew his culture, what interested people, and what they did, what the trends and the fads were. And he adopted the athlete as his illustration of the earnest Christian and the commitment that’s required of us, the commitment that’s required for the Christian life. It’s not a casual life. Just as an athlete must go into rigorous training if he’s going to win his contest, so too the Christian life involves self-denial and self-discipline. If it’s going to be a fruitful life. If it’s going to be a successful life.

Paul begins in verse 24 with a general observation that they all knew to be true, that we all know to be true, that everyone who competes in a footrace runs, but only one wins the prize. So Paul urges the Corinthians, “Run in such a way that you may win.” Don’t run for second place. Run to win. Now the point of his analogy between the race and the Christian life is not that we’re all competing against each other and only one of us will win. We aren’t competing against each other. We each run our own race and we run it before the Lord with the assurance that we will all win the race, win the prize, if we run well. And that’s his point. Run well. Live well. So in that sense, Paul would agree with the old sports writer that what’s important is how you played the game, how you ran the race. It’s not how many souls we won. It’s not how many lessons we taught.

It’s not how many churches we established or what we accomplished. God’s the one who gives the results. Paul stated that back in chapter 3, you’ll remember. States that one plants and another waters, but God causes the growth. He’s the one that gives us the results. What He requires, though, is that we be faithful. We’re to be faithful, and He will certainly bless that. Well, Paul, as I said, stated that back in chapter 3, that we’re to be faithful, and that’s his concern here, that we be faithful. His concern is with the way we live the Christian life. It’s to be lived the way a champion runs. A champion is single minded in his athletic endeavor. He has one goal, and that goal is to get the prize.

So a runner stays focused on the goal and he makes every effort to win the race. Paul explains this in the next verse by showing the necessity of discipline in the Christian life and showing the kind of prize that we seek. First, he says, “Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things.” They put themselves through strenuous exercise in order to compete. IN fact, in those ancient games, the athlete was required to go into ten months of strict training in order to participate. And he was subject to disqualification if he didn’t adhere strictly to those principles of discipline and training. They wanted to ensure that the games were played well and that everyone was fit for the games and gave the best effort, and that requires strict discipline, and they could be penalized for not staying with training. Well, that’s what the world expects. It expects dedication to whatever task we are engaged in, whether it’s in sports, or business, or school. There’s no other way to achieve excellence except through hard work and discipline in any area of life.

Now people who rest on their talent often come to nothing. They begin well, but they often fizzle out. They’re like shooting stars. They’re bright for a moment and then fade to darkness. Winning comes through diligent constant training. There are lots of modern examples of that from sports and other areas.

Ted Williams is baseball’s greatest hitter. And I may have mentioned him before in our studies, but since we’re at the end of the season and we’re in the playoffs and the Rangers beat the Yankees yesterday, I think it’s an appropriate illustration. Ted was a man with great talent. He had a great eye for the ball. In fact, he’s described as having an almost preternatural sight, able to see the ball so well. And he did. He had great talent, but he didn’t get where he got on talent alone. He was always in training. He believed in repetition. He practiced hitting the ball until literally his hands bled. And no doubt he would have been a good baseball player if he hadn’t had such dedication. But because he did, he became a great player, one of the greatest. He worked at his swing. He learned what his weaknesses were and through repetition he overcame the weaknesses and he developed strengths. He succeeded through long thoughtful training.

And that was true of those ancient Olympians. That’s what Paul wants to show here. It takes constant dedicated work to win the prize in the games and equally so in the Christian life. What those athletes won was what Paul calls “a perishable wreath.” The prize was a crown made of pine leaves or celery leaves. It didn’t last very long. They worked all those months. They made all that sacrifice for something that soon dried up and turned to dust. And it’s pretty much the same today with whatever the world offers us in the way of prizes and goals.

My wife finds some interesting knickknacks, trinkets. She once found an old trophy, a loving cup, in some shop. We don’t have it anymore. I think it’s in one of my daughter’s houses. But it has a date on it as I remember, and I think it’s 1895. It was given for a tennis championship back east. It’s made of tin. It’s tarnished. It’s dented. And I suppose that at the time it was a great prize, and whoever won it must have felt that he or she had a great achievement and felt great pride in that trophy. But whoever he or she was is long gone and forgotten, and that cup is just a piece of meaningless old tin now.

Well, that’s really all that the world can offer us: tin cups that become worthless, crowns of celery that don’t last. Paul is not faulting athletes for seeking those things.

That’s not his point. His point is if a person wants to excel in anything, whether it’s in sports, or business, or whatever, he must be disciplined about it. If there’s a rebuke here for anyone, it’s for the worldly Christian. And many of those Corinthians were worldly Christians. They were carnal, as he said back in chapter 3. And so it’s a rebuke for them, because if athletes would sacrifice so much for what he calls a “perishable wreath,” a wreath of celery, we should be diligent all the more to gain what he calls an “imperishable” wreath.

But many aren’t. Many Christians compartmentalize their lives. They work hard at business during the week and then divide the weekend between a hobby on Saturday and church on Sunday. I’m not trying to make people feel guilty in saying that. There’s nothing wrong with hobbies. That’s good. They’re helpful. They’re therapeutic. They’re enjoyable. There’s nothing wrong with working hard. In fact, that’s necessary and I think that’s a good witness. And it is, in part, the way to the goal that Paul is speaking of here: the crown, the blessing, the wreath. But sometimes we get caught up in work. Sometimes that’s inevitable. We can’t help it.

There are seasons like that where it requires a lot of time. Tax season for accountants. Lawyers have case loads that just pile up. Doctors have emergency surgeries, things like that. We all have these kinds of things, so we need to put some perspective on what I’m going to say. But the point is I think in all of this that Paul is saying is we need to take stock of ourselves. We need to examine our priorities. What is most important to us? Is it the Christian life? Is it serving Christ in the home, at church, at work? Or is it work? Or is it the home? Or is it other things?

It is so easy to get distracted. It was in Paul’s day. It’s even more so in our day. So it’s good to take stock of things. It’s good to look at ourselves, at what we give our time to, at what we’re living for. Paul gives us an example of the right way to live. He lived for the imperishable wreath, and he lived hard for it. That word “competes” in verse 25 is the Greek word agonizomai. You can hear in it words like “agony” and “agonize.” We get our words from that. And there’s a lot of agony that goes into the Christian training and discipline. We have to make sacrifices in it, and sacrifices for others. That’s what Paul has been saying. That’s been his subject.

He sacrificed much for the sake of the gospel. He gave up his rights and his pleasures for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of the weaker Christian in order to not offend them, not bring them down, not cause them to compromise their fragile convictions, and give them opportunity to grow and lift them up to where they could enjoy their Christian liberties. That’s the way he lived. He lived a life of sacrifice. He lived a careful life. He scrutinized what he did. He made sacrifices for people. The Christian life is to be lived like that. It’s to be lived for others.

Well, we do this sacrificial aspect of it, this agonizing aspect of it, by avoiding certain things. Obviously, avoiding sin. But even by avoiding neutral things if they should in some way hinder our spiritual progress or be a problem for someone else. There are lots of things that can easily entangle us and keep us from running well. In fact, the author of Hebrews talks about that in Hebrews chapter 12 about “the sin that so easily entangles us.” It’s not always sin that entangles us. There are things that are simply distractions. They may be legitimate in and of themselves, but they can become distractions and we need to be prepared to throw them off, to put them aside. That’s what Paul did. He agonized. He lived his life like an athlete in training. He did it for the sake of the gospel. He did it to win souls. And here it says he did it win the prize.

He speaks specifically of himself in the last verses where he concludes his lesson. He didn’t ask them to do anything that he himself did not do. He practiced what he preached. He lived a disciplined life, a focused life, a life in which he concentrated on what was important, eternally important. Verse 26, “therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air;” No one will win a race if he doesn’t know where the finish line is. And even knowing where the finish line is, if he’s going to run the race successfully, he’s going to keep his eyes fixed on the goal, not look around, but keep his eyes fixed straight ahead, concentrate on where he’s going if he’s going to run successfully.

Likewise, when he enters the boxing ring, he has to concentrate on the target and not swing wildly at his opponent, not swing at the air. That’s what Paul is describing here. He’s not describing shadow boxing. Sometimes this passage is described in that way. The beating the air, shadow boxing. But shadow boxing is an important exercise in training. And so he’s not speaking of that. He’s speaking of the actual fight and missing the mark.

A boxer will not win his match if he punches the air. Fights are won by punching the opponent. Whenever I read this, I think of my past interests. I think particularly of Joe Frazier.

I confess there was a time many years ago when I had an interest in blood sports. Now I used to follow boxing, particularly Joe Frazier. This was back in the mid-1960s, early ‘70s. But I even went to see the first Ali-Frazier fight. Some of you know who I’m talking about when I say that. It was on a closed circuit down at fair park. They called it “the fight of the century.” I don't know how many fights of the century there have been, but that was the fight of the century, and it was a good fight. Neither one of them beat the air. They both landed their punches. But Frazier had a powerful left hook. I’m boring some of the ladies here, but – and he connected with it in the 11th round to shake Ali. And then in the 15th, he landed it on Ali’s right jaw and put him on the canvas, and that was it. That was the fight.

And that, Paul says, is the way we’re to live, with purpose. We are not to be aimless, listless, lazy about the Christian life. We are to live it like we are in a contest, like we are in a fight, like we’re in a boxing match. It’s that forceful. It’s that energetic. In other places Paul speaks about the Christian life in terms of warfare, battle. That gives you the nature of this life we’re in and the kind of effort we are to put forth. The way Paul did that, the way he lived was by getting in the ring, the boxing ring, with himself. That’s who he fought. That’s what he says in verse 27, “but I discipline my body and make it my slave.” “Discipline” is a boxing term and it literally means “to give a black eye.” He’s not speaking literally, of course. He’s speaking figuratively. He’s not encouraging physical beating of the body or bruising the body. He’s speaking about self-discipline.

Winning was the only thing for Paul, and that meant, first of all, winning over himself. That meant beating himself into submission, as it were. That’s what he’s describing here. The way he shows this discipline is with great vigor. That’s how he went at it, with great effort. He was careful about his behavior. He was careful where he went and what he did for the sake of others, for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of his own spiritual welfare. So he bruises himself, he says. He boxes himself. He makes his body his slave, another graphic description of self-discipline, which literally means he leads himself into slavery. Slavery to the things of God.

The body with its natural urges and appetites is not always cooperative with the Holy Spirit. Paul talks about that battle between the flesh and the spirit in Galatians 5:17. Mark gave a very good sermon on that not too long ago, this conflict between the flesh and the spirit, between who we are, our natural desires, and the Holy Spirit. Paul speaks much the same in Romans chapter 7, where he speaks of this principle of sin or this law of sin that is within our members, which is continually leading us away from obedience. There is a constant conflict in us.

Now Paul is not speaking of the body only here, but of the whole person, the human spirit as well as the physical nature. We have to bring our mind, our body, everything that we are as human beings, we have to bring that into conformity with God. Master it. Put it under the authority and the will of God. It’s not easy. It takes self restraint. It takes force of will. And that’s the picture Paul gives here of fighting with himself, capturing and enslaving himself.

But the stakes were high as he indicates when he gives the reason for the fight. “So that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.” King James version has “lest I myself should be a castaway.” That sounds ominous. Well, it is. What is a castaway? William Cooper is a great poet, one of my favorite hymn writers. He wrote a poem called “The Castaway.” It is a poem about a sailor who went overboard and was lost at sea, and it was an actual event that he had read about and then he made this very interesting poem about it. But it’s more than about that literal event. It’s actually about himself spiritually and his fear that he had been cast off from God, that he was a castaway.

And some have understood Paul to be speaking of that, speaking of being castaway from God’s presence, of being disqualified from salvation. But that’s not Paul’s meaning here. That doesn’t fit the context of the passage. Paul is writing about service. He’s not writing about salvation. We’re not saved through great effort and works and diligence. We’re saved by the grace of God. We’re saved by faith alone. We’re saved by simply trusting in Him, receiving the free gift that He has obtained for us at the cross. This is about the Christian life. And so that idea about salvation, obtaining salvation, losing salvation doesn’t fit the context of the passage. Paul is writing about service. Salvation can’t be lost. It’s all of grace. We don’t earn it by our works. We can’t lose it by our sin.

It’s God’s work from beginning to end, and He can’t fail in His own work. He can’t fail to obtain His own goal and purpose.

Paul makes that very plain to the Philippians in Philippians 1:6, where he said, “that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.” He’s going to perfect His work in you. He’s going to bring it to accomplishment. It’s His work and He’ll finish it. We can’t frustrate God’s grace or His purpose. We can’t perish. No one can snatch us out of His hand. We can’t be a castaway in that sense. We can’t be a castaway from God. I think there’s no clearer text on that than John 10:28-29, where Jesus talks about His sheep and talks about His relationship to them, and they’re in His hand, and “no one can pluck them out of His hand,” and “no one can pluck them out of the Father’s hand.” He’s “greater than all.” It’s a beautiful picture we have that tells us of our security. We are in the hand of the Almighty, second person of the Trinity, and He is in the hand of the Almighty first person of the Trinity. We are doubly secure. There is no way we can be taken away from the Lord God. There are numerous other passages that can be cited. I’m sure you know many of them.

But again, the context of the passage is not salvation, but service. Paul expresses a real concern about becoming a castaway. He wasn’t worried that he wouldn’t have salvation at the end of it all. He was assured of that. But he knew that it is possible to preach to others and minister to people over a long period of time and then fail, stumble in the race and be disqualified. Disqualify oneself from service and from a reward. Promise of rewards is a promise that is given throughout the New Testament. There’s the promise of a crown of glory for the, for faithful elders in 1 Peter 5:4. There’s the crown of righteousness that Paul speaks of in 2 Timothy 4:7-8, and he says that’s laid up for him. He’s fought the good fight. He’s run the course. He’s looking forward to that crown.

Paul didn’t want to be like one of those athletes in the Isthmian games who was disqualified from the race for not keeping in training. That happens to not a few Christians. They start out well, but they finish badly. They finish shamefully. Lot is an example. Peter called Lot “righteous Lot,” 2 Peter 2:7. He means justified Lot. He’s a saved man. And yet, what a sad life he lived, one that started out so well. He began with his uncle Abraham. They left Ur of the Chaldeans. They came to the promised land. They settled together and there they were up in the Negev, and that’s when they began to

fight, at least their shepherds did. They were contending over the little bit of grass that grows in that semi-arid area of the land.

And so he’s given a choice. We need to separate. You go your way. I’ll go my way. You pick. Where do you want to go, Lot? And Lot looked to the valley, to that verdant, green valley where the cities of the plain were, and he chose that. That’s the logical choice, isn’t it? There’s prosperity down there. There’s wealth down there. There’s comfort down there. And so Lot moved down there, and we read he pitched his tent toward Sodom.

And then the next time we read about Lot, he’s living in Sodom. He’s sitting in the gate. He’s a prominent citizen. But when we come to the end of his life, Sodom is gone. It’s been destroyed, wiped off the map, and Lot is an old man. He’s drunk in a cave committing incest. What a pathetic, tragic picture that is of a man who started so well. But he’s righteous Lot. He’s a saved man. And what he illustrates is that we can stumble and we can stumble badly. And Paul knew that. That’s why it is so important to exercise self-control and stay in training to live carefully and cautiously. Important to do that.

But how do we do that? What keeps us at it? Well, go back to athletes. Go back to some of the illustrations. Look at an athlete like Ted Williams, who worked so long and hard at batting that his hands bled. Why did he do that? Just for the glory? Just to earn a paycheck? I doubt it. No. I think he did it ultimately and primarily because of his love for the game. You can force a person to do – or try to force a person to do something without much success. And there have been plenty of boys who had fathers that put a bat in their hands and wanted them to become a Ted Williams, wanted them to excel in baseball, and so they gave them the bat and they gave them the mitt, and the ball, and all of that without any success because the boys didn’t love the game. They loved something else. You can’t force a person to be committed to what he or she doesn’t love any more than you can keep a person from doing what he or she loves.

That’s the same with a Christian life. We will continue to strive for excellence if we love something. We won’t continue to strive for excellence by sheer force of will, by laying down rules and setting standards for ourselves and just struggling to meet them. May make some progress for awhile, but that’s not how you continue to do that, to continue to live the life that you’re supposed to live. We run with joy. We fight with

enthusiasm. We live the Christian life eagerly and faithfully out of love for Christ. We sacrifice for others and for Him out of love for Him and love for others. It is the love of God that constrains us, that compels us, Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:14.

An understanding of His love for us, all that He has done for us, all that He’s doing for us, all that He will do for us. That constrains us, compels us to live a life of discipline and service for Him of sacrifice for Him. And that is one reason it is so important for us to teach and reflect upon the person and work of Christ, the greatness of His person, the greatness of His sacrifice, the glory and the grace of the triune God. That generates love and faithfulness, which again is a greatest motivation of the Christian life. We yield our rights. We lay down our lives for others out of love for them. And that’s generated by knowing the Word of God. That’s why it is so important that, as Paul told Timothy at the end of his life – what are you going to tell someone at the end of your life? You’re going to tell them what is really important. If I’m not able to speak to you again, Timothy, this is what you need to know. Preach the Word. That’s God’s revelation and it’s as we study it and know it that love for Him and for others is kindled within us, and we live as we should.

Yielding our rights, making sacrifices, doing that will win the prize. And yet, I think what really gets to the heart of the matter here, what I think is implied in all this must be – and I know that from the other things Paul has written – is that it’s not doing that is the most important thing here. It’s being. It’s loving the Lord. It’s thinking about Him. We gain rewards for all eternity in the quiet moments of our life when we’re not actively doing something for someone, when we’re simply reflecting upon Him in gratitude and worshipping Him, He desires that. He desires that more than going out and serving as some kind of missionary with a sense of obligation and merit. What He desires is our hearts knit to His. And that will produce a life that’s lived well for Him, a life that is lived for the best things and the eternal things.

So may God help us to cultivate that. May God help us to run in such a way that we may win because winning in that way, that kind of winning is really the only thing, the only thing that matters. But you must first be running. You must first be in the race. Are you? You are if you are a believer in Jesus Christ. If you’re not a believer in Jesus Christ, you’re not in the race, and so we invite you if you’re here without Christ to join the race.

Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. He’s God’s Son, His eternal Son, who left the light and the glory and the joy of heaven to enter into the darkness of this world by becoming a man so that He might die as a sacrifice for sinners, and He has died for everyone who believes in Him. So believe in Him. His sacrifice is for you. He’s obtained salvation for every believer, and once you’ve believed in Him, then live for Him by God’s grace. Look to God. Trust in Christ. And live for Him. May God help all of us to do that. Let’s pray.

Father, we do thank You for Your goodness to us. We thank You for this marvelous text in which Paul reminds us of our responsibilities in the Christian life, that it is a life of joy. It’s a life of peace. It is rest in so many ways. It’s spiritual rest. We’ve taken Christ’s yoke upon us. It’s light. It’s easy. And yet, there is effort in it. There are responsibilities in it. It is a race. It is a contest. It’s a battle. It’s all of that. But we can do it. We can actually do it by Your grace. So, Father, we pray for that grace. We pray that You would kindle within us a desire to live for You and the energy and the discipline to do it, that we might serve You faithfully, be a blessing to those around us, honor You, bring glory to You and the gospel, and live for what is really important, the eternal things. We pray these things in Christ’s name, Amen.