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A Study of 1 Corinthians 9:23-27

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In this portion of First Corinthians, Paul utilizes athletic illustrations to emphasize the vital role self-discipline plays in achieving an effective and godly Christian life. “In 9:24-27, Paul advances [an] example ... to undergird his admonition about idol food [9:4ff.]: the athlete’s self-restraint and abstinence to win a prize and to procure honor and acclaim.” This passage also “warns that any who fail to exercise self-restraint when it comes to the delights of this world may be disqualified from the ultimate race directed by God.”¹

9:23 And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

Here the apostle states quite bluntly that he is willing to do just about anything to spread the gospel. Paul “submerged his own rights and desires in the work of the Lord.”² He wants to be able to reach as many people as possible by any legitimate means (9:19-22). Indeed, in the previous verse he wrote: “I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some.” Of course Paul was not about to do something that would be unbiblical or immoral. That would be counter-productive. Displeasing the Lord is not the way to win the lost.

¹ David Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI Baker Academic, 2003), 438.

² *Nelson’s Teacher’s Resource on First Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002), 127.

There is a small text critical issue in the first part of the verse. It is one of the few places where the Majority Text differs from the other set of manuscripts. The KJV and the NKJV have: “And this I do for the gospel's sake.” The NIV has: “I do all this.” The difference in meaning is very minimal.

The gospel (“good news”) was the centerpiece of Paul’s life. Virtually everything he did in day-to-day living he did for the sake of the gospel. “Paul was ready to travel to Illyricum (modern Albania and the former Yugoslavia) and Spain to give the gospel the widest possible hearing (see Rom. 15:19, 24).”³ In Acts (17:30), Paul made it known that “God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent” (cf. Acts 20:24; 21:28).

The apostle is blessed in two ways as a “fellow partaker” of the gospel (“that I may share in its blessings,” NIV). Just to tell someone of the good news of Jesus Christ is a thrill (and a privilege). When someone does get saved, Paul can also share in all the “joy in heaven over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:7; cf. John 4:36; 1 Cor. 9:18). Once Paul announced he was a “slave to all” (9:19), one would think he would be a loser but instead he is a winner.⁴ Is there something in your life which is hindering your spread of the gospel?⁵

9:24 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.

Corinth is located on an isthmus on the south side of Greece. They held their own sporting event just a few miles away every other year.^{6[6]} It was known as the Isthmian Games,⁷ second in importance

³ Simon Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 310.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Nelson's Teacher's Resource*, 207.

⁶ Morris [Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1958), 139], Hodge [Charles Hodge, *1 Corinthians* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1995), 159], and Robertson and Plummer [Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *The First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1914), 194] are of the opinion these games took place every three years.

⁷ “The prestige of the Games was enhanced by a tradition which went back to the sixth century BC, and they took place every two years, up to 146 BC at Corinth (when the Romans laid Corinth waste). Although for more than a century the Games were held at Sicyon, some six miles to the northwest, after the resettlement of 44 BC the influence of Corinth upon the Games steadily increased until it recovered [Footnote continued on next page ...]

only to the Olympics, and it took place at the Temple of Poseidon. The rich would financially back the games. In total there were five such major athletic competitions.⁸

They were actually feasts or festivals complete with sacrifices, prayers, and vows to the gods. “the games were a prominent occasion for celebrating the patronage of the gods. The occasion may have forced the issue of eating idol food.”⁹ They lasted for days. The athletes of ancient times were just as popular and famous as the professional athletes of today. “A truce to all hostilities for the duration of the festival made large attendance possible.”¹⁰

The word “run” (*trecho*) appears three times in this verse, and each time it is in a different mood. The first one is a participle; the second is indicative; and the last is a command (imperative). Thus Kistemaker translates this verse as: “Do you not know that they who run in a race are all running, but only one receives the prize? So run the race that you may win.”¹¹ Apparently the Corinthian Christians needed some encouragement in their walk with Christ (cf. Gal. 5:7; Phil. 2:16).

“In a race” is more literally “in a stadium.” A stadia was approximately 600 feet in length. Foot-races and other events were held there.

This sports illustration would have hit home readily to the citizens of Corinth (“Do you not know...?”)¹² because the foot-race was one of the popular attractions.¹³ No illustration is perfect, however, and this one breaks down in that in the *Christian* race everyone can receive a prize. It seems that the “Corinthians did not

their administration during the first decade of the first century.” Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 710.

⁸ The other four are the Olympics (dedicated to Zeus), Nemaen (also dedicated to Zeus), Pythian (to Apollo), and Panathenaic Games (to Athena). See Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 3rd Ed., 2003), 100.

⁹ Garland, 440.

¹⁰ Vincent Scramuzza and Paul MacKendrick, *The Ancient World* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1958), 176.

¹¹ Kistemaker, 312.

¹² Thiselton describes this “as a rhetorical question which provokes the addressees to notice afresh what they know perfectly well if they take note or reflect.” Thiselton, 710.

¹³ Music and equestrian events were part of the celebration, too. See Clinton Arnold (Gen. Ed.), *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2002), 3:149.

exert themselves; they were indolent.”¹⁴ All believers can run as winners. This “race” is not for salvation but for eternal rewards.¹⁵ There is a difference between analogy and allegory.¹⁶

“Prize” here is not the usual Greek word for “crown” or “wreath,” although the award for first place was indeed a wreath (9:25; cf. 2 Tim. 2:5). Here the word for “prize” is *brabeion* which, interestingly enough, is derived from a word that means “umpire.” It is used in only two other places in the NT (Phil. 3:14 (as a noun) and Col. 2:18 (as a verb)). The Greek word for “crown” or “wreath” is *stephanos*.

The prize wreaths were made out of wild celery, wild olive, or pine.

Paul’s point in this verse is found in the last few words. He is encouraging all believers to strive to live for Christ. Our “training” includes personal Bible study, prayer, and worship, among others (“strict training,” 9:25, NIV). The very last word (“win”) more literally means “attain” or “lay hold of” (“obtain,” KJV). The idea of course has to do with attaining the first prize wreath. “In like manner the Christian must strain every nerve to produce his finest effort.”¹⁷

Paul spent a year and a half in Corinth about AD 51 (Acts 18:11) and certainly must have seen some of the athletic events. Also while there he worked as a tentmaker (18:3). Since people came from all over the Roman Empire to watch or participate in the games, it was a wonderful opportunity to witness to many souls.

9:25 And 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.¹⁸

“Competes” is a translation of *agonizomai* (fight, struggle), from which we get the English word “agonize.” All those who are in a competition stress and strain to be first. In order to be first, the athlete

¹⁴ F. W. Grosheide, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1953), 215.

¹⁵ *Nelson’s Teacher’s Resource*, 127. There were no team sports in the ancient world.

¹⁶ Thiselton, 711.

¹⁷ Morris, 139.

¹⁸ Compare with 1 Corinthians 15:42.

must express determined self-discipline (“temperate in all things,” KJV; “strict training,” NIV). “Self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23).”¹⁹ The Corinthians were not controlling themselves, especially concerning the eating of meat sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8:1-5; 10:14ff).

This regiment for the competitors would include a certain diet, rigorous exercise, endless repetition, and a curtailed social life.²⁰ Each athlete must spend ten months in training or he was not allowed to compete (“disqualified,” v. 27).²¹

The athletes (“they”) go through all this hard work only to receive a wreath that will soon fade away. Believers (“we”), on the other hand, strive in the Christian life to earn rewards that will last forever (1 Cor. 3:12-14; 1 Peter 1:4; Rev. 11:18, 22:12). Which effort seems more worthwhile (cf. 1 Tim. 4:8)?

We can expect to receive crowns of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:8), life (James 1:12; Rev. 2:10), and glory (1 Peter 5:4).²²

9:26 Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air.

It’s always good to ask, what’s the “therefore” there for? After encouraging Christians to win (v. 24) and obtain an imperishable crown (v. 25), Paul now gives more details about how to live the Christian life. He sets himself up as an example (cf. 11:1).

First, when he is running a foot-race, he does not run wildly, but keeps his eye on the finish line (cf. Phil. 3:13, 14). We are not to wander in the Christian life. We need to have goals and objectives. Ephesians 4:14 declares: “As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming,

¹⁹ Garland, 441.

²⁰ Dan Mitchell, *The Book of First Corinthians* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2004), 138.

²¹ Some maintain that Paul in this passage is defending his apostleship, and thus “disqualified” has to do with being an apostle. However, that is not the context of these verses. Paul could also be referring to the idea of being disqualified for eating meat sacrificed to idols. See Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 436-440.

²² See also Psalm 103:4.

but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ” (cf. James 1:6).

“The Greek word [‘without aim’]²³ may mean ‘inconspicuously.’ He did not run like someone unseen, but like someone on whom all eyes are fixed. ... A man who runs being uncertain as to his course or object runs without spirit or effort.”²⁴

Second, when he is boxing (another popular sport at the games) he does not throw wild punches but wants to make contact every time. This verse is not referring to shadowboxing (cf. Eph. 6:12; 1 Cor. 14:9). As with the racing, he seems to be in the act of fighting and not just practicing. “At times a boxer punches but misses his opponent and thus exposes himself to a counterpunch that can be devastating.”²⁵

9:27 but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.

This verse has generated no small amount of discussion and debate. Is it suggesting we whip ourselves to achieve godliness? Can a believer lose his or her salvation?

Instead of (“but”) throwing themselves around uncontrollably, believers must “buffet” their bodies; that is, direct their talent and strength in effective ways. Think of a horse that is “broken.” It has not lost any strength, it’s just under control. “It is perhaps too much to say that St. Paul regards his body^{26[26]} as an antagonist. Rather, it is something which becomes a bad master, if it is not made to be a good servant.”²⁷

“Buffet” comes from the Greek word *hupopiazo* which literally means “to hit under the eye.” It has also been translated “beat,” “discipline,” and “punish.” Perhaps the best translation is

²³ The word is *adelos*. It is translated “concealed” in Luke 11:44, and “indistinct” in 1 Cor. 14:8.

²⁴ Hodge, 159.

²⁵ Kistemaker, 314.

²⁶ It is interesting to note that Paul uses *soma* (“body”) and not *sarx* (“flesh”) which is mostly (but not always) used in the NT to symbolize our sinful nature (cf. Rom. 7:5). Robertson and Plummer, 197. “The ‘body’ is not understood as something inherently evil. It can serve God (6:20; cf. 1 Thess. 5:23; Rom. 6:17-19), be a member of Christ (1 Cor. 6:15), and be the temple of the Holy Spirit (6:19).” Garland, 443.

²⁷ Kistemaker, 314.

“discipline.”²⁸ A different word (*dero*) is used for “beating” in verse 26.

“Make...slave” is one word in the Greek (*doulagogeō*).²⁹ It means “lead along as a slave” and, in this form, is found nowhere else in the NT. Similar expressions are found in Romans 6:18, 22 (cf. 6:6). Hence, Robertson and Plummer translate the first part of this verse as follows: “But I bruise my body black and blue and lead it along as a bond-servant.”³⁰

Paul’s use of the word “disqualified” (“castaway,” KJV) does not mean Christians can lose their salvation (cf. 1 Cor. 11:30-32).³¹ There is a difference between a prize and a gift.³² A prize is earned but a gift is simply given to you. Athletics is the context, so he must have had something else in mind (besides losing one’s salvation). He was probably thinking of a judge at the games who could be disqualified if he were biased for example. The same adjective (*adokimos*) is also translated “worthless” (Heb. 6:8), “unapproved” (2 Cor. 13:7), and “rejected” (2 Tim. 3:8).

Paul was concerned that his testimony would be ruined by some outward sin on his part, especially “after [he had] preached to others” (cf. 9:16). He wanted to practice what he preached.

Paul places himself before his readers as an example. He controls his lifestyle in such a way that no one can accuse him of preaching the gospel while contradicting it by the life he leads. Paul exerts himself physically and mentally for the benefit of the gospel; he shows his listeners that what he preaches to them is reality in his personal life.³³

Many passages present the concept of eternal security. John 10:28, 29 says: “and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.”

²⁸ This verb is translated “wear out” in Luke 18:5.

²⁹ One can see a form of *doulos* (“slave”) in this word. The verb in question adds *agō* (“to lead”) to *doulos*.

³⁰ Robertson and Plummer, 196.

³¹ Others teach that a person who never exercises self-control might not have been saved in the first place. However, that interpretation does not harmonize with “disqualified.” A person has to be in the race at some point in order to be disqualified. *Nelson’s Teacher’s Resource*, 128, 129.

³² *Nelson’s Teacher’s Resource*, 49, 50.

³³ Kistemaker, 315.

First of all, Jesus calls salvation “eternal life.” Why call it eternal if it isn’t (cf. John 3:16c)? Christ continues by saying My sheep “shall never perish.” “Perish” usually means to spend eternity in hell. For example, 2 Peter 3:9 states: “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.” The Lord makes it clear that the ones who belong to Him will NEVER perish.

Other phrases in this passage also emphasize this idea: “no one shall snatch them,” “given them to Me,” and nobody is capable (including oneself) of removing a believer from the hand of the One Who “is greater than all.” The verb “given” is a perfect active indicative. The perfect tense “indicates a completed action whose effects are felt in the speaker’s present.”³⁴ In other words, believers have already been given to Christ and that cannot be changed.

Another verse to consider is Matthew 7:23: “And then I [Jesus] will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’” If someone were a Christian but then later lost his or her salvation, then it would not make much sense for the Lord to state: “I never knew you.”³⁵

It is also helpful to study Romans 8:33-39: “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? ... who is the one who condemns? ... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

It is virtually impossible to get around this passage. Paul’s point is that not one thing can keep us away from the love God has for believers. This is not love for people in general but specifically for those who are in “Christ Jesus our Lord.” Again, the believer is not competent enough to remove himself or herself from “the book of life” (Rev. 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27) because he or she is one of those “any other created thing[s].”

³⁴ William Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek* (2nd edition, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 224.

³⁵ This sentence does not mean there is something God does not know. It simply means He didn’t know this person as a child of God.

Another germane passage is 1 Peter 1:4: "... to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you." Notice all the words Peter utilizes to describe its permanence: "imperishable," "undefiled," "will not fade away." The participle "reserved" (*tereo*) means "to watch over," "to guard." Why would something be guarded in heaven if it were not going to be given to the person waiting for it?

MacArthur writes that "reserved" is a "perfect passive participle [and] conveys the idea of the already existing inheritance being carefully guarded in heaven for all those who trust in Christ. Not only will that inheritance not change, but no one will plunder it."³⁶

Listed here are other supporting passages:³⁷

- (1) Numerous times the believer is said to be "in Christ" (John 14:20; Rom. 6:11; 8:1; 2 Cor. 5:17; 1 John 4:13).
- (2) It is declared that Christ is in the believer (John 14:20; Rom. 8:10; Gal. 2:20; Col. 1:27; cf. John 14:23).
- (3) First Corinthians 6:17 says: "But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him."
- (4) Our lives are "hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3).
- (5) First John 5:13 says: "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life." He didn't write maybe we have eternal life but that we do indeed have it.
- (6) Romans 8:1 promises: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"³⁸ Believers can never be condemned – not now – not later – never.

Some portions of the Bible are presented as proof that followers of Christ can lose their salvation. Those portions will now be addressed.³⁹

At first glance, some verses seem to teach that a person must persevere in order to know for certain that he or she is saved

³⁶ John MacArthur, *1 Peter* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 2004), 36.

³⁷ Much of the following comes from Henry Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing, 1979), 282-284.

³⁸ See also Job 19:25, 26; Eccl. 3:14; John 3:18; 5:24; 6:37-40; *etc.* Taken from Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 3* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2004), 305-314.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 317-336.

(conditional security) but that conclusion is simply not true. Some examples include the following: “He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach-- if indeed you continue in the faith” (Col. 1:22, 23). “You are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you” (1 Cor. 15:2). “We have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end” (Heb. 3:14).

What these passages are talking about is progressive holiness, not positional holiness. In other words, they are speaking about becoming more Christ-like here on earth and not about whether or not “our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20; cf. Eph. 5:25-27). Indeed, a person must ask himself or herself, exactly what does “continue in the faith” mean? How many sinful thoughts can I have each day but not lose my salvation? One is lead to conclude that these verses could not be speaking about losing one’s salvation.

Finally, there is a difference between *having faith to the end* and *being faithful to the end*: Perseverance in faith entails the former but not necessarily the latter. If one is a true believer, he *will* continue to believe in Christ to the end. Jesus placed those who “believe for a while” among those who were not saved, in contrast to those who persevere in belief (cf. Luke 8:13, 15). Hence, while continuance in the faith is a *demonstration* of salvation, it is not a *condition* for being saved.⁴⁰

Another factor to keep in mind is the classification of the “if” clauses. Of the three examples above, the first two are first class conditional (Col. 1:22, 23; 1 Cor. 15:2) and the third example is a third class conditional (Heb. 3:14).⁴¹ Therefore, all three occurrences of the word “if” could legitimately be translated “since.” Other passages which seem to speak of losing one’s salvation can be similarly explained.

A further word on Hebrews 3:14 is needed. Two features of that verse lead to the conclusion that it does not teach that Christians can lose their salvation. The first is the use of the perfect tense for

⁴⁰ Ibid., 319. Italics in original.

⁴¹ A first class conditional sentence is one in which the statement is considered true for the sake of the argument. A third class conditional is one in which the statement is considered generally true at all times. See Mounce, 341.

“become partakers.”⁴² The perfect tense indicates completed past action with continuing results. We have a relationship with Christ and it still continues to be in effect.

The second feature has to do with the specific word utilized to suggest a third class conditional. Normally the conjunction *ean* is found in the protasis (the “if” clause) for such a situation. In the case of the present verse however, the word *eanper*, a word found only in Hebrews (3:6, 14; 6:3), is used. Adding *per* to *ean* intensifies the concept. Thus an expanded translation would be as follows: “since we will indeed hold fast ...”

Homer Kent has a good explanation of Hebrews 3:14.

There is also a human responsibility resting upon believers: if indeed we hold fast the beginning of the confidence [KJV; “assurance,” NASB]. This is not a warning that a true “sharer [partaker] of Christ” will ever have that status withdrawn, but a solemn reminder that a true “sharer” will continue in the first faith, and will not apostatize to Judaism.⁴³

In studying 9:27, one’s thoughts are taken back to the beginning of this passage, 9:23. There Paul made it clear that he wanted to live his life in such a way as to bring honor to the gospel and thus “become a fellow partaker of it.” He did his best to maintain a good testimony. As the passage as a whole points out, discipline is required to do so.

⁴² This is a different word here (*metochos*) from the one used in 1 Cor. 9:23 (*sugkoinonos*).

⁴³ Homer Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 1972), 75.