

STRIVING FOR A CROWN

"Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway." I Corinthians 9:24-27.

Two lines of truth run parallel through the Word of God, namely, salvation by grace and reward for faithful service. Salvation is not a reward for anything one does, nor is heaven a reward for a life of faithfulness on earth. We cannot earn a home in heaven by our gifts or our services.

"Could my tears forever flow,
Could my zeal no languor know,
These for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone:
In my hand no price I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling."

That must ever be the confession of every saved soul. "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). However, while salvation, eternal life and a home in heaven are all set before us as God's free gifts to believing sinners, the Word of God has much to say about the importance of service and about rewards for faithfulness in it. Concerning the latter, our text speaks very plainly.

Athletic sports have played an important part in the mental, moral and physical development of the human race. In some form we find traces of these sports, these trials of skill and strength, in the earliest pages of human history, but it remained for Greece, Great Britain and the United States to bring them into their highest development. The famous Isthmian games, and the great festival which was celebrated in connection therewith, were held every two years at the Isthmus, a few miles from and in full view of the city of Corinth. With these games, Paul was very familiar, and from them he frequently drew effective illustrations. To the inhabitants of Corinth, these games were of the greatest interest. These games were the occasions for the concourse of the people from all parts of Greece. The assembling of the spectators to witness these famous athletic contests gave dignity and solemnity to the occasion. The contests attracted from every part of the land the trained athletes of the day. The honors accorded to the victors were coveted so much that there could have been but very few of the ambitious young men of Greece who were not fired with a desire to distinguish themselves in these contests. It is no wonder that Paul stimulated his own zeal and that of his Christian friends by reminding himself and them of the efforts and sacrifices which were made cheerfully for the sake of a perishable crown.

I. The Runner.

Certain things were necessary for an athlete to compete as a runner:

1. He had to prepare for the race.
For ten months before the contest all competitors were in training under the direction of appointed instructors. They were required

to be clean and sober, to eat sparingly and simply, to bear effort and fatigue, and this, mark you, in preparation for the contest itself. The athletes who aspired to the victor's wreath were obliged to undergo severe discipline under the guidance and care of a skilful trainer, who required them to deny themselves many pleasures, to endure much fatigue, hardship and suffering. From the moment the athlete placed himself in the hands of the trainer, he was no longer his own but was obliged to do exactly as he was told. He could not eat what he pleased. He could not sleep when he pleased and as much as he liked. Unless he did what he was told, he could not hope to win the prize.

2. He had to enroll for the contest. Each contestant had to go to the proper official, convince him that he had undergone the appointed preliminary training and prove that he was a Greek by birth. It was a law of the Greeks that no young man could compete in the games unless he could prove that he was of pure Greek parentage. As the people watched the races, they knew that all competitors were Greeks by birth.

II. The Race.

In this race it was necessary that certain things be done. Among them are the following:

1. Strip for it. Every superfluous garment must be removed and laid aside because it would hinder the runner. That which would hinder must not be left on.

Concerning the Christian race, the twelfth chapter of Hebrews says, "Let us lay aside every weight." There must be a divestment of all encumbrances. Everything that hinders must go. A weight denotes whatever would put one to a disadvantage in running. Things which prove to be weights to the Christian runner need not necessarily be sins. Even things lawful may not be expedient. It is not a sin for an athlete to eat delicious candy and rich pastries, but doing so would handicap him in his playing. It is not a sin for a father to carry his child in his arms, but he would not attempt to run a race with it there. A weight may be entirely legitimate, nay, to others a blessing and a help; but, if it is an impediment in the race, it must be laid aside. It is a well-known fact that many capable people have minimized their influence because they have not laid aside every weight. Some followers of Christ avoid the things that are plainly sinful, but they carry a lot of excess baggage in the form of doubtful habits, trifling interests or second-best activities. This matter of weights takes us into the realm of living where the innocent thing can be carried too far. As Christians we have entered a race and started for a goal. If we are to reach that goal and win the prize, we must make everything contribute toward the victory. If anything does not make us stronger and more useful representatives of Jesus Christ, it is a weight that must be laid aside.

Another thing which the Christian must lay aside is "the sin which doth so easily beset us." One must free himself from besetting sin. What is this sin that we must lay aside? While all kinds of sin are weakening in their effect, the root form of evil, which the author had in his mind when he urged Christians to lay aside the sin which so easily besets, is the sin of unbelief. This sin

of unbelief is the very opposite of the grace of faith which was commended so highly in the eleventh chapter. Sin always produces weakness. It saps the strength of the runner who is out to make a success of the race of life. Loyalty to God spells power, and disloyalty to Him spells feebleness. To distrust God, to struggle against His will or to doubt His promises always lands us in trouble. If we are to run successfully, we must lay aside sin, even such sins as a suspicious attitude, a critical spirit, an irritable temper, an unforgiving spirit and an evil habit. Young people often yield to evil desires, older people to fretfulness and peevishness, the rich to pride and grasping for power, the poor to repinings against God, the healthy to forgetfulness of God, and the sick to rebellion against Him. But each one is expected to overcome the sin to which he is most liable.

2. Make progress.

Think how ridiculous a loner would have appeared, hanging around the stadium, professing to be a runner, but never getting out of sight of the starting-point. The track was measured, the starting point and the goal were fixed, the course was laid out, and over this course every runner had to run if he hoped to reach the goal and win the prize. Running implies great exertion, progression and perseverance.

The Christian life is a race that requires exertion. We must expect to put forth effort. We must expect to run in downright earnestness. Being a Christian is an exacting business. This race is set before us and is marked out for us in the Word of God.

In the actual running of the race some things will help us tremendously

(1) Maintaining a proper sense of direction.

We are to "run the race that is set before us." Some years ago, in a football game at the Rose Bowl, a player got possession of the ball and made a seventy-yard run. It was a brilliant piece of work except for one thing--he ran in the wrong direction. In his confusion he lost sight of the right goal.

That is a parable of what may happen to any of us if we are not careful. It should help us all, however, to realize that Jesus Christ is always out there ahead of us, giving us the right lead. If He doesn't give us complete answers to our particular problems, He at least gives us the direction in which those answers will be found. In this confidence we can say with David Livingstone, "I will go anywhere, provided it be forward!" Yes, keeping our sense of direction is decidedly a help if we are to win in the Christian life.

(2) Understanding that the course is not easy.

"Let us run with patient endurance." From this expression we learn that the Christian way of life is not intended to be a perpetual picnic. It is an adventure with Jesus along a road with a thousand hurdles. It requires exertion. It demands stamina. It asks for perseverance.

The patience required of us is not the patience of those who stand in line and can do nothing whatever but just wait. It

is rather the patience of the plodder who, against all weakness and opposition, persists in going on. The grace of patience is like the one rivet that binds all of the machinery together. The Lord wants staying power that will keep on until life's last breath.

Among the many beautiful pictures in the scripture gallery, there are some sad ones. There are portraits of men and women who started well in the service of the Lord, but they fell before some obstacle. Because they turned back, they had to be labeled quitters. And who admires a quitter?

Among the quitters was Demas, a friend and companion of Paul. For a while he went along to help Paul carry the message of Jesus Christ the Saviour. Then, for Demas, the glamor wore off. It was pretty tough, this being looked upon with suspicion or disdain or hatred by the people in practically every city they visited. Besides there wasn't much in it of a material nature. So Demas quit the race, and Paul wrote, "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world."

By contrast take the case of Martin Luther. He had counted the cost of going on--yes, going all the way, with Christ. When he was ordered to appear before the authorities of the church at Worms and to explain why he had made such charges against his superiors, some of his advisers urged him not to go. They feared for his life. To this he replied: "To Worms I must go. And were there as many devils there as tiles on the roofs, yet would I enter into that city." There was iron in his blood, morally speaking. He was ready to take in stride the obstacles in the course of life which lay before him.