

Self Denial and Discipline

by Miles DeBenedictis

Paul's example challenges us to be willing to adapt and sacrifice for the sake of others, and to be guided by the ethical standards of the kingdom of God in our dealings with the world.

Duration: 50:55

Scripture: Jeremiah 5:31, John 4:1

Topics: "Self-Denial"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the analogy of athletes preparing for the ancient games in Corinth. He emphasizes the rigorous training and discipline that these athletes underwent in order to compete and win the prize. The speaker then applies this analogy to the Christian life, highlighting the need for believers to be disciplined and prepared in their faith. He challenges Christians to not be half-hearted or out of shape in their witness to the lost, but to instead be focused and dedicated to God's purpose of glorification. The speaker also references C.S. Lewis' book, 'The Screwtape Letters,' to illustrate how the enemy can distract believers from spiritual things.

Transcript

Though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself a servant unto all, that I might win the more. Unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win the Jews. To them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might win them that are under the law.

To them that are without the law, as without the law, being not without the law to God, but under the law to Christ, that I might win them that are without the law. To the weak I became as the weak, that I might win the weak. I have made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be a partaker thereof with you. Know ye not that they which run and race all run, but one receives the prize. So run that you may obtain.

And every man that strives for 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 beats the air, but I keep my body under, and bring it into subjection, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway. Father, we ask for your wisdom and guidance as we study your word. It is our desire that we not be conformed to this world, but

be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

And so we pray that you would do just that. Sanctify and cleanse us by the washing of the water of your word. And we pray that you by your spirit would guide us in all truth.

Now, for we ask it in Jesus name and all God's people agreed, saying, Amen, you can be seated. Paul has been building for the last couple of chapters. This theme of laying aside our liberties, renouncing our rights for the sake of others, for the sake of the kingdom, for the sake of the gospel.

And as we come here to verse 19, Paul makes very clear that he is a free man, though I am free from all men. No one owned Paul. He was a slave of no man.

He was a hireling to none. And yet he says here that he had made himself a slave unto all. The Greek word that Paul chooses for servant or slave here is the Greek word and it means to make a slave or to reduce to bondage.

This verse is therefore something of a paradox at the surface. Anyway, he says, though I am free, though I am not a slave, I have made myself a slave, a servant. It's for this very reason that Paul would identify himself on several occasions in his letters as a bond servant, a doulas.

In Romans chapter one, verse one, he says, Paul, a bond servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated under the gospel of God. In Philippians chapter one, verse one, he says, Paul and Timothy, the servants or the bond servants of Jesus Christ to all the saints in Christ Jesus, which are at Philippi. In Titus chapter one, verse one, he says, Paul, a bond servant of God, an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God's elect and the acknowledging of the truth, which is after godliness.

Paul called himself a bond servant of Christ, but his service to Christ was evidenced by his service to others within the body of Christ. But why did Paul, a free man, make himself a slave? Why would anyone put themselves in that position in first Corinthians? Actually, second Corinthians chapter four, verse five, he says that he had made himself a doulas, a servant for Jesus's sake, for the sake of the Lord. And here in verse 19, at the end of the verse, he says, though I am free of all men, yet I have made myself a servant unto all.

Why that I may win the more that I may win the more. Now you might think that the position of a servant would be the position of loss. Not so we would think that to place ourself in the position as a servant, a bond servant, a slave would be to lose everything.

But that is not how Paul looked at it. The culture of this world looks down upon the servant, but the kingdom of God and the economy of God's kingdom is wholly different than our culture here in this world. Remember the words that Jesus shared with his disciples back in the gospel of Mark.

Listen, as I read from Mark chapter 10, verse 42, Jesus called unto his disciples and he said, you know that they which are accounted to rule in this world over the Gentiles, they exercise Lordship over them and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you said Jesus to his disciples, but whosoever will be great among you shall be your servant and whosoever will be the chiefest shall be the servant of all. The reality is that if you want to win in the kingdom of God, then we ought to follow the example of Jesus and remember the pattern of Paul to lay down our lives, to take up our cross, to sacrificially serve.

And in so doing, we win is what Paul says here in this passage. And he'll make very clear as we go on, but just what does he mean by winning? Because winning was Paul's clear purpose. If you were ever to ask Paul the question, what is your aim? What is it that you're doing, Paul? The response would come without hesitation.

I am seeking to win, to win what? To win people to Christ. Five times in the first four verses here in our study, Paul uses the word win. And then in verse 21, he shows what he means by that word.

When he says, I am made all things to all men that I might by all means save some. He switches the words. He uses the word save instead of win.

Paul was wholly dedicated to what the scriptures call a wise work. Proverbs 11 verse 30 there, Solomon says, he that wins souls is wise. And so the purpose of Paul's life was to win souls.

And the purpose of your life will dictate the pattern of your life. If the purpose is winning souls, then the activities, the orientation of your life will be in line with that purpose. You will change the way that you live to be able to meet the purpose that you have for your life.

And we're going to see in these remaining verses in chapter nine, that Paul's pattern of life was perfectly in line with this purpose. He was endeavoring to win souls, doing that wise work. And so he says in verse 20, and unto the Jews, I became as a Jew, that I might win the Jews to them that are under the law as under the law, that I might win them that are under the law.

Paul was prepared to modify his habits, to adjust his lifestyle and to set aside his preferences for the cause of the kingdom and the salvation of others. He was free in Christ. He understood the great Liberty that he had as a follower of Jesus, but he was willing to deny himself certain liberties for the opportunity to minister to as many people as possible.

He was willing to lay aside his liberties to renounce his rights, that he might see the salvation of others. Now in our day, one might say, Hey man, this is who I am. I don't change for anybody.

I mean, isn't that something of the motto in America today? I am who I am, and you got to be who you are and I won't change for anybody. Really? Is that really a reality in the lives of people in our nation? Because as I see it, it's just not. It's amazing to me how many people will modify their habits and adjust their lifestyles, set aside their preferences for a temporal gain.

What do I mean? Well, someone wants that promotion at work, and so they will get up earlier than every single person. They'll come in before anybody else gets there. They'll jump at every opportunity to do the extra work.

They'll stay later than every single other employee in that business so that they can get that temporal promotion. Or maybe the person wants a relationship with that special someone, and so they'll alter their appearance. They'll pretend to like music that they really don't like.

They'll shift their preferences to like long walks on the beach and sappy romantic comedies. You want to fit into that outfit, and so you jog. You tell people you like it, but you really don't.

You jog yourself into the ground, cut out every enjoyable delight, count calories like your life depended upon it. Why? For a temporal endeavor. So all this will do for a temporal gain, an earthly gain that's not

eternal.

Do you think that this goes unnoticed by our Heavenly Father? That we will do such things to serve ourselves, but we'll not do so to serve His kingdom? Again, Paul was prepared to modify his habits, adjust his lifestyle, set aside his preferences for the cause of the kingdom and the salvation of others. Now, I don't want you to misunderstand the Apostle Paul. He was not some sort of slick politician-like chameleon.

Who changed his mannerism depending upon which group of people he was hanging out with at that moment. That's the very thing that Paul rebuked the Apostle Peter for in the book of Galatians. Peter was being kind of like that shifty chameleon.

He would spend time with Gentiles, fellowshiping with them, as long as there were no Jews around. But as soon as the Jews came around, then he had to set them aside because, well, you know, they're unclean Gentiles. And he was only with the Jews.

And Paul rebuked this. So Paul was not some sort of slick politician. Paul was not so dominated by political correctness that he went to every possible length to not offend.

He knew very well that the message he had was an offensive message. The message that we preach is offensive to those who are perishing. People who are still walking in their sin, enjoying their sin, don't like the message of the gospel.

They will be offended by it. Paul knew that was the case. He didn't craft the message in a way so as to never offend anybody with that message.

But he did seek to make sure that his life was never a hindrance to the message going forth. And so Paul was a student of culture. He knew that his brothers, the Jews, would be offended by pork or other unclean foods.

So he would cut those things out of his life so as to not lay a stumbling block before them when he was in their presence. To the Jews, I became as a Jew that I might win the Jews. But then he says to those that are under the law, I became as one under the law that I might win those under the law.

Well, aren't all Jews under the law? Don't they all view themselves as being under the law? Well, some more than others. Remember, before Paul was Paul the Apostle, he was Saul the Pharisee. And the Pharisees, they viewed themselves as separate from the rest of the general Jewish population because they were the ones who really, truly adhered to all the law.

And not just all the law, all the traditions and all the customs. He knew that those who held to the law with pharisaical zeal were bound to rights and rituals and vows. And as we see in the book of Acts and in some of Paul's other letters, he had no problem taking such vows to show his devotion to the Lord.

In Acts chapter 18, when he was getting ready to leave the city of Corinth to go back to Jerusalem, it says that he went to a barber and he shaved his head because he had taken a vow. He was returning back to Jerusalem and he knew that that would give him an opportunity or hope that that would give him an opportunity to minister among his people. Again, in Acts chapter 21, when he had gone to Jerusalem the second time in his ministry, it says that there were people there that thought he was telling Jews to depart from the law of Moses and to not seek to follow the Lord and the law.

And so he was encouraged again to shave his head in a vow. And Paul did so. Why? So that by all means he might win some.

Were such things required for him as a Christian? No. Were they forbidden to him as a Christian? No. Would they open a door for the gospel? No doubt they would.

And so Paul says it's something of a gray area. It's not forbidden. It's not commanded.

But I will do this. Why? Because I want to win people to Christ, to the Jew I became as a Jew, to those that were under the law I became as one under the law, that I might win the more. Well, not just the Jew or those under the law now in verse 21, to them that are without the law as without the law being not without the law to God, but under the law to Christ, that I may win them that are without the law.

Paul was formerly a Pharisee. He was a Jew by heritage and grew up under all the rules and rights and laws of Judaism. It was certainly not difficult, therefore, for him to identify culturally with Jewish Pharisees or with Jews in general.

It would be like you identifying with Americans. It's just not all that difficult for you to do. Now, it may have been constrictive to him in some ways, having turned away from those things.

It may have seen more foreign to him as the years went on after his transformation in Christ. But I imagine it was relatively easy for Paul to be a Jew unto the Jews or to be as one under the law to those that were under the law. On the other hand, here in verse 21, he says to those that are without the law Gentiles.

To those Gentiles, I became like a Gentile that I might win them. You see, Paul was sensitive enough to be culturally relevant and appropriate with those that he ministered to. Meat sacrificed to idols was no big deal to the common Corinthian Gentile in the first century.

And so if Paul went into the home of a common Corinthian Gentile there in the first century. Where it was just no big deal that the meat had been sacrificed to idols, you would probably not have heard Paul ask the question. Wait a minute.

Hold on. Has this been sacrificed to an idol? Because, you know, not only the scriptures, but also the church in Israel, they said, you know, we shouldn't eat meat sacrificed to idols. So if it is, I can't eat.

He would not have done that because he was seeking to tear down any sort of wall or barrier that would allow him to be able to minister to those that he was coming in contact with. To be honest with you, I've always been taken aback a bit by Peter's first words to the Gentiles of Cornelius's house in Acts chapter 10. Do you remember that story? Remember early in the spread of the gospel throughout Jerusalem and Judea, Peter was one day down by the sea at a house and he sees this vision of basically like a table coming before him with all kinds of clean and unclean meats on it.

And God, a voice spoke to him. He said, rise, Peter, kill and eat. And he says, not so, Lord.

I've never eaten anything common or unclean. Three times this happened. The Lord tells him, don't call anything common or unclean, which I have set apart or sanctified.

And then right then he's met by some people from Cornelius's house, a Gentile in Caesarea. He goes up to Caesarea and Peter's very first words, they kind of are staggering to me when he comes into the house of a Gentile to preach the gospel for the very first time. Acts chapter 10, verse 28, he said unto them, you

know how that it is an unlawful thing for me, a Jew, to keep company with you Gentiles.

I mean, could you imagine? I think Peter really struggled with these kind of things. And he goes into the house of a Gentile. Could you imagine going over to the house of a nonbeliever for dinner and you go and you go, no, I just have to tell you this is very, well, it's just not really appropriate for me, a Christian to partake of food with you, a heathen.

And we just would never do that. Or I would hope that that wouldn't be the case. But there are some ways in which we in the Western church today, we are building walls that separate us from the rest of the world, the world that God has told us to go into and preach the gospel.

We build things up. How so? We have Christian music. We don't want to listen to that secular stuff because that's bad.

We can't identify, oh, you shouldn't listen to that stuff. It's Christian, it's holy. We educate our kids in Christian schools, no knock on Christian schools, but we just keep separating ourselves more and more.

We want to have our own. I mean, there's some churches today where they have health fitness centers. They have their own coffee shops and bookstores.

They have their own stores for people to come and shop at because you don't want to go out into the world because the world is dangerous. Stay away from all them heathens out there in the world. Well, wait a minute.

Didn't Jesus tell us to go into the world? Now, Paul makes it very clear that he was not without the law before God. To them that are without the law, I became as one without the law that I might win them. However, he says parenthetically, I'm not without the law before God, but I'm under the law to Christ.

It's so very important to recognize that Paul did not live with some sort of anything goes mentality and ministering in a cross-cultural context. He makes very clear that he did not live like a heathen or cast away righteous living to gain an open door for the gospel among other heathens. He was still governed by God's law before God.

If someone had said to Paul, Hey, Paul here in Corinth, it's culturally acceptable to engage in the prostitution of this great city. Do you think Paul would have said, well, it opens the door of the gospel for me. It's culturally acceptable.

Let's go. No, it's forbidden by God. He says, no, I can't live like that.

As someone said, Paul, join me. I'm going up to the temple of Apollo to offer a sacrifice. There's no possible way that we could see Paul doing those things.

He would certainly have rightly declined, but I do believe we find a very important principle for our lives and ministry here in this verse. We should always be guided by the ethical standards of the kingdom of God in our dealings here upon the earth. We should always be guided by the ethical standards of the kingdom of God in our dealings here upon the earth.

And I think it's very, very important for us to remember that our witness in this world is worship. The way we live in this world is worship. We're to do all as unto the Lord.

What we do here on a Sunday morning. Sure. As we sing praises to God, yes, that is a part of worship, but that's not worship in a whole the way we live on a daily basis is to be worshiped to God the way you drive on the 15 freeway.

Maybe we won't go there. Paul continues verse 22 to the week I became as the week that I might gain the week. I made all things to all men that I might by all means save some.

The Jews, the zealous legalists, the Gentiles of verses 20 and 21. They are very clear. But what does Paul mean by the week here? Well, first, let's say what he's not talking about.

He is not talking about becoming morally weak to reach the morally indigent of this world. Paul did not loosen his moral standards so that he could reach out to those who have no moral standards. Sadly, though, you might think that this is the application of Paul's words by looking at the witness of some who call themselves Christians in our day.

Some have foolishly interpreted this passage in such a way that they feel content to live like a pagan, encouraging themselves by saying, well, you know, I'm seeking to minister to other pagans. Nonsense. That's not what this passage means in any sense.

That person is morally indigent themselves. And they need to repent. We don't become like pagans so that we can reach out to pagans.

We still need to walk in a way that's honoring and glorifying to our God. So that's clearly not what Paul is saying when he says to the week I became as the week. But what does he mean? Well, here at Calvary Chapel, we believe that the best way to explain and interpret scripture is with scripture.

And some people have used this verse as a proof text for just going out and living like the rest of the world, and maybe someday I'll get an opportunity to share my faith with them. Well, they're passing the joint and guys, I really want to tell you something. It's not going to work.

And some people have used this as a proof text for those kind of things. But it's been said that a text without a context is a pretext to a proof text. If you can figure that out, you let me know later.

And so we want to look at this in context. What does Paul mean by the week when he says to the week I became as the week? Well, go back to first Corinthians chapter eight and look at verse four. Remember the context as concerning, therefore, the eating of things offered in sacrifice unto idols.

We know that an idol is nothing in the world and that there is no other God but one. We know this. Verse seven.

How be it? There is not in every man that knowledge. Not everybody has that knowledge. For some with conscience of the idol unto this hour, eat it as a thing offered unto an idol and their conscience being what? Weak.

Same Greek word. Their conscience being weak is defiled. But meat commends us not to God for neither if we eat, are we the better? Neither if we eat not are we the worse.

But take heed, lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to them that are weak. For if any man see you, which have knowledge, sit at meat in an idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols? And through thy

knowledge shall the weaker brother perish for whom Christ died. But when you sin against the brethren and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.

Wherefore, if meat makes my brother to stumble, I will no flesh eat while the world stands lest I make my brother to stumble. The weak individual to whom Paul is referring here is the one whose doctrinal knowledge and understanding is weak. And if they need the gospel and doctrine brought to them slowly with ABCs, Paul was strong enough to be able to do that, to bring it down to a level where they were.

This doesn't mean that we diminish the power or strength of the gospel, but we're able to bring it to people where they are at. If they've come from a background so spoiled by religiosity and they need to be carefully and tenderly carried along. Again, Paul was strong enough to come down to their level.

Ultimately, we need to be willing to start where people are at. Paul became as Jewish as was needed to reach the Jews as Gentile as he could to reach the Gentiles as weak as was necessary to reach the weak. Why that I might by all means save some.

Now, if you take that away, if you take that purpose away from this passage, it makes no sense. The bottom line was reaching people for the gospel to the Jews. I became a Jew.

Why Paul? Well, because, you know, I wanted to be liked. No. To those that are without the law, I became as one without the law.

Why? Well, because I was afraid of them and I didn't want any problems. No. Paul says, I did this that I might bring them to salvation, that I might win them.

Paul was prepared to cross the cultural gap instead of asking them to cross the cultural gap to him. And so very important. This means that we in our ministry are to be incarnational and missional.

These are two big words in Christian circles today. The church needs to be incarnational and missional. You say, what in the world does that mean? It means we need to be Christlike.

That's what it means. Basically, we should be Christlike. Aren't you thankful that God didn't say to us, listen, find a way to get to me.

And when you get here, we'll try and sort out this whole sin problem that you have. I mean, isn't that the epitome of all world religions? Find a way to get to God and then, you know, try and sort that whole problem out. But that's not Christianity.

No, no, that's not it at all. God was incarnated as a man to accomplish the mission for our salvation. God became a man in the form of Jesus Christ to accomplish the mission of our salvation.

He is incarnational. He is missional. We should be the same, meaning that we should be willing to step outside of our cultural way of life to reach those that have a different perspective, a different worldview, and to speak in terms that they can grasp, that they can understand.

Talking to a person who has no understanding about the Bible, talking to them in terms of justification and sanctification and, you know, being wholly set apart and consecrated to the one true God, and they're going to go, what in the world, what language are you speaking? He asks us, God does, to be incarnational, to be missional. Take some time this afternoon when you get home after all the football games and such. I commend you for being here.

I know there are things going on. Take some time to read John chapter 4. Great passage where we see this played out in the life of our Lord. As Jesus meets the woman at the well in Samaria, it was forbidden for a Jewish man to speak to a woman alone unless it was his wife.

Even more so, Jews never had any dealings with Samaritans. And yet there in John chapter 4, this woman comes out to the well near the city of Sychar, and Jesus is there by himself, and he says, would you give me a drink? And she wants to inform him that you've done a great faux pas here. You're a Jew.

You're not supposed to talk to me. I'm a Samaritan woman. Hello.

And then you watch the way that Jesus ministers to her, ultimately to bring salvation to her. Paul's reasoning, verse 23, and this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be a partaker thereof with you. Paul was a bondservant of Christ.

He did what he did not for his own sake, but for the sake of the king, for the sake of his kingdom, and for the sake of the message of that kingdom. This I do for the gospel's sake. I will lay aside my liberties.

I will renounce my rights if it means that I can bring the gospel to those that don't know it, have not received it. Now, if there's something in your heart today that nods in agreement with this, then I want you to consider, what would the world look like if this was our purpose? And I believe that biblically it is. If we recognize this to be our purpose, and we oriented our lives in such a way to meet that purpose, what would be the effect? Could you imagine the impact if we in this room today did that? What if just half of the church here at Calvary Chapel of Escondido, church about 600 adults, what if 300 of them said, I am going to commit myself and my life to winning souls.

And this year, just this year, I'm going to seek to win just one person to Christ and to disciple them to also win another person to Christ. If 300 of us said, I'm going to commit myself to winning to just one person and discipling them this year, then 300 would win 300. And then those 600 would win 600.

And those 1200 would win 1200. And those 2400 going on, in 10 years, you'd have over 300,000. Now, there's a lot of people in America today, a lot of Christians crying foul about the shift of the culture in America.

And that's largely because the American church has been more like a thermometer than a thermostat. And we are not engaging our culture. If we determined that, you know, we are going to shift our whole lives to be in line with this purpose.

He who saves souls is wise. If we were going to do that, could you imagine the shift of the culture just in Escondido? If we committed to doing that, just this group here, if that started to happen in the church in America today, I guarantee you, CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, they'd all be freaking out. It'd be kind of cool to watch the transformation that would take place.

You think the cultural slide is crazy right now? Could you imagine if the church engaged in the culture in that way? There would be like a cultural Haitian earthquake in the United States of America. We, who are a part of Calvary Chapel, have been labeled evangelical Christians. Did you know that you're an evangelical Christian? Did you know that evangelical Christians, there's many in the culture in America today that are scared of evangelical Christians? We are actually labeled in some circles as extremists.

In the 2008 presidential campaign, there were many people that were afraid of the evangelical vote because we're narrow-minded and we're issue voters and we're immovable on many subjects. And so they're very fearful of that kind of thing. Do you even know what an evangelical Christian is? I want to read to you from Barna Research their definition of born-again and evangelical Christians.

A born-again Christian is defined as a person who said that they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and who also indicated that they believe when they die they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as Savior. That's a born-again Christian. How many of you would identify with that today? Raise your hand.

I don't see as many hands as I would hope. Maybe we need to do an altar call right now. That's a born-again Christian.

Barna goes on. Evangelicals meet the criteria of born-again plus seven other conditions. Those include saying that their faith is very important in their life today, believing they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians, believing that Satan exists, believing that eternal salvation is possible only through grace and not works, believing that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth, asserting that the Bible is accurate in all that it teaches, and describing God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today.

That's the description of an evangelical Christian. I believe that's a good definition. And so we have to wonder, are we evangelical Christians? If so, that means that we are Christians who share our faith with people who don't share our faith.

Now certainly you know some people who don't share your faith. Friends, family members, co-workers. And I guarantee you probably just had at least one person come to mind.

I want you to do something. Close your eyes. I want you to think about that person.

Someone's name, someone's face just popped into your mind. There they are. While your eyes are closed, I want you to ask the Lord to begin to work in that person's heart.

By his spirit, evangelism starts by the spirit of God. Now here's the heavy one. Ask the Lord to give you an opportunity to share your faith with him this year.

Now open your eyes. Write their name down. Not on your bulletin.

You'll throw it away. You probably have a blank page in the back of your Bible. It's called the soul page.

Okay, I made that up. But write their name on it. I challenge you.

Begin to pray that God by his spirit will work in their life. Begin to pray that God will give you an opportunity to share it with them. I guarantee you God will answer that prayer.

And then pray that God will equip you to be able to minister to them and disciple them. Now you say, I cannot disciple someone. Well, sign up for the school discipleship.

We'll equip you to do that. Paul was willing to deny himself certain liberties, certain pleasures, certain enjoyment, certain things. He was willing to deny himself that he might be able to better minister with those that he was coming in contact with.

How was he able to deny himself? Was he just stronger than the rest of us? No, he was also able to discipline himself. Verse 24, moving from self-denial, we come to self-discipline. Knowing not that they which run in a race all run, but one receives the prize.

So run that you may obtain the prize. The Corinthians understood the concept of training for an athletic event. Throughout the ancient Greek and then Roman empires, there were what were called the Panhellenic Games.

You've probably heard of the Olympic Games. We still do those today. They were restarted in the late 1800s.

But it was part of ancient Greek culture, the games. Just behind the Olympic Games were the Isthmian Games. And they took place in Corinth every other year, the second and fourth year of the Olympiad.

And so the people would gather there to compete in these games. They were named the Isthmian Games because the isthmus that was there in the city of Corinth. The games ran from the 6th century BC to the 4th century AD.

For a very long time, these games went on. And those athletes that would prepare for these games would prepare for a 10-month period of time. And the last month of that rigorous training took place in the city of Corinth, there in their gymnasium, there in their fields.

And everybody had an opportunity to watch the athletes preparing. And many of those athletes were shown to be disqualified, castaways in the training alone. And then the games would come.

There are many different things that they would compete with. One was a race. And Paul says, do you not know that those that run a race, they all run, but only one receives the prize.

They all train vigorously. They all deny themselves. They all discipline themselves.

But only one wins that prize on the day. You, church, he says, so run in a way that you can win the prize. Every man that strives, verse 25, for mastery is temperate in all things.

Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown. But we, an incorruptible crown. Those who prepare for the opportunity to compete at master's level athletics don't casually train.

Kind of, you know, two, maybe three times a week. They don't casually train. They strive for the mastery of that sport.

The Greek word for strive there in verse 25 is agonizomai, from which we get our English word agonize. The inner drive that causes them to discipline themselves, to govern nearly every aspect of their lives. When others are sleeping, they are awake training.

When others are indulging in the pleasures of this life, they are denying themselves those same pleasures and hungers of their body. When others would quit, they press on. They are determined.

They are disciplined. They are controlled. They are governed.

They are temperate, says Paul. The sleep, diet, and exercise of an athlete at that level, it's not determined by their rights or their liberties. It's determined by the rigorous training schedule, whether they want to or

not.

Now, they do it to obtain a corruptible crown, says Paul. The winner of the Isthmian Games was given a braided pine crown. How many of you would go, yeah, I'm going to discipline myself for a braided pine crown.

Right on. Now, with that came some notoriety in the culture, and they were often looked to as a hero. Sometimes they might even fashion a marble statue of them, but it wasn't immortal, was it? It was a corruptible crown.

Paul says we strive for an incorruptible crown. We are in a race. Many times that illustration is used in the New Testament to speak of the walk that we have as believers, the mission that we're on.

We're in a race. It's not a race against one another in the body of Christ, but a race for our king and for his kingdom. Not a race where one wins, but one in which all who pay the price of careful training can win.

What do they win? Well, what's the context of this passage? They win souls. Now, I know you can take this passage, and many have, and they've used it to preach great messages about how we win this great, abundant life, and we win Christ. Those things are all true.

There's other passages of Scripture that support the fact that we win Christ, and we win an inheritance that's incorruptible. We win a crown of righteousness that does not fade away. But what's the context of the passage? He who runs wins what? He wins souls.

Five times he said, I want to win Jews. I want to win those that are under the law. I want to win Gentiles.

I want to win those who are whoever, weak. Every Christian runs his own race, says MacArthur, enabling each one of us to be a winner, winning souls to Christ. He goes on to say, holding tightly to our liberties and rights is a sure way to lose the race of soul winning.

And so this being the case, we ought to run in a way that we can win the prize. We already have immortality in Jesus Christ. We've already been promised a crown of righteousness to those who endure and press on.

When I read this last week, it cut me to the heart, and I didn't want to be the only one cut to the heart. So MacArthur says, the athlete's disciplined self-control is a rebuke of the half-hearted, out-of-shape Christians who do almost nothing to prepare themselves to witness to the lost. Ouch.

Let me read it again. We'll tear it off slowly. The athlete's disciplined self-control is a rebuke of the half-hearted, out-of-shape Christians who do almost nothing to prepare themselves to witness to the lost, and consequently seldom do.

I didn't say it. MacArthur did. I just read it.

So you can write to him and tell him I didn't like that quote. Paul continues, verse 26, I therefore so run, not as uncertainly, and so I fight, not as one who beats the air. He shifts from the illustration of running now to the illustration of a fight, and he says, I don't fight like a shadow boxer, just kind of jumping around and rocky, you know, that whole thing.

I'm engaged in the battle, he says, fighting the good fight of faith. But I keep my body under, and I bring it into subjection, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified. When Paul says, I keep my body under, it literally means, in the Greek, to beat black and blue, to hit under the eye.

Now, I have to say, many have wrongly interpreted and used this verse for all sorts of crazy self-mutilation and flagellation over the years within the church. That's not what it's saying at all, that we should beat ourselves up physically. Paul's saying, I put myself through the training like an athlete so that I might be able to successfully accomplish the mission.

I bring my body into subjection, which that means is, I make my body my slave. Now, most of us, we are slave to our bodies. The body says, eat, so we eat.

Our body says, eat more, so we eat more. Our body says, sleep, so we sleep. Keep sleeping, we keep sleeping.

And if you've ever read the Screwtape Letters, you know a great book by C.S. Lewis. And he shows these little devils in this book about how, remind him that he's hungry. Remind him that he's tired.

These devils talking about their client, you and me. Whenever he starts to think about spiritual things, just remind him that it's really kind of warm in here this morning. Remind him that, oh man, I'm hungry right now.

The enemy does a good job with our flesh, doesn't he? Paul endeavored to make his body his slave. But we could spend weeks on that statement, I think. An athlete endeavoring to win could not allow this manner of life.

And so Paul says we ought not either. He runs when he would rather be resting. He eats a balanced meal when he would rather have a chocolate sundae.

He goes to bed when he would rather stay up. He gets up early when he would rather sleep. An athlete leads his body, he does not follow it.

It is his slave and not the other way around. I believe that God, at least in my life, and I'm quite sure for our church as a whole, is speaking this very thing to us. We have been distracted by our flesh, by our culture, emphasized by the enemy, no doubt, to think that this life is all about us.

That we were created just for the enjoyment of the things of this life. Now don't get me wrong, God has created us, created so many wonderful things for us to enjoy. But ultimately the purpose is his pleasure, his glorification, that he would be exalted among all the peoples of this earth, which means that we who already know him and exalt him in our lives ought to endeavor to reach those who don't know him, that his glory and his exaltation would be extended.

And so we have to take the time to question, are there things in my life, Lord, that are hindering me from being the best witness and worshiping you in that way? Are there liberties that I'm holding on to that perhaps you want me to lay aside for the sake of the king, for the sake of your kingdom, for the sake of the gospel? Are there rights that I need to renounce that although they're available to me, perhaps they're hindering me from being an effective witness in the culture? I think the church in America has been hampered in their witness for the very fact that we've forgotten that we are not here to serve ourselves but

serve God. And so I'm praying that the Lord would shake us up first, that he would start with us. At the end of Jeremiah chapter five, God says to the prophet Jeremiah, the prophets prophesy falsely, the priests bear rule by their own strength and my people love to have it so.

But what will you do in the end? The question comes down to us. How will we apply what God is speaking to us? It's very clear what he's saying to us. I mean, we don't have to spend a lot of time interpreting what he's saying here.

But we can, by his spirit, submit ourselves to him and say, God, would you work this into our lives today, this week, this month, this year? God, transform us that we would live more for you than for ourselves. I can't even imagine what would happen in our nation if just half of the church within Calvary Chapel, if we determined to do that by the power of the spirit. Remember, God chose 12 ordinary men, one of them denied and departed, 10 of them afterwards, God turned the world upside down.

Actually, I think he turned it right side up, but the estimation of the people of their day was, man, these Christians have turned the world upside down. I would love to hear Rachel Maddow on MSNBC say, these Christians are turning the world upside down. Yes.

Amen. And may it be that she would come to the knowledge of the truth as well. Let's stand and pray together.

Father, we certainly need your strength by your spirit to do the things that we see in your word. And so we pray as we prepare to go from here, that you would fill us to overflowing with your spirit. Empty us of anything that is hindering you from having full control.

Take those things from us. I know, Lord, that's a dangerous prayer for us to pray. But God, we want to be endeavoring to bring forth your word into this dark world, unhindered Lord, work that in my life, work that into the lives of my brothers and sisters here this morning, for we ask it in Jesus name.

Amen. Amen.

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