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Date: October 15, 2023

Title: RUNNING FOR THE PRIZE

Text: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, ESV

Today we'll look at the final few verses of 1 Corinthians chapter 9. Last week we looked at the larger section of this chapter. Here Paul SPEAKS of his motives for ministry and what it means to run life's race with purpose. We saw how Paul was compelled to preach. He said – *"Woe to me if I don't preach the gospel"* AND... We saw how he devoted his life to the good of others, seeking to be "ALL things to ALL people" so that SOME might be saved.

We'll pick up where we left off as we take a closer look at these final few verses of chapter 9, where Paul talks about living your life and or pursuing your calling like it means everything in the world ... because IT DOES. As we see Paul's attitude expressed in these verses, there's a word that comes to mind: TENACITY, which can be defined as – the persistent determination to hang on and never let go, to stay with something through the very end. This was Paul's attitude toward his ministry and his calling. It's an attitude that every person with a calling needs to emulate. Without tenacity, nothing we do will last. I can guarantee you that when you take on a role of leadership – at home, at work, at church, in the community, or anywhere else – you will have an opportunity at some point to throw in the towel. There will be a time when walking away from it all will seem like the most attractive option and will be the easiest thing to do. At that point, when you decide to keep on keeping on in spite of the challenges and difficulties, you earn your stripes as a leader, as a spouse, as a parent, as a servant of God. I agree with a statement I read earlier this week – "Most of our failures are the result of quitting too soon." It's one thing to be defeated – to be outscored by the other team when the final buzzer sounds – and it's quite another thing to give up early and go home just because you've fallen behind in the count, and things aren't as easy as you thought they should be. Your purpose in life must be pursued with tenacity. What does that mean? It can be summarized in three words: Direction. Determination. Discipline.

If you look at every person who has accomplished something great in this life, you'll see that these three words define their work ethic. Direction. Determination. Discipline. You see these qualities not only in great leaders today, but you also see these in great leaders throughout history, and these characteristics are especially noted in the great leaders of the Bible. The Apostle Paul is a good example. He preached sermons and planted churches and saved souls and made disciples and wrote books of the Bible and he faced all kinds of opposition along the way – sickness, poverty, persecution, abandonment, imprisonment – and he kept on and he kept on and he kept on, until finally he was able to say... *"...the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day..."* (2 Timothy 4:6-8). What a great thing to be able to say.

In 1 Corinthians 9 Paul talks about his philosophy of ministry. These last few verses of this chapter are among my favorites in all of Scripture. Today we'll look at these verses and a few others as we take aim at this essential quality: Tenacity. To live life like it matters, there are three imperatives that we must resolve to live by. Let's take a look at each one. First of all, ...

1. Don't Look Back. Jesus said... *"No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God"* (Luke 9:62). He's saying that the Christian life is a forward-looking life. It always looks ahead. It never looks back. Life can't be lived in reverse. It can only be lived moving forward. Someone who worked with W.A. Criswell, who for 50-plus years was the pastor of the historic First Baptist Church of Dallas, said that one phrase he remembers Dr. Criswell most often repeating is, "Never look back." If you're not careful, you can waste your life away looking at where you've been, reliving past hurts, past mistakes, past regrets, past failures. You can waste your whole life thinking, "If only, if only, if only." Those who serve in leadership roles are especially prone to do this, because wins and losses and successes and failures rest on our shoulders. One

basketball coach said that even 15 years after losing a championship game, he is still tormented by some of his play calls during the final game. He keeps asking himself, “Why didn’t I do it differently?” Who was this coach? Was he the coach of the Celtics, the Knicks, the UCLA Bruins? No. He was the coach of a little league team in a tiny town in Tennessee. And he couldn’t stop looking back. To be clear, it’s good to learn from your mistakes so that you don’t repeat them again and again. But... It’s a bad idea to wallow in them. This is how the Apostle Paul described his approach to life. He said... *“But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 3:13-14). And in today’s text he said... *“Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air”* (vs. 26). What’s he talking about? He’s talking about focus. Living forward, rather than backward. Last week I mentioned George Allen, the NFL coach who had a sign on his desk that said, “Is what I’m doing right now taking me closer to my ultimate goal of winning?” This is what we must learn to ask ourselves every day: Am I pursuing the prize or am I still parked in the past? To live your life like it matters, make it a point to never look back. Secondly, ...

2. Don’t Give Up. In the book of Proverbs, Solomon said... *“For though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again, but the wicked are brought down by calamity”* (24:16). It’s not that we never make mistakes. We certainly do. The difference, however, is that we don’t use any mistake as an excuse to quit. We get back up and try again. William Blake said... *“Mistakes are easy, mistakes are inevitable, but THERE IS NO MISTAKE SO GREAT AS THE MISTAKE OF NOT GOING ON!”* When you fall down, or when life knocks you down, or when the battle seems to go on forever ... that’s when you’re most likely to quit. BUT... That’s when you most need to press a little harder and push a little farther. In the movie *Rocky Balboa*, Sylvester Stallone is talking to his son about tenacity in life. He tells him that the world is not all sunshine and rainbows, that it’s mean and nasty and no matter how tough you are, it will sometimes beat you to your knees and keep you there if you let it. And then he says... *“You, me, or nobody is gonna hit as hard as life, but it ain’t about how hard you hit, it’s about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward, how much you can take and keep moving forward. That’s how winning is done.”* That’s how winning is done! It may not be grammatically correct, but in every other measurable way, this statement is quite accurate. It’s never a question of getting knocked down, or even falling down. These are inevitable. It’s a question of getting back up. Babe Ruth used to say, *“You just can’t beat the person who never gives up.”* That’s true. Another way to say it: A man who WON’T be stopped, CAN’T be stopped. Ross Perot said, *“Most people give up just when they’re about to achieve success. They quit on the one-yard line. They give up at the last minute of the game, one foot away from a winning touchdown.”* Apostle Paul says in today’s text... *“Run in such a way as to get the prize”* (vs. 24). Live life like it matters. Don’t give up before you cross the finish line. Thirdly, ...

3. Don’t Throw It Away. Listen to what Paul said. *“I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I MYSELF WILL NOT BE DISQUALIFIED FOR THE PRIZE”* (vs. 27). When we fail, we struggle with the temptation to quit. When we succeed, we sometimes struggle with the temptation to coast or to compromise. Or to give a little less than one hundred percent from here on out. Once we succeed, we will inevitably find ourselves presented with the opportunity to throw it all away. There are more examples here than I have time to number – in ministry, in business, in politics, in sports, and especially in relationships. When you get what you’ve always wanted, you will be given, at some point, the chance to throw it all away. When we see it happen among the rich and famous, it’s easy for us to say, “tsk tsk,” as if we’re above it all. But if the Apostle Paul knew that he had the potential to be disqualified from the race, where does that leave the rest of us? Think of any high-profile Christian that you admire – Max Lucado, Billy Graham, Tim Tebow – whoever it might be. You have something in common with this person. You are both the same in this way: If either of you are going to grow spiritually, you both have to take the same steps. You both have to commit to the same spiritual disciplines: Bible study, prayer, worship, service, and fellowship. No level of achievement exempts anyone from following the fundamentals of spiritual growth. Athletes never get to the point where they no longer need to stretch before a workout. Even the greats still need to prepare for each competition. This never ends, not even when a player is headed for the Hall of Fame. In the same way, Christians never get

to the point where the basics of the Christian life are unnecessary. We'll never get to the point where we're no longer required to forgive others, or love our enemies, or serve with humility, or give sacrificially, or walk obediently. In this way, living the Christian life looks the same for an old saint as for the new convert. The basics NEVER change. Those who live life like it matters understand this principle. They understand that the Christian life requires the same discipline today that it required ten years ago, twenty years ago, fifty years ago. You never reach the place where you can coast out the remainder of your calling. Those who live life like it matters never sell out and never set their calling aside, even when success makes it possible. Instead, we continue to run at full speed until the finish line is crossed.

CONCLUSION. Direction. Determination. Discipline. **Direction** means that... You don't look back. You don't live in the past, AND... You keep moving forward. **Determination** means that... You don't give up, not even when it's easiest to give up. Instead, you get up and try again. **Discipline** means that... You don't sell out. You don't kick back, and you don't coast. You cross the finish line with the same level of commitment that you demonstrated coming off the starting block. We must remain tenacious. This means that you NEVER QUIT MOVING FORWARD, because... YOU NEVER QUIT. May we all resolve to live each day of our life like every moment matters ... because IT DOES!