

1 Corinthians 9:13-14, 23-27 (New Revised Standard Version)

Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is sacrificed on the altar? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

One time when I was flying back from a business meeting,
a bottle of after-shave leaked out into my suitcase,
and of course, everything inside it smelled like Old Spice.

So too the savory truth of God's love and grace, the Good News,
like that fragrance should seep into every aspect of our lives
influencing and transforming all that we say and do,
toward a life that is blessed, meaningful and useful.

So too, after his experience on the road to Damascus, for Paul,
everything about his life was for the sake of the Gospel,
as God's grace through Jesus Christ permeated his all.

Everything from then on,
was all about proclaiming the Good News and building up the Church.

And after Paul moved on from Corinth to evangelize elsewhere,
others came along who sowed doubts and challenged his teaching,
claiming that because he supported himself as a humble tentmaker,
he really wasn't a certified church professional.

So Paul explains to his critics in Corinth, that yes,
it would have been appropriate to require contributions from them,
but for their sake and for the good & benefit of their faith,
he did not ask or demand the support he was due, vs. 13-14, 23,

Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is sacrificed on the altar? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those

who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel. But I have made no use of any of these rights,... **I do it all for the sake of the gospel...**

**Paul chose the lower status of tentmaker for a higher & greater good,
and his ministry become a living example of the gospel itself,
in which Jesus Christ
emptied & humbled himself for the sake of sinners
casting aside his divine status, as the Son of God.**

That is the logic flow of Paul's reasoning and teaching.
Jesus humbled himself obedient to the cross, for our sake,
so too Paul humbled himself, refusing his due as an apostle
for the sake of the Christians at the church in Corinth.

Just as he urged them to restrain from foods sacrificed to idols
for the sake of the weaker more recent converts,
and to build up the church, the body of Christ...

...so too in a similar way,

Paul did not press his right to receive their financial support.

**The lesson is about serving with humility for a purpose,
which is to accommodate for the higher and greater good
of building up the church and to bring others to Christ,
willing to deny himself anything that distracts from that goal.**

**This is our call, to be Christ-centered rather than self-centered,
to humble ourselves by placing the good and welfare of others
over and above our own comfort, our sense of pride and desires.**

If Christ becomes our center **then something incredible can happen.**

For when we no longer see ourselves as the center of our universe,
that then creates space for genuine humility and transformation,
as love of God & others takes the lead and focus off of self.

That is the power of the gospel to change and transform everything,
the power to change us **away from self-centered to Christ-centered**,
and invest our lives to make God's gracious love known to others.

Next section, Paul compares his efforts to proclaim the Good News,
to the extraordinary efforts of athletes who compete in sports,
their willingness to sacrifice so to win their goal,
as Paul earned his own way, to bring them the gospel.

Historically, the city of Corinth was an active and rowdy seaport,
notorious in the ancient world as a wildly corrupt city of depravity.

However the city of Corinth was also a great center for sports,

where athletes were heroes, respected, honored and celebrated,
because such athletes rose above that environment of debauchery,
and were focused, and committed their whole lives toward
achieving athletic excellence – no matter what the cost.

Their lives ran entirely counter to Corinthian self-indulgence,
willing to endure training and discipline to achieve their best,
and all-out effort & commitment to improve so to win their race.

Paul compares the Christian life to running in such a race, vs. 24~25,

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one.

Like fervent and committed athletes
with their single-minded focus on excellence and winning,
so too, Jesus Christ is Paul's single-minded focus,
the primary purpose for all that he does and says.

And the race that Paul wants to win, is not just getting into heaven,
but he strives and he makes sacrifices in his life and ministry
for the purpose and prize of bringing others to faith.

The faithful Christian life is not just responding to an alter call.
It isn't just a one-time decision that you do once and you're done,
but discipleship is an ongoing recommitment all along the way,
an ever-continuing **adventure of a growing relationship with God,**
as our lives are gradually being healed & transformed by God.

It's like this, suppose each of our lives is represented by \$1000,
and that Christian discipleship is turning it all over to Jesus,
as we say, "Here Lord, take my life, take all of it."

However, the ongoing the challenge of discipleship isn't that we
just hand over a thousand-dollar bill, and then we're all done,
but rather, that we do it, a penny or maybe a nickel at a time.
Decision by decision, temptation by temptation, day by day,
continuing as over time as we learn to trust and obey,
and as our faith gradually builds and grows deeper.

Doing youth ministry, I remember young lives touched on a retreat,
with the youth promising to give their lives over to the Lord,
to turn from sinful ways, toward righteous and godly lives,

and for the rest of the retreat they'd always seem to be smiling
even glowing as they read their Bible, prayed & felt God nearby.

They'd be thrilled & confident that they'd given their life to Jesus.

Then Monday would roll around, they'd soar back to life in school,
and usually by 2nd or 3rd period, they'd be in defeated despair,
because living the Christian life was a bit more complicated
than that single decision made while singing "Kum ba Yah"
sitting around a campfire under the stars and pine trees.

The hard part is trying to **keep running** the race toward the goal,
the distant goal of our lives more fully submitted to God's purpose,
because a faithful Christian life isn't achieved all at once,
but over a life-time, **no more than a nickel at a time.**

As Paul continues explaining Christian commitment, vs. 25

*Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an
imperishable one.*

Unlike the victory wreath that Corinthian athletes were awarded
that were perishable and would eventually wither and dry out,
God's promises are sure and eternal – **imperishable.**

So if athletes would sacrifice so much for a perishable reward,
what level of sacrifice should we be willing or eager to make
for God's rewards that are not perishable, but eternal and sure?

Going further, Paul continues his athletic comparison, vs. 26-27

*So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, ...
The idea is that we live our faith with the fervor of an athlete.*

Paul's point is to have in mind what we are trying to achieve,
to know why do I read the Bible, and why do I pray?
Why do we gather for worship, and why do we serve?

If we don't know why, and don't keep that goal & reason ever before us,
then how can we keep doing those things well and faithfully
toward the mission, the purpose we are trying to achieve?

So now, about us, and what we are doing today, the Lord's Supper,
where by grace everyone is invited to gather over a meal together.

The meal is a sign of God's gracious love and invitation to grow
and a call for us to become our best and make a real difference,
but it's entirely our decision how we will choose to respond.

This is not about our salvation, or as if we must work to earn it,
but it's about our response, which is the most visible evidence
that God's grace has permeated and saturated our lives.

There is a world of hurt and need out in our community,
but are we involved with others even enough to notice,
and is our Christian faith making any real difference?

Is there anything about us that's decidedly alive & committed,
anything that's meaningful and fervent about our faith,

anything of God's grace that's splashing out from us?

Like it or not, this is our world and circumstance,

where God has placed us **intentionally**, called us and equipped us
to serve according to his will & purpose **for such a time as this**.

So we are invited to be a part of healing & transforming this world,

by living a life defined by God's grace, purpose and intention,

serving God in all the opportunities of life we encounter,
which means , **that the church, this family of Christians**
exists for the sake of people who are not even here yet -

- and that our assignment and task as Christians and Church

is to help them come into a relationship with Jesus Christ,
which was the central focus of Paul's entire life & ministry.

So, God's love and grace toward us, how are we choosing to respond?

Listen and reflect on Paul's words: 1 Corinthians 9:23-24, Philipians 3:14,

Everything I do is all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings. Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, ... Run in such a way that you may win it... press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.