



Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Laborers

RUN TO WIN • Howard Hendricks

When you make following Christ your consuming desire, your life will change in extraordinary ways.

When I was a student at Wheaton College in the early 1940's, I ran track. At that time, the world's indoor mile champion, Gil Dodds, worked out with us. I can still remember when he came over while I was stretching my legs and slapped me on the bottom, saying, "Come on, Howie, let's go around." It was the first time we had met.

While going around the track, I found myself four or five paces in front of Gil, running as fast as I could and thinking, "If you're going to be the world's indoor mile champion, you ought to run a little faster."

When we finished the first lap, he slapped me across the bottom again and said, "Come on, only three more laps to go." I thought I was going to die. I hadn't understood that he was planning to go around again.

I have followed Christ now for 56 years, and I have found that becoming a disciple of Christ is not like running a 100-yard dash. Christian discipleship is a marathon that spans an entire lifetime. You determine your success in this race not merely by your entrance but by your endurance; not by whether you finish the first lap ahead, but by whether you finish the whole race.

We tend to think that living the Christian life is a dream, rather than a discipline. But there's a war on. The bullets are real, and the casualties are high. Like running a race, following Christ involves discipline, as well as endurance. The apostle Paul learned this secret, and he tells us about it in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27:

"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. And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we are imperishable. Therefore, I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified."

Paul exhorts us to run to win. Everyone in a track meet runs, but only one wins. As disciples we all run, and we can all win. Paul did not run to gain salvation, but to gain rewards from service. He did not fear losing his salvation but losing his sense of accomplishing what he was called to do.

Because Paul says in this passage that he spent all of his life summoning others to the race, how tragic if, at the end of the race, he should be disqualified. And the fact that he was a great missionary leader, a brilliant theologian, a writer of many of the letters that comprise our New Testament, did not exempt him from the possibility of being disqualified.

Like Paul, in order to run to win we must develop a winner's mentality. We must understand that Christ is the One calling us to this race. The "winner's mentality" is simply the confidence that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.



From 1976 to 1984, I was the chaplain for the Dallas Cowboys, where I learned incredible lessons at the hands of a number of coaches in the National Football League. Mike Ditka, Dan Reeves, Joe Gibbs, Tom Landry, and others, have said to me before a game, “Howie, I’m scared to death of this one. My team is going to play not to lose.” They tell me playing halfheartedly not to lose, instead of playing wholeheartedly to win, is the fastest way to defeat. And in the Christian life, halfhearted efforts instead of wholehearted obedience leads to defeat.

I know of only two kinds of Christians: Those who say, “I can,” and those who say, “I can’t.” They’re both right. Our view of who Christ is determines which group we belong to. Do we view Him as being weak and distant, or do we believe that He has made His power readily available to us? We can’t run this race in our own strength, but we can through the strength that Christ gives us.

Winning is not determined until the end of the race. We may run those first few laps well, exhibiting traits of a disciple of Christ during those early stages of the Christian life, and maybe even into the mid years. But as we grow older in our faith, we tend to seek a rocking chair in which to sink our weary bones at the very time we ought to be most active for the Savior. Paul tells us to continue to run to win; there is no place in the Christian life for a retirement mentality.

In verse 25, Paul compares becoming a disciple to participating in the Isthmian Games, then held every two years and second only in prominence to the Olympics. Each athlete had to undergo strict training involving a rigorous diet, disciplined habits and the supervision of a judge who could disqualify a competitor at any point. To compete in these ancient games, no halfhearted effort would do.

Likewise, becoming a follower of Christ involves self-denial. Sometimes we may have to deny ourselves the good things, so that we may choose the better things. Athletes who expect to win have to train diligently. The only place where success comes before work, is in the dictionary.

Paul compares himself to the runner and to the boxer. As a runner, he concentrates on effort. As a boxer, he conserves energy. The phrase he uses, “beating the air,” describes a man in the ring who has sustained a severe blow to the head. The boxer is still going through the motions as a result of his training, but he’s not landing any blows. That’s what you call activity without accomplishment.

Paul wants every blow to count for the Savior. When we read the Book of Acts, we see that the pagans stayed up all night asking, “How in the world are we going to control this thing?” Today the Christians stay up at night, biting their nails, asking, “How in the world are we going to relate to this kind of society?” So Paul says, “I beat my body black and blue. I make any sacrifice. I make it my slave.”

Becoming Christ’s disciple always comes back to living a disciplined life. I ran across a fascinating piece about Audubon, the great naturalist, who was willing to undergo discomfort in order to learn the world of birds. His biographer writes:

“He counted his physical comforts as nothing compared with the success of his work. He’d rise at midnight, night after night, to go out into the swamps to study the habits of certain night hawks. He crouched motionless for hours in the dark and fog, feeling himself well rewarded if after weeks of waiting, he had secured one additional fact about a single bird.”

During one summer he went day after day to the bayous of New Orleans to observe a shy water fowl. He would have to stand almost to his neck in nearly stagnant water, scarcely breathing while countless poisonous moccasin snakes swam past his face

“‘It was not pleasant,’ he said as his face glowed with enthusiasm. ‘But what of that. I have a picture of a bird.’”

If Audubon could do that for the picture of a bird, what can we do to further the kingdom of God?



Paul's instructions are clear to us. But what about the implementation? What does running to win mean for the Christian community in the last decade of the 20th century? First, we must become distinctively different. We've got to make sure that the world does not squeeze us into its mold. The more we become like our culture, the less we are going to influence people for Christ.

We need to become more radical. How many times does the Bible tell us to quit living like the pagans? It's God's will that we should be holy, not happy; that we should avoid sexual immorality; that each of us learn how to control his own body in a way that's holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like those who do not know God, and like some of those who say they do.

If you want to be the most distinctive human being on planet earth, ask God to keep you clean. You will be a breed apart in your generation. During my last year with the Cowboys, we saw about ten people come to Christ, and every single one of them because of the quality marriage that middle linebacker Bob Breunig (now retired) has with his wife, Mary. Our society needs people who will provide another role model, an alternate lifestyle.

Second, you will have to be more disciplined and less defensive. One of my great concerns for the Church is that too many of us are too sensitive to criticism. If you like to be liked, you are never going to run to win. Being criticized is an occupational hazard in becoming a disciple.

Do you know what bothers me most about America? Evangelical Christians just aren't that significant. When you begin to make an impact on your community, whatever the ministry, you can be sure you will be criticized. The devil will let loose everything he has on you, in the form of criticism from others.

Third, make becoming a disciple the overriding purpose of your life. Quit spending so much time on secondary activities that matter so little. Life is like a coin: You can spend it any way you want, but you can only spend it once.

Live like a disciple of Christ.

Run to win.

Go for the gold.

Live and die with total fulfillment because you've invested your life in a cause that will outlast you.

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