

Week of July 15-21

OLYMPIC GOLD

Scripture Reading: Read 1 Corinthians 9

14 days, 18 hours and 22 minutes from now (as I write this), the world's attention will turn to London, England, and the opening ceremony of this year's Summer Olympics. These contests are an incredible opportunity for the world to come together in a display of athletic prowess and goodwill. Athletes from 216 nations will gather for the games of the XXX Olympiad to compete against their peers for Olympic gold. As they do so, they will carry on a tradition that dates back to 776 BC with the origin of the Olympic Games.

While the Olympics were the most popular games of ancient Greece, they weren't the only ones. The Isthmian Games, held near Corinth, took place the year before and the year after the Olympics. They, too, were popular athletic contests and many athletes from all over Greece came to compete for a chance to obtain the crown of victory. The basic athletic events of the Isthmian Games included foot races, wrestling, jumping, boxing, hurling the javelin, and throwing the discus.

It is against the backdrop of these Isthmian Games that Paul challenges the church in verses 24-27 of 1 Corinthians 9. The Corinthians would immediately have understood Paul's allusion to the games. They knew that athletes went into strict straining for many months before they competed. They also understood that for athletes to be able to compete, they would have to do according to the rules (2 Timothy 2:5). To violate the rules would result in disqualification. So, why would these athletes go to all that trouble? They wanted a chance to gain the victor's crown; a crown of leaves that would fade.

If this is how the athletes of the games competed for temporal glory, how much more, according to Paul, should the believers in Corinth *"run in such a way as to get the prize"* of eternal glory. Paul modeled for them how to do it when he founded and pastored the church. He didn't just tell them what to do as a bystander coach. No, he was a player-coach, showing them personally how it's done, how to serve others, how to be pure, how to avoid idolatry, and how to become "all things to all people" in hopes of reaching people with the gospel. After Paul left Corinth, it was the church's turn to compete. Tragically, they abandoned the holy training regiment laid out for them by Coach Paul and adopted an "anything goes" grace-abusing lifestyle instead. They ceased competing according to the and made up their own along the way. Their lifestyle was going to get them disqualified from the team if they didn't repent. This is the reason for Paul's earnest warning here as well as the examples of disqualified "athletes" that he mentions early in 1 Corinthians 10.

Paul's warning, though, isn't just for those 1st century believers. It's also applicable for those of us in the 21st century church. We are called to holy living while we pursue God's "gold medal," the crown of life. Just a thought as we approach the Olympics!

Action Step & Prayer Focus: Carve some time out of your schedule to catch at least part of the Olympic Games this summer. Discover (either by listening to or reading a report of) the training regiment of at least one of the athletes who comes away with a gold medal this year. Then, reread 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 and ask the Lord to drive home the spiritual implications for you.

Take-a-way: *Going for gold isn't just for Olympians. It's also for Christians.*