

## **It Takes Discipline Just to Make it Through the Day**

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### **Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? (1 Corinthians 9:24)**

What a perfect time to be reading this passage of Scripture. The Winter Olympics are here! It's that wonderful event that comes once every 4 years! We spent the previous 6 months complaining about how expensive and wasteful it is for a country to host the Olympics. Shouldn't that money be used for something else? We were up in arms about China's human rights record, declaring them unfit to host the Games. For 6 months we've declared that the Olympic Games in China should be boycotted. And today? Today we scroll through our phones asking that most important ethical question: "Did Canada win any medals today?"

We love to turn on the TV to catch a glimpse of the Olympics. We see these elite athletes travelling at exceptional speeds and displaying other-worldly skills. We see people doing tricks and landing jumps that shouldn't be possible. It's hard to ignore the athletic spectacle that is the Olympics. We watch, knowing that these athletes have given their lives to their sport, and that only one person or one team will get the gold medal. All the athletes compete, but only one gets the gold.

### **Run in such a way as to get the prize. (1 Corinthians 9:24)**

We're educated by the TV commercials about how much training goes into competing at the Olympics. These athletes have spent years waking up early, staying late at practice, and, of course, eating Kraft peanut butter. These athletes are competing at the Olympics in Beijing because they're the kind of people that always gave a little bit extra in their training. These athletes would find a tiny flaw in their form or style and spend years correcting those tiny details.

In a word, these athletes are disciplined. When we watch the Olympics we are watching years and sometimes decades of discipline on display. These athletes have an end goal in mind, and they will do everything that they possibly can to get there. They compete and train in such a way as to win the prize.

### **Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. (1 Corinthians 9:25)**

All of us try to be disciplined. Some of us are good at being disciplined. Some of us tried being disciplined – it was the most difficult 35 minutes of our lives! Most of us fail discipline in one way or another.

Living in a disciplined way feels restrictive. Whether it is changing how we eat, or changing we spend money on, or changing how we spend our time, discipline feels very, very confining.

Living a disciplined life sometimes feels like bondage, but it is actually the path to freedom! We see this freedom on full display at the Olympics. It took years of strict training for a speed skater to work on

their form. But when I see speed skaters stay in control while going insane speeds on the track, it doesn't look like bondage – that looks like freedom. When I see a snowboarder fly through the air in slope style, the grace and speed they have in the air looks like freedom. None of that freedom takes place without the focus on details that comes from strict training.

NT Wright describes the freedom that comes through discipline through the example of music.

*Widespread human experience suggests that freedom often emerges through a pathway that seems anything but “free”. The freedom to improvise musically or to compose music of your own will only come when the disciplines of learning the scales and the technique for the instruments have been mastered. People sometimes imagine that when musicians improvise, as in jazz and other forms, they are just making up anything, playing the first thing that comes into their heads. They couldn't be more wrong. Jazz depends, just as classical music does, on the musicians knowing exactly what's going on, listening intently to one another, and making sure that even the most apparently daring riffs and outlandish extra passages come in to land at the right moment, in the right key. The music may sound strange to those unused to the idiom, but it has its own deep coherence. That is the difference between freedom and chaos. (Broken Signposts, 119)*

When we watch the Olympics and listen to music, we encounter freedom on full display. That freedom we encounter is impossible without discipline; it's impossible without strict training.

### **They do it to get a crown that will not last, (1 Corinthians 9:25)**

Discipline can lead to freedom, but it doesn't always guarantee success.

There are tens of thousands of elite athletes that are not playing in professional leagues, and it's not for lack of discipline.

For some of us, no matter how hard we train and practice, we will never master things the way we want to. We can log our 10,000 hours at any given skill, but it doesn't mean we'll succeed. Our attempt at painting a cat may always end up looking like a deformed, three legged giraffe. Discipline does not always get the results we want when it comes to skills and abilities.

### **But we do it to get a crown that will last forever. (1 Corinthians 9:25)**

The wild part is this: Paul speaks of a reward available to all of us. All of us can be disciplined in our lives, and that discipline can be rewarded. Paul began by speaking of training done to achieve a prize only available to only one. He now speaks of rewards available to everyone.

There is training and discipline that we can do that is eternal in nature.

**Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air.**

When Paul talks about discipline, he's not talking about discipline for discipline's sake. This discipline is towards something bigger. There is a bigger purpose behind the discipline. There is a direction of the disciplined life Paul is describing.

Some of us have been taught discipline for discipline's sake. "Discipline builds character!" Whether it was a specific habit that you were taught or a specific chore, when we do not see any connection between the habit and real life, we ditch the habit if it is no longer required of us. If you made your bed ONLY because a parent told you to, you are ditching that habit as soon as you live on your own. If you read a specific Bible study book every day only because someone told you to, you are ditching that book as soon as it has no connection to your everyday life. Discipline needs focus. Discipline needs a direction. Discipline needs a reason behind it. Discipline for discipline's sake feels like bondage.

### **No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave**

This statement sounds extreme, but we know this too be true. When you have a purpose behind your discipline, you will go to great lengths to discipline yourself. You will put yourself through pain in order to master what you are trying to accomplish. When someone is determined to learn how to play the guitar, they will put up with callouses on their fingers. When an athlete wants to master their sport, they will push themselves to the point of exhaustion, and they will push muscles and joints to the point of needing hours of ice and stretching afterwards. Excellence at anything takes costly discipline.

Paul's example comes from the world of sports. I've used some examples of discipline from sports and music. But Paul is obviously not really talking about sports when he gives this teaching. He's certainly not talking about music. He's talking about discipline as it relates to living his everyday Christ-following life. He is disciplined so he can preach to others and do so well. He is disciplined so that not a single part of his life disqualifies him from his role and ability. Paul puts himself and his body through great discipline so that he can do what he knows God has asked of him very, very well.

Paul's discipline is never for the sake of discipline. He is disciplined for a higher purpose.

### **so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.**

Paul is willing to be in difficult conversations for the sake of telling others about Jesus. Paul is willing to be in the middle of conflict between opposing points of view so that he can tell others about Jesus. Paul is willing to suffer physical harm so he can tell others about Jesus. Paul is willing to be in prison so he can tell others about Jesus. Every choice that Paul makes is an act of discipline. He has a higher goal. He wants all people to know about the crucified and resurrected Saviour of the world, Jesus Christ. He is so focused on this goal that he is disciplined in a costly way. He is so focused on his goal that the WAY in which he shares Christ can be scrutinized and deeply examined and found to be done with integrity.

What do you really want to accomplish in your life? It will take costly discipline to get you there. When that discipline has purpose, that discipline will give you freedom.

I don't know about you, but lately I am finding it difficult to set very big goals. Over the past two weeks especially, I am finding it difficult just to make it through the day.

I am finding that it takes discipline just to make it through the day.

When life is polarized and full of conflict; when you find yourself deeply disappointed by people you used to rely on; when you find yourself frightened for the future of your country, life is exhausting.

My most frequent responses to these realities of instability and conflict are anger and fear. And I know those responses are not helpful. I am angry all the time. Where does it get me? Nowhere. Expressing my anger at the object of my anger – where does that get me?

I also know that anger and fear are not the fruit of the spirit. And that the fruit of the Spirit is in short supply in my life. You know, all those annoying little details: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. These are in short supply. And yet they are available to us.

It is much easier to be angry, and much easier to be afraid. It takes daily (hourly!) discipline for me to access these things made available to me by Christ. Daily discipline for me has required of me dozens of small decisions.

It has taken discipline for me to log off of Twitter and Facebook. It has taken discipline to stop doom scrolling the news and people's reactions to the news.

It has taken discipline for me to listen to perspectives that are different than mine. It has taken discipline to really listen and not just react.

It has taken discipline to block certain people on social media. It's also taken discipline to not block some people on social. It takes discipline to continue to allow access of certain people to my life, and it takes discipline to say to others, "That's enough."

It's taken discipline to be fully present with my emotions and fears instead of bingeing Saturday Night Live videos on YouTube. It takes discipline to acknowledge my emotions in the moment and recognize that God is present with me when I feel these things.

All of these are moments of discipline I've had to remind myself over and over and over again every day for the past two weeks. All of these small decisions are discipline with purpose. If I do not discipline myself toward the fruit of the Spirit, I'm not going to be ok. I want peace in my life. It's available to me. But it takes discipline to live in it.

Peace in my own life that's just for me is not enough. I want other people to be compelled by the peace that Christ offers. The peace of Christ is absent for many people, including Christians. But that peace is available to me and to everyone through Jesus Christ. And sharing that peace with others will take continued acts of discipline.

The life of Christ is available to you. And it is available through you to others.

Discipline matters. Not as a means in and of itself. Discipline matters as a way of Christ transforming our lives, even in times when we are not ok. Discipline matters as a way of us sharing that life transforming message of Christ with others, too.

**Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave, so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.**