



# The Tri-Cities Edifier

Volume 9

March 13, 2022

No. 11

## “Run in Such a Way”

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*Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.*  
—1 Corinthians 9:24—

There are few times in the New Testament record where we find good questions being asked of the Lord. More often than not the questions he was asked were only asked to test him (Matthew 16:1; 19:3; 22:35; Luke 11:16; John 8:6).

But there was a time when he was asked, “Lord, are there few who are saved?” (Luke 13:23) Now this is a good question because it is an important question, and one most of us would like to know the answer to. The Lord’s reply begins with a strong word of admonition — the word “strive” comes from a Greek word from which we get the English word “agonize.” And so Jesus’ reply to the question was:

“Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then he will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ But he will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!’ In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out. And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.” (Luke 13:24–30)

We like things to be easy, and for some reason there are people who genuinely believe getting to heaven is easy. Not only does this passage from Luke 13:23–30 tell us differently, but also what Jesus taught the multitudes in the Sermon on the Mount — “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Matthew 7:13–14). And then, as we began this article, the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians living in Corinth, and by God’s providence he is addressing us, too:

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize exercises self-control in all things. Now they are doing it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an immortal crown. Therefore I do not run with uncertainty. Thus I do not fight as one who merely beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:24–27)

The word “discipline” is a word that literally means “to hit under the eye.” We might say, “give a black eye.” There’s a bit of a play on words since he’s just mentioned not merely beating the air, but rather, beating self — and in this way we see him underscoring the need for exercising self-control.

Self-control is a fruit of the spirit, one of the nine characteristics of the spirit over the flesh:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:22–24)

We don't really like thinking about or discussing self-control, but God certainly does. "A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls" (Proverbs 25:28). "For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control" (2 Timothy 1:7). "For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness" (2 Peter 1:5–6).

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. (Colossians 3:1–2)

As Christians — followers, or disciples (students) of Christ — we need to appreciate how our ability to exercise self-control through the assistance of the Holy Spirit shows the world-thinkers around us, who applaud those who lack self-restraint or self-discipline, that this world is not home.

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life — is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15–17)

Consider Jesus' exercise of self-control when he was unjustly arrested, leading to his crucifixion as an innocent man and the sacrifice that satisfied God's wrath:

They came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" (Matthew 26:50–54)

As we reconsider the first reference of 1 Corinthians 9:24 where Paul reminds us to run in such a way that you may obtain the prize, we should remind ourselves of the importance of the prize — heaven itself — and the importance of failing to obtain the prize: eternal condemnation in hell where "the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night" (Revelation 14:11).

We need to try harder; this means depending a whole lot more on God's grace as he has chosen to reveal himself through his word, meditating upon it, thinking through it, and putting it into practice. "But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness" (Romans 6:17–18).