

DISQUALIFIED!

by Ray C. Stedman

Yesterday a young Christian with whom I was working said to me, "I do not like to be told that I cannot do something that I enjoy doing because it is going to offend the conscience of someone else. That sounds like legalism to me." I agreed, because I do not like to be told that either. I do not like to stop doing something that I enjoy doing because it offends someone else, or because it is a stumbling block to them. But I realize that the thing in me that does not like that is what the Scriptures call my "flesh." I do not like to deny myself anything; I like to do what I feel like doing.

That, of course, is the very enemy within that tends to derail us and sabotage our efforts and destroy our effectiveness as servants of God. This is what Paul is dealing with in Chapters 7, 8, and 9 of First Corinthians, and we have come now to Chapter 9, Verse 24.

The apostle has revealed to us his own practice in this regard. He is glad to give up his rights, even the right to support in the gospel. He is glad to labor long, painful hours at night, making tents with his own hands in order to pay his expenses so that he can present the gospel free of charge to these Corinthian believers. In this section he suggests another good reason for exercising self-control in the Christian life. He says that we might not only injure others, it is very possible that, by giving in all the time to the love of indulgence and luxury in our lives, we may find ourselves trapped into something so spiritually injurious to us that we could end up "disqualified," as he describes it.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. {1 Cor 9:24-27 RSV}

All this is built around the figure of an athletic contest -- a race. This was a familiar thing to these believers in Corinth. Every three years the Isthmian Games (very much like the Olympic Games we are familiar with, which were also held in Greece), were held right outside the city. If you go to Corinth you can still see the areas where the races were run. The starting blocks where the athletes started out the races are still embedded in the stones. Paul is using this figure, because, to him, life is a race like that.

These Corinthians knew that every athlete who participated in the races had to take an oath that they had been training for 10 months, and that they had given up certain delightful foods in their diet to enable them to endure the race. They had subjected themselves to rather rigorous discipline in order to win. Paul says all that they are winning is just a fading, pine wreath, but, in the race we are running, the prize, the wreath, is an imperishable one.

He sees life this way. It's aim, as Paul understood it, is that we are here to run the race of life in order to be a useful and a pleasing instrument of God, to be used whenever and wherever he wants to use us. That is Paul's objective. When he woke up in the morning that is what was first in his thoughts; that is what set the tone of his day. He was ready to give up certain indulgences, if necessary, which were perfectly all right and proper for him at a given time. If they interfered with his objective to be what God wanted him to be, Paul said he would be happy to give them up. For him the great objective was to win the prize, which was the sense of delight that he was being used by God.

I wonder how many of us have that objective?

Sooner or later every one of us has to ask the question, "What am I here for anyhow? Through the normal, natural processes of procreation, why did I appear on the earth here in this scene, in this part of the world, at

this time in history?" And, of course, the answer from the Bible is, God intends to use you. He wants you. He made you. He designed you with all the peculiar abilities you have and the unique talents and gifts he has given you that he might use you and that you might be useful and pleasing to him.

Now in this figure of a race that Paul uses, it is obvious you cannot do that if there is no self-discipline. There is always something about life that tends to derail you if you let it. There are temptations to turn aside, to give up, to rest on your laurels, to sit back and let life go on and enjoy yourself. But that will sabotage your Christian effectiveness. That is what Paul is talking about.

Let me share these words from Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones, speaking on the passage in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says we are to "hunger and thirst after righteousness":

People who really want something always give some evidence of that fact. People who really desire something with the whole of their being do not sit down passively waiting for it to come. And that applies to us in this matter. There are certain things in this life that are patently opposed to God and his righteousness. There is no question about that at all. We know they are bad; we know they are harmful; we know they are sinful. I say that to hunger and thirst after righteousness means avoiding such things just as we would avoid the very plague itself. If we know there is an infection in a house, we avoid the house. We segregate the patient who has a fever because it is infectious, and obviously we avoid such persons. The same is true in the spiritual realm. But it does not stop at that. I suggest that if we are truly hungering and thirsting after righteousness, we shall even avoid things that tend to dull or take the edge off our spiritual appetites. There are so many things like that, things that are quite harmless in themselves and which are perfectly legitimate. Yet if you find that you are spending too much of your time with them and that you desire the things of God less, you must avoid them. That is a common sense argument.

That, basically, is what Paul is saying. He is saying in his own life he did that. He limited his indulgences. He refused to give way to intemperance or to be lazy. He gave himself to what God wanted him to do. He worked at it and took time in planning in order to accomplish it.

I have found that the Christian life is very much like running a car. When I was in high school I learned to drive in an old Model T Ford -- "Tin Lizzie" they called them then. Once in a while the car would not start, and when that happened there were always two things you did. It takes two things to run a car, gas and spark, and the first thing you did was check the spark. You would take a screwdriver and put it up against the plug while somebody turned the engine over. If you had a jolt that took the top of your head off, you knew the spark was all right. Then you checked the gas, because if it was not the spark it was the gas. If the gas was OK, and the spark was OK, then it was only a matter of a little effort and you could get the car running.

There are two things necessary in the Christian life: Discipline and dependence.

Some people try to run on only one. Some people are so concerned about discipline they regulate everything in their lives. They go overboard in this whole matter Paul is talking about here. They set themselves rigid schedules -- a time to get up, early in the morning, so many hours spent in prayer, so many verses memorized every week -- all discipline, with the hope that they will be useful and effective as Christians. Those people usually end up disillusioned, discouraged, and often defeated in their lives because it takes more than discipline. It takes dependence as well; the fact that when you do something you are counting on God to do it with you.

Other people say that dependence is the great objective. They go into a kind of "automatic pilot" where God is going to do everything. and they float along expecting him to do just that -- all spark and no gas. Those people end up disillusioned, fruitless, ineffective. Nothing ever happens in their lives, because it takes both. That is what Paul is saying.

Here at Corinth they were going in for the dependence, the indulgence angle of things, letting God do it all. But Paul says, "You will never win that way. If you are not willing to give up some things and to press toward the mark, to focus your life on a single objective, you will never win. You will find yourself ultimately disqualified." There is that word. Paul says, "It can happen to me. I preach all this to others, and if I just preach it, it shows I understand it, but if I do not do it I too can end up disqualified."

Many people have been troubled by that word, because in the King James Version it is translated "castaway." That sounds as though you lose your salvation, but Paul is not talking about that; that never was a question with him. He understood that when there has come a new birth there is a new life style and an introduction into a new kingdom, and that this cannot be reversed -- you do not lose salvation. What he was afraid of, and what motivated him to keep going every day, was the fear that he might be "disqualified" -- lose his ministry, lose his opportunity to serve. This great apostle, who understood life so clearly, always lived in the awareness that there is coming a day when, as he said, the sons of God will be revealed, when all the world will see what the reality of life is and all the universe will bow before the Lord Jesus and every tongue proclaim him as Lord. All the population of the earth in all its ages will be there, and they will be thinking back through their life, "What did I do that would count toward the glory of God?" That is what will be of value then. All the self-indulgences, all the little times of giving way to laziness and so on, will be looked upon with shame at that moment. Everybody will want to see how much of your life was given to the usefulness for which God had created you.

Paul is remembering that, and he does not want to be disqualified. To him life means service and delight in giving himself for the cause of God. That is what he wants. He is afraid that God will take it away, that too much self-indulgence of the "good life" will trap him, that he will fall into some temptation and end up on the shelf.

I see this happening in three different ways to people in the Bible and to people today. It is possible to be disqualified.

The first stage of it is, God will turn off the power in your ministry. Some of you are young and just beginning to discover that God can use you, and does use you, and you know the delight of being used. Others of you have been at it for longer times. But there are some here, I know, who are going through a mechanical process that has lost its power. That is what Paul fears above everything else.

I know men in the pastorate who years ago were men used greatly of God, but for many years now the power has been absent. They are going through a kind of performance, a ritual of futility, a kind of charade in which they go through all the motions, and say all the words, but nothing ever happens. There is no power, because, somewhere along the line, they were disqualified. Something happened, they refused to deny themselves, to exercise discipline or self-control, or perhaps their dependence faltered, and the power was gone.

Another stage of this is to actually be taken out of the ministry so that even the performance ceases.

There is a young man I know of whose name, if I gave it to you, you would instantly recognize; he is universally known in the evangelical world. A few years ago his books were in demand; he was one of the most popular writers of our present day. His schedule was full of meetings and he was in demand everywhere. Well, I was talking to a friend of his this week who told me that now this man sits in an apartment in Southern California with absolutely nothing to do all day long. He does not know what to do with his time; he does not know what to do with himself; he has no engagements, no meetings, no ability any longer to write. What is the matter?

Well, somewhere along the line he fell into temptation; he fell into adultery, and this morning he is disqualified. I am praying, because I love him, that it will only be a temporary disqualification. God can restore him.

This passage goes on to tell us that it can even mean the ending of your life. God chastens us sometimes and seeks to bring to our attention what is happening to us. If we ignore it continually there may come the time, as Paul will say to these Corinthians, when God will simply say, "Come on home. I cannot trust you down there any longer," and take us away. We do not lose our salvation, but we lose our opportunity to serve him, and our lives are wasted.

Paul has an example to give us here, taken from Scripture itself. (Ignore the chapter division here.) The first five verses:

I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness. {1 Cor 10:1-5 RSV}

What a remarkable example! Notice the repetition through that account of the word *all*. When they came out of Egypt all the Israelites were enjoying tremendous blessing from God, advantages they all had without exception, the weakest of them, the youngest of them, the oldest of them, the feeblest among them. Paul lists the advantages for us.

First, they were "all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea." Now this "cloud" is a reference to the Shekinah cloud, the glory that hovered over the camp of Israel, shining by day to guide them, and becoming a pillar of fire at night. It is a symbol of the protection of God of his people and the guidance that he gives them. The "sea," of course, is the Red Sea that they passed through safely and thus left the bondage and curse of Egypt, so that these are a picture of the protecting, the guiding, and the delivering power of God that they all had experienced.

Now you see the parallel: Every Christian is in this same position. We have all been delivered, if we are Christians at all. We have been transferred, translated from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. We are now part of a new spiritual realm, Paul says. Furthermore, we are protected. God is always watching over us and guarding us. We are guided. We have all experienced at times the guidance of God as he leads us into places he wants us to be. So we all share that, like those of old.

Then the second thing Paul says of them is they "all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea." What does that mean? That is a strange phrase, "baptized into Moses," but it is a parallel to what it says of us, that we are baptized into Christ. Just as we have been placed into Christ and identified with him, so these Israelites of old were identified with Moses. Now Moses was the great mediator of the Old Testament. He stood between God and man; he was the representative of the people to God, and the spokesman of God to the people. He had intimate access to God, and in Moses these people all had that same access to God.

This, of course, is true of us, is it not? Paul argues this in Romans 5, where he says, "Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand," {Rom 5:2a RSV}.

The third advantage they had was that they were all strengthened and refreshed by Christ, for "all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink." The food, of course, was the manna that came from heaven, and the drink was the water that flowed from the rock when Moses smote it. The Rock which followed them, Paul says, was Christ. Now do not ever say that the Old Testament saints knew nothing of Christ, because they did. They saw him in all these symbols and figures that were used in the Old Testament times. They were related to him as we are related to him, and just as he fed them and refreshed them, so we are fed and refreshed by the Spirit of God flowing out of Christ. When it says the Rock "followed them," do not imagine a great big rock rolling along behind the camp. It is not that. It means wherever the symbol of a Rock appears in the Old Testament, and it does frequently, it was a reference to and a picture of Christ. The Rock from which the water flowed, the Rock of refuge into which they ran when the summer storms broke upon the landscape, these were references to Christ. Samuel erected a rock, a "stone," he called it Ebenezer, "the stone of help," -- that was a reference to the help that Christ was giving them at that time. Therefore we are in the same boat. Yet, with all this opportunity and advantage, the amazing thing is that God was not pleased with most of them.

Is that not sobering? How many left Egypt? According to the record of Numbers, over 600,000 men alone, counting women and children makes that almost 2,000,000 people. Of those 2,000,000 how many entered into the land? Two men: Caleb and Joshua. They were the only ones; the rest all died in the wilderness, disqualified, no longer able to serve and function in the way God intended them to do because, as Paul describes in Verse 6,

... these things are a warning for us, not to desire evil as they did. {1 Cor 10:6 RSV}

Do you know that is happening to people today?

A young man told me last week of a girlfriend he has who is a Christian, and when they are together he said he does not know what to do because she keeps urging him to indulge in immorality with her. He says to her, "But you are a Christian; you can't do that." But she says, "Well, what is the difference? We can be forgiven afterwards. Why not?"

Now, that is the very kind of subtle lie that leads people into activities for which they will be disqualified. This is what Paul feared, and what he faced.

He goes on to give us four danger points to watch, and these are just as pertinent today as they were when they were written. Verse 7:

Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to dance." {1 Cor 10:7 RSV}

This was the scene at the foot of Mount Sinai when the Law was being given to Moses, who had gone up to commune with God. He was gone 40 days and 40 nights, and after a while the people got tired of waiting so they had a big feast. There is nothing wrong with that. But then somebody suggested they dance. There is nothing wrong with that either. Israel often danced before the Lord, and God is the God of the dance as well as other things. But in their dancing, in their indulgence, they got "carried away" we would say, and they began to dance in a way that was lascivious and lewd. Finally they found themselves bowing down and worshipping a golden calf which Aaron claimed came out of the fire when he threw in some gold. What a remarkable fire! They ended up in idolatry.

Now that is what Paul is warning against -- the ease with which things can capture our attention and be so important to us that we feel we cannot live without them. That is idolatry. I am amazed at how many Christians worship their cars, or their children, or some sports figure, or some rock-and-roll artist, or some movie star. I am amazed at how many Christians worship the United States and bow down to it. Their main purpose of life is to indulge in some political activity. All these things are right, but they become idols when they take on supreme significance to us. That is a way to be disqualified.

Then there is fornication, Verse 8:

We must not indulge in immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. {1 Cor 10:8 RSV}

That is referring to the account in Numbers 25 when some of the Israelites objected to God's leading, and the women of Moab and Midian came and tempted them, and they fell into fornication with them. A plague broke out in the camp which was not arrested until Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, took a spear and actually speared to death a couple engaged in fornication.

We read these accounts and we say, "Oh! How brutal, how bloody." But it is God's way of saying, "Look, what you are getting into is more destructive than that! This is kindness compared with what will happen to you if you keep on doing what you are doing." He warned them faithfully, and thus the plague was arrested.

Then there is presumptuous spirit, Verse 9:

We must not put the Lord to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents. {1 Cor 10:9 RSV}

This refers to the story in Numbers 21 of how they presumed to charge God with unfaithfulness. They said, "You brought us out of Egypt, and we are going to die in this wilderness. It is your fault. Why did you bring us out of Egypt?"

Did you ever say anything like that to God? "What did you put me here for? It is your fault I got into this." Now that is "putting God to the test," and it is a dangerous thing to do because, continued, it can lead to disqualification.

So the serpents came among them and were arrested, you remember, only by the lifting up of a brazen serpent on the pole.

Then the fourth danger point is murmuring, grumbling,

... nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. {1 Cor 10:10 RSV}

That is the story of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, those three young men who began to grumble at the authority that Moses had. They said, "We are just as good as Moses. Why don't we exercise the same kind of authority he does? He doesn't have anything over us." They began to create revolt and spread unrest in the camp of Israel, and God called them to task and said he would show them which one he had chosen. The ground opened up under Korah, Dathan, and Abiram and swallowed them up. They were gone, destroyed by the Destroyer. Now that is sobering, is it not?

Paul's admonition to us, in Verse 11, is:

Now these things happened to them as a warning, [literally, "as a type"] but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come. [We are the terminal age of history.] Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. {1 Cor 10:11-12 RSV}

These things are given in the Old Testament as types, pictures. That is, when you read these Old Testament stories, put yourself there. The enemies that they faced are answered by the enemies that we face, the principalities and powers of darkness that are seeking to overcome us, assault us, discourage us and defeat us, just as Israel was defeated and discouraged. When you see how they trusted in God, held on to his promises, renewed their strength by faith, and then set about to diligently do what God set them to do, that is the picture for us of how to overcome in the struggles and the battles that we face in life.

They were types, and according to Verse 12, they were targets. We are too. We are under attack. We are not living in a beautiful, pleasant world designed for our enjoyment, and the quicker we get rid of that idea the better. We are in a battlefield, under attack. We are running a race that must be won. We are fighting a battle with a clever and ruthless enemy, and we must never forget it, because his devices are clever, and his strategies are very subtle, and we can easily fall.

I have just been reading some of the stories of the Reformation, and I am amazed again at how the greatest and mightiest names of the past have all, at times, succumbed to the wiles of the devil. Calvin, with his great, clear, theological mind could be austere, cold, cruel, and legalistic. Martin Luther, with his robust faith and his great courage which enabled him to stand before emperors and kings without faltering, could be vulgar, angry, and carnal in his rage against his enemies, even his brothers in Christ.

Do not think that you have it made, and you are not going to fall. You are up against a tough, ruthless enemy. He can trip you, and trap you, and that is what will happen, and it may result in being set aside, unable to be used.

But that is not where Paul ends, and that is not where I want to end either.

Verse 13:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. {1 Cor 10:13 RSV}

Oh what an encouragement that is!

That is written down that we might understand three specific things about our testings:

1. First, they are common to all. I do not know anything that is harder to believe, when you are under testing, than that. We all think, "Why doesn't this happen to them? They deserve it so much more than me. Why is it happening to me?" Well, it is just your turn, that is all. Everybody goes through it. You are not permitted to witness their martyrdom, but you will not be allowed to miss yours. You do not see what they go through most of the time, but no one is left out. Trials are common to all. Their time is coming, if it has not already, so do not ever allow yourself to think that what is happening to you is unique. It is not at all. It is very common, and the minute you start inquiring around, you will find a dozen that have gone through it too.
2. Common trials, but also controlled pressures -- God is faithful, he will not allow you to be tempted above your strength. Again, that is hard to believe, is it not? We say, "Well, it has already happened. I am already beyond my strength." No, you are not. You just think you are. God knows your strength greater than you do. He knows how much you can handle, and how much you cannot. One of the basic principles of training in an athletic contest is to develop you to do things you do not think you can do right now, to put more pressure on you than you think you can handle, is it not? And you discover you can handle it. This is what God does with us. He puts the pressure on, but it is controlled pressure. It will never be more than you can handle, if you observe the third thing, the conquering grace that he provides, "the way of escape" that is always present, never failing.
3. What is that way of escape? Well, it is what we have been talking about -- dependence. Discipline is necessary, but so is dependence. All through the Old Testament the heroes and heroines of faith have taught us that in the hour of testing God strips away all human support in order that we may learn that he is enough. God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in time of trouble, and we will never discover that until everything else has been taken away. Then we begin to discover that God can hold us steady. He himself is the way of escape, and that is why he puts us through pressures and testings.

Let us stand and we will read together the hymn, *We Are Living, We Are Dwelling* . Let this great poem from the past be our closing prayer and admonition.

We are living, we are dwelling
In a grand and awesome time,
In an age on ages telling
To be living is sublime.
Hark! the waking up of nations,
Hosts advancing to the fray;
Hark! what soundeth is creation's
Groaning for the latter day.

Will ye play then? will ye dally
Far behind the battle line?
Up! it is Jehovah's rally
God's own arm hath need of thine.
Worlds are charging, heaven beholding
Thou hast but an hour to fight;
Now, the blazoned cross unfolding,
On, right onward for the right!

Sworn to yield, to waver, never,
Consecrated, born again,
Sworn to be Christ's soldiers ever,
O for Christ at least be men!
O let all the soul within you
For the truth's sake go abroad!
Strike! let every nerve and sinew

Tell on ages, tell for God!

Prayer

Lord, we pray that this may be our experience in these days that lie ahead in this troubled world. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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