

7,10,25 1 Cor. 9:19-27 Obtaining the Imperishable Crown

I would imagine that if you asked any Christian, from the youngest to the oldest, what God desires most for us, it would be that we would know Him; that the relationship which began at our new birth, when we became a child of God, would be deepened over time. As Paul states it simply in Phil. 3:10, “. . . I count *all* things loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord . . . (my desire is) that I may know Him. . . “ And as our Lord put it in John 17:3, when He revealed the *real* meaning of eternal life, He said; “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” Eternal life is not simply living forever; it’s also the experience of growing and expanding in our relationship with our Father.

What is not as commonly known among believers is how this relationship is developed over time and what our personal mindset is meant to be for us to have this relationship increasingly become a reality in our lives. What, specifically, are we to do; what is it that’s meant to guide us and move us forward in our knowledge of the Lord?

Again, the foundation of course, which most Christians would probably agree with, is prayer coupled with the in-depth study of God’s Word; searching out, and praying for, His revelation to us of Himself.

But beyond our general understanding of these things, there is a very specific mindset or inner-motivation and purpose that both sets us on the right course as well as gives us the incentive and the strength to *stay* on that course. Most of us start well, but as we all know, endurance can definitely be a challenge.

In this last section of 1 Cor. 9 Paul pulls back from the *behavioral* exhortations he’s been instructing the Corinthians about in the last two chapters and he goes behind the specifics to show the guiding principles that are meant to undergird *anything* and *everything* we do in this life.

He shows us what’s driving him, what motivates him to do what he does. And as we’ll see in the following verses, he’s hoping the Corinthians will have the same mind about all this that he has:

(1 Cor. 4:16-17) I urge you to imitate me. For this reason, I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.

(Phil. 4:9) The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.

Paul knows that what he's telling them is not only the truth, but it's also the *only* way to glorify the Lord in our lives. So, as to personal motivation and vision; what he's going to tell them now is the most important advice he can give anyone who desires to live the Christian life as it's meant to be lived.

He divides this into two sections. The first is Paul's willingness to do whatever it takes to reach those outside of Christ. The second is Paul's own personal desire to go as far as possible in his own spiritual growth and development. Here's the first section; chapter 9, vs's 19-23:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

Before we break this down, keep Paul's audience in mind. The Corinthians were demanding their rights about nearly everything. Paul was the opposite, but he had to convince them that his way was right and theirs was wrong. That's what these verses are about, and they show the approach that Paul believed would be the best way to do that.

Now, here's the ironic part. To pursue our rights over everything else is slavery; to lose our rights is the greatest freedom we can know. The world, of course, looks at this the opposite way that Paul does. And since the Corinthians were "walking as mere men", and thinking as the natural man thinks, they would have a problem with what Paul is saying.

We've seen before in Isaiah 55:8 that "God's way are *not* man's ways, and His thoughts are *not* man's thoughts . . ." The natural man can't understand how giving up our rights can be something that frees us, because they can't see sin as something that enslaves us. One commentator summed it up like this:

Paul was free from religious traditions, man-made religious rules and secular prejudices. He was free in Christ, for his soul had found the real secret to liberty. Being set free internally, he made himself externally a slave or a servant to all men. Out of his own volition, he relinquished his own rights in order to win as many people as he possible could for Christ. What a paradox: free from all men, yet the servant of all men! "Ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:5). Because he was free, Paul was able to serve others and to set aside his own rights for their sake.

In order to be effective at reaching those the Lord sent him to, Paul took an approach that is unfortunately very rare in our generation. Paul knew that he was free and that knowledge gave him the ability to move into other people's lives in a way that would meet them exactly where they were.

His own personal preferences, lifestyles, etc. were no longer binding on him, so if he needed to, he could let them go without feeling their loss. Like Paul said in Gal. 2:20; "I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live . . ."

In Ironside's work on Corinthians he has a perfect description of how this can be applied to us;

To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak." That is, in ministering the Word of God Paul delighted to enter into the circumstances of the people to whom he spoke. Possibly you make up a sermon in the quiet of your study, working it all out carefully, and you say, "There, I have a sermon on such and such a text." And then you go to the pulpit without taking the needs of the people into consideration, and you just pour out the sermon that you have made up for them in the study. That was not Paul's way; he had the needs of others before him as he preached the Word. As a minister of Christ Paul's great object was to get to the hearts of men and give them the Word as *they* needed it. "To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak." He did not try to astonish people with his eloquence,

he gave them the Word to convict and help and bless and cheer and make things plain to them, that he might gain the weak.

When we studied the 7 letters to the churches in Asia Minor in Revelation, we saw that each letter was totally unique depending on the spiritual condition of the church it was written to. There were no standardized messages given to everyone regardless of where they were spiritually.

And we saw that at the end of each of the letters was this one, all-inclusive mandate: “He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches”. What the Holy Spirit wants to communicate to each church, as well as to us in our time, is in the “present tense” – “What is He saying now?” Not just “What did He say 2000 years ago?” Scripture is not still being written, but it’s application to life has to be fresh and relevant for those who are listening – it has to be based on who and what we are *now, in the present*.

I’ll use one of the examples Paul gives in our passage to show what this meant to him; vs. 20, “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.” Here’s Brian Bell’s summation of this verse:

Paul had just stated that he was free (1 Cor 9:1); he did not place himself back under the Mosaic Law, for he was now and forever under grace. But he was willing to speak to the Jews on the common ground of their Law, for he knew that the Gospel was still present in the Law and that it had the power to save them.

What I believe we can gain from that is knowing that Paul used the scriptures and words of the Mosaic writings to present Christ to Jews, but if he was preaching to the Gentiles, the Old Testament scriptures were *not* the common-ground language. The best example of that is the message Paul gave in Acts 17.

Paul’s gospel message to the Gentiles was significantly different than Peter’s message to Israel in Acts 2. Peter’s was filled with Jewish language and Old Testament scriptures that would have had no meaning at all to Gentiles. Paul even included a line from the Athenian’s own poetry to get their attention and to show them that he was appealing to them with some understanding of who they were, and he respected their knowledge of the things they held in common.

What Paul did *not* do, was pull out a tract and give everyone he talked to the “four spiritual laws”. This life is meant to be a relationship with a Divine *Person*; not a religion or a formula. The Lord gave Paul the wisdom he would need for every situation Paul was led into. When we seek to reach someone who is outside of Christ, we will be much more effective if we meet them where they are rather than give them a canned message that we hope will apply to everyone. And to do that, we will have to have the kind of relationship with our Lord that allows Him to give us the words we need at the time, based not on what we think would work, or even what may have worked for someone else; but instead, we are depending on what Christ shows us of what *He* sees in the heart of whoever we’re talking to.

Now, these next few verses cover Paul’s second section – the *personal* goals Paul has committed to, so that he can reach the end of his life and ministry in a place of maturity and victory:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, 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 crown, but we an imperishable crown. So, I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified (from the crown).

This is nearly identical to what he wrote to the Philippians in chapter 3:13-16;

This *one* thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

I know I’ve said this before, but when any writer of scripture narrows his personal, all-consuming desire down to “*one* thing”; whatever that thing is has to be *the* most important thing any of us could pursue. Never forget that it was the Holy Spirit Who brought Paul’s understanding to the place where he would write this.

The advantage to us, is that this allows us to cut through all the confusion and expectations of ‘Christianity’, and all we’ve learned over the years about what others have told us are the most important things we should commit to. There’s

only *one thing* that rises to the top of Paul's list, and that is "pressing toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ". And as we saw in the passage we read, Paul added, "Let those of us who are mature think this way . . .". This is not just for apostles, it's for everyone who belongs to Christ.

In the Corinthian letter we are able to see the identity of what Paul told the Philippians was "the upward call" – it's the prize of receiving an imperishable crown.

I don't know what you've been told by pastors or authors you've read in the past, about what the primary goal of a mature believer is meant to be (and by 'mature', we are talking about a Christian who has reached a place of spiritual advance where they understand what this life is all about), but as Paul said ". . . let those of us who *are* mature think *this way*".

The highest goal of a Christian who truly understands what the Lord wants us to commit to, who wants God's will above everything else, is a man or woman whose eyes are set like flint on sharing the throne of Christ in His kingdom.

For that honor, Paul would sacrifice all he had, and all he was, to "press toward *that* upward call of God in Christ".

Why *that* above everything else? Because when you start the Bible at page one you will soon discover exactly what God's ultimate plan has *always* been for this creature called "Man"; (Gen. 1:26) "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness, (and) let them have dominion . . ."

God was been working since creation to have a race of beings molded into the exact image of their Creator, shaped into those who will be the perfect Eve to God's Adam, the glorious Companion for His Son (the last Adam); and who will co-rule with Him, at His side over all creation.

That has *always* been in the heart of God. And in those in whom Christ is fully formed, this destiny and purpose has also captured *their* hearts. This is the single highest desire and ultimate purpose of God for His people.

And there are few things more frustrating than reading an author who explains these things without also giving us something specific to do about it. Beyond

understanding the goal the Lord has for us and prayer for God to take us there, we need to know what kind of people the Lord grants this privilege to.

The Holy Spirit has spent an immense amount of time in nearly every book in the Bible, Old and New Testament, presenting as clearly as possible what the people who have been honored by God are like. Whether through historical illustrations and events or in specific doctrinal instruction, the Bible distinguishes, repetitively, between those who have gone on with the Lord versus those who have not. In the Old Testament, these people were called the “remnant” and in the New Testament they are called “overcomers”. Hebrews 11 is probably the most obvious of all the individual chapters in the Bible that shows, in a way that sweeps all human history, who those have been that have pleased God.

I’ve always found it interesting that near the beginning of Heb. 11, when the author is explaining what it is that most pleases the Lord, he wrote this in vs. 6, “Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He exists, and that He rewards those who diligently seek Him.”

We know that faith is the foundation of our Christian life, but if someone asked you what God believed was the most important thing we are to have faith *about*, the one thing above all others that pleases the Lord when we believe it, I doubt most people would say that it’s believing that God “rewards those who diligently seek Him.”

I only mention that because I have received significant push-back in the past when I’m put an emphasis on the Throne, or crowns, or rewards. But when we understand *why* God wants it to be this way, and that this has been in His heart from before time as related to the purpose of Man’s creation, then Heb. 6:11 makes perfect sense.

Along with Hebrews 11, we can put Paul’s exhortations to us in the Corinthian and Philippian passages side-by-side with a visual of the men and women throughout history who have had the exact same mind about this as Paul did. It’s great to know why we are here and where the Lord wants to take us, but it’s also important to know *how*, as individuals, we can be included among those who win this battle we’re in to get there.

I feel we have to clarify this because it's one of the most intense battles we will face, especially when the accuser comes to us and fills our minds with thoughts like "You will never make it. You won't even come close". The only way we can reject that is with the truth, so what does the Bible say? What does God say about this? It's something that we desperately need to hold onto.

First, we have to pray that God will make it increasingly clear why this is so important to *Him*, and then we have to pray that He will give us an unquenchable desire, as Paul said, to ". . . *not* run aimlessly; or box as one beating the air."

Once Paul understood what the Lord revealed to him about our purpose, Paul gave everything he had to pursue it. It was like a fire burning in him, that out of love for His Savior, Paul wanted to be and do whatever would most glorify His Lord.

And as I've mentioned in the past, this has to capture us; and no matter what the majority of Christians may be doing, we absolutely cannot afford to settle for anything less. Paul knew we'd have to know the truth of why we are here, or we'd never be able to pursue it.

I have attempted on occasion to convince pastors that no matter how consistent they have been in teaching the Bible, in overseeing the activities of their congregation, in developing ministries that serve the people and missionary outreaches designed to reach those outside of Christ, if they neglect to instruct the people of God on why we are here, what God's ultimate goal is for us, and how we are to play our part in reaching that goal, the rest of what the pastor has done will be only wood, hay and stubble.

Think of this as applied to a basketball team. During the first half of the game, the players executed some of the most amazing passing and defensive moves they'd ever done. But not one of them even tried to get the ball through the hoop. However, all of them were convinced that when they went in at halftime, the coach would shower his praise on them for their effort, their skills, their hard work and for all the things they did that amazed the spectators. But that is *not* what they are going to hear from the coach. As helpful as all those things were, the most important thing was completely neglected.

Pastors can't set aside the one thing that is the most important of all in the heart of God and expect to hear "Well done thou good and faithful servant". When that

pastor stands face to face with God to give account of his stewardship, he will hear what Sardis heard in Rev. 3:1-2 “You have a reputation that you are alive, but you are dead. I have found your deeds *incomplete* in the sight of My God.”

(Rom. 14:12) Each of us shall give account of himself to God.

(Jas. 3:1) Let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.

So, here are some of the characteristics of those who are “like-minded” with Paul. We’ll start with this, because this lays the foundation for all the others. Anyone moving in the direction Paul was advocating for us will, at some point, move into suffering; (Phil. 1:29) “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for Him.” Paul says that this is our calling. And the word “granted”, which is “charizomai” in the original, means “To do something pleasant or agreeable to someone; to grant a favor; to show one's self as being gracious, kind, benevolent; to give graciously, and freely.”

Have you ever looked at suffering that way – as God’s gracious gift to you? Maybe the Lord knows something about the incredible value of hardship that we don’t. The very thing we resist with all our being is the one thing that enables us to obtain the greatest position in eternity that God has offered to any of His creation.

The goal is not suffering; suffering is what the Lord uses to shape us and enable us to reach that goal – which, as we’ve seen, is the throne.

(2 Tim. 2:3 & 12) “You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ . . . (for) if we suffer, we shall reign with him.”

Our hardship could be physical, relational, psychological, or what feels like impossible circumstances – or it could be a combination of all of these. It will be unique for everyone. That’s why the primary characteristic of the believer that desires to share the throne of His Savior is called “endurance”.

This is by J. Hampton Keathley;

The word overcomer, which comes from the root word (nikao), means literally, “to conquer”, “to carry off the victory”, “to “prevail”. Overcome does not mean achieving success, recognition, acceptance, prestige, health, wealth, or popularity. It is exclusively related to the spiritual life of the one

overcoming. The meaning of this word presupposes and calls attention to the presence of war, contests, battles, and conflicts in man's struggle with evil. The Bible clearly teaches us, as does life itself, that we are in a conflict, indeed, a holy war, with specific adversaries. The conflict rages in and against the life of the growing Christian. This is everywhere evident in Scripture and so obvious in life that one has to deny reality to ignore or disclaim it.

And from Sparks;

There is not going to be one bit of this 'throne inheritance' possessed without conflict. We need to make up our minds to that, for that is how it is going to be. There is going to be resistance from all quarters. As soon as the matter of any spiritual increase comes into view, then, strangely, sometimes mysteriously, a state of conflict arises. It gets into the very atmosphere, and it comes even from Christian people. Be satisfied with what is called 'the simple gospel', 'the basic truths', and you meet no conflict; everybody applauds and accepts, and is on your side. But set your heart on the *whole* purpose of God, and you find yourself at once in a realm of terrible conflict. Satan is not going to allow us to reach our intended destiny, if he can prevent it.

You can reject all we are saying still be saved. All you need is to believe on the Lord Jesus and you are saved. With that you can go to heaven, you can be delivered from condemnation and from hell. If that's all you want, you can have it. But I ask you, are you as concerned to be useful to God as you are to be saved?

The Lord brings these things into all our lives. Some respond to this and go on with the Lord, some become bitter and die in the spiritual wilderness of settling for something less.

Billheimer tied God's purpose of having us share the throne of His Son into the *means* God uses to get us there;

Literally everything Christ is doing in our lives is designed to qualify His Eternal Companion for entering into full partnership with her Lord in the governance of the creation. . . This is the order of beings which is to be the

aristocracy of the universe; we are to be princes of the heavenly realm. Christ will administrate and govern His eternal kingdom through His body, the Church.

The Lord knows that what we experience here, in time, is what will equip and enable us to assume this role in eternity (2 Cor. 4:17) “Our light affliction, which is but for a moment (compared to eternity) is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

This is from Alva McLain;

In the Church, God is preparing a people, called out and tested in adversity, who are destined to occupy the highest place of responsibility in the future Kingdom of Christ.

And another author puts it this way;

The intent is a governmental union with Christ in the ages to come. Not only a heavenly citizen; but called to the highest place that Heaven affords believers – sharing the very throne of Christ. Unto this there may of necessity be chastening. It will be a disciplined, chastened people who will attain unto this completeness.

The purpose is singular, and the means God uses in our lives, our trials to purify and draw out the gold of Christ’s character in us, will be unique based on our needs, but ultimately, everything the Lord is doing in your life and mine, from *His* standpoint, is designed to move us to that one, particular goal; co-rulership with God’s Son in His Kingdom.

So, the challenge to us is to develop, over time, the ability to see literally everything we are going through, everything we are learning by experience and Bible studies, as God’s means of accomplishing that one purpose in each of us.

The best thing that could happen to any of us would be to become obsessed with praying to the Lord to reach a place where Christ is fully formed in us.

We didn’t anticipate this level of intensity in our lives, and we would probably escape if we could. But God has seen our hearts and He sees the outcome, the goal of this, and He knows that when we’re standing face-to-face with Him, having not ‘tapped out’, we’re going to realize that pushing us to finish our training was

the best and most loving thing He could have done. (Job 23:10) “He knows the way I take; when He has tested me, I will come forth as gold.”

Job didn’t say that at the end of his trials, or at the beginning, but in the midst of his suffering, when he had no idea why it was happening or if there would even *be* an end.

God could deliver us, but besides being our God, He’s also our Father and knows that ensuring our completion of the training is something even we, in our pain, hope for. He knows what this will mean to us when we reach the end.

No one can become an overcomer who is not first broken.

It wasn’t until Peter “went out and wept bitterly” over his denials of the Lord that God had a man He could use. Peter had finally given up on Peter; and that is what God is after. In Peter (and a multitude of others in the Bible) we can see exactly what the Lord must allow, and even arrange, to ensure our growth. Jesus deliberately gave the enemy permission to sift Peter as wheat.

As paradoxical as it may sound, failing does not make you a failure. I’m assuming most of you have not committed murder or adultery like David, but God calls David, “A man after my own heart”. God’s seeing of David goes deeper and far beyond David’s sins to the man God was shaping *through* his failures; just as He did Peter and Jacob and Abraham, etc.

God chooses the base things of the world, the weak and despised, to bring to nothing the strong and successful. He does this so that He gets all the glory and no one will be able to boast in His sight.

The overwhelming majority of those God presents to us in the Bible as “spiritual heroes” (those we are to emulate) failed a million times.

When you think about Peter’s denials, Abraham’s offering his wife to the king to save his own neck, Jacob’s theft of the birthright (and the list is as long as the genealogies in Matthew and Luke), you also need to stop and realize that God knows the end from the beginning, He knows the hearts of all men and women, and He knows who is going to come out on top in terms of spiritual ascendancy at the end.

If you are a failure, you have His attention. For you, God has a future and a hope. He can use someone like you. God has His heart set on you, because you are the type of person that will never be anything on your own. That's what being broken will do for us. It will transfer all our faith away from ourselves to God; the unbroken never realize the fullness of that, but anything less than dependence on the Lord alone will substantially limit our spiritual advance.

Now, as I said earlier, all that the Lord takes us through, as the Word of God is fleshed out in our experience over the course of our lives, lays the foundation for what results in us in terms of the personal characteristics which both reflect Christ as well as equip us for our eternal destiny.

One of the character traits that surface in an overcomer is an insatiable desire to know the truth and to know the One Who *is* the truth. There is a hunger for the Word of God, not just academically, not just to understand doctrines, but to know whatever the Lord wants to bring to us of Himself through the scriptures.

Another common trait of a remnant believer is what the world calls "Low Self-Esteem".

(Job 42:6) Therefore I loathe [my words] and abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

(Isa. 6:5) I am undone and ruined, because I am a man of unclean lips.

(1 Tim. 1:15) Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am chief.

The word "chief" is *protos* meaning "first, leading, or ranking above all others". Paul saw himself as the highest-ranking, worst of all sinners. One commentator on 1 Timothy put it this way;

The magnitude of the gift he had gained in Christ was best understood by Paul when set before the dismal backdrop of his own deep depravity. And so, with humble gratitude, Paul accepted the title "chief of sinners."

In Eph. 3:8 Paul wrote; "Although I am *less than the least of all the Lord's people*, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ".

And we could quote other passages showing this characteristic in Moses who said, “I cannot speak; find someone else. . .”, or in Jeremiah when he said, “I am (only) a child.”

What kind of person do you believe has a better understanding and appreciation of the grace of God - someone who’s convinced they are awesome or someone who has “been forgiven much?” Which person would genuinely be filled with extreme gratitude for all the Lord has done for him?

We’ll have to close, but I’m sure you get the point of why Paul so consistently appealed to the Corinthians to turn away from the prideful, selfish, blind thinking of the world and turn to the One Who said, “I am meek and lowly of heart”.

It is impossible for the proud to find rest in their souls.

After over 50 years of watching Christians rise and fall in their spiritual life, I can guarantee you that no matter how many characteristics we can find and list from the scriptures that identify an overcomer, all of those except one are things the Lord has to produce in us. He gladly, graciously, takes on that responsibility; we can trust Him for that; it’s not a burden He wants us to carry. The one thing that is up to us is teachability.

Paul was very aware of the warning we are given Hosea 4:6; “*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. . .*”. Paul knew that we’d have to know the truth of why we are here, or we’d never be able to pursue it or attain it.

I know that some people would say that “faith” is the most important thing. And I agree that there is no way to overstate the importance of faith in our relationship with the Lord; it runs throughout the Bible in literally every book as absolutely essential. But where does faith come from? (Rom. 10:17) “Faith comes from *hearing*; and hearing by the Word of God”, and (Matt. 11:29) “Take My yoke upon you and *learn from Me* . . . and you will find rest for your souls.”

So, just make sure you have an “Ear to hear what the Spirit is saying (present tense) to the churches”.

Everything that will matter in our lives and in our spiritual growth in Christ flows from the humility of being open, teachable, transparent and hungry to know the Truth no matter where that takes us.