

Contending Lawfully

by Walton Weaver

Some of the finest lessons to be learned from Scripture are to be discovered from the illustrations in Paul's writings gathered from the Grecian games. The subject suggested by the title of this article comes from such an allusion to these games found in 2 Timothy 2:5: "And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully." (KJV). It is interesting, as well as profitable, to consider other translations of this verse.

"And if also a man contend in the games, he is not crowned, except he have contended lawfully" (ASV).

"An athlete is not crowned except he competes according to the rules " (RSV).

"And also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules" (NASB).

"And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules" (NKJV)..

"Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules" (NIV).

"No one who competes in the games is awarded a crown unless he obeys the rules" (Goodspeed).

The wording is a little different, but each of the translations comes out with the same truth. Living of the Christian life is like a race, and just like in a race, if one expects to win he must give his very best. He must strive hard; and if he violates the Lord's rules as he runs the race he will fail to win the victor's crown. Let's now give some consideration to the two central points in the passage.

We Must Strive to Win

It is easy to forget just how much emphasis is given in the New Testament to the effort we must put forth in order that we might be victorious as Christians. Paul mixes his figures in another passage to illustrate the same point: "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 is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not

with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who 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" (I Corinthians 9:24-27, NKJV).

In this passage, as well as the one earlier quoted, the central point is that it makes a real difference as to HOW one runs the race or engages in the fight: Run in such a way, that you may win it. At the head of the list of requirements for winning is discipline, or self-control in all things, and then there must be the running or the fighting itself. If one is to win the race, he must run hard, and if he is to win the fight, he must fight hard. One cannot win in any competition unless he desires to win, has his mind set on winning, and then fights hard to win the prize. When every weight has been set aside (Hebrews 12:1), the race must yet be run with patience or endurance. One's very best effort must be put forth to win. He must never take his eye off the prize, "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

Not everyone who enters the Christian race is going to win. The possibility that one can begin the race and then lose the prize is definitely taught in this passage, as well as many others. Even Paul could have lost out in the race. That's why he said, "I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified." To be disqualified is to become "reprobate" or "rejected;" and therefore means more than exclusion from the contest. It means exclusion from the prize, or "disqualified for the prize" (NIV). Do not think that just because you have become a Christian you are assured the crown of life. Paul was confident at the end of his life that he had been successful, but his confidence was not due only to the fact that he had become a Christian, but because as a Christian he had been faithful to the end: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

We Must Strive Lawfully

The second part of the verse we are considering says we must run "according to the rules;" or that we must "contend lawfully." The idea that the gospel is "law" in

any sense is contrary to the thinking of many people, but it is not contrary to New Testament teaching. We are "under law toward Christ" (I Corinthians 9:21). That which James calls "the word;" "the implanted word;" and "the word of truth" (James 1:22,23,21,18), he also calls "the perfect law of liberty" (vs. 25). Let no one think that we are without law in this Christian age.

The word law simply means a rule or standard of conduct. Man has never been without law in relation to God. And man has never been given a law by God that he was at liberty to disregard and disobey. The Christian is no exception to this basic truth. To illustrate this point Paul says that no athlete is honored or crowned with approval who

does not contend lawfully. The point is that it is equally necessary to contend lawfully in spiritual matters.

What Paul says in this verse is just as pointedly taught in other verses, but without the illustration. The illustration just helps us understand the truth in spiritual matters by reminding us of what we already understand in the field of athletics. It is just as necessary that we contend lawfully in the Christian race as it is for the athlete to do so. What are some other passages that teach that we must act "according to the rules;" or "contend lawfully" with regard to religious matters?

John tells us, "whosoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God" (2 John 9). According to this statement we are not permitted to go beyond the Lord's rules. One has God only as he abides within the teaching of Christ. So there is a limit beyond which we are not permitted to go, and that limit is what has been revealed and taught by Christ. It is His law or rule, or His standard of conduct. What one does in religion is not lawful unless it is authorized by Christ. If it fails here, it is not "according to the rules." This is what Jesus meant by "the will of My Father in heaven" when He said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord', 'Lord', shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

The word "iniquity" (KJV) in verse 23 of this passage means "lawlessness"(ASV, NKJV, NASB). These people did not receive God's approval for one reason or another. Everything we do must receive God's approval. God must also approve our character. The things we practice may be right, but our heart may be wrong; or our heart may be right and our practice wrong. In either case we are acting as people without law to God, and when we do this God is not pleased with us.

Everything must be tested by the law of God. Striving alone is not enough. The Jews in Paul's day were striving, but not according to God's righteousness (Romans 10:1-4). They had set up their own way of righteousness, and rejected the gospel of Jesus Christ. They were not striving according to the rules of God. See also Matthew 15:8-9.

Where does God's rule book tell about the denomination you are in (Jesus says in Matthew 15:13, "Every plant which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up"); being saved by "faith alone" (James 2:24 says, "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only"); sprinkling or pouring water on a person instead of immersing him in water (Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 2:12); instrumental music in worship to God under the New Covenant (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16)?

Does this not tell you that there is much unlawful striving today?