

Lesson Plan - "The Imperishable Prize"

Key Passage: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Central Truth: A relationship with God is the imperishable prize that I can receive only as an unearned gift. Because of what I have already freely obtained through the completed work of Jesus Christ, I can live a life of spiritual discipline.

Relate

Option #1: The Best Prize

Think of the best prize that you've ever won. It can be at a carnival, state fair, sporting event, or anywhere else you may have won something. Tell your group about your experience, what it took to win the prize, and why you were glad to have won it.

Next, have some, or all, of the students in your group share briefly about the best prizes they have ever won and why they were special to them.

Say: Prizes are a fun part of life. They reward skill, hard work, and sometime even dumb luck. But even the best prizes in the world can't compare to the prize we're going to talk about tonight.

Option #2: Past The "Best By" Date

Some food, like milk and eggs, have a use by date that is a pretty good estimation of when a product will go bad. Other items, like the ones listed below (and in the students books) have a "best by" date. This date isn't intended to tell consumers when a product will go bad, but when that product will no longer be at it's peak freshness. Often times items we'll have a "best by" date that is months or even a year or more into the future. However, some products stay good long after their "best by" dates.

Have students look at the list of products in their books and see if they can guess how long past the manufactures "best by" date that product will stay good if unopened and stored properly.

Heinz Ketchup	2 years
Hershey Chocolate	2-4 months
Oreo Cookies	2-3 weeks
Candy Sprinkles	5 years
Coca Cola	9 Months
Cheerios	8 Months
Pop Tarts	1 year

Once you've completed the activity, ask the following question.

Have you ever opened the pantry or fridge at your house only to find that your favorite snack had gone bad?

If you could pick one food that would last forever and always be available what would you pick?

Say: Nothing in this world lasts forever. However, we're going to talk about an imperishable prize tonight. This means it will never run out, go bad, or spoil. It's eternal!

Option #3: Group Discussion About The Imperishable Prize

Ask the following questions and allow time for your group to discuss.

Do you think there are things that will last forever? If so, what?

What do you believe awaits people at the end of their spiritual journey?

Realize

Bible Teaching Plan:

Introduction to the Passage

Teach: A marathon is an intimidating 26.2 mile monster. That is approximately the distance that Greek legend says the soldier Pheidippides ran from the Battle of Marathon to the city of Athens in 480 BC to report that an invading Persian army had been defeated. Once he arrived in Athens, he shouted, "we won!" before collapsing and dying on the spot. Even with such a daunting origin story, thousands and thousands of people undertake the challenge of running a marathon every year.

With this background information in our minds, we come to the running and training analogy of 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

READ 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Preparing to run a marathon is a big deal that takes major discipline and commitment. However, all that the runner who completes the race would have received as a prize in Paul's day was a "perishable wreath." The prize that would have been obtained is a circle of leaves that would wither and fall apart after a few days. In contrast, the Christian is in pursuit of a prize of eternal value. He or she can obtain an imperishable prize, meaning something that has lasting value.

What Is the Prize? The Prize Is God Himself

Teach: Since the imperishable prize is the thing that we discipline ourselves to obtain, it is essential to identify from the start exactly what that prize is. In verse 18, Paul has provided his own Q&A session when he says, “What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge.” Later in verse 23, he then states that “I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessing.” That sounds great! In light of this close contextual connection and the wording of verses 24 and 25, it is unavoidable that the imperishable prize that we want to obtain is the gospel. The literal translation of “gospel” is “good news.”

Quote: “My sense is that far too many Christians would answer with something far short of what the Bible holds out as “the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Maybe they’d answer, “The gospel is that God will forgive your sins if you believe him.” Or they’d say something like, “The good news is that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” Or, “The Gospel is that you are a child of God, and God wants his children to be abundantly successful in every way.” Some would know that it’s important to say something about Jesus’ death on the cross and his resurrection, but then again, how does it all fit in? The fact is, getting Christians to agree on an answer to the question, What is the gospel? Is not as simple as it should be.” - Greg Gilbert

Teach: While the answers mentioned by Gilbert contain truth and parts of the good news, we want to continue pursuing an accurate understanding of what the imperishable prize of the gospel that we are seeking to obtain is. A few chapters later in the letter, Paul provides a clear summary statement of the gospel. 1 Corinthians 15:1-4.

READ 1 Corinthians 15:1-4

Teach: The gospel is the truth that we are saved from our sins by Christ’s substitutionary death on the cross and by receiving his righteousness. But there’s more. These truths of the gospel are the ways and means that God uses to bring us into a relationship with Himself. God Himself is the prize at the end of the race. We seek to obtain more than a circle of leaves that sits on our head before crumbling away, or even a modern marathon medal that we can keep and display for the rest of our lives. We seek more than the cheers of an excited crowd. Our goal is to obtain God Himself – Father, Spirit, Son – the Godhead three in one! If we follow the path that Paul presents before us, we get Jesus, His Father, and His Spirit!

Realize Discussion Question #1: Do you believe that having a relationship with the true and living God is a prize worth having?

How Do I Obtain It? I Obtain The Prize By Receiving It As a Free Gift.

Teach: You cannot obtain a relationship with God by trying your best. Isaiah 64:6 explains that “all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment” (or as other translations say, as “filthy rags”). God is good. Humans are sinful. Christ is sufficient to unite God and humans. However, faith is the essential piece of obtaining it, and there is the urgency of eternity pushing us to receive freely the good news of our forgiveness through Jesus.

Teacher’s Note: You will share the Gospel more fully in the RENOVATE section of this lesson. What needs to be communicated clearly here is that we cannot earn our salvation but that God provides it freely for us.

Teach: The greatest conceivable prize in the universe is right in front of us, and we can obtain it! Obtaining this prize is life altering, but it is only obtained when received as a free gift. Look back again at the phrases Paul used in our passage from 1 Corinthians 9:25-27, “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things ... 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.” Self-control, discipline, purpose, and avoiding disqualification are things that require work and planning. Without the assurance that we are loved and accepted by God unconditionally and that our imperishable prize is freely given and not earned, we can so easily fall into the trap of believing we can be good enough to earn our way to God.

Realize Discussion Question #2: How do some people in our culture try to “earn” their salvation?

Realize Discussion Question #3: Why is it important that salvation be offered as a free gift?

How Do I Live With My Eye On the Prize? I Pursue a Life of Spiritual Discipline By Keeping My Eyes on the Prize.

Teach: The prize is God Himself! We obtain the imperishable prize of our relationship with God only through faith in His free gift of Jesus – His death in our place for our sins and His perfect obedience of God’s law in a way that we can never obtain. Stop and think for a minute. This entire Bible study is about training hard for a marathon, but we are saying that we receive our prize without even having to run for it. Since the imperishable prize is a free gift that cannot be earned, why does Paul use the running and training metaphor to describe how we obtain it?

Because the purpose of the race, and the training, is to become more like the One who is the Prize.

If spiritual disciplines are not practiced from a stance of being rooted in the joy of a personal connection with the prize Himself, then they are burdensome, difficult work – like someone who hates running who decides to start training for a marathon. Because we know that we have the prize of a personal relationship with our Creator, we discipline ourselves to pursue Him because we cannot help but want to be with Him and be like Him. Our security in the love and acceptance of Jesus causes us to want to train ourselves with spiritual disciplines such that our lives look radically different.

Realize Discussion Question #4: Why is it hard for Christians to practice spiritual disciplines that make them more like Christ?

Realize Discussion Question #5: How are you training yourself to become more like Christ?

Renovate

Option #1: Share the Gospel

Teacher's Note: Even though this is called "Option #1" please don't view it as optional. This is a must do activity! After sharing the Gospel with your students, ask the following question, but don't have them answer out loud. Offer to meet after group time with those who have not responded to the Gospel.

The Gospel has four essential elements:

God: We must start with God. There is one God who has always existed. He is holy (Isaiah 6), and demands perfect obedience from us. If we obey, we are blessed, but if we disobey, we are punished – severely and eternally.

Man: We are created in God's image and after His likeness (Genesis 1:26). We were created to love Him, worship Him, and serve Him. However, we have all sinned against Him (Romans 3:23). We have disobeyed His Word and rejected His authority. Because He is holy, He must punish us. His wrath is His righteous response to our sin. We are in desperate need of a Savior!

Christ: Christ Jesus is that Savior. He came to earth and lived a perfect life – the life we were supposed to live. He died in our place on the cross for our sins (1 Corinthians 15:3-4, 1 Peter 2:24). He rose again on the third day in victory over Satan, sin, death, demons, and Hell. All who call upon Him as Lord and Savior will be saved!

Response: We call upon Christ through repentance and faith (Acts 20:21). Repentance means to turn away from your sin. Faith means to turn to Christ and to trust Him as your Savior from your sin. By believing in Him, new life is ours. Supremely, we are brought back into a loving relationship with our heavenly Father. He is the highest and greatest gift the Gospel offers.

Ask: Have you responded to the Gospel's call? (don't have them answer aloud)

Option #2: Worth the Cost

Read Matthew 13:45

Say: This is a parable about a person who sacrifices everything they have to be a part of God's kingdom.

Have students answer the following questions in their student book.

1. What would it cost me to follow Christ in a way described in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27?
2. What difficulties will I face along the way?
3. Do I truly believe that the imperishable prize of knowing Jesus is worth the cost?