



ELIZABETHTOWN  
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Loving Victory*

1 Corinthians 9:24–27

By Pastor Greg Davidson Laszakovits

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777 South Mount Joy Street  
Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania 17022  
717-367-1000  
[www.ETOWNCOB.ORG](http://www.ETOWNCOB.ORG)



**1 CORINTHIANS 9:24–27 NRSV**

<sup>24</sup>*Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it.* <sup>25</sup>*Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one.* <sup>26</sup>*So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air;* <sup>27</sup>*but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.*

**A RELIGIOUS TRADITION**

I hope you all are taking this worship slide how I intended it—a satirical look at how religion and football can get mixed up, but also how football can sometimes become someone’s religion. There are a lot of parallels between football and religion after all:

Both operate on a weekly pattern—primarily Sundays—, yet each calls for devotion throughout the week;

Both invite followers to don a special ceremonial garb—in football it’s team jerseys and jackets, socks and shoes, maybe even terrible towels, cheese heads here or there; in church we see nicer-than-usual clothes and vestments: robes and cassocks, albs and stoles. Don’t know whether this bishop is a 49ers fan or Chiefs fan, but he’s wearing red so he must be one or the other.

Both football and religion inspire pilgrimages to holy sites: Israel to see the birthplace of Judaism and Christianity. Or maybe it’s to the dome of the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio.

With both, hours of study and preparation are spent as experts and analysts dissect the finer points of each at an intellectual level. We pastors spend hours getting ready for worship, studying, preparing, practicing. The same goes for coaches, players, and even fans. To wit, the pregame show for the Super Bowl starts today at 11:30—7 hours before kick-off! Now I know there is usually some post-worship analysis around lunch tables. But I don’t know pastors, I’m a little

2 offended there aren't any pre-worship programs that I know of.

I could go on and on, but I'll spare you. I am excited for today, Super Bowl Sunday!

We're going to find out who the real winners are! Everyone loves a winner! Even Paul in 1 Corinthians:

*Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it.*

Well isn't that first verse fascinating? Everyone runs; one wins. I wonder if that means that all of the who don't win first place are losers? Are Paul's words the first version of the spoof movie legend Ricky Bobby from *Talladega Nights* who learned from his daddy... "If you're not first you're last."

In other words, if you're not the very best, then you're just lumped with the rest, a loser.

## **THIS YEAR'S MATCHUP, SEEING RED: CHIEFS AND NINERS**

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Well one of the subplots of today's big game is precisely about who will become a real winner and who will remain a loser. This particular narrative will be played out on the sidelines with the head coaches Andy Reid and Kyle Shanahan.

Andy Reid is the coach of the Kansas City Chiefs. He has led that storied and proud franchise back to prominence. We may remember him though as the former coach of the Philadelphia Eagles who had an overall successful coaching career while in the City of Brotherly Love, but who ultimately left a loser. Many blame him for the loss to the Patriots in the 2005 Super Bowl when he *inexplicably* did not coach his team to hurry in the fourth quarter when they were down by two scores! Though only five coaches in NFL history have won more games than Reid, he is labeled a loser by some because he has never won the big one, and still unloved by many disgruntled Eagles fans!

Across the field on the other sideline, we have Kyle Shanahan coach of the San Francisco 49ers. Though he too has led his

team from pretty terrible all the way to a Super Bowl in just three years as head coach, the story going into this afternoon's game is his absolute coaching fiasco three years ago while offensive coordinator of the Atlanta Falcons, blowing a 28–3 lead in what some have called the “mother of all Super Bowl meltdowns.” Ouch.

One of these men will leave the field today labeled a winner, and the other a loser. Fascinating how winners and losers get pegged.

### **WINNING = DOMINATION, POWER?**

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Winning is a powerful motivator, and so we hear it *everywhere*. We are a country consumed with winning. In my Super Bowl sermon from 2011 — that I'm sure you all remember 😊 — I criticized President Obama's repeated use of the word “winner” in his State of the Union address for being overly competitive.<sup>1</sup> Little did I know how much his successor, President Trump, would absolutely love the word winner and the word loser. Winners are those who dominate. Losers are those who get dominated.

If that is one's definition, then remember, Jesus was a loser.

Truth is, we strive to have an edge so that we can be more powerful, more in command, and more dominant. These are the assets that sooth our fragile egos and make us feel important.

We like to win. And, sometimes, competition has the ability to bring out the best in us, motivating us and inspiring us as individuals and groups to greatness. Unfortunately, it can also bring out the worst in us. And it's not just on the field. We compete at card games, we want to show we're the smartest person in the room, we want to beat the competition in business, we compare homes and cars and even grandkids.

I'm interested in stories of cheaters in sports — those who are willing to do almost anything to win. Why does the desire to

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<sup>1</sup>He proposed that we as a country need to “win the future” by investing in innovation and education and reducing the national debt. I'm all for innovation, education and debt reduction, but I am concerned about our motivations for winning.

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win fog a person's otherwise clear sight of the moral and honorable way? Have you heard the story of marathon runner Rosie Ruiz? She initially won the Boston marathon in 1980 but was later found to have cheated, likely skipping much of the race and taking the subway to close to the finish line. She's not the only runner who has pulled a similar trick. Sad story of marathon "winner," a doctor, runner, who seemed to have an addiction to winning to the extent that had been banned from races for cheating so many times.

Major League baseball just discovered that the Houston Astros, winners of the 2017 World Series, cheated their way to that World Series victory. Their Head Coach and General Manager were banned from the sport for a year and fired from the team. Houston gets to keep its title, but it will forever be stained.

And now, it seems like the political soul of our nation is at stake as the Senate weighs whether or not to remove the President of the United States from office. And the only thing I think the entire nation can agree on right now is this: nobody is winning. In their lust for power has led to an outright unwillingness to cooperate between parties has literally created a no-win situation. No matter the outcome, our democratic system is fraying at the edges if not cracking atop its foundations. The near future of politics will be uglier than ever, and sadly, we are treating one another as enemies. With very few willing to heed Jesus' instruction to love their enemies.

We will certainly be talking about the election as we move into the fall, and how we as a people who practice peace, service, and openness to all can be real witnesses to this faith. In the meantime, we must continue to view the world as more than winners and losers.

In all of these cases: the marathon runners, the Astros, and the state of our politics. These "winners" lost more than they won. And this is where we cue scripture...

<sup>25</sup>*Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one.*

<sup>26</sup>*So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air;*

<sup>27</sup>*but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.*

If the lust to win distorts who we are, then we are—like the scripture says—disqualified.

The metaphor here is racing as life. This life, and life beyond. Whether or not you view this life beyond as the pearly gates, or the legacy of how you will be remembered and what you will pass to this world, *how will we run the race?*

We want to run it with the discipline of an elite athlete, but our measure of greatness is not individual glory; our measure of greatness is sharing ourselves with others.

### **“LOVING VICTORY”**

It is here we would do well to remember how Jesus won. He did not win by overpowering his opponents and enemies. Not through dominance. He won through love and an unwavering commitment to God and neighbor. Victory through love was as difficult a concept to understand in biblical times as it is now. This kind of orientation to the world, or to the game, makes for terrible pregame speeches and half-time pep talks. You’re not going to win many ball games out-loving your opponent. I’m not proposing the Chiefs and Niners sit in a circle and sing *kum ba ya* tonight. Play with respect, heart, and do your best. But keep the game a game. You’ll see that tonight too, when some of the players get together at mid-field for prayer. Keep the game a game, and live your real life for God. True greatness will not be found on the field or the court, True greatness is found on the way, on the path. On Jesus’ way and path.









