

This passage is considered especially difficult because of challenges in the original language. Therefore, we should refrain from being dogmatic in our interpretation. It seems reasonable to accept the suggestion that Paul has in mind the figure of running a race which would have been familiar to the Corinthians because of the famous Isthmian Games. Though having other more common meanings, two words in the text found usage in the realm of athletics. "Classify" (v 12) was used in reference to judging candidates for the games, if they could be admitted as competitors. "Area of activity" (v 15, cf. vv 13, 16) translates a word which usually means a measuring standard, but also had a specialized reference to the lines that were drawn to measure off the lanes for runners in track events. Therefore, it may be helpful to keep a picture of a track event in mind to explain the text.

I. Understanding the passage within the picture of a track event

1. Paul would not wish to consider himself as a competitor in the same game or compare himself with his opponents who commend themselves (v 12a).
2. It is not wise for runners to judge their performance by those around them (v 12b). That can be deceptive. Even judging oneself by oneself, though helpful to see improvement, fails to realize that the standard of excellence is outside oneself.
3. Paul and his associates restricted their boasting to the things that are accomplished in the lane which God has marked out for them (v 13). This lane had taken Paul to the Corinthians to preach the gospel.
4. By correcting the Corinthians, writing to them, and visiting them, Paul was not stepping out of his lane, i.e., "overextending himself" (v 14). (By way of interpretation the NIV has added the word "boasting" which is not found in the original, nor is it present in translations such as the RSV, ESV, or NASB.) Paul had even been the first to bring the gospel to Corinth (cf. RSV, ESV, NASB).
5. Not only did Paul keep to his lane, he did not boast about what was happening in another lane (v 15a). The Corinthians were his spiritual children, his letter of commendation, proof of God working in and through him. He could boast of them.
6. Paul had long range goals in mind (vv 15b-16): (1) he wanted the Corinthians to grow in their faith, and (2) he wanted thereby to be freed to continue to yet unevangelized regions. ("Among you" in verse 15 is probably better understood as "by you", i.e., "within our area of activity we will be greatly enlarged by you".) Cf. Romans 15:24 where he expresses his wish to visit Rome and be helped by them on his way to Spain.
7. The Lord establishes the lane in which each is to run and produces the growth in our lives and the lives of others. All boasting must ultimately be "in the Lord" (vv 17-18). Runners may run a race and feel like they have done well, but in the end it is the judge who awards the prizes. The Lord's commendation is what counts.

II. Defining the "lane" in which Paul ran.

1. Certain suggestions for Paul's "lane" do not appear consistent with other Scripture.
 - a. Paul was not claiming exclusive rights to a geographic area, i.e., Corinth. He welcomed others who "watered" where he had "planted", so long as they built correctly on the foundation (cf. 1 Cor. 3).
 - b. Paul was not claiming exclusive rights to ministry among the Gentiles. Others were not excused from the dictates of the Great Commission and Paul himself strove to reach Jews.
2. Paul's "lane" can be defined by its emphasis and God's grace. See Galatians 2:9; Romans 15:15-16, 20-21.
 - a. The Gentiles were the emphasis of Paul's ministry, though not exclusively. He was furthermore burdened to preach the gospel where it had not previously been preached.
 - b. By God's grace this ministry to the Gentiles and among the unreached had been confirmed.

III. Considering our own "lane"

1. Every believer has been given a portion of grace by Christ to run the race (Eph 4:7). Cf. Gal. 6:4.
2. The parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) may give a helpful analogy.
 - a. Servants received money according to their ability. Our "lane" is defined by what God gives us.
 - b. Those who brought a return, though having differing absolute amounts, received the same commendation. We will be commended according to what we do with what God gives us.
 - c. The one who brought nothing was rebuked. The worse danger is to do nothing, because it would show that there is no true spiritual life in that person.

Running a good race is not about becoming a Christian. There is only one way to become a child of God, to accept by faith the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our sin. The person who does nothing with the Word of God and the evidences which God provides is likened to the third servant in the parable of the talents. That person will be condemned and not commended.

True believers were created in Christ Jesus to do good works. What we produce will depend upon our ability and the opportunities which God gives. We shouldn't be judging ourselves by others, but concentrating on doing what God has given us. Then we should give the Lord the credit for all He has given and accomplished. "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."