

Septuagesima Sunday

1 Corinthians 9:24-10:5: "Strive for the Imperishable Prize."

February 8/9, 2020 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Merciful God and Father, we give You most hearty thanks that in Your Word You have graciously revealed the goal toward which we should ever strive; and we humbly ask You, keep and direct us by Your Holy Spirit upon the way of truth, that, when our course is run, we may obtain the crown of righteousness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 79)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the ninth and tenth chapters of St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

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 wreath, but we an imperishable. 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. / For I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who gives us holy food and drink to strengthen us for the race of this life that we must run, dear fellow redeemed:

Our country is serious about its sports. A survey from 2017 indicated that the American people spent about \$100 billion in a year's time on sporting events, athletic equipment, and gym memberships. For the Super Bowl last weekend, advertisers didn't mind paying millions of dollars for a 30-second TV commercial. They knew people would be watching, and more than 100 million viewers were.

But our obsession with sports is not simply an American thing or even a twenty-first century thing. Athletic competition goes back in ancient history, probably all the way to Adam and Eve, or at least their kids. Humans have always been concerned about who is the fastest, who is the strongest, who is the most skilled. The Olympic Games were created in 776 B. C. as a way to measure these things on a grander scale. About 200 years after that, a similar event called the Isthmian Games was started. This was held in Corinth and featured recognizable events like racing, wrestling, boxing, and discus throwing.

The Isthmian Games made Corinth a hub of athletic activity. The athletes likely trained and participated in competitions throughout the year. The Apostle Paul spent an extended time in Corinth during his missionary journeys—more than a year and a half (Act. 18:11, 18). He saw firsthand the dedication of the athletes and may have even been present at one of the national Games.

He knew when he referred to athletic competition in today's text that he was "speaking the language" of the Corinthians. It's our language too. We understand what he is talking about when he mentions racing and boxing and the training needed to succeed. He writes: *"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."*

If you are serious about sports, you don't put in all the time and hard work, push through injuries and pain, to come in second. You train to win. A kid who is content with a participation ribbon is not serious about winning. And there is nothing wrong with competing just for the fun of it and not caring about winning or losing. But if the goal is winning, that requires sacrifices.

Paul writes that we should go all out to obtain the prize. But he is not really talking about athletic competition. He is talking about our life of faith. He urges us to dedicate ourselves to spiritual training and exercise, so we do not lose the prize the Lord has prepared for us. And what is that prize? It is the imperishable crown, very different than the perishable wreaths won by the athletes in those days, whose leaves soon withered. The imperishable crown is everlasting life which Jesus secured for sinners through His death and resurrection. This crown is reserved for all who believe in Jesus. He assures us, *"Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life"* (Rev. 2:10).

But how exactly can we "train" or "exercise" our faith? It is not simply a matter of going through the motions. Even athletic training requires more than muscle. It requires heart and strength of will. All the physical, mental, and emotional resources of a person must be focused on the goal if he wants to succeed.

We need to approach our spiritual goal in a similar way. We can't take for granted that the prize will be ours if we make no effort to obtain it. It would be absurd for a fifty-year-old to think he could compete in a marathon simply because he "ran a couple times" as a kid. This is like the adults who feel they are in good shape with God simply because they got baptized and confirmed at a church many years before. They figure as long as they are on the congregation's books, they are on their way to heaven.

Saving faith, though, is hardly a matter of "checking certain boxes" or of doing certain "churchy" things because "we are supposed to." It is certainly good to attend church, but simply being present does not mean faith is being exercised. You could be sitting here physically, but your thoughts could be a million miles away. Or in your mind, you could be rejecting the things you hear: "Oh, I'm not really as sinful as that!" Or, "I don't go along what the Bible says on this point." Or, "I'm a good person; I deserve to go to heaven!"

Or you could come to Communion and bow your head with the rest of us, but you come more out of obligation than anything. You are not especially troubled by your sins. You don't have a

strong desire to be nourished and strengthened by the body and blood of Jesus. You just feel it is important to keep up appearances.

Does this sound far-fetched, like something that wouldn't happen to you or the people around you? Then listen to what Paul wrote about the Israelites, the chosen people of God. He said that all were delivered from slavery in Egypt. All were led by Moses through the midst of the Red Sea. They all looked up to him as their leader. They *"all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink."* But not all of them remained believers. Not all of them were saved. Paul said that *"with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness."*

Do you see why our spiritual training and exercise is so important? We cannot take for granted that we will inherit heaven simply because we are connected to a congregation or because we have generally tried to live the way Christians live. Salvation comes through faith in Jesus. It comes from knowing, trusting in, and being comforted by what He did. It comes from recognizing that there is no other way for us to be saved (Act. 4:12).

Salvation does not come from our work. Jesus made this abundantly clear in the parable in today's Gospel reading. All the vineyard workers received the same wages no matter how long they had worked. The ones who worked the longest weren't cheated, because they were paid exactly what they had been promised (Mat. 20:1-16). It is a parable that expresses the grace of God, that He saves us out of the abundance of His love.

It was His love that caused God the Father to send His only Son to us. Jesus came with no ambitions for personal success or glory. He came to redeem us from our sin and death by giving Himself in our place. This was no easy thing to do. He had to resist countless temptations to sin, fully keep God's law, endure great anguish and pain, and die on a Roman cross. He maintained His gracious resolve, and He accomplished His goal: our salvation. The author of Hebrews tells us that *"for the joy that was set before him [he] endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God"* (12:2).

Jesus finished that bitter race for you. He carried your sins to His death and suffered the torments of hell on your behalf, so you would have forgiveness and eternal life. On the third day He rose again to show that the victory over sin and death is yours and all who believe in Him. But if He already won the race, if He already obtained the victory, what more is there for us to do?

There is nothing we can do to win the victory. The victory is ours by faith in Jesus. But as we learn from the example of the Israelites, that faith can be lost. It can be lost by spiritual laziness, by not taking time to hear and study God's Word at church and at home. It can be lost by letting our guard down, which makes us vulnerable to the attacks of the devil and our sinful flesh. It can be lost by rejecting our training and running off into sin.

This is why Paul, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, urges us to *"exercise self-control in all things."* The very term *"self-control"* tells us that we need to maintain spiritual discipline, so our *"self"* does not lead us in the wrong direction. Paul clearly recognized the harmful desires of our sinful nature. This is why he diligently disciplined his body and kept it under control.

He did not run without purpose. He did not box for show. In a letter to Timothy, he said his spiritual training and exercise bore fruit. The Lord strengthened and kept him in the saving faith until his earthly end, so that Paul could gratefully say, *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith"* (2Ti. 4:7).

Our spiritual growth as Christians is always by the grace of God. We cannot get ourselves to heaven. But Jesus promises to visit and strengthen us through His powerful Word and Sacraments. These are the means He uses to carry us to the finish line in this life and on into His eternal kingdom. We stay focused and connected to Him by repenting of our sins, filling our hearts and minds with His Word, and applying our will to His work. We are not running to lose. We don't want to lose what Jesus won for us.

We **Strive for the Imperishable Prize**. It may seem a long way off in the distance, but we will be there before we know it. We confidently run forward saying with Paul, *"Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing"* (2Ti. 4:8). God grant us all the grace and strength to finish this race in faith and to receive the blessed crown of life.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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