

INI

St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
January 31, 2021
4th Sunday after Epiphany

Scripture Lessons: 2 Kings 5:1-14, Mark 1:40-45

Hymns: 239; 417:1-4; 447; 453:2

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

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*.²⁵ 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*.²⁶ Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as *one who* beats the air.²⁷ But I discipline my body and bring *it* into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified. (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In Christ Jesus, God our Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Faith in Jesus brings Deliverance from Sin

This week's focus is really all about faith in Jesus as the source of forgiveness, life, and salvation. In our Old Testament lesson we read the account of how Naaman, a Syrian general and so an enemy of Israel, was healed of leprosy by God's grace and power. Only the God of Israel could cleanse him of his leprosy, but it required the obedience of faith. Naaman had do something that

made no sense to him, but through which God worked cleansing. So it is with us also. God brings forgiveness of sins through the washing of baptism. It doesn't make sense, but it does bring the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

In our Gospel lesson we read of a man who was also the victim of the dread disease of leprosy, and he came to Jesus in faith, confessing that if Jesus was willing, he knew Jesus could heal him. Jesus was willing and the man was cleansed of his leprosy. Faith in Jesus is what we possess in our hearts. By the grace and power of the Holy Spirit we are convinced that if Jesus is willing, Jesus can cleanse us of the leprosy of sin. **Jesus is willing!** Jesus went to the cross to secure this cleansing for us. He declares that we too are clean of sin and guilt and delivered from death. Because He lives we too shall live! This is our faith. It isn't science. It isn't common sense. It is **faith**, a **sure and certain knowledge** that Jesus and only Jesus can save us from sin and death. In our text the Spirit would give us direction for --

THEME: Running the Race of Faith.

There is a prize at the end of this race, and this race which we call "life on earth" needs to be focused on –

I. Securing the Prize of Eternal Glory.

We must begin with a clear understanding of both the nature of the prize we are talking about and the criteria for possessing the prize.

The prize is eternal life. Most people in the world not only assume, but insist that the possession of the prize, the awarding of the prize is dependent upon the effort made by those who seek this prize of eternal life, or eternal glory. We have already been taught by the Word of God this morning that this prize is awarded through faith according to God's grace. "*The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" (Romans 6:23) The Apostle Paul makes it abundantly clear that we haven't earned the prize. It is a gift which we have been awarded according to grace through faith in Christ Jesus.

Now to the point of our text. While we have faith in Jesus we are still living in this world, living this temporal and material life with

all of its allurements and temptations. So we are traveling through this course of life as if it were a race to the finish line. It is a race not against other people but against spiritual forces that are determined to undermine our faith and lead us into sin and ultimately despair, that we are such sinners that we couldn't possibly be forgiven, so that we would **not** finish the course as children of God.

One of the strategies of the devil, a strategy that appeals mightily to our sinful flesh, to our human desires is to distract us from the heavenly prize that awaits, and entice us to seek, and pursue some lesser prize of earthly happiness, and personal fulfillment. That idea of personal fulfillment, of being true to oneself, or temporal, fleshly happiness, or even political and or social justice has blinded many people to the true ultimate prize of eternal life. People are told, not based upon the authority of God's Word, but based on the world's social agenda that sin doesn't matter, in fact that sin isn't sin. What matters is outward acceptance and inclusion and kindly love. That's pretty hard to argue with if you have lost the authority of God as revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures! But the Word is clear. To cave into false ideals built upon the shifting sands of human opinion and relative morality will bring tragic results. If we allow the prize to be happiness and fulfillment of fleshly desires now, the real prize will slip from our grasp. Jesus said: *"Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. ³⁵ For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?"* (Mark 8:34-36)

The prize is not found in personal fulfillment, but in personal **denial**. We are not in life for the fulfillment of the lusts of the flesh. We are in this life to glorify our Father in heaven who came to us in grace. *"God has sent His only begotten Son into this world, that we might live through Him!"* (1 John 4:9) That is through faith in Jesus' name, through faith in Jesus' merits. And in the end God awards the prize of eternal life to those who believe in the merits of Jesus as our crucified and risen Savior and Lord. Keep your eyes on the true prize. Keep your eyes on the goal which is before us. Don't allow the devil to distract us from that goal.

So then let us consider the Holy Spirit's counsel for --

II. Striving for the Finish Line.

1 Corinthians 9: 24-25 “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. ²⁵And 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.*”

The Spirit's first advice is to run like you want to win! We need to run the race of faith with determination, and with discipline. In worldly competition for material and earthly glory we see people train hard, and exercise temperance in all things. Some of the biggest athletic games in the ancient world were held in Corinth every two years. They led up to the Olympic games. If you were going to complete in the Olympic games you had to do well in Corinth.

We know how that is. The Superbowl is a week away. Whether you are a fan or not, Tom Brady is a living testament to training hard and being temperate in all things. It is well known how disciplined he is in training and in diet. He holds to a regiment stricter than anyone who has gone before him. Next week he is playing in his 10th Superbowl. No other quarterback has come close to that number. Tom Brady plays to win! It is all for earthly glory, fame, money and holding up a trophy. It will all pass away.

Now what are we to learn from this? If athletes put in that kind of dedicated effort and discipline for something that will pass away, shouldn't we be all the more focused on staying on course for the heavenly prize that awaits us? “Run in such a way that you may obtain it!” (v.24) And yes, this isn't a 100 yard dash. It's a marathon! It takes a lot of focus for our entire lifetime. That was Paul's view, may it be ours also.

Paul wrote these words to the Philippians: “*Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.* ¹³*Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead,* ¹⁴*I press toward the goal*

for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:12-14)

In these words Paul reminds us that we have not already attained the prize. We stay on track, faith's track that we might attain that prize which Christ has already won for us, and for which Christ has laid hold of us! Paul also asserts that we ought to forget those things we left behind. For Paul it was a life of work righteousness as well as personal fulfillment in the order of the Pharisees. He also left behind a load of sin and guilt which the Lord in His grace removed from Paul. So let us also leave behind thoughts of merit and glory, leave behind sin and guilt. Press on to the goal for the prize of the upward call of God!

Our text gives us direction.

1 Corinthians 9:26-27 “Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as *one who* beats the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and bring *it* into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

So often the weakness of our flesh undermines our goals in life. We don't maintain a consistent effort. Our minds and feelings work against us. We might find ourselves thinking, “I'm not really into this.” or “This is so hard!” or “I don't want to do this anymore!” and what happens we fall short of the goal. A half-hearted effort in living a Christ centered life isn't what's called for. We don't proceed with uncertainty, wondering if heaven is worth all the trouble of saying “NO” to sin, or going to church and staying in the Word, and being ridiculed by the world. **Heaven is worth it!** Christ paid for our salvation with His holy precious blood and His innocent sufferings and death. (Luther's explanation to the 2nd Article) He paid an inestimable price for your salvation. Don't start thinking you are sacrificing too much for Christ and salvation. Such thoughts are ludicrous!

Then Paul says that we ought not be like the boxer who beats the air. Empty wild swings that don't connect with temptation and sin in our lives won't work. We dare not just go through the motions. We need to give the sin in our lives a knockout punch. Deliver a consistent left jab to the jaw of the devil; hit him with the Word of

God! Tell that old foe what the will of the Lord is, and how Christ has redeemed you from sin!

Finally, Paul looked at himself and the need to bring his body into subjection. Into subjection to what? To the Word and will of God! We ought not to think “It’s MY life, I can live it as I want to live!” Or “It’s MY body, nobody can tell ME what to do with it!” Scripture reminds us: “*Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? ²⁰For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.* (1 Corinthians 6:19-20) We discipline ourselves that we might glorify God, after all, not only have we been redeemed by Christ the crucified, but we also have been blessed with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We are each the temple of the Spirit of God! We are to glorify God with our bodies and with our spirits, for they do belong to God!

The Apostle Paul speaks to us of being careful not only to talk the talk of Christianity, but also to walk the walk of Christianity. Again, he used himself as an example. Paul returns to his illustration of participating in sports. Even Paul, an apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ, needed to be careful that he not just talk a good game, but he had to stay focused lest he be disqualified! The allurements of sin, and how sin can grip an individual, and then lead to impenitence, and impenitence would disqualify us from eternal life. Let us live avoiding sin as the danger it is, lest we be disqualified!

Today we are focused on the importance of faith and its presence in our lives. We have learned that it is by grace through faith that we have been cleansed from sin and saved from death. Indeed, it is through faith that the Lord has already revealed to us the prize of the upward call of God, the prize of eternal life. We are encouraged to “Keep the faith!” Our faith in Christ gives us direction in life. The gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation. (Romans 1:16) By the gospel the Spirit of God empowers us to run the race, keeping the goal of eternal glory before our eyes so that in the end we will obtain that crown of glory which the Lord awards to all who love Him.

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.