

SERMON -- SEPTUAGESIMA -- I CORINTHIANS 9:24-27

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.” Thus far our text.

With the Olympic Games going on, this passage directly relates to the spirit of competition that characterizes these sporting events. For most of the athletes competing in China, the entire focus of the last few years of their lives has been training for the specific event that they are going to be competing in. Their home for this time has largely been the ice rink, the basketball court, or the gymnasium. They have forsaken other outside interests for the sole purpose of improving their chances of winning the gold medal, which is the highest award at the games. As a result, it is fair to say that winning this prize is the primary goal in their lives at this point; it's their full-time job. What matters to them is who wins the race. Many of the winning athletes say that this is the greatest day of their lives, and that nothing could be better than the sweet feeling of victory.

However, Paul tells us that these feelings can and do translate into our spiritual lives. The crown of victory that Paul speaks of in our text has us straining toward the goal with the same intensity as the Olympic athletes. The only difference is that the goal

Paul speaks of is much greater than the goal that the athletes strain for, but the question of who has won the race is also in the back of our minds. Of course, Paul is speaking of the hope of eternal life, which is the greatest thing that we can hope for. What Paul also reminds us of, however, is that the attaining of this goal does not depend on our doing enough to deserve it, but rather on Christ's gaining it for us. Thus, our text for this morning reminds us of the importance of eternal life for our eternal security and comfort, but also that there is only one way to attain it, and that is faith in Christ.

First of all, let us consider what is so great about this eternal life that we are all looking forward to. What is so wonderful about eternal life? What will we gain from being in heaven after our life on this earth is over? There will be a cessation of all of the pain and suffering of this world once we are in heaven. People will not live in the throes of agony and illness anymore; rather, there will be no sickness and death there. We all have experienced or are experiencing some pains or body or soul in our lives. Sometimes this can be overwhelming to us; other times, it is just more than we can bear. What we are promised with the words of Scripture is that this pain and suffering will end in heaven, where we will be with Christ forever. This is another reason to be joyful that we have the hope of eternal life – Christ will be there. This means that we will have complete happiness there, because our Maker and Redeemer is full of love for us His children. He will be all that we need, because His love takes care of all that we want or desire. We won't need to work for our food; we won't have to worry about how to pay our bills anymore. All of our worries will be swallowed up in His complete sufficiency. We won't need anything else besides Him. All of these blessings are the reason why we look forward to the prize that Paul speaks of – eternal life.

After all, we certainly wouldn't look forward to the alternative of eternity in hell with the devil. This would be eternal pain and torment, much worse than we have here on earth. It has been said that if we knew exactly what we have been saved from, we would appreciate the gifts of God all the more. This is certainly the case with the hope of eternal life in heaven. It is a gift from God, and is the most important thing to us in our lives. We strain toward it even more strongly than those competing in the Olympic Games do for the gold medal, because the "crown of life" is much greater than any gold medal. After all, the gold medal is an earthly gift, and will pass away; the gift of eternal life is eternal, and will not pass away.

Secondly, we must ask the question: What does Paul mean by us running in such a way as to get the prize? How are we to do things the right way so that we will gain this eternal life in heaven? After all, everything here on earth that we have that is good is obtained by hard work, sweat and tears. Shouldn't the gift of heavenly eternity be attained by us in the same way? Paul tells us clearly in the Scriptures that the gift of eternal life in heaven is not gained by anything that we do; rather, it has everything to do with what Christ has done. Paul is saying that the only way to get to heaven is to trust in Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world. There is no other name in heaven or on earth by which we can be saved. He is the way, the truth and the life. Christianity IS an exclusive religion – there is only one Savior. Any claims to the contrary are plainly false. Jesus Christ is the true Savior of the world, and the true hope for sinful men; any other place that we put our hope is just plain false!

Of course, this stance makes us immediately unpopular with our modern society, which says that there is no absolute truth, and those who claim that there is are intolerant,

which is the most dangerous and “incorrect” thing to be. After all, those who are intolerant have the audacity to tell others that they are wrong, and there is no absolute wrong in their minds. What we need to remember is that this is part of Paul’s directive to run the race with the prize firmly set in our minds. Christ is the only way to heaven, and there is no other. Therefore, we need to refute attempts by others to substitute anyone else in His place as Savior. All gods are not alike; the only true God is the God revealed in Scripture, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is the truth, and is the only way to the prize of eternal life that Paul speaks of in his letter to the Corinthians.

In addition, we must not only fend off attempts by the world around us to substitute other gods for the true God, we must also keep faith in Christ as our focus against all worldly desires. We must not let anything get in the way of our Christian faith, lest we make it into our god, and be guilty of sinning against the first commandment. However, we know that this will not occur due to our sinful nature. What we trust is what we have been told in Scripture – the Holy Spirit will guard our hearts and minds, and keep us in the true faith until we die. He will watch out for us, sustain the faith which He placed there in the beginning at our baptism, and cause good works to proceed out of our hearts as a fruit of this faith. He has promised to do this, and has done so every day of our lives. Without His urging and work, we would indeed have no hope. We would be unable to obtain the prize of eternal life; in fact, we wouldn’t even be able to leave the starting blocks of the race. The Holy Spirit is the promised Counselor that Jesus spoke about when He walked here on earth, and He is with us every day of our lives. He keeps us in the true faith until we get to everlasting life. Therefore,

we must remain faithful to God to obtain eternal life, but the ability to do so comes from God Himself.

Thirdly, Paul instructs us not to run like a man wandering aimlessly, or to fight like we are fighting the air. Think about these analogies! If we are running aimlessly, we will never finish the race. If we fight like we are shadowboxing all of the time, there is no way that we will defeat the opponent. I am reminded of a scene I once saw in a movie. The two main characters are lost in the jungle during wartime, and after their Jeep has been blown off of the road. They don't know where they are or where they are going, so they just set off in any direction, hoping to find a place away from the fighting. After all, they are out on a road that usually only sees a few friendly vehicles a day. After a few minutes of traveling, they find themselves back at the spot where they began. It turns out that because one of them is limping, they are walking around in circles, and not getting anywhere, because they are walking aimlessly. This didn't register with them at first, because they didn't know where they were going anyway. This is the same with a man who is wandering aimlessly – there is no way that he is going to win a race.

The same is true of the Christian life that is not focused on the person and work of Jesus Christ – if there is no focus, then there will not be an attaining of the goal. The Gospel involves simple trust in Jesus Christ, and this trust comes from the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. To make it any more complicated than this runs the risk of adding something to the faith that shouldn't be there, or subtracting something that is crucial to the faith. Paul instructs us to keep the focus where it belongs; namely, on Christ and Him crucified as the basis for our faith.

So, to answer the question that we have been asking all along in this sermon: Who is the winner of the race, and who gets the prize? This is the ten thousand dollar question, so to speak. Paul explains to us that Jesus is the winner of the prize. He defeated death by dying on the cross and rising again. He won the race against the devil and achieved the prize of eternal life. No one else could have done it, and He did while being tempted in every way, yet without sinning. However, He gave us the benefits and rewards of the prize of eternal life. This was not because we deserved it, but because He loves us so much that He wanted to give the gift to us. This is similar to an athlete in the Olympics giving the gold medal that they have won to someone else. They do this not because they have to, or because they will gain something from doing so; rather, they do it because they want to give a wonderful gift to someone else. The athlete won the medal, but the gift is given to someone else. This is how it works with eternal life. Christ won the race, but gives the victory and the benefits to us. In short, His love for us conquered death and gave us eternal life.

When the race is over and the work is done, at the end of the day, Christ is the winner of it all. He has conquered sin, death and the devil, and they no longer have any power over Him. This occurred because God is the strongest force in all of creation, and everything is subject to Him because He made it. However, He didn't just take this victory and keep it for Himself; rather, He gave us the victory over sin and death because of His love for us. Therefore, the way that we gain a part of this victory is through faith in His atonement for our sins, and that He is the only way, truth and life. If we believe that He is the only way to get to heaven and the promised eternal life, then we have saving faith. This saving faith is given to us by the Holy Spirit, so even this is done for

us. What wonderful gifts our loving God has given to us His children! We need not wander aimlessly wondering why we are even in this world; we know that we are God's creation, made in His likeness, and living under His grace, mercy and love. We know that the prize is ours because we have God's word on it, and His word is truth. What a wonderful victory this is; even better than winning an event, or a medal, in the Olympics. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.