

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 29, 2020

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 380, 370:1, 372, 447, 52.

Lessons: Isaiah 5:1-7, Romans 7:18-25, Matthew 22:1-14

Sermon Text: Philippians 3:7-14.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Don't we all try to win at whatever we are doing? No one really tries to lose. Paul uses the picture of running a race.

The letter to the Hebrews tells us how we are to run. After it has just listed Old Testament believers we read ***“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”*** Hebrews 12:1 (NIV)

But this is a race to

“THE PRIZE FOR WHICH GOD HAS CALLED ME HEAVENWARD IN CHRIST JESUS”

- 1. Saint Paul is striving toward the goal of eternal life.**
- 2. We are striving toward that same goal.**
- 3. God provides the strength for that race.**

Do you realize that every day you, too, are running in a race toward eternal life?

What did Paul have in his life when he was still known as Saul of Tarsus? Was his former life before his conversion so miserable? No, not as the world would judge his life. Saul from the city of Tarsus was a freeborn Roman citizen. This in itself was important. He also was a Jew with a proud heritage who traced his descent from the tribe of Benjamin. He was a Pharisee, a member of the strictest sect of Jews. He had a fine education in the Law of Moses and in all the traditions of the Jewish elders. His zeal for keeping the Law was as great as anyone could have. Because of this no one could have worked any harder than he did to persecute the followers of Christ. Saul was important in this world and he had a reputation as a leader among the Pharisees.

Why, then, does Paul say in our text that he counted all these things as worthless and as useless as rubbish or manure? The big difference in his attitude came when he was brought to faith in Christ. At the very height of his frenzied activity in persecuting Christ and his followers, God took him prisoner, made him a captive when he brought him to faith in Jesus on the way to Damascus. From then on he was an altogether different person. What he had counted as being very important before, was now considered nothing better than rubbish or garbage. He became the great Apostle Paul who devoted his life to Christ and the spreading of the Gospel. What had been so important in his life before conversion, he now counted as worthless trash. His former friends, of course, did not agree with him. He writes to Christians: ***“We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. ... Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world,”*** 1 Corinthians 4:9b-13.

He had lost his earthly freedom for Christ. But all the things he lost, he condemned as rubbish, garbage, trash, not even anything to recycle and reuse. For there was nothing in his sinful life to recycle!

What was so important, so precious, that Paul would suffer in this manner for Jesus' sake? Paul says, ***“I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”*** Paul's own righteousness that he had when he tried his best to keep the Law of Moses, was no longer any good to him. He had given up in trying to earn his way to heaven by good works. In Christ he had found the

righteousness that is completely foreign to man, the righteousness that cannot be earned by man. This is the righteousness that comes from God that Christ earned by his work of redemption.

Of course he knows and we know that we don't personally win righteousness before God with our lives.

He wants to ***“gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”***

He is straining toward the goal. This is the prize for which God has called him toward heaven. One writer had this to say: When believers are brought to faith, they become possessors of eternal life. As long as they are in the world, they are like people who hold title to property in a distant land. That title makes the property theirs, but the owners are not yet physically in possession of what rightfully belongs to them. In the same way believers, although they are possessors of eternal life by faith and have the righteousness of Christ, are still also sinners living in a sinful world. They have not yet arrived at the full, physical possession of the perfection of eternal life.

Today Paul vividly describes the Christian life as a constant striving toward the great goal and prize of eternal life that God's grace holds out to believers in Christ.

When Paul wrote these verses, he had been a Christian for many years. In that time he had grown in knowledge of Christ and in learning about living a life of conforming to Christ. He had suffered the loss of his personal freedom for the sake of Christ – this was written when he was a prisoner in Rome, but that did not mean he had “arrived” spiritually or reached the goal of perfection.

Like all of us, Paul was still living in a sinful world. He was still a sinner, still troubled by the weaknesses and failings of his sinful nature. Although he was a child of God by faith, he had not yet arrived at the point where he could perfectly and completely serve God or enjoy the fullness of the blessings God had in store for him. That would have to wait until he entered heaven. Meanwhile he lived his life as a Christian in a constant striving for holiness. He “pressed on”, he “ran the race” toward perfection.

Paul uses a picture from the world of athletics. Just as an athlete must concentrate on the race or the game, so too a Christian must concentrate on what his real purpose and goal is as he is running the race to heaven. An athlete can lose out by overconfidence, lack of mental alertness, and by not always striving to do his or her best.

In the same way, spiritual dullness, overconfidence and lack of concentration can cause Christians to lose – to lose everything. The Christian who does not concentrate on living the kind of life to which God calls him may, like the overconfident athlete, be eliminated from the race and in the end lose the blessing God has in store for him. A believer's sanctification, that is, his life as a Christian in this world, will never be perfect. But the struggle against sin and the devil must be carried on every day as long as the Christian is in this world. Neither Paul nor any other Christian can ever afford a lack of concentration or think that the race is as good as run and won.

He writes ***“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.”*** Paul was a believer because Christ had redeemed him with his blood and called him by the gospel to be his own. That call of the Savior included the promise of eternal joy. It also included the call for Paul to serve the Savior with his life. God's call to every believer includes that call to service here on earth, and in that call the Lord provides the spiritual power for such service. Paul was motivated by the fact that Christ had reached out in grace and taken hold of him – remember Paul calls himself ***“chief of sinners”***, 1 Timothy 1:15 (KJV) that is, “the greatest and worst sinner”. He, like we, can claim no credit for deciding to become Christians. Motivated by Christ's love for him, Paul pressed onward – like a marathon runner – with firm concentration and all-out effort toward the blessed end to which Christ has promised that his life of faith would lead.

Twice in two verses Paul emphasized the fact that he himself has not yet reached spiritual perfection or taken full possession of his eternal inheritance. In our epistle lesson this morning, you heard Paul say ***“what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing.”*** Romans 7:19 (NIV)

Paul did not believe that he had achieved perfection or could achieve it in his life on earth. But that did not mean he became lazy or despaired or gave up striving for perfection.

As we read Paul's letters, we see very clearly that during his entire life as a Christian he had one passion: He wanted to serve the Lord Jesus Christ in all that he did, in all his life, every day. He did not want anything to distract him from that goal.

He sums that up in the next words: ***“one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”***

If a runner in a race looks back while running forward, that is dangerous. It can result in a loss of speed and direction. In the race of his Christian life Saint Paul did not look back either. He did not look back with pride on past accomplishments. He knew they cannot earn him anything in God's sight. With each new day he put forth every effort to press ahead, to grow in his Christian living and service to Christ. Just like a runner strains and stretches every muscle, putting all his energy into the race as he approaches the finish line, Paul was spending all the spiritual energy he possessed as a Christian as he drew ever closer to the goal and prize of eternal life. There is no evidence that he waited with this effort as he approached the end of his life. For who knows when our life might end? There is no evidence or proof that today is not our last day on earth!

Every Christian should run the race of his Christian life in that way. We know we won't reach perfection in our lives here on earth, because we are sinners, but there is no limit to the spiritual growth we can accomplish by the grace and through the power of God who called us to be his children and to serve him with our Christian lives.

At the end of the race course – in any kind of a race – is the goal, the finish line. The winner of the race receives the prize. For Christians the goal and the prize are the same thing: the end of our faith is eternal life with Christ in heaven. When God calls Christians and brings them to faith, he sets that prize and goal before them. He encourages them always to keep that goal and prize in mind as they run the race of Christian life. For Christians everything is “in Christ Jesus”. We are called into Christ Jesus. We are running “in Christ Jesus”. We reach the goal “in Christ Jesus”. We don't do it by ourselves. We can't do it by ourselves. That prize is totally a gift from God.

We need the encouragement of Christ Jesus all the way as we run the good race, as we fight the good fight. In every step of a marathon race – or a sprint for that matter – the entire body must function together and must get its strength from the food the racer has taken into his body. In every step of the race to eternal life we must get our strength from the spiritual food Jesus Christ provides.

Where would a baptized child be 5, or 10, or 15 or more years from now without learning from the Word of God? Where would you be if you relied on once upon a time having memorized some bible passages or Luther's small catechism without having continued to hear the Word of God since that time? The spiritual food to sustain you, you need regularly. Your car or truck won't continue to run indefinitely unless you keep filling its gas tank. Your body won't keep you going unless you feed it regularly. Here on Sunday mornings is a time and place to recharge your spiritual batteries to keep you going through another week, and the spiritual meals you eat each day – personal bible reading, reviewing the catechism with your children, family devotions and bible reading – provide daily food as you run your race toward eternal life. And just as an athlete is spurred on by the cheering of family and friends, so too here on Sunday mornings we can cheer one another on and give one another the encouragement we need to run our race in a wicked world.

Without the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts, we couldn't run the race or reach the goal. But in Christ and through faith in Christ, we press on each day. We eagerly look forward to the day when we shall reach the end and goal of our faith and take full possession of that for which God has taken hold of us.

Our Old Testament lesson and Gospel lesson both remind us pointedly of those who were called but lost out because they didn't finish the race. In our Old Testament lesson we learn that when ***“the house of Israel, and the men of Judah”*** yielded only bad fruit God took away its hedge and broke down its walls and it was destroyed. When ***“the house of Israel, and the men of Judah”*** turned their back on God's very son, Jesus the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah, God then left them and gave the gospel to the gentiles – and that includes us! In Jesus' parable in our Gospel lesson we learned that ***“many are invited, but few are chosen.”*** You have been invited. You have been called by the Gospel to follow Jesus Christ.

All mature believers should take this view of their lives: Understanding their own lack of perfection, they should, in Christ, never stop striving for perfection. They should never lose sight of the eternal goal that the Lord has set before them.

With Saint Paul, may you strive to fight the good fight, to run a good race every day until God takes you to your heavenly home. Amen.