

**MINISTRY BY MAIL**  
**Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship**  
[www.lutheranlccf.org](http://www.lutheranlccf.org)  
**Nineteenth Sunday After Trinity, October 10, 2021**

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

Hymns: 660, 444:2, 447, 370, 247.

Lessons: 2 Kings 23:1-3, Philippians 2: 1-11, Matthew 24: 3-13.

Sermon Text: Philippians 3:12-21.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Saint Paul, writing by inspiration of God the Holy Ghost, tells us that Christians are always looking forward to eternal life. They should never lose sight of the eternal goal that the Lord has set before them.

Paul uses a picture here 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 out.

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 blessings 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 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. That race is important because it is

**THE RACE TO ETERNAL LIFE**

- 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.**

Paul 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 happiness. It also included the call for Paul to serve the Savior with his life. God's call to faith to every believer includes that call to service here on earth, and in that calling 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”, that is, “the greatest and worst sinner”. (See 1 Timothy 1:15) 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 fact, he wrote in Romans: *“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For 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 7:18-19 (NIV)

He knew that he had not achieved perfection and could not 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 his 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 wrote: ***“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.”***

Paul offers himself as a role model, but he is not boasting. ***“Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.”*** He also wrote in First Corinthians: ***“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.”*** 1 Corinthians 11:1 (NIV) In our epistle lesson today from this same letter to the Philippians, he holds up Jesus Christ as a role model. We know Jesus lived a perfect life, and as you review Luther’s Small Catechism for yourself or with your children, you will be reminded as you study the Ten Commandments that Jesus Christ kept the law perfectly, something we can never do, but that doesn’t keep us from trying to please God. That is the kind of role model or hero Paul points us toward.

What kind of role models and heroes does the world have? Those who do not sincerely strive to follow Jesus Christ in faith seem to have no sense of shame whatsoever, and even boast of their wicked lifestyles. Instead, the child of God, as we read in Ephesians, will ***“find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret.”*** Ephesians 5:10-12 (NIV)

Paul is pleading with us, as it were, not to follow the examples of those who live only for this world and either ignore, or simply pick and choose what parts of Christianity they want to follow. He goes on in our sermon text: ***“For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.”*** We don’t have to look far to find those who live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Don’t we see them all around us? At work? At school? In our neighborhoods?

As we strive to live a Christian Life – and remember “Christian” literally means “Christ-like” – we learn of Jesus Christ and what he did for us. We learn of God and strive to show and teach others and especially our children about God.

Scripture tells us: ***“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”***

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. And he didn’t look back in regretfully worrying over past sins which had been washed away by Jesus’ blood. Although he remembered his sins, he knew that Jesus Christ did not remember them and hold them against him. 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 had as a Christian as he came closer to the goal and prize of eternal life. There is no evidence that he waited with this effort until 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 winner of the race receives the prize. For Christians the goal and the prize are the same thing: the end result of our faith is the perfect gift of eternal life. 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.

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 will 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? You regularly need spiritual food to sustain you. 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. That 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 in all our worship services and Bible classes we can cheer one another on and give one another the encouragement we need to run our race in a wicked world. Scripture encourages us to ***“consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”*** Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV)

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 who have been called to eternal life, 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.

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.

We must daily remember that Jesus Christ came to earth to live just like us, to be tempted in every way just as we are, but through it all to live a sinless life in complete obedience to God, his heavenly Father. He obeyed the law of God which we cannot. And so the Father in heaven imputes his perfection to our account, and says “Not Guilty”. That is the judgment of justification. You have been saved by Jesus Christ's perfect life. And then Jesus Christ, who did not sin, was punished for all the sins you and I have been guilty of. The innocent suffered for the guilty, and God judges the guilty ones free because of what Jesus did. Believe it and you will be saved eternally!

Yes, we are waiting for the Lord Jesus Christ to come and take us to himself in heaven. It doesn't depend on our good deeds. It depends solely on Jesus' blood and righteousness.

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.