

## Luke 13:22-30

Finishing in second place is not bad. It's usually rewarded with a silver medal. But when there are only two teams, coming in second is as bad as it gets. In the last verse of our text, Jesus talks about those who are first and those who are last. He is not speaking here of winning or losing in cards, sports, or some other venture in life. The first and last here refer to our standing before God. It boils down to the placement of our soul when we die. Those who are first will enter into the joys of Paradise. Those who are last will enter that place where there is weeping, and gnashing of teeth.

We would do well to consider carefully how races are won and lost today. A runner in the lead when a race begins is not assured of gaining the victory when all the runners cross the finish line. In the same way, a runner at the back of the pack when the race begins can, and sometimes does, finish in first place. With this in mind, listen to Jesus' words in our text: *"Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."* Where are you right now...first or last? To answer this question, we need to know what Jesus means by first and last right now.

The Jews, God's chosen people, were first. Out of all the people living in the world, God chose them to be highly favored. He called prophets from among them to speak His words to all of His chosen people. He gave them His words of Law and Gospel. He assured them with the promises of the coming Savior. And from them, the Savior was born. When Jesus sent out His Apostles, He ordered them to go first to the Jews. Even St. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, when arriving at a town or city, spoke first to the Jews about the good news of Jesus.

Just as the Jews were first, so are you. You are first right now because God has highly favored you by giving you in full measure His Word and Sacraments. Nothing is being withheld from you. You are free to worship at a church where His truth is purely proclaimed. You have Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the words of the Gospel. You have catechisms and hymnals. You have the opportunity to purchase and study good Lutheran books which set forth the Faith clearly and accurately. You have the opportunity to worship every Sunday and also on other days, in Lent for example, without fear of being persecuted or jailed for coming to church. You are free to speak about the Lord and His truths in your homes and among your friends and neighbors. You are first because God has richly blessed you with everything you need to become Christians and to grow in the Christian Faith.

You are very different from those who, right now, are last. There are people living in countries--in places where it is illegal to have a Bible, where baptisms are rarely done, where the Lord's Supper is offered hardly at all, where Christians cannot openly speak of Christ for fear of being put to death. Such people are destitute. They are last in line when it comes to being blessed with the Word of God and His Holy Sacraments. They are the exact opposite of you. You have all these things; they have none of them. You have every opportunity to read, study, and grow in the Faith; they have none. You can come to worship sixty or more times a year; they are deprived of any opportunity to come and hear the life-giving words of Jesus. You can receive the Lord's body and blood as often as you want; they are not able to receive the Sacrament at all. You are first, but they are last.

But now listen to what Jesus says. *"Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."* Not all who begin the race in last place, finish last. There are some who, although deprived of God's saving Word, are being reached with that Word by faithful Christians. These last ones are being baptized, being taught the Faith, being given the opportunity to hear the Gospel and receive the Sacraments. They are being given catechisms and hymnals and places where they can worship. Do you think they are ignoring these blessings? They are devouring the Faith. They are standing up for

Jesus even amid penalty of death. They are not ashamed of the Gospel, but they gladly hear it, speak it, and live it. *“Some who are last will be first.”*

Just as this truth of our Lord is happening right now, so is the opposite taking place right now. There are those who, although now in first, are finishing the race in last place. We have them here. Every Christian congregation has them--people of God who are highly favored because they are blessed from little on up with God's Word, His Sacraments, with everything they need to finish first and enter the narrow door of heaven--but these Christian people are dropping back in the race and will finish last because they do not use the means God gives us to remain constant in the Faith. They come to church hardly at all, if ever, but always have an excuse. Or when in church, they are not here to listen and learn, to confess their sins and receive pardon. They may own a Bible, a catechism, a hymnal, but they are unfamiliar with these things. They know that the Lord's body and blood are offered here for them, but they rarely, if ever, come to receive it.

Martin Luther says about Jesus' words in our text that *“they should frighten the greatest saints.”* Any Christian who does not take Jesus' words seriously to heart is in danger. If we do not fight against sin, if we do not live a life of repentance, if we do not come regularly for God's Word and Sacraments like an AIDS patient coming for his medicine, then we are not striving to enter the narrow door, and although now we may be in first, we will come in last.

Let me tell you what Jesus did for you. He was first in every way, but He became last. He was highly favored above all, yet He chose the path of suffering and death on a cross. He went to the last place in line. He went to that place of weeping, and gnashing of teeth. He was counted guilty in the place of every sinner. He who was first of all, did not hold on to His majesty, but He became the accursed One. He was damned by God for you.

Friend, God, therefore, is not against you; He is for you. He is not working against you in your race. He is not secretly hoping that you come in last. No! He is on your side. He has a heart of mercy toward you. For Jesus' sake, He forgives you. For all those times in your life when you did not fight against sin, but went along with it, God forgives you. For all those times in your life when you did not open the pages of His Word when you could have; when you skipped the opportunity to come for the precious body and blood of your Lord; when you sat in church with anger in your heart and did not come to receive anything, God right now forgives you. He looks at Jesus who lived, died, and rose again for you, and He forgives your sin.

You know what else He does? He gives you His Holy Spirit--right here and now through His words that He is speaking to you, His Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, is entering into you to fight against sin for you, to create within you a heart and life of repentance, to drive you into His Word in your home, and to bring you with willing hearts and ears to His House of Mercy. He knows that none of us strives very well to enter in through the narrow door. So through His Word and through His Sacraments He helps you to strive, He helps you to enter the narrow door.

That door is Jesus. The narrow door into heaven is nothing that you and I have done. It is no good deed that we have done in our life; Jesus is the narrow door. And you can be assured that Jesus loves you. You can be assured that because He entered the race--your race--and He went out of love to the last place in line, that He is right now your strength, your confidence, your hope. He is the reason you are in the race. And He is the reason you will finish the race not in last, but first.

No one can finish first on their own. We would all come in last. But you have Jesus, or better said, He has you. He is the path. He is the prize. He is the narrow door. Strive, my friends, to enter that door-- and be assured that you will run the race well, for Jesus who is for you, runs with you. Amen.