

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Later today only one football team will be rejoicing. One team, one coach, one NFL owner. The game will not end in a tie. One team must win, and one must lose. In any athletic competition this is how it goes. There are winners and there are losers. And if you have ever competed in such a way, you know how intimidating it all can be. You train for the big event. The day comes, and you suddenly realize that others want to win as much as you. Whether it's a wrestling match, an endurance race, or something else...you soon discover how you match up against your competition.

Now imagine all this not in a physical sense, but in a spiritual one. What if you had to compete against other Christians with the winner gaining the prize of eternal life? In every community, or congregation, the Christians train, not their bodies, but themselves in the Christian Faith, and only the strongest in the faith wins. As St. Paul says in our text, *"Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize?"* If it came down to the one who was the most faithful; the one who was in the Word of God the most; the one who best lived their faith, would that one be you?

Now don't panic. The apostle is not saying that only one member per congregation makes it to heaven. But it is an interesting observation. Would you be in the Word more than you are if this was the case? Would you rearrange the priorities in your life so that Worship and the Sacraments were front and center, with everything else a distant second? If the Christian life suddenly became a competition, how many of us would train differently, perhaps much differently, than the way we are training right now? And should I not ask...are some of us not even in training at all? Do we live as though we're not even in a race? As though we can start preparing upon our death-bed for gaining the prize of eternal life?

No, you and I do not compete against each other, but you are, as the apostle writes, nonetheless in a competition. And your competition is strong and well-prepared. You are competing against the devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh. These are the athletes, so to speak, who are in the race, the match, against you. And only one of you--you, or your adversary--can win the prize. For you, the prize is life. For your adversary, the prize is to keep you from winning.

Now if you think Satan will ease up on you because you are spiritually out of shape, think again. He is determined to beat you, at any cost, by whatever means possible, and he will never give up. The world around you has been in training for thousands of years. It knows well how to beat Christians at their race. It knows how to lure us away from the church; how to busy our lives with so many things, that the things of God become less important.

Our sinful flesh is not going away either. It's in the race until the day we die. It was buried in our baptism, but each day it raises its ugly head and competes against us. It competes by causing us to hold a grudge against our neighbor so that we stop running. It competes by telling us that sex is not just for marriage so that we put our desires ahead of God's will for us. It competes by giving us a false sense of security, so we become spiritually lazy and slough off in our training.

Far too many Christians have the idea that running the race of life is like a walk in the park. But God's Word disagrees. 'As an athlete competes,' writes the apostle, 'so we must compete to receive the prize.' *"Run that you may obtain it. I do not run aimlessly,"* Paul says, *"I do not box as one beating the air, but I discipline my body and keep it under control."*

In boxing and in running an athlete does not waste his energy on motions that are unnecessary. He keeps himself disciplined in order to win. And so a disciplined Christian is one who focuses on the things of God first, and makes use of this world--enjoying God's creation--second. But too often we are undisciplined and we make use of this world first, and focus on the things of God only when we can fit them in. That's like a boxer throwing wild punches, not at his opponent, but into the air. It's like a runner veering off course while he is still in the race. If St. Paul says here that he could be disqualified; that he could lose the race, lose the prize of eternal life, what makes us think that we are immune? That nothing can stop us from winning, and so we can live Christian lives that are undisciplined if we want?

Now I have some good news, however, it may sound like bad news at first. When Paul says, "*Only one receives the prize,*" he is speaking literally. There are not two, three, or more winners, but only one. And knowing that our opponent is much stronger than we are; much more focused; much more disciplined, how can any one of us hope to win? But the good news is this...God made a switch and put in your place a substitute runner, and that one is Jesus Christ your Lord.

God became man to run the race for you; to stand in the boxing ring and square off against Satan in your place. And so Jesus was born under the Law, and He kept the Law perfectly. He was not disqualified. Not one rule did He break. And because He was your substitute, in God's eyes you are innocent. For the sake of your Substitute, God declares you holy--one who has kept His Law completely.

As your substitute, Jesus ran the race to hell and back for you. He endured the harsh blows which Satan dealt out. He endured the anger of God for the sins of the world. He allowed death to claim Him, but on the third day He burst out of its clutches and rose in victory. All this He did not for Himself, but for you. He was running your race. He was fighting your match. And friend, because your Substitute won the prize, in Jesus that prize now belongs to you. "*Do you not know,*" says St. Paul, "*that only one receives the prize?*" The devil could not beat Jesus. Death could not defeat Him. Your sins and the sins of the world could not beat Him. Jesus is the one who claimed the prize. The prize of eternal life and glory in heaven belongs to Him, and since you belong to Jesus, that prize is yours. In your baptism Jesus claimed you. In His Holy Supper He gives Himself for you. Through these things of God; through your hearing of His Word, in faith, Jesus gives you the prize that He won.

None of us is faithful enough. None of us is in His Word enough. None of us lives the Christian life as we should. But you know something? It's not how well you run the race as a Christian...it's that you stay with your Substitute. You do not have to beat Satan. You do not have to overcome the world. You do not have to defeat your sinful flesh. Jesus did all these for you. Stay with Him in your race. He stays with you. He is not distant from your life. Every week He is here for you; here forgiving your sins. You and I cannot conquer them. In mercy He forgives them. He forgives you. Every time His body and blood is here on this altar, He is here for you...to help you run; to help you to be faithful; to help you live your faith.

I think the race you and I are running is very much like a race that was held out in the state of Washington several years ago. It was the Special Olympics for boys and girls. One of the events for these special children was the 100-meter dash. Boys and girls together lined up at the starting gate. The gun sounded and they took off--all except for one little boy who tripped and fell down and started to cry. The others were half-way down the track all wanting badly to win the big race. One of the girls who was running heard the boy crying. She stopped and turned around and went back. One by

one all of them went back. One boy kneeled down and helped the boy who had fallen to his feet. And then all of them locked arms and they walked together to the finish line. And there was not a dry eye in the entire stadium.

Friends, that is how we win our race. By walking together with Jesus. By helping those who have fallen, back to their feet. By calling back those who are veering off course. By keeping, not the things of this world, but the things of God--keeping Christ and His Sacraments--at the center. We win...we all win with Jesus. Amen.