

Charles St-Onge
Epiphany 5B
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Running the Race

1 Cor. 9:24-27

²⁴ 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. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. ²⁷ No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

Introduction

An argument can be made that there are only two Christian churches in North America. The first is Insurance Policy Community Church. In it we find, at least a few times a year, the good folks of the town who want to “do the right thing.” They make their way to the building on the hill, when they can, to “make their presence known.” They sit in the pew, mutter through the hymns, snore through the sermon, and head home feeling good about themselves. Their eternal “insurance policy” has been renewed, and should anything – well, you know – anything “unexpected” happen to them they know where they’ll be going. To the great Celestial Lodge in the sky, a “better place,” home with their loved ones, to the bosom of Abraham, to the Spirit in the Sky. Like with any insurance policy, the less interaction they have with the insurance company and the less the company knows about them, the better. Unfortunately, Insurance Policy Community Church has been finding that sales of heavenly insurance policies have dropped dramatically in recent decades.

The second church, Spiritual Olympic Church, is entirely different. On Sunday we find an evangelism team arriving early to pray that the Lord’s will would be accomplished among them that week. Elders assemble to discuss a team member who hasn’t been to worship, and another who can’t make it to worship anymore. The pastor is in his study, asking God to bless the words of his mouth and help him to say only good, right, and saving things. The people sing their praises with gusto, can be seen listening to the readings as if their life depended on those words, and praying as if the fate of the world depended on them and on them alone. These folks are a team. They know they’re depending on everyone else, and everyone else is depending on them. Anyone dropping in on Spiritual Olympic Church is struck immediately by this group’s commitment to their goal. These are folks who have their “EYES ON THE PRIZE.”

Which kind of church is Paul addressing in his letter to the Corinthians? And which kind of church does Paul want First Corinthian Lutheran Church to be? Paul is clearly worried he is dealing with Insurance Policy Community Church. What he wants is a congregation of Spiritual Olympians. That’s what he wants for all his congregations, including the ones listening to his letter 2,000 years later.

I. The Corinthian Church Wasn't In Training

It's clear from the rest of the letter to First Corinthian Lutheran Church that they had problems: serious problems.

They're fighting each other over who's the better preacher: Paul or Apollos. As if they come to church to worship the preacher and not the one being preached! They're building themselves up on a foundation of straw and hay, coming to worship the man in front instead of the God up above. We fall into the same trap when we pick a church based on the one in the pulpit, or leave a church because of the pastor's hair color, demeanor, or some other ridiculous non-issue.

As if that isn't bad enough, a lot of them have placed themselves over Paul and Apollos, teaching their own ideas as if they were Gospel truth. They shrug off Paul's letters and Apollos' preaching as the teaching of "mere men," utterly disregarding the Word of God. Paul writes of these folks, "some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to visit you."

They have one member who's sleeping with his mother-in-law, another who's taking a brother to court, divorce is rampant, women are lording it over their men, and the Lord's Supper has become a free-for-all for the rich and an embarrassment to the poor. Everyone boasts that their spiritual gift is better than everyone else's, and the shouting and screaming during services is drowning out the preaching of the Word. That's just a snippet of the problems Paul's trying to address in First Corinthian Lutheran Church.

The problem is that this little church in Greece has become the Church of the Insurance Policy. Everyone believes in Jesus, everyone's "getting into heaven," so now anything goes. But what Paul really wants is a "Church of the Spiritual Olympics."

II. Paul Wants a Spiritual Olympic Church

Paul, as he often does, draws on a "sports" analogy to make his point. Let's take a look at some of his points. First, he says "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." In other words, the life of the Christian in the church is not a nice, socialist, "everyone who shows up gets a prize" life. Run as if you want to win, says Paul!

ILLUS: In one episode of the Simpsons, Homer and his best friend Barney compete to be the first "blue collar" astronaut on the Space Shuttle. After weeks of competition, Barney is in the best shape of his life, while Homer has hardly been able to shed a pound. The time finally comes to end the competition, and Homer and Barney are brought before the NASA administrator. He announces: "Gentlemen, you've both worked very hard. And in a way, you're both winners. But in another more *accurate* way, Barney is the winner."

Too many Christian churches, and too many Christians, run the race as if "everyone's a winner:" as if it really doesn't matter. Paul urges all of us to run as if there were nothing

more important in the world. In fact, he goes on to say that “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.” In other words, it’s not enough just to run the race of the Christian life. We ought to be training for it. Christianity is not just a policy we sign up for, but a training program that goes on everyday of our lives.

ILLUS: The winter Olympics is, of course, coming up in a few days. Many athletes spend hours – sometimes up to eight hours – training each day for their sport. That kind of dedication would not have been unfamiliar to the Greeks of Corinth, the birthplace of the Olympics. That’s the picture Paul wants you to have in your mind: that “training” for the Christian life doesn’t just happen for an hour each week, or even a couple of hours each month, but all day long every day. We practice living the life of Christ in preparation for living that life eternally with him at the final resurrection.

Lastly, Paul says that he himself does not “run like a man running aimlessly;” he does not “fight like a man beating the air.” Rather he beats his body and makes it his slave. Jesus said that we cannot serve two masters in this life. Either we serve him, or we serve money. Or Satan. Or sin. Whatever you want to call it, any service we are not rendering to Christ is being rendered to another master. Of course no Christian wants to have a master other than Christ. Therefore we train our human nature to become like Christ, the one who has saved us from the Prince of this World and is preparing a place for us in the world to come. It’s Christ himself who has called us to this training. When we put to death our old loves, habits, and lusts that we know go against Christ’s will, we are not just “beating the air” or fighting an “invisible opponent.” We are actively fighting our sin and Satan, the very real enemies of Christ. Better a slave of Christ in this world and a free man in the next than a supposedly free man now and a slave to Satan after death.

Conclusion

In the movie “The Empire Strikes Back,” the Jedi Yoda warns the young Luke Skywalker of the struggles he will face in becoming a Jedi. He tells him:

“A Jedi must have the deepest commitment, the most serious mind. A long time have I watched you. All your life you have looked away... to the future, to the horizon. Never your mind on where you were! What you were doing! Adventure. Ha! Excitement. Ha! A Jedi craves not these things. You are RECKLESS!”

The same could have been said by Paul to the Christians of Corinth, or to us. Christianity is not a magical Eternal Life Insurance Policy. It is a race. One that we must train for, one that we ought to run in order to win. The Church is training for the Spiritual Olympics. We ought not be reckless with our salvation, but be committed to it, and serious about it. And we are training not for a gold medal that will crumble with time, but for a crown of gold that will last forever. A crown earned for us by Christ Jesus himself, who has the run the race before us and now waits for us at the finish line. Amen.