

Pastor T.C. Arnold  
Septuagesima  
1 Corinthians 9:24-27  
February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014

You may remember Jim McKay's famous introduction to ABC's long running program Wide World of Sports: "*Spanning the globe to bring you the constant variety of sport. The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.*" Television coverage of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Olympiad in Sochi, Russia demonstrates Mr. McKay's words perfectly – if you have had the opportunity to watch the competition. Men and women competing in events they have trained for most of their lives. They have disciplined themselves with diet and exercise. They are some of the most amazing athletes in the world. Not only do they have a great measure of God-given talent, they have pushed their own bodies to the brink in training and preparation for the very moment you watch on the world's largest stage. It's hard for me not to get excited and astonished by how much time, effort and discipline these men and women go through to get where they are in their respective sport. For that reason, victory is so sweet – and you can see it... and defeat is so bitter – and you can see that as well.

St. Paul knew of exactly this same kind of thrill and agony in preparation and discipline. So did the Corinthians. As a matter of fact, they knew about this sort of thing perhaps better than most people in the world at the time. Not only did the Corinthians compete in the Olympic Games, but they had their own games during the years in between Olympic competition. They were called the Isthmian Games, so named for the area in Corinth they were held. By the time Paul wrote these words, the Isthmian Games were more than two hundred years old. They were well known and you can imagine there were athletes who prepared most of their life to compete at these games – much like today. So Paul uses a bit of context for the people of Corinth when he speaks to them about self-control and self-discipline.

*"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things."* In the realm of competition, only some of us "run the race." But in this game we call life, all of us run. So, if we are all running, Paul reminds the Corinthians, and us, that we are to run with self-control and discipline in all things. Paul is speaking of our Christian life under the cross of Jesus. He is speaking to you, Christians, on how we should live – with self-control and discipline – in the midst of this chaotic world.

Here's the easy path for you and me. I know it's easy because I have fallen into the bad habits promoted by what is all around us. The easy path is misdirected with the wrong priorities our world would like for us to believe are important. The unimportant priorities we put so much of our effort into take us away from God's race for us in the midst of our vocations as parent, child, worker, student, or even as Christian. Misplaced priorities cause us to run the wrong race through life.

You see the world around us is running many different races all at the same time. These races move at a faster pace today than they ever have before. You and I can attest to this fact. We are running around to doctor appointments, or getting the kids or grandkids to their activities. We try to steal a few moments to get our homework done or our project for work complete because there are multiple other events we have on the calendar for the day. We are busier, more frustrated and frazzled, and more occupied with "stuff" than we have ever been. We find ourselves running the race, many races at once, even the wrong race.

What I mean is that we lack the self-discipline and self-control to run the race that God has marked out for us – the one Paul talks about that has the ultimate prize – and rather focus all our

worries, attention and concerns on the races that don't matter so much. Our eyes quickly get off the ultimate prize. And this is what Paul mentions when he says in the text, *"So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified."*

Have you ever felt as if you are just "spinning your wheels" and getting nowhere? We all have. Paul calls it "boxing the air." By the way, boxing or some kind of fighting was probably a competitive sport at the Isthmian Games. For the kind of life Paul is speaking of, we don't spin our wheels and go nowhere... we don't box the air... rather, we have goals in our life. That is where the self-discipline of living the Christian life comes in. It's not to attain God's righteousness or merit forgiveness by the way we live. No, rather, it is to keep ourselves prepared for spiritual things as we carry out the duties of our callings. We need preparation and spiritual discipline to fight the evils, the distractions of this fallen world around us. Our eyes need to be focused on the prize and hearts strengthened by God's Words of life. Yes, this is a lesson on how to live our spiritual life today. How do we do it? Put the Lord first in all things. Put your energy and heart into service of your Lord – and to your neighbor – as the Lord serves them through you. Have your eye on the prize every time. It's not a wreath or a medal. The prize is heaven.

You want the example on how to live? That's easy... look to Christ Jesus, His actions and His Words. Whether it's having compassion that comes deep from within to feed 5000 souls or the same that raises the dead and heals the sick, His example is to serve and live for that service. He lives it as He told the story of the workers called into service by the master of a vineyard in the parable appointed for today's Gospel reading. God calls you into service. God calls you into His kingdom of grace by desiring to serve you the best way imaginable.

And how is that? By giving you every blessing of life and forgiveness from this place. God calls you to this place of priority for the race of life that you find yourself running every day. In a race there is a goal. You have a destination. You are working toward a particular end. In your life of faith – your Christian life – there is discipline, there is self-control and there is a goal. While we are always working, we keep our eyes on the prize – the one who has already won the race for us... Jesus. Jesus has won the prize by achieving the goal. His goal was death, for you. His goal was to come, to teach, to lead by example, but then to work out God's grace for your sake by submitting to death.

It's hard to imagine that the biggest and best prize for you is a cross and not a medal or cash. It's hard to imagine that God's goal for running the race would be to nailed vertical between two criminals on a mount called Calvary while bleeding to death with a crown of thorns for a victory wreath. It's hard to imagine because this world has taught us that that is not what you get for winning. But that is victory for you. And it's victory for our Lord as well. The reason, He desires all to believe and live eternally. That's the gospel of love and hope already won by your Savior. You enjoy this victory by God's grace for you through faith.

Today life has the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat on every side. And sometimes it seems there is more defeat. There is more defeat for you. Death has been defeated. Your victory is heaven. It's a hard course to run until we get there, but God made it possible. God made it for sure for you!! Thanks be to God. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.