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Today is Septuagesima Sunday, which means that we are seventy days out from Easter. For those of you who are hoping to get home in time to watch the Super Bowl you might think of these next few Sundays as the Lenten “pre-game.” It is also fitting that on this Super Bowl Sunday this morning’s Epistle compares the Christian’s spiritual life to the life and training of an athlete. St. Paul says that being a Christian is like being in training to compete in track and field. We have to subject ourselves to discipline and to the spiritual exercises which are the roadwork of the spiritual athlete. And let us not forget that these spiritual exercises include church attendance, prayer, Bible study, self-examination and tithing. But there are two significant differences between the athlete and the Christian who would be a spiritual athlete. First of all, only one runner can win any given race, but in the Christian race everybody who makes it to the end is a winner. The other difference comes in the prize. In first-century Greek athletic contests, the prize for winning a footrace was a wreath of laurel leaves. Laurel leaves don't last forever, they eventually wither and disintegrate, they are that "corruptible crown," that St. Paul references. The Christian is in training for a prize that will last forever, the prize of eternal life, a crown that will never decompose or fade away.

This idea that Jesus will reward us with crowns which will not fade away has certainly caught the attention of some. In the second chapter of Revelation Jesus says, *be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life*. But we do not just receive a crown of life, but a championship ring too. Later in Revelation, Jesus says, *to him who conquers I will...give him a white stone, with a new name written on it*. But if we are rewarded with the crown of life and a white stone we do not keep them for ourselves. At the end of Revelation we read that when the Hosts of heaven sing *Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come...then all fall down and cast their crowns before the throne*. Even in heaven, the rewards which we receive from God for being Christian athletes are not for our own glory but for the worship of God.

The Epistle seems to tell us that Christians have to be highly disciplined and need to keep at their discipline all the time or they run the risk of being lost. But the Epistle and Gospel seem to contract themselves this morning. Jesus’ parable suggests that it doesn't matter as much when we decide to pull ourselves together and begin serving the Lord. God will take us in at the end in the same way that He will take us in at the beginning. In this morning’s parable a man who owns a vineyard hires some workers first thing in the morning and agrees to pay them what the King James Version calls "a penny." But what in actuality is a coin equal to a fair day’s wage. He hires other workers throughout the day, ending with a group that winds up working only one hour. When the time comes to dole out the wages, the

ones who worked only an hour get a penny. The ones who have worked all day assume that they will receive proportionally more, and they are disappointed and angry when they, too, are paid a penny. The owner tells them, *You have no right to be angry. I told you I would give you a penny if you worked all day, and I have done just that. You have no right to be jealous, because I have been generous to these other people.*

Now we must be careful not to push Jesus' parables beyond their breaking point, but it is pretty clear that the vineyard owner represents God, the penny is the grace of salvation and the workers who are hired are human beings whom God calls into a relationship with him. God calls some people early, they could represent the Jews who were God's chosen people from the time of Abraham. He calls other people later on, they could represent the Gentiles, who get to be chosen only after Jesus comes to earth and most Jews reject Him. The different times of hiring also stand for the fact that people get themselves right with God at different points in their lives. Some are pretty well on board from their childhood on, others take longer, some don't come around until they are approaching their deaths. The fact is that no matter when we let God put us right with Him, we get the same reward. There is no such thing as being more saved or less saved, or more united to Jesus or less united, or more a member of the church or less a member. The advantage of coming to Christ early is that we have more time in this world to enjoy the relationship to God that will continue into eternity.

So the lessons don't really contradict one another. They merely focus upon two different facets of what the Christian life is like. Pre-Lent, the "gesima" season, is the time to shift gears away from the more joyful seasons of Christmas and Epiphany to get ourselves ready for the more rigorous fasting and penitential season of Lent. And so, we need both insights. St. Paul's ideas about discipline and the dangers of being lost remind us that Lent will be the time when we try to face what draws us away from Christ and make a sincere effort to eliminate it. But the message of the gospel has to remain before our eyes as well. God will accept us and save us whenever and however we decide to turn to him.

*Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain.*