

Run To Win

1 Corinthians 9:24-10:5

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

You heard the reading from Exodus, you heard of the people testing the Lord by asking, “Is the Lord among us or not?” They were constantly grumbling about their lot in life. God was with them. God had performed 10 plagues on Egypt, had brought them out of their slavery to Egypt, parted the Red Sea so the water stood up on both sides of them and they walked through on dry land, He fed them with manna from heaven.

What was the problem?

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus tells the parable of the overly generous owner of the vineyard – God. God is gracious about what belongs to Him, He gives of what is His generously in an equal manner to all those whom He brings into His vineyard. It is not about how much work one does, but about the gracious nature of the master. Of course, people have a problem with God’s generosity.

Why is it that when people get into their feelings, their perceived thoughts of what they “feel” God should be doing for them, they mess things up?

Then we come to our Epistle lesson. *Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. 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.*

I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

Dear friends, you are to run to win! What is the prize? You win no perishable wreath, nothing made of garland or leaves. You win the crown of righteousness. And yet, you do not win it by your works, it is a gift of God. What is this all talking about?

When the Israelites were brought out of Egypt, they were baptized, they had Christ with them, they ate Christ, they drank Christ, and yet, with most of them God was not pleased and they were overthrown in the wilderness – they perished in the wilderness – not allowed to enter the promised land of Canaan. Why?

Dearly beloved of God, your eternal salvation is a gift of God. He purchased it for you through the precious and innocent suffering and death of His Son Jesus Christ. He delivers this salvation and life to you in the miracle of Holy Baptism, in the Word of Absolution and the proclamation of the Gospel preached into your ears, and in the meal of His body and blood given you to eat and to drink.

Now what? What do you do after having been blessed by God with the gifts of His grace? What

do you do, now that you've been forgiven? How do you live your life?

That's Paul's point in our text. The Israelites were God's chosen children. They possessed all the gifts of grace which we receive, and what happened to them? They were baptized, they ate the same spiritual food, drank the same spiritual drink – they partook of the Rock which accompanied them, which was Christ. And yet, God was finally not pleased with most of them. Why?

Many of the Israelites were disqualified because of their unfaithfulness and false worship. When God brought them to verge of the promised land, twelve men went in to spy out the land, two came back and were greatly encouraged about it, trusting God's promise that He would give them the land. All twelve said how great the land was, flowing with milk, honey, and wonderful fruit. But ten of them trusted their eyes and their hearts and denied God's promise. Then men are mighty, we can never win. They convinced the hearts of the people to also turn away from trusting God's promise. God made them wander the wilderness for forty years till that unbelieving generation had passed away.

They made a great show outwardly, but inwardly they were faithless. Christians too can be tempted to false worship, to wander from repentance and the faith wrought by the Holy Spirit, and to be trusting in the things they want to see and feel in their hearts. If we were to continue reading in this chapter of Corinthians, we'd read:

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. (1 Cor. 10:6-12)

Did you catch what happened? They acted as if they were no different. God brought them out of Egypt, brought them through the Red Sea on dry land, and they continued to live their lives as if they were not the special people of God.

What about you? Who are you? Are you Sunday morning Christians, Monday morning heathens? Does it even take that long? Maybe it is more like, Sunday morning Christians, Pro Bowl Sunday afternoon heathens? Do you take the gifts of God's grace for granted, and then live the rest of your lives as if you are no different than unbelievers?

What is it that informs your daily life? Is it the word and will of God? Or do you succumb to the siren voices of the masses, the ways of the world seduce you into false belief. It is easier to go along and get along than it is to stand out from the crowd or swim against the flow. Besides, the times have changed, we know what we feel in our hearts, certainly God understands, right?

Most of them were overthrown in the wilderness.

When we come into God's house, are we here to receive what we want, or here to receive from God what He knows is best to give to us. We are here because we are sinners. We gather to be forgiven. And by God's grace, we are. Here is where God's gifts build and strengthen faith. And

faith should lead to a different life and works appropriate to that faith. Can we come to receive forgiveness, turn around, walk out these doors and continue in lives that are not a reflection of the faith we confess? Can we come to receive forgiveness, even as we plan to walk out these doors and continue in what we know God calls sin?

We are baptized into Christ, into His death and His resurrection. As we have put our sinful nature to death in Christ, we should live a new life. That new life doesn't begin in heaven, it begins here. That new life is a life that is a reflection of the perfection we've been given from Christ – we need to run to win!

Some people believe that once they are forgiven they can do whatever they want to, as if the Absolution and the Lord's Supper bring us into some new realm of blessedness where we can go about and do whatever we want, sin to our hearts content, and it doesn't matter, thinking, "Since I'm forgiven, I can be a pagan in all the rest of my life. Since I have forgiveness, I can sin without consequences." Do you, as many do, think that forgiveness is as a license to further sinfulness?

What did Jesus say? "Your sin is forgiven. Go and sin no more."

We are to be different in the world. Dear friends, we are told that we are *not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.* (Rom. 12:2) Your lives are to be living sacrifices in all that you do. We are to be living examples of the love of God which dwells within us. Our lives are a living testimony of the faith that dwells within us, we love God and others, as God in Christ Jesus has loved us. We are to run to win, not just show up as spectators.

Which brings us to reason why we gather today. You and I have not lived as if God mattered most, and as if His Word was the ruling principle in all our thoughts, words, and deeds. We have lived as if our own sinful flesh were king of the world, and so we do all that we can to satisfy it.

We come into God's house because we acknowledge our sinfulness. Yes, I have abused God's grace – I have at times thought that because I was forgiven, I was excused to go out and do as I pleased. I have not loved God with my whole heart, nor have I always loved my neighbor as myself.

We are all guilty of this. We are all guilty of sin.

Christ ran the race and won it for us. He took all our sins into his own flesh, and lived every second, of every minute, of every hour, in perfect love toward God and His every neighbor – He ran the race perfectly. On Good Friday, that perfection was sacrificed to atone for our running aimlessly, to atone for your sinfulness and mine.

What will you eat and drink today? Will you eat the spiritual food that is Christ? Will you drink the spiritual drink, which is Christ?

Yes, you will. You know the forgiveness that is yours in Christ. You know the painful sacrifice by which that forgiveness was purchased. You know the precious means of Word and Sacrament through which that forgiveness is given to you, so that you might be sealed unto eternal salvation in the precious gifts of Word and Sacrament.

So, you are invited today – to hear and, to eat, and to drink. You are invited to partake of the very forgiveness Christ desires to give unto you. And then, you are sent out from here, to run the race set before you. You are to live in the forgiveness, as it has made you something different. Live in it as a living reflection of the glory of God, to life everlasting. Amen.