

February 4, 2018

I Corinthians 9:24-27:

“Faith Runs the Race and Fights the Fight!”

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 North Oakland Avenue
Decatur, Illinois 62526*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

If you had been living in Corinth during the time of Paul, you would have been familiar with the Isthmian Games. The games were played every other year, ten miles from the city, and the apostle himself would have been in the vicinity long enough to have witnessed them. The basic athletic events included racing, wrestling, jumping, boxing, hurling the javelin, and throwing the discus. It may very well be the case that Paul, having watched the athletes at the Isthmian Games, recognized the amazing self-control of the athletes, and decided to use what he saw as an illustration of the Christian life. **Faith Runs the Race and Fights the Fight.**

An athlete must exercise tremendous self-control in order to win. Gregory J. Lockwood, in his commentary on *1 Corinthians*, observes:

Self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit that should be found in the lives of all Christians (Gal 5:23; 2 Pet 1:6). It is one of the qualities essential in a minister of the Gospel (Titus 1:8). Whereas contestants in the Isthmian Games exercised self-control in order to win a wreath of withered celery and some ephemeral honor and glory, it is infinitely more worthwhile for the Christian to practice self-control, for the crown awaiting him - if he completes the race - is the imperishable gift of eternal life (2 Tim 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Pet 5:4; Rev 2:10).

Some of you might remember, the Sunday before the last, that I said these words: "The maintenance or preservation of faith is just as vital today as the day when we started to believe. Good works do not preserve faith. God preserves faith through the Gospel, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. However, though good works do not preserve faith, our evil works will destroy faith." I then quoted the Lutheran Confessions: "Faith does not remain in those who lead a sinful life, lose the Holy Spirit, and reject repentance [FC SD IV:31, 33]."

This morning I would like you to consider this: Faith in the promises of the Gospel must be our weapon against all evil works that would destroy what we believe. **Faith Runs the Race and Fights the Fight.** Faith must be continually sustained by the promises of God's Word in order that it might fight back against intentional sinning, and conquer the evil works that might destroy it. We diligently condemn and reject the false delusion that faith, righteousness, and salvation cannot be lost through any arrogant and intentional sin or evil work. When Christians follow evil desires without any fear and shame, resist the prompting of the Holy Spirit to do what is right, and then intentionally proceed to sin against their consciences, they should not think that faith, righteousness, and salvation will remain.

There are three things that I would like to add to this. First, if faith is ever crushed, it can be restored by God as we see in the cases of king David who committed adultery and murder, and Simon Peter who denied Christ. Both found forgiveness in their Savior. Secondly, we should not be surprised when we are inclined to unbelief, or temptations to commit some of the most horrible sins imaginable. Thirdly, the fact that we must run a race, fight a fight, push back unbelief, and struggle with horrible sins does not prove that

a Christian has fallen from the faith, as some might think. On the contrary, such a conflict is evidence that the child of God is living in a state of grace. Only when the struggle has ceased, has the fall from grace taken place. Only when we knowingly allow sin to take over our lives are we in forever danger. We need to understand that there is a real danger of being “disqualified,” as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9:27. Disqualification would mean to miss out on the crown of life.

In a heavyweight boxing championship bout on June 28, 1997, Mike Tyson was disqualified because he bit off a piece of Evander Holyfield’s right ear. Mike Tyson did not have self-control and was disqualified. He lost the fight. In the same way, if we do not fight the Christian fight as it must be fought, continually striving to knock out our sinful desires to do evil works by faith in the promises, our sinful natures may very well get the best of us and knock out our faith in Jesus. It would be a tragedy if we were to stop running, stop fighting, only to allow our evil works to reign freely; thereby, disqualifying ourselves.

It would be a tragedy to forfeit the crown of life because of our lack of self-control, because we are unfit to run the race or fight the fight. You see, if the Christian allows sin to master him, to have dominion over him, then he can expect to receive the wages of sin, which is death and hell. Here there is no victory. Since we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ alone, and this faith is a gift from God, and is preserved by his Holy Spirit, we have all that we need if we do not fail to use the Word and Sacraments. We have what we need to run the race and fight the fight until the very end. Victory in the race or fight is assured to him who continues in the grace of God’s Word and Sacraments, and thus gives the Holy Spirit opportunity to work in him effectually with his divine power. Luther writes:

The real sword is this, that you are strong and firm in the faith. If with your heart you take hold of the Word of God and cling to it in faith, the devil cannot win, but must flee. If you can say: “this my God has said; on this I take my stand,” you will see that he slinks away, and with him will depart the laziness, the evil desires, anger, miserliness, depression, and doubt. But the devil is sly; he will not have you put your trust in the Word and reaches out to take it out of your hand; if he can make you lazy, so that your body becomes unfit and filled with deceitful desires, he will soon take the sword out of your hand.

The struggle against our sinful desires to do evil works is difficult and painful. Such sinful desires and evil works are to be put to death, which is a bitter struggle on the one hand, but on the other, a sweet and glorious end. Jesus says in Matthew 16:24-26: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?” The word of Paul comes back: “disqualified.”

Again, our struggle against our sinful desires to do evil works is difficult and painful. Only faith in the Word of God, which promises the forgiveness of sins and the hope of everlasting life in Jesus can drive out and replace the sinful desires and evil works. Paul says in Colossians 3:1-4, “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life

is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” As a runner runs a race, we do not look to the right, left, or behind, but as Paul writes: “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:13-14).”

Yes! We consider everything that Jesus of Nazareth has done for us in his sufferings and death. Our sins are forgiven; even the times in the past when we have failed to run the race and fight the fight of faith. Today is a new day, as we confess our sins and receive his forgiveness. Motivated by his great love for us and everything that he endured, we also now desire to endure with him the cross and die to sin, and in his love for us, we love him by throwing off the sin that so easily entangles (Hebrews 12:1-3). In faith, that has been strengthened by his promises, we run the race, fight the fight, and do at once the very opposite of what our sinful flesh and the devil propose. When we find ourselves murmuring against God, we respond with prayer while thanking him for his many mercies which are always in Christ Jesus. And when we are tempted to entertain matters that are contrary to right doctrine and life, we run to his Word.

Having said these things, I have one more thing to say to you this day as **Faith Runs the Race and Fights the Fight**. The more you run and fight to do what is right in all things, the more you will become conscious of your daily deficiencies and your desperate need for Jesus and his mercy. That’s a good thing! This will make you even stronger, for you will realize that you have nowhere else to go but to flee for refuge under God’s divine grace. It is in this moment that you will understand through experience that the whole Christian life is one of daily repentance - one of daily dying and rising with Jesus.

There is so much more we could say about these things, but I will leave you with these words from the faithful, Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper: “The more sincerely Christians daily endeavor to rid themselves of all they have and to serve God alone in all their works, the better they learn to know the abysmal sinful depravity which clings to them, and the more earnestly they will daily implore the free grace of God in Christ . . . deploring their many failures . . . but, at the same time, being assured of their ultimate victory [*Christian Dogmatics*, Vol III, pg. 34].”

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott