

*The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany*  
February 15, 2009  
Amazing Grace Lutheran - Pastor Chip Wilke

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

*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. 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. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. 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. (NIV)*

Personally, I am not one for running. Don't get me wrong if there is a basketball, or football, or baseball for me to run after I'm all for it. I guess I'll even be willing to get on a track and race others in a sprint. But to run cross country or long distance or to just go out and run, that has never been for me. Whatever your feelings are about that kind of running, I pray that you would agree with me this morning that there is a race you love to run. For most of us it is more of a marathon than a sprint. It is a race for us that is more important to run in than anything else that we do.

We love to run this race because we were placed into it when by water and the Word God made us His own dear children and set us on the track for heaven. We love to run this race because the Holy Spirit called us through the gospel out of darkness and placed us into His light where we now run and are guided through the course of life. We love to run this race because Jesus' great love for us has made it possible for us to say with the psalmist: ***"I run in the path of your commands, because you have set my heart free"***(119). I pray the Lord works in our hearts so that this is always the kind of running we love. I pray we take to heart the encouragement from God's Word today as Paul urges: **Christians, keep running through the finish. Keep giving it your all. Keep looking forward to the eternal prize.**

The Corinthians were caught up with sports perhaps almost as much as Americans are today. Most large Greek cities had stadiums with race courses. The city of Corinth even had its own Isthmian Games, which were held every other year and were second only to the Olympic Games in importance. So Paul's picture and illustration to drive home a point is fitting when he writes: ***"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. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training."***

Please understand that Paul never speaks of the prize as something he is earning. When it comes to our race toward heaven - we can't earn or win the prize. We don't beat out other people and merit the prize of heaven. In this whole section of Scripture Paul is talking about doing all things for the sake of the gospel. The gospel, the good news about Jesus, is - the prize we are running toward already exists and had been won for us by Jesus! So what is Paul saying when he compares our Christian life to a race? He is saying: ***"Run in such a way as to get the prize."*** He is saying in your new life in Christ Jesus, in your life of faith, keep giving it your all so that one day you will take hold of what your Savior has won for you. Some athletes will do whatever it takes to be the best.

They want to cross the finish line. So they work out and train, they practice, they lift weights, and they put their body through all kinds of things so that they can win.

In the 2002 Winter Olympics there was an incredible finish to the 40K relay in cross-country skiing. This four team relay race of 25 miles came down to Norway and Italy and was decided by 3/10 of a second with the victory going to Norway. Down the stretch it was Thomas Alsgaard for Norway and Christian Zorzi for Italy. Side by side, you could see their massive thighs pumping, their arms driving off the poles, their legs and lungs burning for oxygen. They used everything they had as they lunged for the finish line. Every ounce was expended in this race because ***“in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize.”***

Can you see the parallel Paul is making? Does this exertion describe what we are putting into our race toward heaven? Are we doing everything we can to make sure we will keep running through the finish? How do we do this? Paul warns about doing it the wrong way. ***“Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air.”*** The Lord does not want us to run a zig-zag pattern or get way off course or go the wrong way. We are not to punch the air and have all our efforts and training be for nothing. God has given us the tools for strict training. We have His Word and Sacraments. These are the tools God uses to strengthen us and guide us and equip us to finish the race. We are to run with perseverance the race marked out for us, as the Bible encourages us, by fixing our ***“eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross.” (Hebrew 12)***

There is nothing that is more important in our lives here on earth than focusing on Jesus. I repeat there is absolute nothing more important in this world than taking time for Jesus and His Word. Daily laying our sins at Jesus' feet in repentance and turning in faith to Jesus for forgiveness is the only thing that keeps us running our race toward the finish. While the training of an athlete is important, how much more important is our training. How much more important is it for us to come to church, to open the Bible in our homes, to stay an extra hour for Bible study, and to make sure we give our children the one thing needful. ***“Run in such a way as to get the prize.”*** With the strength God gives you keep giving it your all.

Our enemies will do all that they can so that we never cross the finish line. There will be all kinds of distractions and temptations trying to get us to give up the good fight of faith. The first one is right here inside me. It is my own sinful flesh. It is this flesh that hates God and loves laziness. It tells me I'm too tired or can't do it today. Sinful desires to slow down, stop running the race are right inside us.

Then there is this world and the devil throwing up big poster boards all over the place as we run trying to knock us out of the race. They will stop at nothing to get our eyes off our the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus. Almost anything can be used to get us to stop running. It could be drugs or alcohol. It could be money. It could be work. It could be sex. It could be sporting activities. It could be a father or mother or son or daughter. It could be friends. It could be false doctrine. It could be pride. It could be despair. One sign after another is held up with sinful pleasures that look inviting. One detour after another tries to lead us away from Jesus. One big board after another gets in the way to block the view of the crown of life toward which we are running.

That's why runners are told to look straight ahead at the finish. That is why the Lord keeps pointing our eyes toward the eternal prize. ***"They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever."*** Athletes go through all that hard work and endure all that strict training to be the best so that they can win. And when they win what will they get? Paul says a crown that will not last. Normally, the runners in Corinth would get a wreath of laurel or wild olive leaves. Along with that perishable crown would come fame and glory. But just like their wreath that too eventually fades away.

But why do we keep running with our eyes fixed on Jesus? Why do we every day beat our bodies by recognizing our sins in repentance and live each day with the memory of Jesus' victory over sin and death? Why do we pray and strive to live upright and self-controlled lives so that we aren't taken out of the race? Why do we want to keep running a life of faith in Jesus? What will the faithful get when God takes us across the finish line?

We will get the crown of life - a crown that will last forever. We are running toward a place with no sin or sorrow or death. We are running toward an inheritance that will never perish, spoil, or fade. We are racing toward a glory that will far outweigh all our earthly suffering. We will cross the line to a place where we will find eternal pleasures at God's right hand.

That my Christian friends is why we love to keep on running. We have a crown that is already ours because although Jesus was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor. The King of heaven became the scum of the earth, was loaded up with our sins and on the cross tasted the full rage of God. Jesus suffered for our every sinful detour. Jesus was punished for every time we have slowed down or stopped our race. Jesus poured out His blood and paid the price for all our laziness and all the times we have decided not to go into strict training. Jesus died for us and then rose again so that He could put on our heads a crown of righteousness. He died and rose to win for us the sparkling crown of everlasting life.

Now by grace, God has put us in the race. He has called us to faith in Jesus as our Savior. He keeps pointing us to our eternal prize. He keeps refreshing us and training us on our way through Word and Sacrament. He wants nothing more than for us to run through the finish into His safe arms for all eternity. So Paul says: *"Christians, keep giving it your all. Keep looking forward to the eternal prize. Keep running. Keep running until you are finally home in heaven with Jesus."* This is the kind of running that we can all love. Amen.