

Sermon  
1/31/2021

**Sermon on 1 Corinthians 9:24–10:5**  
**Septuagesima**  
**January 31, 2021**

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

Today we begin the Pre-Lent season and our Sunday festival is called “Septuagesima” meaning seventy days, that is, seventy days before Easter.

The sermon text for today is the epistle lesson, from 1 Corinthians chapter 9. I rarely preach on the epistle lesson, and that is because I follow the traditional use of the lectionary and use the chief Sunday morning service to preach on the Gospel.

The Gospels reign supreme in the New Testament and even the whole Bible, because they are the history and very words of our Lord Jesus Christ; nevertheless, the epistles are inspired just like the Gospels and we do well to pay attention to them.

Epistle is simply a fancy word for letter; and in Holy Scripture it refers to those letters written by the apostles, Paul usually, who would be writing to a congregation or to a Christian individual like Timothy or Titus to instruct them in the faith.

You should understand a few things when you read or study the Epistles.

They are all based on the facts and events that we find in the Gospels, most supremely the facts of the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus the epistle writers are usually reminding believers what Christ accomplished through his death and resurrection and what it means for us.

And even if they do not mention Christ that much, like the epistle of James; still, they are all based on the Gospels and must be interpreted in light of them.

After Paul preached in Corinth and organized the church there, he reflected on his time spent there and told the Corinthians, *“When I came to you...I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified”*

At the same time, the epistles are full of warnings and admonitions to Christians to keep the faith; to grow in knowledge of Christ; to avoid false doctrine; to live a holy live in word and deed; to be careful to love others and so imitate our Lord.

In this way the Apostles teach us Christians to be ready for Christ’s return when our salvation will be made complete.

There is more that could be said about the epistles in general so that you can read them and study them for your own benefit; but this is enough for now.

Let’s get into our text. And let’s be careful to pay close attention to the Word allowing the Holy Spirit to convict of us sin, and to comfort us with the Gospel and forgiveness.

Again, the text for the day is 1 Corinthians 9. Paul begins the text with two powerful sports metaphors of running a race, and then boxing in a boxing match in order to chide the lazy and aimless Christian and encourage all of us to be careful and serious about faith matters.

Paul then went on to use the example of the Israelites with Moses to reinforce the need for us Christians to take the Word and Sacraments and the Christian life seriously lest we be destroyed like the Israelites were.

Paul writes, "*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.*"

Here Paul described the Christian life as a race and all the baptized as runners. This metaphor would have made perfect sense to the Corinthian believers, because there were athletic contests, basically track and field events throughout the Greek empire.

But let's understand the metaphor. What Paul is saying here is that, you, O baptized Christian are a runner in a spiritual race and Paul is chiding you to run like you mean it, in order to get the prize.

What is the prize? Eternal salvation. A place in heaven to live in eternal bliss with our Lord Jesus Christ. And this is proven, in part, in the next verse when Paul said that our prize is something imperishable, that is, it lasts forever.

The prize for the winner in Greek contests won a laurel wreath; something that would wither up in a couple of days. Nowadays winners win gold medals, but even those are perishable, as is everything of this earth.

Now do not press Paul's metaphor more than you should. He does not mean that since there is only one winner in a footrace that only one Christian will get to go to heaven since we are all in the race. That would be ridiculous.

Also, do not get from this that you *earn* the prize. That would be salvation by works.

Your place in heaven is a gift. So the idea then is that at your baptism and through faith you are promised the prize; now run the race like you mean it and do not disqualify yourself from the prize.

Let's keep going. Paul explained what is needed to get the prize: self-control. And he used another sports metaphor, of boxing this time, to explain this more richly.

He wrote: *“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 love this boxing metaphor. But the ESV translation is weak here. I do not know why they did not simply translate it more literally like they have in their footnote with, “I do not box as one beating the air. But I *pummel* my body and make it a slave”

A decent paraphrase would be “I do not box as one beating the air. But I knock my flesh out with a powerful left-hook and triumph over it, and stand over it and make sure it stays knocked out on the mat”

By this time in the text it is clear who we are competing against as Christians and trying to beat across the finish line or knock out with the left hook: we are competing against our own body, our own flesh, with its lusts and desires.

Your own body and its fleshly desires is the only thing that can trip you up and make a shipwreck of your faith, and make you lose the race, and the boxing match so that the prize is lost and you stand condemned on Judgement Day.

And so the great enemy of the faith is not so much the crazy liberals in Sacramento saying that you should be quiet and private about what you believe; nor is it the crazy muslims with their swords saying convert or die. The great enemy of the faith is your own flesh, and the devil, who uses your flesh to such great effect to bring about the destruction of souls.

Oh, how many people have started out well and confessed Christ, only to lose track of the finish line; only to disqualify themselves from eternal life because of the love of riches, because of laziness in matters of the faith, because of the lust for comfort and friends and lovers and family and food and good times, etc. etc.!

So, God calls on us today to repent. We are all guilty of running aimlessly and taking God's Word far too lightly. We are all guilty of letting our flesh and its lusts get the best of us and knocking us out, rather than us knocking our flesh out.

Now by God's great mercy, there is forgiveness for the Christian who let their flesh get the better of him—when he returns to Christ through repentance.

So it is that David repented when he threw away his salvation and committed murder and adultery. Likewise, Peter repented when he committed apostasy and denied Christ publicly.

Oh the grace and mercy of God that he accepts back through repentance and trust those who treated him so shamefully!

We also have to be careful here to not go where John Calvin and his followers went with Scripture and simply say, "Well once I am saved, I'm always saved." Scripture does not teach this. Scripture teaches that we can be baptized and believe and then later commit apostasy and leave the faith, and the fault will always lie with ourselves.

So it is that the apostle Paul warned Timothy and said, "*Wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith.*"

So, how do you "wage the good warfare"? How do you win the race and get the prize? How do you not lose the boxing match and make a shipwreck of your faith?

Our epistle lesson answers that: by exercising self-control and beating down your flesh with its sinful desires, and not letting it get the best of you. The apostle James says the same thing when he writes, *“Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”*

Isn't it a wonder that the apostle Paul, the greatest of the apostles, who preached the word of God so wonderfully clear, who so sweetly championed that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ alone, was nevertheless careful to discipline himself and beat down his own sinful nature so as not to disqualify himself.

He had his own soul to be concerned about!

Paul then brings up the account of the Israelites under Moses as an example of those who had God's Word and sacraments, like us, and yet failed to please God because they let their flesh get the best of them and desired evil.

Here are his words again, *“I do not want you to be unaware, 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.”* And if you read on one more verse, *“Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did”*

You could paraphrase that last verse with, *“Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might learn to not be like the Israelites who failed to exercise self-control, and let their flesh and its desires get the better of them.”*

In this section of our epistle text Paul brings up the important doctrine of the Word and Sacraments which we need to pay attention to.

Paul wrote that the Israelites were baptized, and he writes that they drank from the spiritual rock which was Christ. In other words, they had Word and Sacraments, like us; and the same Christ as us; but it looked different.

Take note, friends, that God has always led and redeemed and saved his holy people by two means: first, by his own word or promise; and second, and by some external and objective sign or sacrament that would provide grounding and comfort in that word.

Adam had God's word and promise of a Savior who would bruise the serpents head; and he had the external sign or sacrament of animal sacrifice to help comfort him in the Word.

Noah had God's word and promise of being saved from the flood; and he had the external sign or sacrament of the ark and the rainbow to comfort him in that Word.

Abraham had God's word that he would be the father of nations and that the Savior would come from him; and he had the external sign or sacrament of circumcision to ground and comfort him in that word.

The Israelites had God's word about the promised land; and they had the external sacraments of the parted Red Sea, and the ever-present cloud that guided them, and the manna that came on the ground everyday, and the water from the rock which gave them life.

Now since Christ has come all the previous signs and sacraments like sacrifice, and circumcision and such have been fulfilled and we are left with baptism and the Lord's Supper.

And it is in these, provided we believe, that God grounds and comforts us in the great promise that all who believe in the Christ will be saved.

And so it is that there is much to learn from the Israelites and all the Old Testament figures. God led and redeemed them in the same way that he has led and redeemed us: by word and sacrament (or sign).

We have positive examples like righteous Noah, and Abraham, and David and so on. We can read of them in the Bible and seek to imitate their faith and piety.

And yet we have the negative example of unrighteous Israel. They had word and sacrament; and yet, God was not pleased with them. And they were overthrown in the wilderness and died.

In other words, these Israelites failed to take the Word seriously or the Christian life seriously. And they abused the sacraments that God had given to them to encourage them in the Word and instead they let their bodies and feelings and lusts run the show.

How did they do this? They complained about food; they complained about water; they grumbled against their pastor, that is Moses; and they grumbled against God; they grumbled about the land they were going to inherit; they engaged in sexual immorality; they engaged in the worship of other gods.

And they all lost the prize, everyone one them, not one of them entered the promised land—except pious Joshua and Caleb. You could say that they alone exercised self-control and beat down their flesh and its desires and remained steadfast in their trust of God.

Friends, we receive such treasure through the word and sacraments (as did Joshua and Caleb). It is through these that God graciously pours out his blessings upon us and forgives us our sins and promises eternal life.

Let us not take these gifts for granted; rather, let us take God's word seriously and exercise self-control and not let our flesh get the better of us and disqualify us from getting the prize! And with God's help we shall do this! Amen.