

**Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27** <sup>24</sup> Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. <sup>25</sup> And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. <sup>26</sup> Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. <sup>27</sup> But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

**Sermon Theme: Running the Race of Faith to Obtain the Crown of Everlasting Life.**

In the name of Jesus Christ, who through His redemptive work enables us to obtain the crown of eternal life, dear fellow redeemed;

The saying “Going for the Gold” has been used in recent years when speaking of those who anticipate being in the Olympic Games. “Going for the Gold” gives expression to the highest aspiration of athletes around the world— that of winning a gold medal in the Olympics. The goal of winning that special medal has been regarded as being so very important that for many it has been their primary focus throughout the youthful years of their lives. The endeavor of “Going for the Gold” has involved dedicating many years of the athlete’s life to rigorous training. Along this long and arduous road athletes have had to make many sacrifices of self-denial. They give up certain kinds of foods and drinks and a normal social life and various other amenities of life. All of this is done so that the athlete can be in top form for athletic competition. And if athletes are privileged enough to be among the few who are chosen to represent their country in the Olympics, when the time finally comes to compete in those games, the athletes will give it their all in “Going for the Gold.”

The Christians in Corinth to whom the apostle Paul initially addressed his inspired letter were fully acquainted with such high level athletic competition and everything it involved, for it was in this region of the world that the Olympic Games first had their beginnings. At that time there were four different places where these athletic games were held and one of them was in Corinth.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul spoke of the athletes who competed in the foot races of the Corinthian Games to illustrate certain truths of yet another kind of race. He pointed to a most important race which by the grace and mercies of God in Christ Jesus we are highly blessed and privileged to be in as believers. It is the spiritual race we run in our life of faith. The book of Hebrews alludes to this all important race as it gives us the following exhortation, “let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.” (12:1,2) In the course of life the Lord has set before us to run in it is His good and gracious will for us to live and abide in the one true Christian faith to the very end of our lives.

The wondrous prize that awaits all those who finish this race by remaining in the

faith to the very end is far more glorious and far more valuable than the prize the winning athletes received in the Corinthian Games in Paul's day. All that the winners received in those games was a crown made of a perishable garland of Grecian pines. Even the temporal prize of a gold medal Olympians of today receive pales in comparison to the prize we will receive at the end of our earthly life. Paul tells of this incomparable prize, as he speaks of his own race nearing the end, saying, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing" (that is, all believers who look forward in faith to Jesus' appearance on the last and final day of this world.) (2 Tim. 4:7,8) When believers in Christ cross the finish line of life, they will receive the imperishable crown of a glorious life of righteousness and blessedness in the everlasting realms of heaven.

Having such a glorious prize to set our sights on, we have every reason to go for the imperishable crown of everlasting life in heaven. Like the aspiring athletes who are going for the gold our life should be, as they would say, 'focused.' For our entire life we should be focused on the aim and goal of finally attaining the crown of life in heaven. A 'focused' Christian life involves diligently following an ongoing spiritual course of training, pursuing what strengthens our faith and avoiding what weakens or destroys it. We need to do this so that with the help of God we will be able to run in that all important race of faith until we finally cross the finish line.

Paul spoke of this latter aspect of training when he said, "And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things." When the athletes were preparing to race in the Corinthian Games, they were temperate in all things, that is, they used self-control in denying themselves or abstaining from anything that would physically or mentally weaken them. So also in our going for the crown of eternal life, we need to faithfully exercise temperance in all things. We need to use self-control in denying ourselves anything that would spiritually weaken or cripple us so as to prevent us from finishing the race of faith.

Having been set free from the control of our fleshly nature through the redeeming and sanctifying work of our God, we are called upon by the Lord to deny ourselves by not indulging our flesh with all its sinful emotions and desires, and worldly living. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul warns any who think there is no harm in indulging themselves in one way or another in this regard without giving any thought of repentance or turning away from it, saying, "Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." (Gal. 5:19-21)

Instead of indulging ourselves in sinfulness, Scripture exhorts us, saying, "Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run." (Heb. 12:1) Let us lay aside the hindrances that would prevent us from completing the race by

resisting the sinful prompting of our flesh and by repenting of those sins we have become guilty of. This kind of laying aside needs to be a daily occurrence, because our fleshly nature is ever with us and because of our slips and falls into sin that occur each and every day.

Speaking of slipping and falling, in the 1988 Winter Olympic an American speed skater by the name of Dan Jansen, who was favored to win the 500 and 1,000 meter races, fell in both of those races. Here was an athlete who had trained hard and long in order to compete in the Olympics and all it took was one slip or fall and he lost all hope of winning or placing. In striking contrast to this, with regard to our spiritual race in life, the gospel of Christ comforts us with the good news of God's abundant grace and mercy. It tells us that no matter how many times we slip and fall into any kind of sin the Lord can still enable us to finish the race and gain the crown of life. The Lord leads us to repent of our sins and turn to Jesus in faith for the forgiveness of all our sins. Paul confirms this blessed truth as he writes in his letter to the Romans, "But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more." (Rom. 5:20)

There is, however, an even more sorrowful scenario in the spiritual arena than that of the speed skater who fell in the Olympic races. If any were to fall from faith in Christ Jesus and continue to remain in the state of unbelief, such a one would quite tragically be disqualified and would not receive the crown of eternal life. Such a tragic fate is, to be sure, a horrifying thought.

And yet, Holy Scripture gives us every reason to have a confident, certain hope of being able to finish the race of faith and finally receive the crown of glory in heaven. The apostle Paul gives expression to this by saying: "Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty." The confident certainty Paul possessed in being able to run this all important race of life to the final end did not rest on a trust in and reliance on his own personal spiritual strength and fortitude. Rather, it rested alone on his Savior God. Paul wrote to Timothy concerning his confidence in the Lord, as he declared, "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day." (2 Tim. 1:12) Through the work of the Holy Spirit in the Word of God Paul had been led to the firm conviction that Jesus was his Lord and Savior. In this blessed truth he knew and believed in his heart that Jesus had already won eternal life for him through His redemptive work and was enabling him to receive this eternal salvation by giving him faith to believe in Jesus. Yet not only this, Paul also possessed the unshakeable confidence that God would keep him in the faith until life's end so that he would finally wear the crown of eternal life.

The apostle Peter also speaks of believers being preserved in the faith through the power of God so that we receive that incorruptible crown of everlasting life. He writes, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." (1 Peter 1:3-5)

The Lord Jesus helps us to realize that God preserves us in the faith as we continue to listen to His gracious saving word with a receptive spirit, as He declares, “But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand.” (Jn. 10:26-29)

God in His infinite grace and mercy has richly blessed us in having chosen us in Christ Jesus to run in the race of faith so that we receive the imperishable crown of eternal life. Knowing and being assured that God has given us the victory through our Savior Jesus Christ, let us go for that eternal crown, always looking to Jesus and His Word, for He is the author and finisher of our saving faith. Amen.