

How would you describe being a Christian? What metaphor would you use? Perhaps you'd use the metaphor of a family, that we are all brothers and sisters in the Lord and that we are the sons of God, heirs of the promise. That'd be a very good thing to say. That's a very biblical image to use. Maybe you would use the metaphor of a body, that we are all joined together into one in Jesus Christ. Yes, we're not all the same, but at least we are all joined together, because we need one another. That would also be a very biblical thing to say, a very biblical image to use. You might even use the metaphor of a building, that we are stones which have been put together into a single structure, that we are living stones built up into the temple of the living God. Also a very good, a very biblical thing to say. But all of these metaphors tend to focus on the connection that we have with one another, on the unity which we share. But there's another image in the Bible that we may not always think about, and honestly, that's the image that Paul uses in our Epistle lesson for today. Paul tells us that being a Christian is a competition. It is a foot race, even a boxing match. And there are clear winners and losers in this contest. This is also good and biblical language, and honestly, I think it's language that we need to hear more of today.

Because Paul begins in verse 24, when he says: "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." So he says we are running a race. We are in a competition. And we are seeking after a prize, the prize of Jesus Christ our Lord. As he says in Philippians 3, verse 14: "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." So that's what we're competing for, so that we may obtain Christ.

Now, yes, of course, we are only in this race because of Jesus. It's not because of ourselves. And yes, of course, we are only able to run in this race because of Jesus, not because of ourselves. And yes, the prize itself is a gift, something given to us by God. We are not going to win heaven by our works. But all that being said, don't you want it? How badly do you want to win? How badly do you want Christ? How badly do you want to finish this race? So run, Christians! Christ, our prize, is worth every effort. He is worth anything that we have to pay. The things that we are doing are not pointless. They are not done in vain. So run, Christians! Run with all of your might after the Lord.

But the great danger here--and this is Paul's point in this reading--the great danger is that we might be disqualified from this race. As he goes on to say: "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." So in other words, he says, an athlete has to be self-disciplined if he wants to win. All of the blood, all of the sweat, all of the tears that he pays are meant for a specific purpose, so that he may win the victory. This is why an athlete trains. This is why an athlete lifts weights. This is why an athlete eats a specific diet or runs through specific plays. They go through all of this effort, all of this hard work so that it will pay off in the end, so that they will be able to obtain the victory. But if he doesn't work hard, he's not going to win. Because then, someone else who worked harder, who wanted it more, is going to win instead.

And so an athlete is often disqualified for one of two reasons. Either, on the one hand, because they're not paying attention to detail. They're not focused on what they're supposed to do. They

become lazy and inattentive, and as a result they do something that disqualifies them. And on the other hand, an athlete may be disqualified by being unfit. They chose to walk the easy way, to skip the training, to do what is easy, because, well, that's what they felt like doing at the time. But as a result, when they get to the competition, they are not ready. And they are disqualified as a result. They are no longer allowed to compete, because they're not ready for the competition at hand. But the athlete who is focused, the athlete who pushes hard, the athlete who is disciplined, that is the one who's going to win.

And Christians, we too can be disqualified, as Paul tells us. We can be disqualified from this Christian race when we lose focus, when we become distracted and start doing things that God doesn't want us to do or not listening to what he has to say. We may also be disqualified when we choose the easy way, the easy way of sin, the easy way of the world. And this is always a danger for us while we are still in this race. We may very well be disqualified, because like a lazy athlete, we're not putting in the effort.

And Paul uses the example of those who are in the wilderness to really show this danger to us. Because we might think of those who were in the wilderness as being spiritual superstars, as being spiritual Olympic athletes, the kind of people you would think would definitely win the race. Because think of all the things that they went through. They saw the cloud with God in it. They saw the Red Sea split before them. They saw that same Red Sea cover over their enemies. They saw the food that was given to them. They saw the water that came from the rock. Over and over and over again, God did all of these wonderful things for them. And so you would think seeing all of this, seeing God at work in such a direct way, that they would have no problem running the race which was set before them. You would think that they would be the best athletes of all. But they weren't. They were disqualified, because they fell into sin. And so God judged them in the wilderness, and they were overthrown. And if they fell, Christians, what makes us think that we are somehow immune to this, that we're somehow above the danger of being disqualified from this race?

So we need to train. We need to engage in spiritual exercise. How? we might ask. How does that happen? Through the things that God has given to us and through the things that he wants us to do. God wants us to pray, to call on him in everything, to bring all of our cares and concerns before him, so that when we come into the moment of trial, when we come to the contest, we will be prepared in the Lord. God wants us to fast, to abstain from the things of this life, to abstain even from the basic things, so that we learn not to depend on the world, but to depend on God and him alone. God wants us to be self-controlled, to be in control of our bodies, in control of our passions, so that we don't give into our feelings, so that we don't give into our whims, but become the masters of ourselves in everything. God wants us to resist temptation, to turn away from those things which threaten to disqualify us, to turn away from those things which threaten to lead us into sin. God wants us to be in the Word, to read it, to study it, to think about it, because this Word is our life. This Word is our way. This Word is our weapon against all evil. God wants us to reflect on that Word, to think about it, to consider what it says, and to apply it to ourselves, meditating on it day and night. And God also wants us to be in the sacraments, to receive his gifts here, those gifts which strengthen us for this fight, which strengthen us in body and soul to lead us on the way. Through all of these things, Christians, through this spiritual exercise, we run the race which has been set before us. We run the race which leads us to Jesus

Christ. So discipline yourselves. Christ is your goal. Christ is your prize. How badly do you want to win?

But I should also say that this discipline is not meant just for yourself. It's not just an individual thing. It is also meant for your fellow brothers in Christ. Because Paul writes all of these things in the context of talking about not making somebody else stumble. Because when we are spiritually lazy, Christians, that can hurt other people too. Either because they see what we're doing and become offended, and as a result turn away from God, or because they see what we're doing and they do the same thing. And as a result, we are both disqualified from the race. So discipline is necessary not only for yourself, but also out of a love for your neighbor. Because we push each other on. We drive each other to excel. And because of our excellence in seeking after the Lord, we glorify the Lord in all that we say and do.

So Christians, let us run the race that is set before us. Let us look to Jesus, the founder and the perfecter of our faith. Forgetting what lies behind us and straining forward to what lies ahead, being totally focused on the goal, let us push onward towards the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Don't get distracted. Don't get lazy. Don't get sidetracked. Run with all of your might, because Jesus Christ our Lord is worth every cost.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have called us to yourself in your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to run the race which has been set before us, so that we may be ever focused on your Son, who is our life and our prize. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.