

“Run the Straight Race through God's Good Grace”

(Philippians 3:12-21 – Pentecost 20 – October 11, 2026)

Philippians 3:12-21 – ¹²*Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.* ¹³*Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead,* ¹⁴*I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.* ¹⁵*Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you.* ¹⁶*Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind.* ¹⁷*Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern.* ¹⁸*For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ:* ¹⁹*whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame – who set their mind on earthly things.* ²⁰*For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,* ²¹*who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.*

Dear Redeemed in Jesus Christ:

I am often impressed as I watch runners in a race, whether it is high school teams competing in the 5K, or runners of all ages competing in a 26 mile marathon. I am impressed by the finishing times, to see that a person can keep up a 5-minute mile pace or even less over such long distances.

In our text, the apostle Paul compares living the Christian life to running a race. This is the image when he says: *“I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”* (vs. 14). Thankfully, as we press on toward our heavenly goal, crossing the finish line as winners does not depend on our personal performance. Paul points us to Christ our Victor. He alone has run the perfect race as the Savior of sinners. Through faith in Christ, we already possess the prize of heaven. It is the gift of God’s grace alone. So as we sang in the verse of our hymn (“Fight the Good Fight”), we are encouraged to: **“Run the Straight Race through God’s Good Grace...”** knowing that “Christ is the path, and Christ the prize.”

1) Christ is the path

Christ is the path. What do we mean by this? Is He one of many paths leading to heaven? No. He is the only path. God sent His only-begotten Son into the world as the only Savior to bring us to heaven. Jesus said: *“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No*

one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). Christ is the path. Does this mean He came to show us the way to live, so if we follow His example we will earn heaven? Does winning the prize depend on our running in His footsteps well enough? No. Christ did not come to save those who are good enough for heaven. Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:15: “*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*” Christ is the path, and the only path, because sinners cannot run the race well enough to win the prize.

In every race there are rules. If you run out of bounds or behave wrongly, you may be disqualified. God’s Law does not say, “Just try to run your personal best, and that will be good enough.” It says: “*You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy*” (Leviticus 19:2). Jesus lays down the standard in Matthew 5:48: “*You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.*” As imperfect sinners, how can we run well enough to enter God’s holy presence, when His Law says even one sin disqualifies us (James 2:10)? How often in life we have run out of bounds, transgressing His Law. We have run in such a way as to serve our sinful desires rather than His holy will. We have run for our own glory instead of His alone. In our self-centered race we have run over other people, disregarding their needs, putting them down to get ourselves ahead. Can we expect some kind of trophy from God for our unholy performance? If getting to heaven depended on our running the perfect race, no one would make it: “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23).

Therefore Christ is the path, and the only path, because He is the only Savior of sinners. God sent His Son into the world to run the perfect race in our place and win the heavenly prize for us. All that Jesus did was to bring glory to His Father and serve the good of others. By His perfect life of obedience, He fulfilled the holy Law for us. Then Jesus went to the cross, bearing all our sins. He went the distance for us, giving His life to take away all our sins. Having done everything needed to save us, He shouted from the cross: “*It is finished!*” He crossed the finish line and won the victory for us. And He rose again to share His perfect gift of forgiveness and eternal life with us.

Running the Christian race does not mean we are perfect. But by the grace of God, while we are sinners, He declares us forgiven and perfect in His sight, for Jesus’ sake. And one day when He brings us to heaven, we will be made perfect just as He is perfect.

So the apostle Paul says: “*Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*” (vs. 12-14).

Like Paul, we have new motivation for living a holy life and running the race well. It is the grace of God in Christ. Now that God has called us to faith by His Gospel and given us the gift of eternal life, we can run for pure joy! We can run eagerly, looking forward to that prize Christ has already won for us and is preparing for us in heaven!

With Paul, we want to forget those things which are behind and reach forward to those things that are ahead. We want to turn away from all false paths of the world that would tempt us into sin and misbelief and lead us away from true faith in Christ.

In this regard, Paul gives both a warning and encouragement, so we may continue to run the straight race through God's good grace. First the warning: *"For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame – who set their mind on earthly things."* (vs. 18-19).

Who are these enemies of the cross of Christ? On the one hand, Paul's description leads us to think of those who serve the appetites of their belly, the lusts of their flesh. Many live in ways the Bible calls shameful: adultery, fornication, homosexuality, etc. They parade their lifestyle in pride and gather around them many who support them. Many false teachers in churches give their blessing. Sadly, they think they have found glory in sin that brings eternal shame and destruction in hell. When they are called to repent and turn to Christ for forgiveness and for help against temptation, they show that they are enemies of His cross by brazenly continuing in their path of rebellion.

On the other hand, Paul has warned about false teachers who preach high morals; yet, they lead people away from faith in Jesus as their only Savior from sin. This includes all who teach that faith in Jesus is not enough; but that you must add your own works to make you acceptable to God (vs. 2 ff.). This faith-plus-works religion says that the cross Jesus bore for you is not enough, but you must atone for your sins by your own works of sacrifice. It says that the life Christ lived for you is not enough, but you must strive to present yourself pure and holy before God.

One way or another, enemies of the cross of Christ lead sinners to think they are running in a path to heaven apart from repentance and faith in Christ alone. Paul warns: Don't follow them. They will lead you off the straight and narrow path of Christ.

As we run the Christian race, there are many challenges to our faith. The unbelieving world will not encourage us to run the straight race through God's good grace. Satan tempts us to take our eyes off of Christ and the heavenly prize He won for us. The sinful nature within misleads us with its deceitful desires.

How important it is, then, to have godly encouragement along the way. As members of Christ's Body, God puts us together as a team to encourage each other in the faith. This is what Paul gets at when he says: "*Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern.*" (vs. 17). The pattern by which we encourage each other is Christ Himself. We share His Word of forgiveness and love, His assurance of salvation and eternal life. In the heat of the race, when life is an uphill battle and we feel weak, we point each other to Christ who is our Strength, Christ who took away all our failings, Christ who ran the perfect race for us. In Christ, we can forget those things that are behind and reach forward to those things that are ahead. We can run the straight race through God's good grace, knowing Christ alone is the path...

2) Christ is the prize

And Christ is the prize! Paul reminds us of this: "*For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.*" (vs. 20).

As we run the Christian race, our hearts are not set on the trophies of this world, with its false honor and glory, its deceitful treasures and pleasures. All the world's best prizes turn to destruction. But our citizenship is in heaven. What we want most is to be with Jesus. He gives us eternal life and lasting treasures. He is our life; He is our prize. We eagerly await the coming of Jesus, the Savior of sinners, the Lover of our souls. And we can be sure that He who laid down His life for us, is also eagerly looking forward to bringing us home and sharing His heavenly prize with us.

When Jesus calls us across the finish line, we will see Him as He is. It says He "*will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.*" (vs. 21). At last, we will be made perfect as He is. We will have no sin, nor feel its effects; no more tribulation of evil and falsehood in the world; no more discouragements along the way. All that will be behind us. Death itself will be swallowed up in victory (1 Corinthians 15:51-54). Ahead of us will be heavenly peace and joy without end. We will live with God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – in the light of His glory, and reign with Him forever and ever (Revelation 22:5). We will join myriads of angels, and all the saints who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 7:14) – praising Him who won the victory for us (Revelation 5:12)

Therefore we "*press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*" (vs. 14). We join in that team spirit that says: "Run the straight race through God's Good Grace," knowing that "Christ is the path, and Christ is the prize."

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.