

Septuagesima 2025

Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish

Father Craig Looney

1 Cor. 9.24-27 St. Matt. 20.1-16



Our friend Saint Paul and the author of Hebrews both make numerous references to sports in the New Testament. Paul tells us in this morning's Letter to the Corinthians, the runner boxer who hopes to win first prize must practice, exercise and eat healthy. The author of Hebrews writes we must "run with determination the race that lies before us". Even with all the rigorous training, there is no guarantee the runner or boxer will get the first prize.

The same holds true for contestants on the popular game show *Jeopardy*. They have to retain a vast amount of knowledge on many subjects if they hope to make it to the next day's show and hopefully become the all-time champion. Even with all their studying, there is no guarantee they will walk away from the show with anything but a consolation prize.

Our friend Paul tells us the Christian life is a lot like running a race with one major exception...we already have the First Prize...everlasting life in Heaven. The athletes of Paul's time disciplined themselves through exercise and self-control if they hoped to make it to the track or the boxing ring. If they slacked off in their training...they ran the risk of being eliminated from the competition. Even if they won the race...their first prize was a laurel wreath, which would eventually dry up and wither away.

The point Paul is trying to make is that our Christian lives must be spiritually disciplined, full of spiritual exercise and self-control. We must be serious about our mission as "athletes" for Christ. We don't want to waiver in our faith in meeting the challenges life sends our way. We want to share the Good News about Jesus Christ with others. We can only do that when we keep ourselves spiritually disciplined. We already have the First Prize...everlasting life in Heaven; we don't want to slack off and lose it.

Both the Epistle and the Gospel have to do with hard work and what we earn for our hard work. In the Gospel, Jesus employs one of his favorite methods of teaching...parables or short stories taken from everyday life. Today's Gospel is another "what the Kingdom of Heaven is like" stories. A man owned a vineyard. He sent workers out into the vineyard at different times of the day. When we go to work we get an agreed upon salary or we work for an hourly wage. If the hourly wage is \$20 and we work 4 hours, we earn \$80. If we work 10 hours, we earn \$200.

The workers in the parable all agreed to be paid the same wage...let's call it \$20. When it comes time to get paid, the workers who had worked just one hour received \$20. The workers who had worked 10 hours received the same \$20. That doesn't seem quite fair. The men who had worked all day started grumbling and accusing the vineyard owner of cheating them out of their wages. The vineyard owner reminds the workers they all agreed for the same wage. He hasn't cheated them and he was free to do with his money as he wished.

The point of the story is that God's generosity exceeds anything we can imagine and surpasses all standards of what we consider equitable payment for the work we do. Our job is to try to figure out what God wants us to do with our lives. We should do our work faithfully and enthusiastically. God's reward is the same...no matter how early or late in our lives we start our work.

Father Massey Shepherd, author of the *Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* writes...

"...the parable teaches us we do not and cannot earn our reward in the Kingdom of God by merely working long and arduously. It is a free gift of Him who alone knows our merits and deserts."

Toward the end of his life Saint Paul summarized his work in these compelling words...

...“I run straight for the finish line. I am like a boxer who doesn't waste his punches. I harden my body with blows and bring it under complete control, to keep myself from being disqualified after having called others to the contest”.

Jesus tells us heaven is like a vineyard where all the workers get paid the same wages...wages we can't earn. Saint Paul tells us the Christian life is like running a race...and the First Prize for those who finish the race is Heaven...and there is no such thing as a consolation prize in Heaven...there is just Heaven...and it's free for those who want it. On that day...we want to stand with our friend Saint Paul and say...

...“I have done my best in the race. I have run the full distance, and I have kept the Faith. And now there is waiting for me the prize of victory...not only for me, but to all who wait with love for him to appear.”

And God will say,

...“Well done! The prize is yours”!

