

Septuagesima 2026

Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish

Father Craig Looney

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



"Winning the race" meant everything to our friend Saint Paul. Paul was a Greek-speaking Jew born in Tarsus, a coastal city in present day Turkey. He was familiar with the intense training, discipline and competitive nature of ancient Greek games. To win at any game required constant practice and a healthy diet. The athletes bodies had to be in good physical shape, if they ever hoped to win the grand prize. Even then, only one of them wins the prize.

Saint Paul uses "winning the race" as a metaphor for the Christian life. He is talking about a disciplined, intentional, and persevering faith and receive the ultimate reward of eternal life in Christ. The Christian life is not about competing with others, but about self- control, overcoming trials, and completing the mission God has given us.

The winner of the race in those Olympic Games of long ago won a Grand Prize of a crown made of laurel leaves. The crown was a beautiful thing to look at but it didn't last. It eventually dried up and became only a distant memory in the minds of the person who won the prize and the people who saw him finish the race.

Next Sunday, Mass at Saint Joseph Parish will have to compete with the Super Bowl. The team players at the the Super Bowl spent many hours practicing and getting their bodies in shape. The successful team gets a trophy and the players go home with big cash bonuses. Some players become famous and get their names on running shoes and other sports equipment. But even all that fame and fortune is temporary...also to become distant memories.

The prize Saint Paul is talking about isn't an earthly reward...it's the prize God wants us to have...everlasting life in fellowship with him. Our focus during our lifetime must be to always focus on the goal...and not wavier in our faith. We run the race called the Christian life with enthusiasm...always moving forward and not looking back. Paul tells us our faith must reach out and "win" others to Christ.

Paul summarized his work toward the end of his life 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". What Paul is saying is our lives in Jesus are lives of prayer, love of God our Father, and compassion for others. When we show our love for others, we are showing the same kind of love God showed us by giving us his Son, Jesus. Our faith is not just something we "feel"...it's an action leading to good works.

The Gospel is the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, and it is a story about what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. The vineyard owner hires men at different times of the day to go out and work in the vineyard. He told them they would get paid a silver coin. Some men had worked all day and others had worked for only an hour. They all got paid the same...a silver coin.

The men who worked all day complained to their employer...they should have been paid more for working all day. The vineyard owner told the men they had agreed to work for a silver coin, and besides, it was his money to do with as he pleased. Jesus concludes his short story by saying, "the last shall be first and the first shall be last". What exactly does that mean?

The Gospel is more than a short story about humility and fairness in the workplace. It's about God giving us the invitation to go work in his field knowing that when we complete our work the wages we will receive are more than we can possibly imagine. The Gospel makes it clear anyone can answer 'yes' to God's invitation to do his work and at any time. The pay is the same. We can't have more or less of heaven.

There is a connection between the Epistle and the Gospel. Anyone can start running the race at any time. It's never too late to start training. When we see God our Father face to face, and Jesus promises we will some day just as he sees him now, we want to stand with 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".

