

The lessons present two metaphors about the kingdom of GOD. On the surface these metaphors seem to be in conflict. In Paul's description of the Christian life, the responsibility of the Christian is competitive.

"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." There is a limited prize and it is only for those who have run the race well. Even if we don't say that Paul is talking about running against other Christians, it still seems that he is saying our reward in heaven will be based on the work that we do on earth. What we accomplish here and now determines what we will receive.

The Gospel lesson, on the other hand seems to present the opposite notion. Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is like a landowner who hires a variety of men to work for a variety of amounts of time. However, they all receive the same reward. The ones who seem to have put the most effort into their labor, who toiled in the "heat of the day" are no more worthy than those who only put in a few minutes work at the end of the day. They are all paid equally. What happened to many runners but only one victor, and running to win etc? It seems like Paul's attitude is the very one that gets rebuked at the end of Jesus' parable. The land owner says, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with my own money, or do you begrudge my generosity?"

However, understood correctly, these two parables give us a unified picture of life in Christ.

First of all, it must be acknowledged that both our lessons recognize the reality of the work of the Christian life. We are brought into a life of labor. The work is through the burden of the day and the scorching heat. We are required to bring our bodies into subjection, giving a full effort in order to achieve the prize.

Now we are accustomed to speak of the gospel in opposition to works. We recognize we do not earn our salvation by our work. We are not made worthy for glory because of our efforts. The grace of God is what makes us suitable. It is only Jesus who secures for us our salvation. For the law is unattainable for fallen man. There is none of us who has worked sufficiently hard to satisfy its demands. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and once fallen, we cannot lift ourselves again to the glory of holiness.

However, it is wrong to say then, that we have no work to do in Christ. We must not make much of the free grace of the Gospel, but deny that it enjoined a work, as well as conferred a blessing; or, rather, that it gave grace in order that it might enjoin a work. Christmas comes first, and Septuagesima afterwards: we must have grace before we work, in order to work; but as surely as grace is given, so a work is required. It has been said that works were only required under the Law, and grace comes instead under the Gospel: but in truth the Law enjoined works, and the grace of the Gospel fulfils them; the Law commanded, but gave no power; the Gospel bestows the power. Thus the Gospel is the counterpart of the Law. Christ says, "I am not come to destroy the law, but to fulfil it." The Gospel does not negate works, but provides for them. "Man goeth forth unto his work and to his labour" from the morning of the world to its evening. Those brought in to the field are brought in to work. So whether a Christian your whole life or just a moment, you are brought into the work of salvation. We in the church have begun the race, the starting gun has fired. We cannot know if we are run the 100 meter dash

or a marathon. We do not know if it is the first hour or the eleventh in which we have been hired. No matter, it is ours to labor and run.

However, we are not working against our fellow Christians. It would be wrong to read St. Paul as saying that we race against our brothers and sisters, and only a few of us will achieve the goal. We do not even contend against the world around us. Our salvation is not dependent on the church's standing in the world or how powerful is the Christian voting block. "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." Our contention is with the sin and darkness in ourselves. We battle against our own flesh. The runners in this race are all the temptations and trials which beset us. At the end of the play *Cyrano de Bergerac*, the main character's strength is failing, and he sees all of his old enemies approaching to claim him. And he stands to fight them, but instead of naming the men who he contended with in life as we expect he begins to name all of those foes which plagued his soul. He cries out, "

What do you say? It's useless?...I know, ah yes! But one cannot fight hoping only for success! No! No: it's still more sweet if it's all in vain! - Who are all you, there! - Thousands, you claim?

Ah, I know you all, you old enemies of mine! Deceit! There! There! Ha! And Compromise!

Prejudice, Cowardice! ...That I make a treaty? Never, never! - Ah! Are you there, Stupidity?

- I know that you'll lay me low in the end No matter! I fight on! I fight! I fight again!"

This is the contest which St. Paul is describing. For each of us, there are so many other runners. We run against pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, **wrath**, and sloth. We run against all of the devices of the devil which rise to meet us. And these are all hard running opponents. We have no easy task before us. To be defeated in this race is to abandon our calling in Christ. In reality, we are running that we might stay in the fields. To lose the race would be the equivalent of one of the laborers from the gospel abandoning the job in the noonday sun. We run in order to keep running. This is what Paul is warning us against. As he says,

"that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness." All the fathers started well, they began their race in the same way that we did. But they flagged. They burned out, and many perished in the wilderness having lost the race. Paul also uses the metaphor of a boxing match. We are not merely fighting the air. We must train ourselves hard so that we can go ten rounds. How often do fighters start strong, yet when it comes to the later rounds the gloves get heavy, their guard drops, they get flat footed and they are knocked out because of fatigue.

Let this not be the case for us. We have to continue to struggle, to fight against all the enemies which beset our soul.

How often do we train as if we were only fighting a shadow, or running against a child. We do not exercise ourselves in righteousness, we just go along with whatever comes across our paths. We wake when we feel like waking, the exercise we get is no more or less than what comes to us as we go about our days. We do not seek out virtue and love. We allow it to come to us. How unlike an athlete's training camp.

Or perhaps we do train. We exercise ourselves in righteousness. We are diligent in our prayers and look for opportunities to grow in love for neighbor and for God. Yet we are like an athlete who trains and diets and works, but continues to smoke a pack of cigarettes each day. We harbor a sin which we will not give up that saps the strength of our lungs, makes it impossible for us to go the distance. The tar we inhale will take its toll. We must break the habit if we are to run well, to work through the scorching heat.

Yet remember, we do not fight in our own strength. It is in Christ that we contend.

Isaiah 41:10 So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your **God**. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. And Exodus 15:2 **The Lord** is my **strength** and my song; he has **given me** victory.

This is the lesson of the gospel. Our employer is so generous that he does not require us to earn what we are paid. He just desires for us to be in his field. If we will labor for him, we will receive a full wage. His son has already earned the needed gain. He will give what we need to run the race and to win.

Ultimately, these two lessons present the realities of Epiphany and Lent. The light of the world comes into Creation and is given to the gentile peoples who have not concerned themselves with God or his commandments. It is a free gift, unearned, un-looked for. This is what we celebrate in Epiphany. Yet in Lent we embrace the call to mortification and preparation. The need to align our lives to the righteousness, the perfection, which we are commanded to exemplify. This free gift, which is like the deliverance through the Red Sea, the gift of Manna in the wilderness, the Prodigal Son's fattened calf, may be lost like entrance to the Promised Land, as the snake bitten complainers and the selfish goats were sent away.

What then, is this gift truly free? Is it the first place prize for a race won, or a wage given for merely coming into the field at the end of the day?

In truth, it is both. The Kingdom of God is like unto all of these things, and yet unlike each of them taken separately. We are given the gift of salvation, irrespective of our merits, yet we may choose to decline the invitation. We may find the attractions of the world too enticing or the pathway to God too narrow and difficult, the land too full of giants, and the temptation to sleep too strong.

We may, like the prodigal son, look wistfully from the heat of the fields to the pleasures of the city of man. We may abandon our work with the Father, spurning his generosity and take to the passing pleasures that the world holds out. Yet when we find ourselves in a pig stie, envying the swine's food, we will remember how good it was to be a servant in the household of God – to be a laborer in his field.

For it is not that the offer of salvation is ever rescinded. It is that ultimately, it may be rejected. The stories and parables of those who were found unfit, are related to remind us that we may in the end turn away from the promised land. If we will not ever remind ourselves that there is something greater than the comforts and joys of this world, how will we remember it on the day of judgement. We are exhorted to run the race, not because if we are too slow we may not finish in time, but because we will ever be tempted to stop running altogether. The laborers who came in at the last hour were rewarded for their willingness to work, even though they had not much to offer. They did not turn away, thinking that the master's wage for one hour's work would surely not be worth the time.

This is what this season of pre-lent reminds us. It presents the transition – the contrast – between Epiphany and Lent in order to show that great prize for which we strive. Let us not think we earn what we are given, yet at the same time let us not delude ourselves into thinking what we are given is not worth earning. Train yourselves to desire the good, so that when the good is offered you will take hold of it. This is the message of pre-lent. It is an encouragement and a warning. Let us heed both.