

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany – Epistle

“RUNNING INTO THE GROUND” TO “RUNNING THE RACE”

First Corinthians 9:24-27

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

Analysis by Eric W. Evers

24 Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it.25 Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one.26 So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; 27 but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

DIAGNOSIS: Running Around – Into the Ground

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Aimless Running*

So often the Word seems to make no difference in the lives of sermon-hearers (or sermon-preachers, for that matter). The Law's conviction, the Gospel's consolation, and the Holy Spirit's power don't seem to change the hearts of comfortable pew-sitters. Habits destructive to self and community continue. Decisions that are foolish, except in the eyes of the world, are made. The humble works of quietly serving the neighbor in love, speaking forgiveness in the name of Jesus, and building up the Church so often remain undone. Our people are busily running

around like never before; they are indeed “active!” But are they active by faith? Instead, it often appears that they are running aimlessly, with no goal in mind.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Self-Indulgent*

If the above description sounds familiar, then we are simply running in the shoes of the Corinthian congregants. They had heard the Gospel message of freedom, all right. And 1 Corinthians 9 is Paul’s use of himself as an example in an ongoing argument (chapters 8-10) concerning their abuse of that freedom. Consuming food sacrificed to idols was the “presenting problem.” And this led Paul to instruct the Corinthians about living out Gospel freedom: This freedom is not given for one’s own satisfaction, but for the building up of the neighbor. Corinth (and perhaps North America) has not grasped this. When freedom is used to indulge the self (through food sacrificed to idols, various forms of wild consumption/consumerism, or other types of self-gratifying individualism), it is no longer freedom, but bondage to the (never-satisfied) appetites and whims of the self.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Disqualified!*

The end result of all of this self-directed running is that we are run into the ground, and not just by our futile quest to satisfy the flesh. For self-indulgent behavior is a symptom of a heart curved in on itself. Such a heart does not love and trust Christ as Lord; it is idolatrous and self-worshipping. Before God, such a heart can only be judged unworthy to receive the imperishable crown of life. God disqualifies the self-loving and self-serving from the race of faith, and so the finish line is forever out of reach.

PROGNOSIS: Running the Race

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal solution) – *Put (Back) In the Race*

“Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it.” These words are addressed to disqualified, self-serving Corinthians who neglect the good of their neighbors for their own convenience or self-serving preferences. And with these words, Paul proclaims that Christ has re-qualified precisely these sinners. Christ, who sets aside self-service and self-aggrandizement and takes on the humiliation of the cross—Christ who put himself last in the human race—has re-qualified them. Now they are gifted with the call to “run,” not from wrath, but in faith of this very same Christ, trusting in the mercy of God, who delights in putting sinners “back in the race.”

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Aimed at the Prize*

This re-qualification is also a re-orientation. “Run,” yes, though not as you once did, but “in such a way that you may win the prize.” This exhortation is not intended to weigh down the free spiritual athlete with the Law; instead, it is Gospel, breaking the bondage to self-indulgence. God’s grace “aims” the runner, pointing her to life in serving the good of the neighbor, rather than death in indulging the old creation’s appetites. Gospel preaching offers the hearer a new race to run as it puts him on the track. The finish line is God’s glory, not our own satisfaction. It is reached by servanthood rather than self-promotion. It is empowered by the wind at your back – the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Enslaved in Freedom*

Taken in this light, Paul’s punishment and enslavement of his body is not an exercise in rigorous asceticism. It is living in the shape of the Spirit’s life-long baptismal work. The old, self-indulgent creature is daily drowned, or to use Paul’s language, punished. The body is no longer mastered by the self’s

own desires. It is enslaved to the neighbor, to seek his or her good in all things. That is the shape of the evangelically free life: serving the neighbor out of love, and trusting that one has already been “qualified” for the eternal prize by Christ’s work on the cross.