

GO FOR THE GOLD!

🏆 **Get the prize. (vv.24,25)**

👉 **Don't be disqualified. (vv.26,27)**

In the name of Jesus, our shining Champion of grace, dear athletes of the heavenly nation:

Apparently the Europeans aren't buying it. In fact, most nations have little use for the American media's new view of the Olympics as a way for the world to blur the boundaries of national pride. Maybe so, maybe not, but we've lost one thing in the centuries since Paul wrote about the Isthmian Games at Corinth when the Olympics were still fresh in Greece. There were none of these silver and bronze consolation prizes. One champion got to wear the wreath; everyone else walked away with nothing. There were no cameras at the opening and closing ceremonies to see which athletes looked best in their designer gear for future endorsements in the competition of capitalism. Every athlete shared an intense desire to win that single prize. Likewise, the Holy Spirit calls every Christian today: **Go for the Gold!**

🏆 **Get the prize. (vv.24,25)**

For the Lord's Apostle Paul these verses summarize the previous chapters and his God-inspired teaching on Christian freedom. One of several major problems among God's people at Corinth was the misuse of their spiritual gifts. Many members could make fine distinctions between idols and their sacrifices whether sold at market, eaten at pagan temples, or on the table of unbelieving friends and relatives. They knew that freedom in Christ means freedom from the curse and coercion of God's law. But they lacked the love to apply that knowledge in grateful compliance. They forgot that God's law is summarized in love. They were losing **the prize** of heaven which our loving God gives by faith in Jesus.

To help them mature in Christian faith and love Paul counsels care in their use of knowledge and Christian freedom. (1 Corinthians 8) Now in Chapter 9, he has applied to himself this principle of loving Christian concern for building others up. Paul exercised his love for weak fellow Christians by giving up his rights to the pastoral paycheck which the Lord Himself commanded. Paul said he would ***“put up with anything rather than hinder the Gospel of Christ.”*** (9:13) Paul wanted to share the Good News of sins-forgiven for Jesus' sake. He was eager to enjoy these Gospel blessings himself. So he aimed all his energies at winning the heavenly prize. His athletic illustrations especially make sense on this first full weekend of Olympics 2006: ***“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.”***

Many of us have been taught these principles from childhood. And we tried to apply them to our fund raiser last Sunday. As a pastor charged with teaching God's Word in its truth and purity, I have emphasized especially for our Ladies' Fellowship two key principles about Christian giving: 1) God wants Christians to give and not to ask the unchurched community; 2) Jesus says His Father's house is a “house of prayer,” not a market place. After several years of teaching these principles, it seemed wise to let my sisters in Christ put them into practice in a Super Bowl snack exchange to support our Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. They made phone calls to encourage donations of snacks to be offered without price tags for whatever freewill offerings some might want to give. This was advertised on posters and carefully explained for those who might prefer simple donations for our future pastors' training.

Now we need to evaluate our efforts in the light of God's Word. ***“Everything is permissible”—but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible”—but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.*** (10:23f) Yes, we have the Christian freedom to have fun raising funds among ourselves. But how do we build people up in their faith by clearly teaching

what we believe? A phone call last Sunday afternoon from a truck driver in Michigan raised questions about that. As a former pastor he had trouble in congregations which insisted on fund raisers instead of freewill offerings. After thanking me and our congregation for Internet sermons for him and his wife, he expressed dismay that we seemed to be straying from our clear practice of Christian giving. Without going into details, we had similar questions from a mature member as well as misperceptions from a generous visitor. From a teaching standpoint our confession was blurred. **The Gold** was tarnished.

☞ **Don't be disqualified. (vv.26,27)**

So are we **disqualified**? If left to ourselves, the answer is a sad and certain, "Yes." Sinners like us in a sinful world will always fall short in spite of our best efforts. Think of the man in today's Gospel Lesson (Mark 1:40-45) whom Jesus healed of leprosy. Despite Jesus' command not to tell this to anyone, he *"began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places."* His enthusiasm actually hindered Jesus' Gospel ministry.

Every coach knows that excited players need to focus their energy between the boundaries. Paul's description reminds me of high school track. One fellow freshman consistently beat me in the mile until I started watching the way he ran. He wasted too much energy flailing his arms. Remembering this passage, I worked on my form to "run silent, run deep" with every movement aimed at the finish line. Soon our situation reversed and I better understood what Paul was saying: *"Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."*

It wasn't until Tuesday morning in my prayers that I realized how far short I fell from prayerful Christian giving last Sunday. Maybe the reason several men could only remember the Super Bowl and not the Seminary goal, was because I left something out of the worship service. No one else seemed to notice, but as Pastor it is primarily my responsibility to honor our Father's house of prayer. Without realizing it, I became so focused on giving to get something that I failed to say a prayer for God to give His blessings on our Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Like most participants I gave much more than the snacks were worth. But asking the Lord for wisdom Tuesday morning, I realized my check was far less than I would normally give for a door offering or special Seminary Sunday. Raising \$358 was fine, but a few months ago my rather sheepish request to replace one of our projectors was answered with a check for \$250 before Bible class was over. By the time I returned from China, we were excited by a Thrivent grant of \$1300, but God's people had given more than double that. Last week did we maybe burden the consciences of some who wanted to help but weren't sure about our method? How goes **the Gold**?

By ourselves not one of us could give a God-pleasing gift. *"We were by nature objects of [God's] wrath" and "dead in [our] transgressions and sins"* (Ephesians 2:3,1). We had no desire or strength for giving. But in love God gave first the priceless blood of Christ. He washed away the sins of pastors and people alike so that now we eagerly **Go for the Gold** which He promised us for the sake of Christ's victory in our place. But still, if the Lord's Apostle Paul was concerned about preaching to others yet losing eternal life, how much more shouldn't we heed the Holy Spirit's advice: **Don't be disqualified.**

This was a fine learning experience. But would you agree we can do better? It reminds me of when my father would let us explore in the Oregon forest. "Just make sure you can see me so I can see you," he would say. If we went too far out of sight, his whistle brought us back in a hurry. So with God's Word today. His mercy covers whatever was amiss and His grace powers our thanks in future gifts of love. Why don't we take this as a challenge from God? Would our Ladies Fellowship be willing to try again next Fall? Can we aim all that beautiful enthusiasm – posters, phone calls, personal encouragement – toward an MLC Sunday for our Ministerial College in New Ulm? Could our Board for Lay Ministry consider matching a door offering up to half of that Sunday's collection? We have members so motivated by God's grace that if they normally give \$100, they'll write a check for \$200 on a Sunday like that. You see, no one has to wonder when God's people **Go for the Gold!** Let's run in Jesus' Name. Amen.