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The Christian Loves God above All

In today's Gospel, Jesus calls us to follow him with total commitment, with cross-bearing resolve, and with our mind set on heavenly rewards. Faith will have it no other way. The great churchman C. S. Lewis wrote, "Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing Christianity cannot be is moderately important." Our love for God cannot be "kind of." It must be absolute and complete.

Sermon

1 Timothy 6:11-16

¹¹ But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. ¹² Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³ In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴ to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵ which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, ¹⁶ who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen.

Introduction: The Gospel readings in many Christian churches over the next seven weeks describe seven qualities or characteristics that Jesus wants to see in his followers. The theme for the series is *Define Christian*. The first of these traits is this: **Define Christian? Christians love God above all.**

Jesus explained that characteristic in today's Gospel by describing a really unhappy situation: A Christian person lives in a family where some of the family members are not Christians and make life miserable for the person who is. Jesus understands the tension in those homes, he hears the arguments, he sees the challenges, and he knows how easy it for Christians just to give in, give up, and keep the peace. But listen to what Jesus said, **Anyone who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.** Jesus knows those situations are tough and that they weigh down on people but Jesus said more, **Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.** Nobody likes trouble and suffering hurts, but loving God before all is worth it. Jesus made that point: if you give in and give up, you'll eventually lose life with God. If you love God before all, you'll find life with God that lasts forever.

In the Second Reading for today, St. Paul wrote about the same quality, the same characteristic, but he changed the scenario. The place isn't a family home but a stadium. The challenges don't come from family members; the challenges come in a race, a foot race, a long footrace like a marathon. The

runners in this race push themselves to the limit: they're sweating bullets, heads are throbbing, chests are heaving, and their legs feel like lead. But the prize is ahead; they can see it as they run. Christians are those runners; you and I are those runners. Our race is life as we live it; the prize is life as God gives it. We love God above all and so...

We Run the Race to God

We don't know if Paul was a runner, but he would have known about races. Same for Timothy. The Greek Olympics had been around for a thousand years when Paul came on the scene and there were stadiums in all the major Greek cities. Back then the Olympics didn't have hundreds of contests like today—there was one event: a foot race. This isn't the only time Paul compared the Christian life to a race. He wrote to the people in Corinth: **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.** So Paul is urging all of us to live our lives as though we're running in a race to God.

It's too much for me to say that Paul wrote this whole paragraph with a race in mind, but the comparisons are there. When a runner goes into training, there are certain things he has to give up: no more beer, no more smokes, and no more lying around on the couch. That's how Paul begins. He had written about people who get bogged down and banged up by bad stuff: controversies, quarrels, envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions, constant friction and then think that clean living will make them rich. Paul knew that Christians can't run their race with that kind of baggage; they can't even walk. So this is what he told Timothy: **But you, man of God, flee from all this.** There are things in life we need to walk away from and put behind us. We need to watch them get smaller and disappear in our rear-view window. That isn't easy. We are all people of God, but that old sinful self still hangs onto us. We can't run a race wearing snow boots and winter coats. We can't run a race on a track with potholes. That's what sin does: lazy habits, half-hearted loyalty, more care for me than for God. In a race for God sin will trip us up and bring us down every time.

The determined runner gets rid of bad habits and picks up good ones. He improves his diet, drinks more fluids, and increases distance at every practice. Paul issues the list of the habits we need—three pairs of two: **Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness.** We all have our own checklist of thoughts we like to think and things we like to do. We pursue righteousness when we think and speak and act with God's checklist. We all have our own thoughts about God; we pursue godliness when we think about God the way he wants us to think about him, not the way other people think about him. God wants us to ditch our doubts, to stop worrying about stuff that God controls, to live life with courage and confidence—that's pursuing faith. How do we love? Do we love only when it feels good or when someone loves us back? We pursue love when we love people despite their flaws, when we care more about their interests than ours, when we love people close to us and far from us. And we pursue love when we love God more than anything or anyone else. The race to God is full of challenges and hurdles. What we need is the determination to keep going and not give up. We need to steel ourselves against the pain that comes with disappointment and sadness in life. That's what Paul calls endurance and he wants us to pursue it. The runners who want to win God's prize don't push others off the track; they don't taunt people or try to trip them. We pursue gentleness when we keep our heads down and our mouths closed and race for the prize.

The distance runner doesn't need speed or savvy; he needs stamina and strength. We need certain traits, too, and Paul encourages them: **righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness**. We'll never achieve them perfectly; no runner does, no real runner and no Christian runner, either. But with those traits we can do what Paul calls us to do: **Fight the good fight of faith and take hold of eternal life**. We could also say: Be a contestant in the contest of faith. And then Paul says again, **I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ**.

Timothy's race to God began when he was baptized, certainly as an adult; Paul knew about it: **You were called when you made your good decision in the presence of many witnesses**. That's when our race began, too, except we were babies. For a long time we raced with others—parents, pastors, and teachers—who pulled us along or even carried us. Even now we don't run the race alone. We run with others who are running the same race. The letter to the Hebrews mentions them: **Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us**.

You and I are involved in the race of life and we are all chasing the same prize. The prize is **eternal life**. There is more to this prize than a medal or money, more than chubby cherubs who sing pretty songs. Eternal life is not some pie in the sky that simple people hope for or some paradise that silly Christians long for. We are running to a place a place where Jesus is always in sight, where sin is gone for good, where Satan has no power, where loved ones share our glory, where memories of sadness vanish, where tears are dried forever. **The God who gives life to everything has promised** eternal life. The Savior who **testified before Pontius Pilate** and died on a cross Pilate authorized and rose from a tomb Pilate guarded, that Savior who carried our sins to win eternal life, who rose from the dead to guarantee eternal life, who ascended to the right hand of God to prepare eternal life, who provides his power so we can race to eternal life, that Savior says to us, **I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am**. That's the prize. Paul told Timothy, **God will bring this about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever**. This is the God who promises eternal life.

A Christian loves God before all. That how Jesus defines what a Christian is. But loving God isn't a burden we carry or a load we bear. It's not a command or an obligation. For Christians, loving God before all means we're running a race that has eternal life at the finish line. **And so we fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that we do not grow weary and lose heart**. Amen.