

Fight the good fight

Philippians 3:4b-14

A Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Fight the good fight, run the race, go for the prize.

Paul writes in our text for today: "Not that I have already attained this [resurrection from the dead] or am already perfect, but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13-14).

Here and elsewhere in the New Testament we find the theme of a contest, a race, a battle in war, someone striving to reach the goal and the prize.

But didn't Christ do that for us? What are we to make of this?

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul writes:

"Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize. So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we, an imperishable. Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified."

And then there's 2 Timothy 4:7: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

And, of course, there's the troublesome Book of James, which says: "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:20). And then the author says about Abraham: "You see that faith was active along with his works and faith was completed by works" (James 2:22). And: "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24).

That's the only place in the New Testament where "faith alone" is mentioned, and there "faith alone" is rejected.

We find this also in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:13-16 it states that we are the salt of the earth, and if the salt has lost its taste, what good is it? There are other such admonitions: Don't put your light under a bushel, but let it shine.

What do we do with all this? There are two basic ways of dealing with it.

The first one is found in discipleship programs in which the message is salvation is partly God's doing and partly your doing. God gives you a kickstart in the right direction, but you have to do your part to make it work. Because, as it says in James, "faith without works is dead." That's a heavy message.

As we look at the four Gospels, it seems at first glance that this is the case. The Lord does 99% of what it takes to save us, and we have to do 1% to close the deal, that "something" that makes it all work. Even if it's just "accepting God's grace."

The second way we find most strikingly in Paul but elsewhere, too. In our text today Paul writes: "Not that I have already obtained this [resurrection from the dead] or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, **because Christ Jesus has made me his own**" (Philippians 3:12).

Paul presses on; he's fighting the good fight because Christ has already saved him, already made him his own. Because his ultimate destiny is secure in Christ, he's free to be a fallible man, doing what needs to be done.

This is like what Paul wrote in Philippians 2, last week: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13). God is doing it. Rest in this.

This is also like Colossians 3:3-4: "For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you will also appear with him in glory."

Or consider Romans 9:11 where Paul writes of Isaac as "who was not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call."

Paul continues in Romans 9:16: "So it depends not on man's will or exertion but on God's mercy." Not our works, our will, our faith, but his call and his mercy.

Then, so that we don't say to ourselves: "That's just in Paul," we can go to the Gospel of John: 1:13 which says: ". . . [you] who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." And John 15:16: "You did not choose me, but I chose you"; and John 6:44: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him"; and John 6:65: "No one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."

This is a very different kind of thing than saying God does 99%, but you have to do your part, even if it's only 1%. There's a huge burden in that 1%. What if you don't do it right? Earnestly enough?

Baptists take the Bible seriously. They take church going seriously. Many go to church Sunday morning and Sunday evening. It's also true that if you ask Baptists about these Bible verses that say God chooses us; we don't choose him," they will say: "We've never heard those passages. They are skipped over in our Bible studies."

How do we sort this out? When one Bible verse says one thing and another verse conflicts with that, what do we do?

One thing we don't do is try to tally up the number of passages that say this in contrast to the number of passages that say that, and then the column with the most passages is the winner. It's not a problem that can be solved in that way.

The key to everything is the cross. Everything in the Bible points to that. When someone asks: How do you use the Bible? We say: To point to Christ, to the cross and resurrection. That's what it's all about.

If someone uses the Bible to diminish the cross, that is, to say the cross is important but not all-sufficient, you need more than the cross, then they're using the Bible wrongly.

In Philippians 3 Paul says that he himself is righteous according to the law but he counts that all as loss, as nothing because of the surpassing worth of having Christ as his Lord, having a righteousness not based on law and following law, but a righteousness based on Christ and being found in him.

In Galatians 4:8-9, Paul writes: "Formerly, when you did not know God . . . but now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God . . ."

One sees here (also Philippians 2:12-13, Philippians 3:14, and Galatians 2:20) that the opposite of "not knowing God" is not "knowing God," but rather, it is "being known by God."

The opposite of "not choosing God" is not "to choose God," but "being chosen by him."

The opposite of "not believing" is not "to believe," but "being called by him."

The opposite of “not repenting,” is “to repent,” but “being forgiven,” or as Paul writes in our text today, “being found in him” (Philippians 3:9).

The Lord does it 100%. Not 99% and the remaining 1% is up to us.

To ask about free will in things above us is to raise the 1% question. Is there something in me that is pure, a 1% not caught in sin, so that if I respond rightly, do rightly, then I’ve done what is needed to make salvation work?

No. From head to toe, from the inside out and the outside in, we are rebels, lost and broken. The Lord knows that, and nevertheless, he comes and makes us his own.

It’s astonishing. That’s why Paul writes in Romans 11:33: “O the depth of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”

Paul got it and others have, too. Consider Dietrich Bonhoeffer writing from prison:

“During the last year or so I’ve come to know the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. The Christian is not a *homo religious*, but simply a man, as Jesus was a man—in contrast, shall we say, to John the Baptist. I don’t mean the shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the busy, the comfortable, or the lascivious, but the profound this-worldliness, characterized by discipline and the constant knowledge of death and resurrection. I think Luther lived a this-worldly life in this sense” (July 21, 1944).

Yes, he did, and we are called to live a this-worldly life in that sense, too.

Because Christ did everything, we do everything, fallible as we are, forgiven and free. We run the race, fight the good fight, confident that he is Lord and we are his.

Amen