

Sermon on 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 for Grace Church by Jonathan Shradar

Race for life...

We like winning. In fact it is probably the most significant driver in our lives at any given moment, if we are honest! To win the argument, to beat out the huge pool of candidates for the job, to get to the next stop light before everyone else, to have my views vindicated by a vote of the masses, or just enough likes on facebook.

Some of us have a more honed competitive nature and everything is an opportunity to come out ahead - but all of us order our lives with effort and hopes toward the winners' circle. We want the results that match our definition of victory... and we have evolved our institutions to deliver just that - to help us get ahead - and when we lose, or are told we can't win as we have defined it, we are ferocious!

In a sea of voices and organizations that champion our redefinition of the race and goal, there are faithful voices speaking the word of God and saying - our definitions are wrong... there is something more truthful and more real.

To a church taking matters into their own hands and attempting to win in their own terms, the Apostle Paul pens Scripture that speaks a different word.

The way to truly get ahead is to get behind Jesus.

1 Corinthians 15:50-58 "I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. [51] Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, [52] in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. [53] For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. [54] When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

"Death is swallowed up in victory."

[55] "O death, where is your victory?
O death, where is your sting?"

[56] The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. [57] But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

[58] Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." (ESV)

The Corinthian church has received this letter from their planter, from Paul, as an answer to some specific questions and some pointed correction for errors that had crept into the church. As he begins to close the letter he once again has put the emphasis on the news of first importance - the gospel - that Jesus died for sin and was raised. We have been chewing on this reality of resurrection, not only for Jesus but also for all who believe in him. Those that would be transformed and made new by him.

Timely for that church, and always for us, Paul has steered them away from attempts to earn their own resurrected body - as they have made their spirituality about winning on their terms - and here again he tells of the need of outside action, the work of someone other than us to deliver this miraculous transformation. And what good news it is of this victory given to us by another.

As we think of this victory, we need to see our striving for it, how obtaining it is actually surrendering to it and then how we are to stand in it as we live.

1) Striving for Victory

We love a great effort toward victory. It is how we pick our heroes and often who we aspire to be.

Winston Churchill "You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us: to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer with one word: Victory - victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory however long and hard the road may be; for without victory there is no survival."

For without victory there is no survival. Churchill is talking about victory over the Nazi regime but he might as well have been talking of the foe our text, death...

Without victory over death, there is no survival... there is nothing. This is the great challenge of humanity, that each and every one is headed toward death.

It is in our nature then to recoil against it, to fight it... rightly so. Decay, disintegration, and loss are fought against because they are all signposts on the road that leads to death.

The greatest human endeavor ever undertaken is the innumerable attempts to vanquish the enemy death, to savor and prolong youth... to beat the odds.

And this filters into all corners of life, especially religious activity. Here Paul has been giving glorious news to the church, that death is not all there is, that resurrection is real. That this physical life is connected to a coming eternal life and for those in Christ, that believe in Jesus, it is an eternity of being like him.

But this message is being received by a church that is convinced they can do the delivering, that they have what it takes to spiritually arrive at their own glory. That they can do what it takes to earn the kingdom of God.

“I tell you this, brothers and sisters, flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God...” The corrupted body can not earn the incorruptible.

You can't get there on your own, no matter the effort, no matter the precision, the talent you have, it is not enough. Something else has to happen.

It is not even “the perishable does the best it can then someone comes to help nudge you over the finish line...” It cannot inherit, it cannot gain, achieve or secure for itself, eternity.

This is the first sentence of the gospel, and often the one we are most uncomfortable with... all fall short of the standard, from the most immoral to the most religious, from the pagan to the “righteous.”

Even the good things, our success, our ritual and routines are not enough.

Hebrews 10:1, 4 “For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, **it can never**, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near... [4] For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” (ESV)

So victory is not found in ourselves, in our striving but it is a gift from outside of us and that truth changes things. For those following Jesus, it is a surrendering to victory.

2) Surrendering to Victory

You can't make it happen in your own effort, but Behold! “I tell you a mystery (a truth hidden now revealed in Christ). We shall all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality...”

When the trumpet announcing the return, the final, victorious return of Christ to dwell with his people, when that sounds, in an instant the transformation - the full complete, the destination our spiritual transformation happening now is headed toward - will be finished.

Action outside of us, will take place and there will be a transfer, a putting on, of the glorious promised results of our resurrection in Christ. The glorious gift.

Paul is saying don't look toward your spiritual exercises, your fantastical experiences, don't look at your spiritual pedigree or the human privilege you own... look to the One the trumpet announces. Look to Jesus, the beginning and finisher of your faith... The One that wins, that is the effective, efficient sacrifice for you.

What we bring to the transformation is our need, the reality of death, the weight of what we truly deserve. All of us equally culpable and deserving... "For there is no distinction: [23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," Romans 3:22-23 (ESV)

This is what we own as we look to Jesus. "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law."

Death is like the strike of a scorpion, painful, resisted, because of sin. Sin, the missing of the mark, the standard needed to be in the presence of God. Flesh and blood can't inherit the kingdom of God but they do inherit sinfulness, rebellion against God. This is all the parts of us that aren't so sparkly. Even our desires to win at the expense of others... or the denial of our need for outside intervention.

This is a big thing in our time... And even among those that claim Christ, a lack of taking responsibility, or owning sin.

Mistakes Were Made (But not by me), Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson. -
"As fallible human beings, all of us share the impulse to justify ourselves and avoid taking responsibility for any actions that turn out to be harmful, immoral, or stupid. Most of us will never be in a position to make decisions affecting the lives and deaths of millions of people, but whether the consequences of our mistakes are trivial or tragic, on a small scale or a national canvas, most of us find it difficult, if not impossible, to say "I was wrong; I made a terrible mistake." The higher the stakes - emotional, financial, moral - the greater the difficulty..."

We act like Other people are the problem that needs to be solved...

The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law... the requirement that hangs over us that oppresses in our inability to keep it. Given by God as the right response to his provision and care, and to make clear our need for a Savior.

"However holy, just and good it might be, the law condemns all men by its strict requirements. It even throws the reality and seriousness of sin into sharp relief through its precise definition of sin as transgression of God's commandments. Indeed, man's inner propensity to rebel and disobey actually makes him want to do the opposite of what God's law requires; we see the sign "No Trespassing" and its very presence makes us want to trespass. In these ways sin exerts its inexorable grip over us, and the law serves only to spell out the seriousness and the strength of that grip." Prior

Lived this the other day as I took Ewen to run some errands. We had the windows open and he was taking the label of his water bottle and letting it blow in the wind... then he let go. Out the window it went. And like any good father I took the opportunity to convey to my four-year-old son how bad, and illegal, littering was. After a couple of minutes I look in the mirror and he is crying with a worried look on his face. 'What's wrong buddy?' and he responded he was scared the police were going to come and take him to jail for littering.

I told him that they would just give him a warning and ask that he never litter again - did he promise he wouldn't? As he did, I told him that forgave him and he didn't need to worry about it any more. "Just call them so they don't come"

This is what the law does to us, no wonder we run from it, it makes clear how "in trouble" we are because of what we do... even how we think.

Death, sin and the law. These are what we need victory over. This is what we own, our need, our sin and this is what we surrender to Jesus. "The cross leaves us staggered at our unworthiness"

57 "But thanks be to God, who gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Jesus, God himself, lives in perfect obedience to the law for you. He dies as a substitute in your place, defeating death by his death. Securing victory in his resurrection. The cosmic dilemma dealt with, resolved and those in need gifted victory. This verse does not say 'thanks to God for making victory accessible through Jesus...' Thanks be to God, who GIVES us victory through the work of Jesus for us.

"Death... sin... the law - all have been broken wide open in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Even now we can experience victory over this trio, but the full fruits of the victory of God through our Lord Jesus Christ are only for the last day. As with all that God has done for us in Christ, this victory is a gift of his grace: *thanks be to God, who gives us the victory*, now and then." Prior

He has absorbed the sting of death. "Its venom has been absorbed by Christ and drained of its potency so that the victory over death now belongs to God and to God's people who benefit from it." He took away the power of sin by fulfilling the Law on our behalf. There is nothing a sinner can do to defeat death because Jesus has already defeated it for him. There is no law that he must fulfill in order to be given imperishability - Jesus fulfilled the Law in his place. The Christian inherits the kingdom of God, imperishability, and immortality because of the work of Christ.

John 11:25-26 "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, [26] and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (ESV) **The way to truly get ahead is to get behind Jesus.**

As we surrender ourselves, our brokenness and need to Jesus, we sing the refrain of victory: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

Where we once were striving for it, we now surrender to it in Christ and stand in it as we wait for that glorious trumpet announcing his return.

3) Standing in Victory

The victory and imperishable life is not something that we will possess only in the future - we already have it now as an inheritance in Christ. If we already know that life has been won, if death has been defeated; if life has been secured, if it has been given to us, then we can walk forward with great confidence, joy, and victory.

“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

“Paul intends—God intends—that there be a practical effect of what he has said. He intends for the effect to be verse 58. And the word “therefore” shows that he intends for verse 58 to happen because we know and remember verses 51-57. Christ has come. He has died for you. He took all your sins on himself. He satisfied the demands of the law for you. The sting of death is removed. There is no condemnation. No hell. No fear. Though your body be laid in the grave, Christ will come and the trumpet will sound, and this mortal body will put on immortality and this decomposing, decaying body will become imperishable. Death is swallowed up in a great, blood-bought, Christ-wrought victory. To die is gain. Away from the body, at home with the Lord. THEREFORE” -Piper

“*Steadfast*” means steady as you move forward. Keep on going and don’t let up. Don’t be given to fits and starts. Put your hand on the plow and don’t take it off till your work is done.

#NeverRelent. Steady movement forward till your work is done. The Christian’s motivation for steadfastness is not his own winning, but the winning of Christ. We stand on his victory made ours.

“*Immovable*” means don’t get knocked over by sudden blows. Keep your balance. Stand strong and unshaken when the rains come down and the floods come up and the winds blow and beat against your house. Be like a boulder that can’t get washed away. Be like a tree that can’t get blown down. Because Christ is your anchor and God’s love for you is immovable.

“*Abounding in the work of the Lord*” means do lots of it. “Abound in” means “overflow with.” Fill your days with things that count for Christ. Pray and dream and plan and then work, work . . . work while it is day. This is doing the work of ministry in the church and outside of it. We bring

the kingdom of God with us everywhere we are Monday through Saturday as much as we do on Sunday. Bring peace, care and the cool water of the gospel to parched souls.

And all of this happens “in the Lord.” United with Christ, “in Christ” we stand, we live, we adventure, we enjoy, we labor for his glory. Because the victory over death and sin has been won we live now to have eternal impact...

Ephesians 2:8-10 “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast. [10] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (ESV)

Saved, to show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. To

The way to truly get ahead is to get behind Jesus.

You can't gain it by your own work or ability; your own attempts at immortality. In Christ you have victory over death and sin, and now you live having won with Christ.

Response:

Surrender - Give up the self-improvement project and turn to Jesus - let him transform you. Repent, own your need, your sin, and give it to Christ. **1 John 1:9-10** “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. [10] If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” (ESV)

Stand - Live this unshakable life, anchored in Christ, laboring for his glory, for his kingdom's expansion. Do it with others.

In our day, a day full of attempts at winning by our own terms, the greatest news is still the victory that Christ has won, and that is given to those that believe as a gift. It is what the church has to offer a world exhausted of trying, tired of losing and tired even of the emptiness of the things some call winning.

Know the Jesus who conquered your death, by his death for you. Surrender to him and his gift of victory and pray that he would give you peace and strength and a passion for his cause in the world, to make him known...