

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
August 5, 2012**

Spiritual Olympics 3

1 Corinthians 9:24

One Way to Win

1. *The Paths to Victory*

Hymns: 225 - 422

Distribution: 435 - 464

Closing: 439

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

If you were to die tonight, why would God let you into heaven? With a question like that, there is no tip-toeing around. That question brings your mortality right to the forefront. It forces you to look forward to an event that many people don't often want to think about. However, there couldn't be a more important question to ask a person. The way in which a person answers speaks about much more than their temporal earthly life, it speaks clearly as to where they will spend eternity.

Yet in spite of its importance, if you would summon up the boldness to ask that question individually to the many different people that you know in the world, chances are very good that you would receive a host of different answers. Certainly, some would point to the "goodness" of God while reasoning, "There is no way that a loving God could send me or anyone else to hell, so heaven it must be." Of course, others might point to their own "goodness," thinking, "I'm a pretty good person, and I've accomplished a lot of good things during my time on earth." Or, "As I look around at the rest of this world, I know I am better than the vast majority." Or, "I know I've messed up, but I've worked hard to make up for those bad things that I've done, and I'm confident the good outweighs the bad." For those reasons, I think God would let me into heaven. Others would point to their dedication to their religion, whether it be Islam, or Mormonism or Judaism, as the reason that God would let them into heaven. And then, without a doubt, you would find the people

who would tell you that there is no heaven and hell, or there is no God, and it is succeeding in this life that matters.

To me, that array of answers, that you would receive to that all-important question is astounding. When it comes to sports, everyone knows and would freely admit that there is only one way to win. You have to be the best during the course of competition. Yet, when it comes to winning the spiritual race, we live in a world today that tells us that there are many ways to win, there are many ways to attain the goal, whether it be "heaven" or something like it. Whether it be the way that a person lives or what a person believes and trusts in, our postmodern world tells us that each person is entitled to their own opinion and that each person's opinion is right. So whether you think that there is nothing after this life, or you think that you will one day become like a god, or you think that your good works and dedication will gain you entrance, if that is what you believe, then good for you. And I better be careful in questioning what you believe and I certainly better not tell you that it is wrong. COEXIST is what the bumper sticker tells us. "We're all serving the same God." "All roads lead to heaven." The message is clear: Let each person have their own way, let's all just get along. And while this way of thinking is peaceful and harmonic and good for humankind, there is a rather large problem....It is wrong.

That there are many ways to heaven is a false thinking; and it leads many people astray. And it is easy to see why that is the case. Who wouldn't want to be told that it doesn't really matter how they live, and it doesn't really matter what they believe, and it certainly doesn't matter what anyone else tells them? This way of thinking is a license for the reason of man. And the reason of man will always come up with something that appeals to man, but it is always wrong. So, while the world tells each and every person that it is good and right to be confident in your own way and your own convictions, all the world is doing is filling people with a completely false confidence.

And the truly terrifying reality of what is so popular in the world today, namely, that each person's way is right, is that this way of thinking leads to defeat, eternal defeat; every one of those paths that man comes up with on his own, falls short. None of those reasons that we spoke about before would be good enough for God to let a person into heaven. Consequently, there are many, many people in this world who are running on a

path to eternal loss and they are being told that it is the way to victory.

And while this line of thinking threatens so many out in the world, it also threatens us who are Christians running the race. This worldview that it doesn't matter what you believe, and it doesn't matter what you do, and all paths lead to heaven, it impacts Christian people. A few months ago, I read an article in TIME magazine that talked about the changing worldview of what heaven is and how you get there. The thoughts and views weren't surprising, but the sources were at times. Many of those thoughts were coming from mainstream Christians. This is a view that you will find in a church down the road, and which you will hear on the radio, and which you read about in magazines. This is something that threatens you, and it is something that threatens your children. They will hear it as they go out into the world and they will be told it is the truth – there are many ways to heaven. And if you don't believe that, you are close-minded and unloving and wrong.

And continually hearing the same message from the world around you is bound to have an impact. Doubts can creep in. "Is the way of the Bible, the way that I was taught, really the only way?" "It sure seems like there are some in the world who are more or less deserving?" "It is difficult to imagine that my really kind Mormon neighbor or roommate is going to hell."

And hearing this view from the world can threaten the way that we want to live as Christians. If we start to think, even slightly, that maybe, just maybe, the way of God's Word isn't the only way, everything changes. It will make us less faithful and dedicated to the whole truth of Scripture. It will dampen our conviction and our resolve to spread this Truth eagerly and to defend it valiantly.

Because this danger is constantly in front of us, because it is such a common proclamation of the world around us, because we are told so often by so many that there are many answers to that most important question; it is good for us to receive a simple reminder as we focus on running the race. It comes from Paul and he says, "***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.***" What Paul says there in those words is simple, "Despite what the world tells us, there is only one way to win the race."

And if anyone knew that, it was certainly the Apostle Paul. If you remember, Paul tried different paths to victory. He tried to win the race on his own. As a zealous Pharisee, he was dedicated to

the law and following it completely and perfectly. He thought that following that law better than everyone else was the way to win the prize. And from what we know about Paul, he was very successful at doing just that. But there was a problem. Paul's way was not the way to victory, and it would've taken him straight to hell.

But that is not where he ended up. He ended up winning the victory. This victory overcame all the odds. Think about it. What are the chances that the self-proclaimed worst of sinners would claim the prize? What are the chances that a stone-faced murderer would attain the victory? What are the chances that an enemy of Jesus Christ would win the race? Those were the odds that Paul faced, because that is what Paul was.

But the odds changed when Paul, who had been running his own way, was given the one way to win. And it happened when his eyes were opened on the road to Damascus. He was shown that Jesus Christ, through his perfect life and sacrificial death, had won the victory already. Believing in him was the path to victory, it was the only way to win.

And with that path of victory laid out before him, Paul now ran in such a way as to win the prize. He no longer relied on himself. He didn't put the burden of victory upon himself. He believed in what Jesus had done for him. And that is why the Apostle could speak so confidently of victory even while he was still on this earth running the race!

And our lives also proclaim that truth to the world that there is only one way to win the prize. Just like Paul, your victory has overcome all odds. What are the chances that a person born in the depths of sin would claim the prize? What are the chances that a person whose natural thoughts are only evil all the time would attain the victory? What are the chances that a person who is by nature an enemy of God would win the race? Those were the odds that you were facing when you first began the race.

But those odds changed when God in his grace, gave you the path to victory. Through the precious Word of God, the one way to victory was given to you. Victory came through Jesus Christ's perfect life and sacrificial death. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, you became convinced of that truth.

And now in faith, you run in such a way as to win the prize. Despite what the world tells you, the way to victory is not on your shoulders. Knowing that Jesus is the one way to victory can fill us with confidence each day as we continue to run the

race. And so, each day as you set out to run, put away your reason, shut out the voice of the world that tells you there are many ways to win, and put your faith solely in the one way to win!