

PM Mark 10:17-30 "The Fool hath said in his heart"

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[0 : 00] where we will read from verse 19. This is on page 1152 in your pew Bibles, and not as intimated on the sheet at 1020.

Page 1152. The Apostle Paul writes, For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.

To the Jews I became as a Jew in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law, though not myself being under the law.

That I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law.

To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I may save some.

[1 : 31] I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize?

So run, that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we, an imperishable.

So I do not run aimlessly. I do not box as one beating the air, but I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified.

We ask for God's blessing on this word as we sing again to his praise in Psalm 65. Let us pray to the Lord together.

O Lord Jesus Christ, you said I am the way, the truth and the life. And so we pray that you would not allow us to stray from you who are the way, nor to distrust you who are the truth, nor to put our trust in any other thing than you who are the life.

[2 : 57] Teach us by your Holy Spirit what to believe, what to do, and wherein to find our rest. For we ask this in your own name's sake.

Amen. Friends, this evening, as I've said, by unexpected chance, we are turning to Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church, exploring Paul's response to one of their most pressing questions.

Paul, in his answers, made good use of scripture, and so if you haven't, I'd urge you to follow along in 1 Corinthians chapter 9, page 1152 in your Bibles.

And I've been bought up by Jacqueline, so I don't give people enough time to turn to the right page, so I will do my best to give you that time to turn the pages up.

And if I don't, I'm sure that somebody will tell me. But we can follow along in 1 Corinthians 9, A, so that you can follow my reasoning, but more importantly, to make sure that what we are hearing is true to the word of God.

[4 : 19] Now, in this portion of his letter, Paul is responding to questions put to him concerning the eating of food which had been previously offered to idols.

Corinth, as you may understand, if you've ever seen a Biblical map, the sort you used to find in lovely leather-bound Bibles, was really a crossroads of the ancient world.

It was slap-bang in the middle of a trading route between the Mediterranean, on the one hand, and the Middle East. Owing to being on this trade route, there were many different cultures and many different religions in that part of the world.

Now, the city of Corinth was originally a major Greek city, but it was sacked in the 100s BC, and in about 44 AD was rebuilt by the Romans as they needed a strategic base in that part of the world.

In many ways, like major cities of Scotland today, Glasgow being by obvious thought, it was a place where people from different languages, different cultures, different traditions, often settled.

[5 : 39] It made the place a real mixture of different experiences and traditions. You see, Corinth was a Roman colony, so it enjoyed, amongst other things, the protection of the mighty Roman

Empire.

It also lived according to Rome's laws. And these laws included the worshipping of many of Rome's gods and goddesses according to their customs.

Remember, friends, this was well before the Romans designated Christianity as the official religion of the empire. At this point, Corinth, and indeed the whole of the empire, was thoroughly pagan. Paul, along with his fellow tent makers, Aquila and Priscilla, travelled to Corinth in the early 50s AD. And after spending some time there, Paul moved on to Ephesus from where he wrote this letter. Before he wrote what we now have as 1 Corinthians, he did indeed write them another letter, sadly lost to time. He quotes, or references it rather, in 1 Corinthians 5 at verse 9.

[6 : 50] He said, I wrote to you in my letter, which clearly shows that there was one preceding 1 Corinthians. However, this is sadly lost. But from what we read, we can assume that this first letter was there to deal with conflict in the church.

How could the new Christians in that place deal with living in a sexually immoral culture? However, as we can read from chapter 5 at verse 10, they had misunderstood this first letter.

And it was for this, among other reasons, that he wrote what we now have as 1 Corinthians. We'll see in various places throughout the letter that Paul writes things like, now concerning the matters about which you wrote in chapter 7, or now concerning the betrothed in 7 as well, now concerning food offered to idols in chapter 8, and so on.

He was addressing different problems, many of which he had heard from the Corinthians in previous letters or communications. And it was this last one, now concerning food offered to idols, that Paul continues in chapter 9, and indeed, which underlies our passage this evening.

As I mentioned earlier, Corinth was, at the time, a milieu of different cultures and religions, but was thoroughly pagan, as it was under Roman occupation and control.

[8 : 23] Therefore, the pagan temple was the very centre of activity. The worship, as you may or may not know, in pagan temples involved the sacrifices of different parts of animals to various Roman gods.

But, pagan temples also functioned in much the same way as a modern-day butcher's shop and banqueting hall merged into one. Often, meat from the temple was later sold to the public in the marketplace.

It was often eaten in there as well. This is why Paul goes into great detail about whether or whether not the early Christians should eat in the temple. He wasn't talking about the polo mint we may sneak in our mouth before the sermon.

He was talking about going for a meal in the temple. The problem that the Corinthians could not solve for themselves was, what should we do when presented with a plate of food which only a little earlier in the day we know had been offered before some god in the temple?

And it was an interesting question. But in their confusion, the Corinthians had overlooked one thing. Even though those around them believed that this food had been offered up unto gods, these gods and these idols were not real.

[9 : 46] the idols had no significance to the Christian. The gods in that temple had no power. Therefore, they were simply pictures or statues or thoughts.

So, says Paul, food offered in this way to a make-belief god was in no way affected with ungodliness because that god didn't exist.

Paul, of course, puts it far clearer than I ever could. He writes in 1 Corinthians 8 at verse 4, Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that an idol has no real existence and that there is no god but one.

For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is one god, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. However, Paul goes on to explain that just because these idols aren't real and have no power of their own, we must not ignore, and indeed his readers must not ignore, the power that people ascribed to them because other people in Corinth believed that these idols and gods were very real.

[11 : 15] Even though the Corinthian Christians knew this to not be the case, the community thought they were all powerful. They ascribed them powers in their own minds.

If an outsider saw one of these newfangled Christians eating food offered up to idols, they may have put two and two together and come up with six.

Similarly, some new Christians, maybe those who had been born again but did not have a strong understanding of the gospel, might continue to associate that food with the idol it had previously been offered to.

So, says Paul at verse 7 of chapter 8, however, not all possess this knowledge, but some through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol and their conscience being weak is defiled.

Therefore, the Christians had to be careful. On the one hand, they had to be absolutely sure in themselves that this food was in no way special or soiled just because it had been waved about in the temple.

[12 : 30] They had to remind themselves that these idols and these gods were not real. But on the other hand, they had to be sure that the people around them were not confused or worse, led into sin or error through their actions.

Therefore, even though the Corinthians were quite within their rights to eat this meat and in doing so were not endangering their souls in any way, shape or form, they had to make sure that their actions did not become, as in verse 9, a stumbling block to the weak.

So this is how Paul introduces his theme of self-denial and self-control which forms the basis for this evening's passage. Throughout chapter 9, Paul goes on to explain how this act of surrendering one's liberty for the sake of others is an inherently Christian action and that he, Paul, is a fine example of this.

If only, friends, we could write a letter to somebody today saying that surrendering one's liberty is a good Christian action and by the way we are fine examples of it.

I know I can't. However, throughout his ministry Paul shows that he had surrendered various rights and privileges for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of the church.

[13 : 56] Now these included surrendering his right to eat or drink certain things. He writes in chapter 9 at verse 4 Do we not have a right to eat or drink?

And of course he does have a right. In fact, he had a right for far more than that. He had a right to eat and drink whatever he wanted. He was, we can remember how Peter was told that all foods were clean.

He also had a right to take a wife and have a family in chapter 9 at verse 5. Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? It should be added here that although Paul was not married and some people would say he was not in favour of marriage from some of the other things he wrote. The truth is far from that.

He was very keen on marriage and he had a great respect for marriage between ministers and believing wives. We can see this in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 and various other places.

[15 : 07] Paul had a right to have a wife in the human sense and yet he didn't for the sake of the gospel. And thirdly, he had a right to payment for his ministry among them.

He says in chapter 9 at verse 11, If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much that we reap material things from you?

If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Now, of course, Paul occasionally did receive material support from churches for his proclamation of the gospel.

We can see that in 2 Corinthians 11, in Philippians 2, but he appears to have never received such support from those Christians in the immediate vicinity of where he was ministering at the time.

Rather, he was, if you like, sponsored by distant churches to minister in that place. Basically, he did not want to become a burden on the very people to whom he was ministering.

[16 : 13] for while he had a reasonable expectation to be cared for by the church, he did not want to become a burden.

All of these acts of surrender were not for the sake of looking good, says Paul, but, in chapter 9, at verse 23, for the sake of the gospel.

So let us turn again to our reading tonight, and particularly verses 23 through to 27, where we can read, Paul say, I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, and yet only one receives the prize? So run, that you may obtain it.

Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

[17:18] So I do not run aimlessly. I do not box as one beating the air, but I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest, after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified.

Here from Paul we have three things. We have an illustration, an exhortation, and an application, and I propose we look at each in turn.

Firstly, the illustration at verse 24, the first half. Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize?

Corinth was now aside, as I have mentioned, from being an important trading city, Corinth was also famous as the host of one of the ancient world's many athletic games.

Many of us will have seen pictures on the television or in the newspapers this week from Paris. If we think that the Olympic Games today is big, we have no idea of the scale of the games in the ancient world.

[18:24] Like similar games in Olympia, the Olympics, in Pythia, and in Nemea, the Isthmian Games, and I can never pronounce that word, included every form of athletic exercise.

For the Greek, these contests were great national and religious festivals. Nobody but free men could enter the lists, and even then, they had to prove to the officials that they had been in training for over ten months before they'd be allowed in.

The games were a big thing, and often children from a very early age were trained in athletics in the hope that one day they could bring their families and their hometowns a great honour by competing for and winning in the games.

Many of you will maybe remember the 2012 Olympic Games, for example, where every gold winner had a postbox in their hometown painted gold.

This was seen as an honour, but the honour from competing at and winning in the Isthmian Games was even greater. It's said that when a winning athlete returned to his city, having won at a game, they would not enter through the gate as every other citizen would, but they would make a special breach in the walls, and the person would walk through this great hole in the city wall, illustrating that with such a great athletic citizen in their midst, the town didn't think they needed a good wall anymore.

[19:59] The recipients of Paul's letter would have been all too well aware of what a big deal these games were. Indeed, one commentator thinks that Paul may have even been in the city when one of the games was taking place in his first visit to Corinth.

And so, building on this shared knowledge of the games, Paul begins his analogy of the Christian life being a race. Throughout his epistles, Paul uses a number of different analogies, and many of them involve a farmer or a soldier, and we have tonight an athlete.

Therefore, Corinthians, seeing that you know a lot about the games, says Paul, I'm paraphrasing, remember that just as many people attend the arena on the race day, and just as many people enter the race, yet only one person is crowned as the winner.

As John Calvin later wrote in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, there's no reason why anyone should feel satisfied with himself on account of his having entered the race, unless he persevere with it until death.

Now, there is a major difference, between the races in the Isthmian games and the life of a Christian, because in an athletics race, many people enter, but only one person wins, only one person is crowned, all the rest go home disappointed.

[21:29] Yes, somebody may have won silver or bronze, but they did not win the race. There would be no gold postbox for all of them, only for the one who won gold.

In the Christian race, to continue the analogy, however, only one person did win, and of course, that is the Lord Jesus Christ. He alone fulfilled the entire law.

He alone died a traitor's death, blameless, yet for our sins. Only he rose again to destroy sin and death, and yet through his victory, those of us who are still panting on the racetrack are one day going to be winners of eternal life through him.

All we have to do, says Paul, is continue in the race. Therefore, says Calvin, God requires from us nothing more than that we press on vigorously until we reach the goal.

when I was writing this sermon, there was a thought that prompted me.

[22:40] It is, of course, a wonderfully rich passage on which to feed at any time, but being the summer, we are in the middle of sports season. As I've said, in another place at another time, it is only at this point in the year that I become a sports widow and lose jacks to the television, to the

football and the tennis.

Not only this, but some of you may have been aware that there was a big football match only a few weeks ago and that Spain won it. And this year, being a multiple of four, as I've said, it is the Olympics.

However, this year is a particularly special one to me and maybe to many others for on the 11th of this month, it was the 100th anniversary of Eric Liddell running, or more specifically, not running, the 100-metre race in the Paris Olympics of 1924.

None of us here are old enough to remember the games or even to have lived through them, but thanks to the wonder of film, of course, many of us will have seen chariots of fire. And alongside the scenery and the acting and the races, the film shows something else.

It shows two men, each running their races for a different reason. Harold Abrahams, the Lithuanian Jew who was running to try and overcome prejudice and make a name for himself, becoming the fastest runner in the world, pulling out all the stops, and Eric Liddell, the Scottish son of a missionary who ran because God made him fast.

[24 : 12] We also know from the film or from the many books about Liddell that have been published that he was meant to be competing in that 100-metre sprint, but the race fell on the Lord's Day, and so he withdrew from the race because he knew that to run on the Sabbath would be run, for it is God's appointed day of rest.

And in dropping out of this race, Liddell faced criticism both at home and abroad, even in his native Scotland, once the home of Sabbatarianism. He was condemned for being a traitor to king and country, although Liddell was quite sure that he was actually being a faithful servant of the real king. So when the Lord's Day came on the 11th of July, 1924, Liddell was not found in the arena, but rather in the Scottskirk in Paris where he preached from Isaiah.

Eventually, after winning the race, entering the mission field. If that is an illustration, so too is that which Paul gives.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run? But only one receives the prize. So therefore, taking this athletic imagery into account, says Paul, keep running so that you can attain the prize as well.

[25 : 34] Here, friends, we have the exhortation. There is, I feel, a sense of deep desperation in Paul's plea. It's as though he is the coach or the trainer shouting, keep going, as he sees his students starting to slow down halfway around the track.

You've come this far, Corinthians, Paul may well have been shouting. Don't stop now. He has reminded them of the need to exercise self-control in all things.

And now he encourages them to continue in the race. Calvin said that it's not enough to have set out in the Christian life if we do not continue to run our whole life.

And so, friends, I say to you tonight, if you were baptized or became a member or came to faith in the Lord Jesus one, ten, fifty years ago, this means little unless we continue to run, unless we continue to go in the Lord.

This talk, this talk of continuing does, of course, raise questions for us as Reformed Christians. We, you don't need me to go into the details of what the Confession says, although I'd be quite happy to, of how it's not our works that save us or fit us for heaven.

[26 : 58] We do not earn our way up to heaven through some heavenly stepladder with the rungs being the things we do, the prayers we say, even the things we give up.

We know from Scripture that once God has saved and called and sanctified a person, they are saved, called and sanctified. There's nothing that will change that. And so, no matter what we do, no matter how far we may wander or how many things we may fall foul of, how many times we may fall to that same sin, we cannot wiggle free from God's grasp on our life.

This is not, this is not a call from Paul to say that if you don't keep running, you may somehow wiggle free from God. But just because of this good news, it doesn't mean that we should stop running, stop trying to live a good life for Christ.

James, in his letter, asks, what good is it, my brothers, if somebody says he has faith but does not have works, can his faith save him?

If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food and one of you says to them, go in peace, be warm and filled, without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?

[28 : 22] So also, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. If you have been saved by God's grace, friends, if you are a Christian, if you are a believer sitting here tonight, then this encouragement of Paul's, this exhortation of keep going, keep running, applies to you.

Yes, you have been saved and that is excellent news. But you need to keep on in the race. Don't stop now.

For not only would stopping running naturally lead you back into a life of sin and lawlessness which you could really do without, but it would grieve God's Holy Spirit which we are commanded in Ephesians at chapter 4 not to do.

Furthermore, our stopping running in the race, our stopping following the Lord's will and the Lord's way would hurt and scandalise others bringing us back full circle to the Corinthians eating that meat offered before a pagan temple's idol.

We can of course continue in Paul's analogy. We can ask many questions about people who were once Christians and do not come to church anymore.

[29 : 46] Time does not really allow for us to go into that. Suffice to say that scripture does seek to answer those questions and answer them very well and I can commend some texts to you if you have those thoughts in your mind.

A brief read over Hebrews chapter 6 may be very helpful. so too Mark 4 at verse 17 but regardless of this there is an exhortation an encouragement from Paul to you to me to the Christian church in Corinth and beyond to keep running to keep on in the faith regardless of what is going on around you keep going and then we reach the application verses 25 through 27 where we can read that every athlete exercises self-control in all things they do it to receive a perishable wreath but we an imperishable so I do not run aimlessly I do not box as one beating the air but I discipline my body and keep it under control lest after preaching to others

I might myself be disqualified Paul had made his point about food in chapter 8 he had illustrated it in the first part of chapter 9 at verse 24 and he had exhorted his readers in the second part of that verse and now he turned to the really important bit to applying it to his readers lives yes they must persevere yes they must keep going yes they must run the race but how in answering this Paul turns again to the lives of athletes and I know that it is possible for us to take analogies too far but we can trust that Paul has his at just the right length because when he looks at the lives of athletes and at the lives of boxers he sees that both of these people have to exercise great self control in order to compete in their chosen disciplines because they know that their 20 second sprint in the track their 20 minute fight in the ring is wholly dependent on the days the weeks the months sometimes even the years of training that went into it beforehand those competitors at the Isthmian games that I mentioned had to show that they'd been training for at least 10 months before the race so too the boxer and the runner had to prepare they had to show discipline they could not go for example eating every chocolate bar they saw it's why I never became an athlete it's why they could not go and just do the things that they wanted to and socialise and go on long holidays because they had to be at the track they had to be in the ring they had to be preparing whether we see this today in the lives of athletes or indeed in the lives of our fellow Christians who we know are good godly people devoted to their Lord we see in our Christian journey that the Christian must to quote Paul exercise that self-control in all things the Christian life affects the things we do the things we say the things we wear the places we go sometimes we deny ourselves for the sake of self because we know that to do or to say or to think that thing would be wrong sometimes we deny ourselves for the sake of others because we know what a bad effect it may have on the other person on to quote Paul the weaker brother we voluntarily as Christians deny ourselves things to prepare us for the

Christian run the Christian fight the Christian race the Christian journey the Christian walk call it what you will and just as those Greek athletes did this for verse 25 a perishable wreath a garland of beautiful foliage which would be placed on the athlete's head we do it for the crown of life which unlike that perishable wreath will never fade friends this sermon is not intended simply to tell you to watch what you eat let's face it I'm not qualified to do that all too frequently I find myself eating the wrong things or often too much of the right thing or the wrong thing this week past I didn't go to the gym once and that's the same as every other week for the last 28 years it isn't about your physical health although for

[35 : 24] Paul it was a useful analogy this is about something far bigger what are you and I willing to put down that we may take up the gospel we remember the words of the hymn nothing in my

hand I bring simply to the cross I cling that hymn of course talks about what can we bring to earn our way to heaven and of course the answer is nothing and yet we cannot cling to Jesus with hands full of the delights of earth the things that may weigh us down in this world Paul offers us friends an example he does not run aimlessly he has his eyes set on the prize he willingly denies himself certain things be that food or money or power or relationships for the sake of reaching that gospel prize himself and for the sake of leading others towards it he says that to the weak he became weak to the Jew he became a Jew he did the things that were necessary to help reach those who needed reaching he does it for a purpose friends before us in our scriptures tonight we have a gospel imperative we have a challenge and example from Paul yes to the

Corinthians but also I believe to you and me for he was following the Lord Jesus and he is encouraging his readers to put down those things which may hinder them in the Christian run and instead take up training for that Christian race there will be people here tonight who have been in this race for many years or decades people who may well be nearer to the end than others and there will be people here tonight who have just entered the track people who are still cycling with the stabilizers on and I realize I'm mixing my metaphors but wherever you are in the race know that you and I are running toward the greatest prize of all and that when we fall as friends we most certainly will we must not give up we must get straight back on our feet and re-enter the race the self control that we are expected to exercise as Christians may seem tedious or at times burdensome but the reward is beyond our wildest dreams it is not a wreath that will perish but endure it will bring us closer to

Jesus and encourage those around us may the Lord richly bless us in our Christian walk sustaining us and keeping us on the right path and may we in our final breaths say as did Paul I have fought the good fight I have finished the race I have kept the faith and so we pray oh God you have given us your precious word to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path grant that it may be so to us and now as we prepare to take our homeward way abide with us may we rest this night and always upon you knowing what underneath and all about us are your everlasting arms and when we depart this life may we in your love find welcome to and a glad rest in that heavenly place where there is no night where your redeemed need no candle nor the light of the sun for the Lord God gives them light and they shall reign forever and ever amen you