

I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. - Philippians 3:14

"I Believe That We Have Won!"

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied. "What is written in the Law?" "How do you read it?" The man answered: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." The man wasn't quite satisfied with this answer and tried to clarify his question, tried to get more out of his time with Jesus, and so he tried to test Jesus again. "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus went on from there to tell a story that convicted the man of his sin. He told the story of the Good Samaritan. Even this expert in the law could not save himself. His favoritism towards his own countrymen, his indifference towards and his hatred of others fell short of God's perfect demands. With a simple story Jesus exposed this man's sinful heart. Jesus exposed his bias, his favoritism; Jesus exposed this man's sinfulness.

The simple truth is that we all fall short of God's demands. Standing before our Lord he could hand craft for each one of us a story tailor made to convict us of the specific sins that corrupt our hearts. Even the youngest of children is not innocent, but each of us is filled with sin. This is the sad truth. We are all sinners. The Bible tells us that no one is righteous before God; not even one. No one can save themselves by their own effort. We cannot reach the goals of obedience, scratching them off one by one until we win the prize of heaven. No, God's law does not say, "Do your best!" nor does it say, "Be better than some or better than most!" No, God's law says "Be holy!" "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect!" We are to love the LORD with our whole heart and with all of our soul and strength, and with our entire mind; all the time. We cannot do that, we all fall short, we can cannot even come close.

So why try? Why serve the Lord? If we look at the goal of salvation as a race, a pursuit that we must endure on our own it would be an impossible task. If we look honestly at ourselves we must admit that there is no chance to reach that lofty goal of heaven on our own effort or merit. If an expert in the law is convicted by the holy law of God that he strives day and night to master, how can you or I have a chance to be saved? As Jesus proclaims the parable of the Good Samaritan and describes a truly remarkable act of kindness and love and then tells us to go and do likewise. Are we not condemned along with this expert in the law by the fact that we have failed time and again to measure up to God's demands?

But the beauty of this parable is that it not only proclaimed to condemn and convict the self-righteous, but it is also proclaimed to show us the undeserved, unparalleled love of God, and then it spurs us on to love as he has loved us. Beaten and bloodied by sin and as good as dead

God saw us in our spiritually misery and while we were on the verge of eternal death he saved us. We were enemies of God and yet in his divine kindness he stopped and stooped down to save us. In his kindness and grace he rescued us from certain death and he gives us the gift of eternal life. And now we live for him. We live lives of thankfulness and service.

Jesus is our Savior. He is the one who rescues us with a perfect love. His life of holiness was lived for us. He lived a life of perfect love toward God and neighbor. He lived a life that was completely lacking of bias and hatred toward his fellow man, and all the temptations that make us stray away from our God our Savior resisted. Jesus ran that straight race for us. He earned that perfect record we needed and then in love he gave that perfection to us. For us and for our salvation he defeated our enemies of sin and Satan that so regularly trample and humiliate us. And now through faith that comes from hearing his Holy Word, this victory is ours. We can do nothing to save ourselves, but God's Word has worked faith in our hearts and now we have the triumphant victory of our Savior. By faith we believe and know that our mistakes and errors have been covered over and the punishment that we deserved Jesus has absorbed for us. He has saved us. We have the victory through Christ Jesus.

And that's why we serve him. We serve him with gladness and thankfulness. We serve him with reverence and with holy awe and fear. Jesus does not teach a message of defeatism. He does not show us our sin so that we give up because it's no use. He does not want us to simply lament that the goal of perfection and heaven is too far out of reach for sinners like us. No, Jesus shows us our sins, so that we cling to him and rejoice that we are saved. In Christ alone we have the victory. The message of Jesus Christ is this wonderful message of divine kindness and eternal victory for all that believe. Jesus is our Savior. Jesus gives us the victory of heaven. And we gladly serve him in this life, which can be difficult at times, but we gladly serve and with gratitude in our hearts we press on toward the goal to obtain or hold onto the eternal prize which Christ has waiting for us in heaven.

Each day at Soccer Camp we were reminded of the victory that we have in Christ Jesus and what this means for our daily life. We were encouraged through God's word and special skits and object lessons, that God has indeed given us the victory. We were reminded what he has done for us. We fail to follow the rules perfectly. We make mistakes. We forget that the goal of our life is to serve him. We hurt our God with our selfish disobedience. We hurt and harm others with our words and deeds and the good things that we fail to do. And yet Jesus was perfect for us and his perfection more that makes up for our failures. We deserved punishment, but instead he calls us to receive the prize that he has won for us.

This victory is ours through faith, but it remains important that we stay connected to this message and with our Lord daily. In a daily meditation out at the soccer field we were reminded of the need to remain in this word and stay close and connected to him. In soccer it is important to control the ball, to dribble and keep the ball close to you, so that the ball isn't stripped or snatched away from you as you head toward the goal. In life it is much more vital to stay close to God through regular use of his Word because when we are connected to God he promises that we will bear much fruit and best of all God promises to be close and faithful to us. He promises that no hardship or problem, or person or demon could snatch us away from our God or rob us of the victory of heaven that our Savior has freely given.

And through an object lesson we were reminded of how the victory that we have in Jesus helps us to resist the temptations that daily pile up around us. As we consider the love of God and the punishment that he endured for us, and the mercy and grace that he has shown to us sinners, we are empowered to rear back and fight off those temptations, and even those sins that seem to always come rolling back our way we are able to push them out, kick them out of our life. During that particular day of soccer camp a pile of soccer balls were rolled toward my feet symbolizing the problem that we have with sin and temptation. I rolled them away and then the coaches rolled them back to me. Like Paul in Romans chapter 7 we talked about those temptations and sins can trouble us and pester us and keep coming back. The good that I want to do I do not do and the evil things I do not want to do those things I will keep on doing. What a wretched man I am, who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord! The Bible tells us that we have victory over sin and temptation. The good news of Jesus, our Lord and Redeemer, tells us that he has set us free from sin and temptation and has set us free for service to God. He rules my heart. I am strengthened and equipped to serve him more and more.

And so with the eyes of many little kids watching I wound up and kicked those soccer balls as far as I could toward the goal on the opposite side of the field. I blasted each one as hard as I could, and those little eyes were amazed as the ball sailed from one end of the field to the other. This is what we can do with the sins that trouble us! This is what we can do because Jesus has saved us! We can kick away those bad habits. We can drive away, and kick those sins out of our lives that trouble us. By God's grace we can do this more and more as we grow and mature in the faith. This is the power of Christ in us. We can drive out those temptations. We can do great things for our God who saves us. We can do this more and more when we recall that we have the victory through our Lord and Savior Christ Jesus. What a wonderful and meaningful victory we have in Christ Jesus! What strength and joy and peace our Savior gives us as we press on toward the goal of heaven!

We are given wonderful victory in Jesus and that victory makes even the darkest day brighter. Because of the sin that has wrecked this world, the daily course of life can be a difficult one. Daily we still have to put up with the pains and problems of this sinful world. But even those encumbered by the wreckage of life lived in a sinful world can rejoice in the victory that we have in Christ Jesus. Even when Job was pushed to the brink of despair and hopelessness he was able to rejoice in the victory that his Lord and God and Redeemer gave to him. Even in the pit of despair and trouble Job was able to press on toward the goal of heaven that by faith he knew was waiting for him. It was a prize that his Redeemer, his God, had won for him and one day he would enjoy in full and in his own flesh. ²⁵ ***I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.*** ²⁶ ***And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God;*** ²⁷ ***I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!***

This message of victory refreshes us, it strengthens us, and it is ours to share. Like the shepherds sped through Bethlehem to proclaim the good news of Jesus birth, like the women who ran from the empty tomb and grabbed onto the disciples to tell them the good news of Jesus' resurrection, we too have hands and feet made quick and nimble by this good news. We too can rejoice in the gospel and share this gospel.

Today we give thanks for the hands and feet made quick and nimble and able by our gracious God so that this large undertaking of soccer camp ran smoothly. 94 children came to camp. Many volunteers stepped forward and served their Lord so that the message of salvation could be shared to so many. But it wasn't easy. Some volunteers had to deal with frustrations and the daily grind of life. Some had to overcome and press on through physical ailments, sore backs and sore knees, and tired muscles and strained ligaments from the long week. But throughout the 5 days of camp, God's love shined through like the sunshine on a beautiful August day. You and I were given the energy needed to make it through the week. You and I were given the energy needed to bring the thrill of sport and game and fun to these children. And even if you didn't make it out to the field we all worked together as a body of believers to do our part so that the unending joy of the gospel was proclaimed. Your prayers were offered and heard. Your offerings and donations contributed to this ministry. And the gospel was proclaimed to God's glory.

Dressed in jerseys with a cross on the heart and the word victory on the back these children were reminded that there is eternal victory in Jesus! Volunteers and coaches and all of us here today are reminded of this good news as well. There is victory in Jesus. Nothing can change this! Jesus has won the prize and promises that it is waiting for us in heaven. There will always challenges for you as individual Christians; there are obstacles that confront us as a congregation, and yet we press on. We press on toward the goal of heaven, and as we do, we serve our Lord in thankfulness. We strive to serve and proclaim his name. We press on toward that goal of heaven. We press on toward the goal as redeemed children of God. We press on toward the goal of heaven with the sign of the cross on our hearts because God has put his mark on us through faith, through baptism. We were once enemies of God and now we have been brought us into his family and put us on his team. You and I have victory in Jesus because we are redeemed children of God.

My favorite part of soccer camp this year had to be when the children joined in a simple chant. This year was a World Cup year and the American Men's National Team did quite well in this tournament that was held Brazil. And if you were able to watch any of the games and if you listened closely during the tournament the USA fans would often join in a simple chant that served to fire up their fans and encourage their team. That chant was a simple. *I Believe that We Will Win!* Thousands of USA fans would jump and clap as they screamed and shouted this simple chant. What a scene that must have been. I would have loved to see that in person.

Well, we adjusted that chant a little bit for our camp, and each day all the children at the 212 WELS Soccer Camp joined together to proclaim this victory that we have in Christ Jesus by clapping and shouting, *"I Believe that We Have Won!"* It wasn't quite a crowd of thousands upon thousands, but it was still a wonderful and thrilling scene to see and hear 94 campers and their coaches shout this each day. This is the message that is the heart of our faith. This is the message that is so encouraging to us as we press on through the troubles of this life toward the goal of heaven. May this be the good news that you believe and proclaim and live each and every day! "I believe that we have won!" Amen.