

## A Sermon for Septuagesima, February 4, 2007

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Septuagesima marks a change of season, color and liturgical mood. It is one of three Sundays with funny names that make up the season of pre-Lent. Septuagesima tells us that Lent is two and a half weeks away. We begin to look down the road to Easter and the cross that precedes it.

The epistle says, "Everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we an imperishable." (1 Corinthians 9:24). In ancient athletic contests, the winner was awarded a crown of pine branches. To win this corruptible crown, the athlete underwent a regimen of training and practiced discipline.

For the Christian, the prize is Easter and resurrection. The temperance, or self-control, required are the disciplines of the Christian life which enable us to persevere in faith so as to reach the goal.

The key is the goal. Athletes are willing to train and practice discipline because they want to win. Conversely, much contemporary practice of the Christian faith suffers from lack of a goal. People often look at the Commandments as rules that don't lead to any particular end. People aren't sure what the goal of worship is. That's why so much of it has been changed into entertainment. We do, after all, understand the goal of entertainment.

There is a fancy Greek word for the study of the end or goal of Christian faith. It is *eschatology*, which means, "the study of the last things." When it is used poorly in our culture, eschatology refers to talk about various scary things that supposedly will happen before the end. However, in its best sense, eschatology refers us to the ultimate reality towards which the Christian life points.

People often look back with nostalgia on the zeal of the early church. The primary reason for its zeal was that it had its eyes on the goal. It understood the Christian life in terms of eschatology, in terms of the end towards which faith points.

In virtually all of his writings, St. Paul points to the end as the reason for doing what is to be done in the present. For example,

Romans 8:23. "We, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit...eagerly wait for the adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (8:23).

1 Corinthians 15:52. "The trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised...and we shall be changed"

Philippians 3:20-21. "We eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to a glorious body."

1 Thessalonians 4:16. "The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise."

1 Timothy 6:14. "Keep the commandment without spot, blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ's appearing."

In 2 Timothy 4:8, a passage that echoes the theme of the epistle, St. Paul writes, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day.”

The most notable thing about the New Testament is how it teaches us to live all of life in the light of the goal. The most notable contrast in our time is that just about the opposite is true. Today, the practice of the faith is typically evaluated in the light of life in this world. There is an emphasis on the practical: What will faith offer to me in this life? The end or goal of faith only comes up as a sort of “comfort” in the face of death.

Pre-Lent and Lent point to Easter. They remind us that we can live as we ought in the present only with our eyes firmly fixed on the end.

The Eucharist points to the end. At the altar we have a foretaste of the future heavenly feast. Christ meets us here in a manner that points us forward to the ultimate encounter, to Easter, when the dead will be raised and we will be changed. As Jesus said, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life *and* I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:54).

Morality is, likewise, based on eschatology. Each person we come in contact with points to the end. Man is made in the image of God. Each Christian is born again in the image of Christ. The goal of man is to be restored to the perfect image of Christ. Thus, morality, love, is not primarily about the fear of hell; it is about understanding the ultimate value of people and treating them accordingly. As Jesus said, “Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).

The crisis of faith in our time is a crisis of aim. If our life is aimed at this world, then morality will be all about what people can do for us. And religion will be all about how Jesus can aid our quest for temporal success and happiness. There’ll be no room for the cross and, thus, sadly, no real hope of resurrection.

Pre-Lent is time to renew the call for spiritual discipline; to once again give exhortation, to pray the daily offices, to find time for silence in the presence of God, to read the Scriptures, to use your gifts in service, to gather with the church on Sunday, to tithe, to love the brethren, to fast.

However, the best way to look at Lent is not with a list of things to do and not do. The best way is to begin with the end. We are people destined for Easter, for eternal life in a renewed creation, in new bodies, without death, sorrow or pain. This is God’s gift to us in Christ. The question at the root of our spiritual disciplines is, How should we live so as to hold fast to this hope until the end?

Today many will watch one of the world’s biggest sporting events. When the game is over, the players on the winning team will say, “This is what we have been striving for all year; this is what we worked so hard to achieve.” As St. Paul said, “They do it to obtain a corruptible crown, but we an incorruptible.”