

Strengthened by Grace

The Olympic motto has been around since before the start of the modern Olympics. It was used by a Dominican priest named Henri Dinon while giving a prize in athletics at Albert College in 1891 and he continued to use it in his writings on sports. It was used again at the closing dinner of the congress for the reestablishment of the Olympic Games in June 1894 and was adopted as the official motto of the International Olympic Committee. What is it? *Citius, Altius, Fortius* - Swifter, Higher, Stronger.

The Olympic motto is a life motto for the Christian. We are all about growth, about maturing, about being builders who strive to become stronger so that we can, in turn, strengthen others. God teaches us to walk in humility with Him so that we can grow, so that we can be led by the Spirit and so that we can do the works of His Kingdom while we're on this earth. But how do we grow? What is it that makes us stronger and more mature throughout our Christian lives?

There is a verse in the last chapter of the book of Hebrews that gives us a glimpse into the answers to these questions and it says this:

It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them.

When you hear a verse like that your mind may gravitate to the phrase, "it is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace." I know that that's where my mind goes and I would like to just rip that phrase out of the whole context of the chapter and focus on how grace strengthens us. But the context is always important ... and here it is important because it creates a contrast between eating certain kinds of foods and the grace that comes to us through Jesus. So we have to ask the question, "What kind of strengthening did people feel they were gaining by eating ceremonial foods?" and then we can contrast that with the strength that grace provides us.

Let's look at the larger context, the big picture, and we'll start reading at verse 7:

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them. We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through His own blood. Let us, then, go to Him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace He bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

Complicated. But maybe not all that complicated if we go back in time nearly 2000 years and try to understand what this group of Jewish Christians were experiencing. I

say “Jewish Christians” because this letter is written to the Hebrews and begins by talking about how God had in earlier times spoken to “our forefathers through the prophets”. Now, these Jewish Christians were facing some serious challenges and, it seems, were looking for a safe way to worship Jesus and be His followers.

There was an attraction in those days, both among Jews and Gentiles, to strict rules about eating, both about what should be eaten and about what should be avoided. Both groups attached religious significance to what they called “ceremonial foods” and it was felt that eating certain food in certain ways was an enhancement to one’s spirituality.

What seems to have been happening for a number of Jews who had become followers of Jesus was that they were under pressure to remain as Jews and risked persecution if they did not. For them, it was easier to continue to follow the rituals of their old laws and customs than it was to be fully identified with Jesus. There was a safety from the pressures that would come from their old community of Jewish family and friends who wanted to include them as part of their religious culture. And here the writer of this letter to the Hebrews says that the foods they are eating to remain kosher within their community are “of no value to those who eat them.”

Now, using that filter to look at the entire passage, notice these things. “Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you” is a call to these Jewish Christians to follow the example of people who have passed on. In fact, the most natural reading of the text would be to interpret the next phrase as “Consider the outcome of their lives, the culmination of their lives; think about the way they died,” whether that would refer to some perhaps dying as martyrs, but certainly dying full of faith and at peace with God. Then he adds to that, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.”

“Your leaders who taught you the Scriptures and helped you to understand God’s plan of salvation may be gone, but you can both remember their example and you can learn from Jesus who has not and will not change. He’s the very same as He was on earth and will always be the same.” And in the context of having just said that Jesus is always the same, the writer of this letter then says, “Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings.” To some Jewish Christians who had been pressured to fit in with the other Jews in their circle of relationships, the call is to remain faithful to Jesus, to follow the example of those who once taught them and to steer clear of strange teachings, things they had not been taught, additions to the faith. These ‘additions’, these strange teachings, were some form of legalism, something that resembled the requirements of the law, perhaps, or something that had been imported from the Greeks. They represented a way to do something to better yourself, to strengthen your spiritual life through your own effort. The writer of Hebrews told his readers that it would do them no good, and to choose instead to be strengthened by grace.

Then the text takes us to a remarkable statement about the Christian faith: “We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.” Many

critics of Christianity in the first century accused them of having no visible signs of being a religion: no temples, no altars, no priests offering sacrifices. Some of their pagan neighbours accused them of being atheists because they didn't have a visible god. The Jews of the day may have thought of the Jesus-followers as not having a religion because they had no sacrifices. But the author of Hebrews says, "We do have an altar, and a better one than yours," and goes on to explain that the altar is, in fact, Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice of His life on the cross.

Then, the statement that those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat of this sacrifice could mean two things: one is that the sacrifice of Jesus was an offering for sin, a sacrifice of atonement, to pay the price due to all of us for our sin. The sin offering was never eaten, by the priest or anyone else, but was totally burned up. The second possibility here is simply that those who are relying on a religious system for their spiritual health are not able to participate in the faith of the Jesus-followers because they are trying to earn their salvation rather than trusting in what Jesus has done for them.

The passage ends with a picture of the sacrifice being taken outside the city gate to be burned after the blood of the sacrifice had been placed on the altar. And then the author reminds his readers that Jesus, too, suffered outside the gate of the city, outside the world of religious respectability, outside the place where people were honoured and where the official worship of the Jews took place. The point of mentioning this is made clear in the appeal that follows: "Let us, then, go to Him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace He bore."

The writer is appealing to the Jewish believers to forget about respectability, to stop trying to please everyone who has rejected Christ and to go to Jesus, to identify with Him, to throw your lot in, fully, with the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. To people who are fearful and willing to compromise, the writer says, "Your place is with Jesus. You're not gaining strength by following the rituals and customs of your former religion, but strength comes from relying on the grace of God. You're looking for safety, but there is no safe place for someone who is committed to following Jesus -- you'll find Him outside the camp, rejected and despised by human powers and authorities, but approved by God and exalted to the place of eternal glory and authority."

So, where does our strength come from? How do we find our hearts "strengthened by grace"? I think we can see this best if we look at those things that *don't* strengthen the believer.

1. You don't get stronger by tinkering with the truth. In the time when this letter was written, there were groups of believers who felt that the message of the gospel was a bit too simplistic, maybe a bit too far from the traditions they'd grown up with. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 1:23, "We preach Christ crucified; a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

There are people in our world -- and I'm sure you know some of them -- who think that the gospel is foolishness. They believe in themselves, or science or in the inevitable progress of civilization, which means that in another 20 years the only people who will be speaking will be politicians and entertainers -- the rest of us will be texting our evaluations of the people who are speaking. There are others who stumble over the gospel, which means that they take offense at Jesus' claim to be the only way to the Father. They find things in biblical history that they don't like or which they think paint the God of the Bible in a negative light. That's what is meant by a stumbling block.

Do you know people who are offended by the message of the cross? Do you know people who think it's foolish? Does knowing those people make you want to work the text a little bit so that it's less offensive or more believable? That's what was happening to the Hebrews as they tried to fit in better with their Jewish neighbours. They wanted to remove the offense of being different, of being outside the camp. And the way to do that was to adopt some of the religious rituals, the ceremonial foods, the Jewish traditions that had once been at the core of their religious life. "See, we're not so different. See, we believe pretty much the same as you do, with a few minor differences."

Was this making them stronger? No, it was weakening them. They were weakened spiritually because they were abandoning the grace of Jesus in favour of the rules and regulations imposed by others and they were weakened in their testimony to the world because they had nothing to offer -- they had left Jesus outside the walls and stayed inside where they didn't need to be different from the world around them. The truth calls us to be different. The truth of the gospel is that our lives are changed by the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. The truth is that we are being made into the very image of Jesus Christ.

We can't just be like everybody else because we're afraid we might cause someone to think we're foolish or another person to take offense. The truth is with Jesus and the grace comes from Jesus and so we go where He goes and plant our flag with Him.

2. You don't get stronger by following a bunch of rules that depend on your best efforts and which you can do - with or without a relationship with Jesus. That's what the law was and it showed us how weak we are and how incapable of living up to God's standards of right behaviour. No matter what we did under the law, trying to be good, trying to do the right things, we always fell short because we were selfish and we didn't have an appropriate reverence for God. Can you get rid of selfishness and can you develop an awe for God that keeps you fully submissive to His will at all times? No. And the attempt to live that way doesn't make a person stronger in their faith, but more discouraged, more aware of their failings, more sure that God is disappointed with their efforts and more self-condemned. That's not what I would call having your heart strengthened.

Strength doesn't come from attempting to do what we can't do, but from disciplining

ourselves to repeatedly do what we can do. If you can't bench press 400 pounds, then trying over and over to get your arms to push 400 pound weights up in the air will lead to nothing but frustration. But if you start with whatever weight you can lift and then gradually add to it, you will become stronger over time. It's the same thing with any form of legalism. If you attempt to prove to God that you can do it all in your own strength, that you can improve yourself, that you can stop every bad habit and maintain every spiritual discipline, you'll be lying there under the 400 pound weights wishing you could do better and feeling frustrated that you can't. But if you walk close to Jesus and talk with Him through your day and ask the Holy Spirit to help you withstand temptation, things will change. Because you're not dealing with condemnation, but you are instead developing a friendship with Jesus, you will grow. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace.

3. You don't get stronger by leaving the well-worn paths travelled for centuries by people who loved God and who gladly gave themselves to the service of His Kingdom. It's easy to get caught up in the trap of looking for something new. Over 150 years ago a bunch of movements started out of the U.S. that added things onto the gospel. Joseph Smith claimed to have found some magic spectacles that enabled him to read a book from an angel and used that to start a whole new thing called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Mormonism. The Watchtower and Tract Society was formed and Judge Rutherford organized it into a formidable corporation, but it wasn't the same gospel. It didn't teach that Jesus physically rose from the dead or that He was and is God, the Word that was with God and was God and who became flesh and lived among us, as John 1 teaches us.

Today, there are all sorts of journeys that one can take that are off the path of centuries of Christian belief and practice. There are attempts to merge Christianity with New Age or Hindu beliefs, attempts to reinterpret Jesus as a guru, attempts to merge Christianity with Islam in something called Chrislam. These are not motivated by a desire to better understand the text of Scripture, but by a desire to accommodate the pluralism of our world, the huge variety of belief systems that are out there, and to make our faith less offensive. But our passage today says that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. There isn't a "new Jesus" that has yet to be discovered and there isn't a new interpretation of the cross or of the resurrection that will change our faith. Those who want to change the gospel leave out big chunks of the New Testament, like Paul's teaching, in order to make their case.

So there's a lesson for us in all this -- don't get carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace.

So here's what won't bring you the growth you desire in your spiritual life. You won't get it by tinkering with the truth, adapting it to modern values, to the social changes we see around us all the time. You won't get it by doing your best according to a list of rules that others have found frustrating and self-defeating. And you won't get it by looking for a new gospel, by strange teachings that seem fascinating but which change the nature of the gospel. Compromise, legalism and false doctrines do not

bring growth, strength or even the peace or sense of security that we think they might bring us. No, spiritual growth comes from a deeply rooted confidence in God's grace, His gift of love to fallen humanity that is demonstrated to us through the cross. We have an altar there, in Jesus' presence, where we offer our confession, our repentance from sin and selfishness, and where we receive grace. Only those who can humbly admit their need for such grace are welcomed at that altar, but those who come there with sorrow for their sin, He will never turn away.

Our passage ends with these words: "*For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.*" It's the city of grace, the city where the King of love rules, the city that is prepared to welcome all who love the Lord and who are willing to identify with Him . . . outside the city gate.

Next week, we will talk more about grace and about the power of God's grace to change our lives.