

12th July 2020 10am What's Your Prize?

Service led by Andrew Attwood, talk by Michelle Harris

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Introduction and notices

[Andrew Attwood, Michelle Harris:]

Good morning. Good to see you, Michelle. It's the sun is shining again. Yay. Lovely. It is good. It is good. We kind of have to tolerate a bit of rain to make everything grow. But I'm a bit of a sun guy.

[Michelle:]

Yeah, see the garden? Is this going to go crazy now, isn't it?

[Andrew:]

It is indeed. And I'll talk about lawns later on. I mentioned something to do with that, because that's on my mind when you get big lawns like mine, it takes me nearly two miles of walking to mow our lawns. Anyway, welcome to everyone for today's service. There's going to be a talk from Michelle today to help us to be focusing forward and if you've got Bibles to hand for today's service, if you could put put your finger in the Bible for 1 Corinthians 9, verses 24 to 27. So keep that to hand either on your phone or with an actual Bible.

A couple of notices just to mention to you. As usual, there will be a 6pm service later on today at this place on this channel¹. And there will be Wednesday Bible study as usual. But what won't be usual will be, I'll be absent from the Wednesday Bible study because myself and Lindsey are having a couple of weeks off. So after a fairly busy and strange lockdown, we're just going to be unavailable work-wise and ministry-wise, probably towards the end of July, we'll click back in and do a few things, so I hope you understand the need for us to have a break. You'll be in perfectly good hands, all the usual Sunday stuff will be happening with very competent people running things as usual.

I did just briefly want to mention something as well that is very formative at the moment. Many of you will be intrigued with regards to what's happening with our church building. Just tentative information at the moment, there is a small group of people working on the possibility of maybe some private prayer sessions, not services, private prayer sessions in the church building twice a week. But we have to do some rehearsal and some deep clean, and some very careful planning before we can get to that stage. So we'll we'll share more information about that as we get towards it, but probably two sessions a week at some point in the near-ish future, just for private prayer, and we'll take it from there. Nice, slow steps before we can understand what we can do at another stage. Okay, so that's all of the notices I wanted to share.

Introductory prayer and activity

To begin our service today, though, I wanted you just to be quiet for a moment. Hopefully, you'll have spotted the notice on your sheet that said, "Could you grab a handful of grass." Now don't worry if you haven't, you can kind of use

1 <http://youtube.com/c/StJohnsChurchKenilworth>

mine of it as a visual aid, but it's useful to have a handful of grass ready quite soon. Okay, let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for this morning. We thank you that, like the sunshine, Your Grace and Your love is towards us. Let's just have a moment of quiet to remember God's grace shining towards us.

And if there are things that are raging around your head and heart at the minute, give them to the one who understands:

God, we give you all that is on our mind at this time.

Once again we breathe, Lord Jesus, we thank you that you give us the gift of your Holy Spirit. Fill us again so that we might know you better.

Staying in the attitude of prayer, just have a think about the grass that is growing everywhere. Now some of you may not have a garden. Most of us will probably have some access to a garden. I just want you to grab a handful of grass. And what I want you to do is, let's just have a look at it first. Get yourself as close as you can to it. And consider first of all, how many blades of grass there are, even in one handful. And I just want you to start counting out maybe 10 or 20 pieces. Drop them and just see where they fall. They don't have to land in a neat pile – 7,8,9,10,11,12,13 – they vary so much, even in a tiny, tiny handful. And now I'm going to pull out the 14th blade. This is unique. This is more complicated than the most clever computer a human being could make. And God makes billions of them. Let's count just a few more – how much growth there is! This is what I have to trim pretty much every week in the summertime with the lawn mower, another 10 – how many we got to now? Past 20 – Oh my gosh, there's so many!



Just have a look at it again. And remember a famous verse from the Bible. It says this: God causes the growth. God causes the growth. I didn't make this happen. You didn't make this happen. God causes the growth. And now just perhaps close your eyes and picture in your head the 20,000-plus people who live in our town of Kenilworth. 20,000 people, all of whom are known by God. He understands their lives intimately and he understands the differences and the levels of openness to him. God causes the growth. Let me just pray again.

Lord, we consider the work of your hands, we consider the work of your hands in nature. We also consider the work of your hands in lives. Lord, we praise you for your secret, hidden work that is going on, not just in your church, not just in your people, but in all the people around, some of whom may be opening up to you for the first time in their lives. We praise you, Lord, that you cause the growth, you cause the openness.

We pray, Lord, as we move through this service, that we would be sensitive not only to the activity you do in us, but sensitive to the activity going on in others. Let's just have a moment of quiet as we imagine God's growth happening all around us.

Amen.

Just as a little challenge for any children out there – a kind of challenge – count every blade that has come into your house today, see if you can get an accurate number as to how many blades of grass there are that you've grabbed. You'll be amazed how many there are.

We're going to play some music now to help us worship. So let's continue to focus on God in some worship.

Song: King of Kings

Verse 1:

In the darkness we were waiting
Without hope without light
Till from heaven You came running
There was mercy in Your eyes
To fulfil the law and prophets
To a virgin came the Word
From a throne of endless glory
To a cradle in the dirt

Chorus:

Praise the Father
Praise the Son
Praise the Spirit three in one
God of glory
Majesty
Praise forever to the King of Kings

Verse 2:

To reveal the kingdom coming
And to reconcile the lost
To redeem the whole creation
You did not despise the cross
For even in Your suffering
You saw to the other side
Knowing this was our salvation
Jesus for our sake You died

Chorus

Verse 3:

And the morning that You rose
All of heaven held its breath
Till that stone was moved for good
For the Lamb had conquered death
And the dead rose from their tombs
And the angels stood in awe
For the souls of all who'd come
To the Father are restored

Verse 4:

And the Church of Christ was born
Then the Spirit lit the flame
Now this gospel truth of old
Shall not kneel shall not faint
By His blood and in His Name
In His freedom I am free
For the love of Jesus Christ
Who has resurrected me

Chorus

Praise forever to the King of Kings

Reading: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

So let's just continue to pray at this time.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for your plan and for Your glory and for your ways that will die [?]Not the work will succeed, you will fulfil all of your promises. We praise you, Lord for Jesus. And we praise you too for your word. Would you help us now as we look at one Corinthians nine, to hear your voice, and to hear what you're saying to us personally, in Jesus name,
Amen.

²⁴ 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. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever. ²⁶ Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. ²⁷ No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

This is the word of the Lord.

Talk

So let me just hand over to Michelle now. And Michelle can speak to us.
Lord, just bless Michelle and help her to communicate what's on her heart.
In Jesus' Name,
Amen.

[Michelle Harris:]

Amen.

We're actually going to start off a bit further back than the reading. Paul starts off this chapter in 1 Corinthians talking about his qualifications as an Apostle. He talks about the special relationship he has with the Corinthian church (being the founding apostle) and then he establishes that he has the same rights as others – the right to food and drink, the right to marry, the right to require payment for the work that he has done.

So, reading from verse 6 it says

⁶ “Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living?

⁷ Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink the milk? ⁸ Do I say this merely on human authority? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? ⁹ For it is written in the Law of Moses: ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.’ Is it about oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰ Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever ploughs and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. ¹¹ If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? ¹² If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?”

But then he goes on to say that he hasn't used this 'right'

He says ²

“But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.”

He is saying that he's sacrificed certain rights so that he can better proclaim the gospel. His personal rights are less important than declaring the gospel to people who haven't heard it.

In verse 15 he talks about the fact that he is compelled to preach the gospel.

He says:

¹⁵ “But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me, for I would rather die than allow anyone to deprive me of this boast. ¹⁶ For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ¹⁷ If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. ¹⁸ What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make full use of my rights as a preacher of the gospel.”

So His reward for faithfulness to this having to share the gospel is the satisfaction of making it free of charge.

2 Continuing verse 12

And then we come to our passage for today. Verse 24, "Don't you know that those who run in a race all run?" Has Paul changed tack now and randomly started running about talking about running in races? Or is he referring to something different?

Now I am not known as one of the most disciplined people in life (this little section of the passage is actually entitled 'Self Discipline'). I am really good at making poor choices when it comes to snacks of an evening and, unless it's Lent, I find it nigh-on impossible to stay away from chocolate and sweets.

But there are some things that I am a little more disciplined about, and running is one of them. Running does seem to come up in my talks quite a bit but I guess that's because God uses the things that we can identify with to speak to us. Anyway, I am still on my running streak. For those that don't know, a running streak is where you run every day consecutively. So today was day 1,655 of consecutive days running. I know, it's ridiculous! Now throughout my 4½ years of running I haven't just run the same route every day. I've done various different events where I have gained all of these medals. The ones I'm probably most proud of are this one here.

So this is the Coventry half marathon. This one is a 100 mile bike ride, that I did with Peter Jackson from church, And this one is a triathlon, a sprint triathlon I must add, not a full Olympic-distance one. And so yeah, they're probably the ones that I'm most proud of.



But for each of those things, I didn't just do the same run I've done every day. So most of my running streak consists of a run that I do, which is just over three kilometres. But if I have an event that is coming up then I have to change my training so that I'm not just maintaining my fitness levels but so that I prepare my body and, more importantly my brain, for the new challenges that lie ahead.

So much of so many of the events is mind over matter. Believe me, when I'm stood on a start line with a few thousand other people, whether it's for a 10k that I know I should be able to do because I've done it before or whether it's a 100mile bike ride (ridiculous!), I'm always really, really nervous, but it's the training beforehand that gives me the confidence to take part in the event in the knowledge that I should be able to push myself to get to the end. I have to be able to trust in the training that I've done, and know that I've done the right training to help me to get there. Now there are some people out there who are naturally fit or athletic who may be able to just go out there and run a 10k or a half marathon, but for most of us we'd be pretty silly to just turn up to a start line and expect to be able to run it without doing any training first.

Paul says, "Run in such a way as to get the prize". He says that everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. But that they do it for a crown that will not last but we do it for a crown that will last forever.

I know there is no way I'm going to win any of the races that I train for or run in, but the prize that I am aiming for in both my training and on the run itself is to push myself to get to the end. Whether that's a 5km park run, the Two

Castles or a half-marathon, I have to know what I'm aiming for and I have to give it my all. I have to know what the prize or the goal is.

Back in Corinth in those days they did actually have athletic competitions and games and they apparently would have included things like boxing, wrestling and racing. And although the winners of those athletic contests got wreaths of laurel branches, olive branches, or celery – bizarrely! Those prizes had no real monetary value, but competitors prized them for the same reason that football players prize a championship trophy. People knew that the one possessing the wreath was the best of the best.

Paul contrasts those wreaths, which would soon wither and die, with the spiritual prize that he is calling the Corinthian Christians to go after. Laurel wreaths were really perishable, but the prize that Christians go after is imperishable, in 2 Corinthians 5:1 Paul says it's "eternal, in the heavens".

So, Paul knows that they would have understood the metaphor that he was using. In the passage just before this he's just been talking about the sharing of the gospel, the good news of Jesus, so the Corinthians would have known that he wasn't talking about training for athletes at all, but that he was talking about the training of Christians to go out and share the gospel.

I have never thought of myself as an evangelist, someone who goes out and shares the Gospel or the good news of Jesus. When I look at my spiritual giftings and the way that God has skilled me, He has always put pastoring front and centre for me. I love His flock, I care for His flock and I love to guide and take care of the pastoral needs of people around me. But from just before I started in the role of Youth Worker at St John's, God has been growing in me the gift of evangelism. I don't think I'd realised just how much until recently. I had a moment where I really felt like I might be having to make a choice between staying and looking after the flock or going out and sharing the gospel. Thankfully I haven't had to choose in the end but it did make it really clear to me just how much God has been growing that gifting and desire in me over the past few years.

One of the things that has been really difficult through this time of lockdown has been not being able to go into School and share the love of Jesus and share who Jesus is with the young people of our town. It has been amazing to see our young people go deeper in their faith and they have been so, so good engaging with God. Yeah, they've just been growing and developing as Christians. Watching them have their moments with God even via Zoom where we've been doing our groups, like during the week on Zoom, it's been amazing that they've had those spiritual moments. But I've had this niggle the whole way through – what about the ones that we haven't stayed in touch with? What about the 30 or so that used to come to Youth café? What about the 40 that used to come to Girl Talk? Or the others that came to the other clubs at the school? Throughout this time, who's been sharing the love of Jesus with them and what am I going to do about reconnecting with them when we're allowed to? I know that coming out of these 'unprecedented times' and into the 'new normal' (I did just put those in especially for anyone playing lockdown talk bingo), I need to have used this time to train well for going forwards.

So what's the race that we're running? How do we train for it and what's the prize we're aiming for?

Well, I think Jesus gave us a pretty clear heads up as to what the race is that we're running and what the prize is that we're aiming for.

Famous people's last words are always remembered...

Humphrey Bogart - "I should have never switched from Scotch to Martinis."

Bob Marley - "Money can't buy life."

Leonardo da Vinci - his last words were apparently, "I have offended God and mankind because my work did not reach the quality it should have."

Jesus' last words on the cross may have been, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," but they weren't His last words on Earth. Jesus rose again from the dead and He came back to the disciples on numerous occasions.

The book of Matthew, when telling about the end of Jesus' time on Earth, finishes with the Great Commission from Jesus.

Matthew 28 starting at verse 18 says,

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'

He commands us - He doesn't ask us nicely, or say "thank you very much...", or "it'd be lovely if you could just...", or "if you might be ever so kind..." - No. He commands us to go out and make disciples.

He didn't tell us to go and become a biblical scholar - although knowing what you believe is obviously important! He didn't tell us to go and be nice to people and show it through our actions, although again it is good to be nice to people. There has to come a time where you take a step, and you say some words. People aren't mind-readers and they'll never come to faith just because you've done something nice for them. At some point you have to be brave and take a step of saying something - even if it's as small as "I'll pray for you."

Jesus told us to go and make disciples, go and share the gospel - share the Good News, Jesus died to pay the price of our sin, He took the punishment for each and every one of us - me included, so that we can be in a relationship with the Father God, creator of all who loves us so, so much.

Do you know Jesus? Do you really know Him? Do you know what He did for you? Do you live in that freedom? Then why, oh why would you not want that for your friends, for your family members, for the ones that you love and for those that don't know Him yet?

So how do we share it? Well, like I said earlier - a lot of my training for events [running ones] is for my mind as much as it is my body. I practice, I make mistakes, I fall down and I get back up again. I have difficult runs and ones that don't go so well. Things don't necessarily go according to plan all the time, but it's because I do those ones that help me to know when it comes to it, when it comes to those events, I've done it before. I've got through the toughest days of my life. I've got through every toughest day of training. And if I can get through that, then I can get through this.

The hardest part, I think, is taking that step out of the door to start. But you know what? After you've got over that and got out the door, it gets easier and easier. And when you start seeing the results, that's amazing. When you say

to someone who is going through something tough – “I’ll pray for you, I’ll ask God to intervene” and then you see that prayer answered – that opens up an opportunity to share who Jesus is. When you walk alongside someone and you intentionally invest in a friendship with them and you get to speak into their life and share the gospel with them, when they come to a place of commitment and you are able to share that prayer of commitment with them, that is something that is really, really special.

Now, we can take this race running analogy a little further if you like. If you are injured, then you should not be training to run a race. You should be resting and focussing on getting better and making yourself well. And the same goes for this. If you are in a place where you need to heal or rest, then you do need to use whatever time that you need to, to do that, whether that’s physically or spiritually. Take the time to get well, because you can’t give from an empty place.

But I don’t think that’s the case for most of us. For most of us, we just get complacent. We get stuck in a rut or in a routine and we get out of the habit of pushing and training for the prize.

How’s your training going right now? What’s the race that you’re running? What’s the prize that you’re training for?

How are you sharing the gospel with others? What plans are you making for how you can go out and make disciples of Jesus going forwards from here?

God has a little laugh with me sometimes. I don’t know if you’re familiar with the term ear-worm? It’s where you get a song stuck in your head and it goes round and round and round and you just can’t get rid of it. You’re probably going hate me for this, but I think God uses these with me quite a lot. My ear-worm this morning comes from my childhood days. I used to go to a Church of England Primary School so we had all the golden oldie songs and my ear-worm for today has come from those days. It’s Go Tell it on the Mountain.

Go tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere,
Go tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is Lord.

What I’ve been talking about today isn’t new. It’s something that we have known all along. Go, tell it on the mountain – tell everyone that Jesus is Lord – He’s Lord over everything, over pain, over fear, Jesus is Lord over all. It’s Good News that we get to share with people!!

If Jesus’ last command was for us to go out and make disciples then that’s what we should be doing.

I’m going to hand over to Andrew now so that he can lead us in a response time.

Prayerful Response

[Andrew:]

Thank you, Michelle. That's really good to hear. Let's have a time of prayer. Let's see if we can meet God in response to what Michelle has been saying, Let's pray.

It may be that you haven't really made a commitment in this way to Jesus before.

So before we talk about anything else, let's address this. The invitation is before you. The Good News of Jesus is writ large before you. The Son of God has died for our sins, He's risen from the dead, to give us hope for the future. If you need to commit, to say that you believe, then pray along with me. With that in mind, let's pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, we acknowledge that we have done wrong.
Lord Jesus Christ, we acknowledge that You have died to set us free.
Lord Jesus Christ, we invite You into our lives as King, as Lord.
And Lord, would You now lead us forward?
Fill us with Your Holy Spirit
And help us to share what we have received.
Amen.

Now, if that's the first time you've prayed that kind of prayer, do make a point of getting in touch with us, so that we can support you further. For those who are listening, who have already made a commitment, maybe several times, what I want to put to you is another question. I'm going to share some words on the screen now. And these words are going to be for you to contemplate during the whole of the rest of July and August. My presumption is that during this time of lockdown, a number of us have been enjoying a renewal of closeness with God, quality time with God, drawing near to God. So I want to read these words to you as something to consider over these next weeks.

1. after quality time with God, are you pretty sure that God is directing you to reach out to a particular network of people? A geographic place? Or a social need?

That's the first category.
Second one, maybe this is you:

2. After quality time with God, are you desiring to be used and sent out? But at the minute you don't know where God wants you to focus?

Just have a think for a moment. What is God saying? Has He begun to be clearer in where He is pointing you? Consider as lockdown eases, consider what will happen in the next quarter of the year, the next few months. Are you getting clarity from God as to where He is pointing you, to share what He's given to you? Or maybe you're just aware for the first time that you want to share but you don't know how.

I'm going to pray now that the Holy Spirit would put His finger on number one or number two for you. And then you can dwell on it for the next few weeks.

Holy Spirit, help us to hear again the last words of Jesus Christ, "Go make disciples. Just as I made you, go make disciples." Come Holy Spirit and help us to know what You're saying to us.

Let's just have a minute of quiet.

[pause]

Come Holy Spirit, speak to our hearts.

Lord, make us sensitive to Your call and obedient to Your command.

Amen

So again with the words on the screen it says,

If these categories ring true for you, LET US KNOW!

Part of the function of local church is to equip people who are hearing from God so that we can step out and be more effective. Can you let me know through an email through to Denise, admin@stjohn316.co.uk, so that we can get alongside, have a conversation and support you, because we're beginning to release people more effectively now, into all these different kinds of things. If this is you, get in touch. So we'll finish with some words of prayer.

Lord Jesus, ordinarily at this time on a Sunday service, we would go into intercessions for the world. But I want to stay focused entirely on Your last command. Jesus, Your final words, let them ring in our ears.

Holy Spirit, what is it that You have been doing in us as individuals for the last two to three months?

Where we have gone deeper would You now help us to hear?

Freely you have received. Now, freely give.
Freely you have received. Now, freely give.

Once again in the minutes of quiet, let the reality of God's command, go in.

Come Holy Spirit.

Lord, we pray, like Michelle has taught us this morning, that there is a race to be run, that there is training to be done, that there is focus on the prize, a prize of seeing lives change, the prize of making disciples like Jesus did.

Would You set us on fire, with a desire to obey the final command of Jesus Christ and Lord, would You help us to help each other to fulfil this?

So Lord, let Your blessing rest on all those watching and listening today. We pray, Lord Jesus, that this would be the ultimate ear-worm, the ultimate thing that goes round and round.

Go make disciples,
Freely you have received, freely give,
Go tell it on the mountain.
Go tell it on the mountain.

So we finish with a blessing prayer.

In the name of the Father, and in the name of the Son, and in the name of the Holy Spirit, we pray that God's holy Trinity would be with you, would be close to you, and would speak to you in a way that you can hear.
So we bless you in that name.
Amen.

We'll finish there. So God bless. And we'll see you next Sunday. Bye now!

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from Michelle Harris' script and <https://otter.ai>]

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