



"Never fight a battle when you won't gain anything by winning."  
—George S. Patton

17-Apr-15

## 'I Want To Be First'

Pentecost is only a few weeks away. This late-spring holy day marks the end of the grain harvest. In the Greek, *Pentecost* means "count fifty," and in the Old Testament, the same festival is called the "Feast of Weeks" and "Feast of Firstfruits." The children of Israel lived in an agrarian society, and the harvests were important times of the year, as a harvest could determine their prosperity or lack thereof for the following year.

The farmer awaited harvest time with great anticipation—and perhaps with an equal amount of anxiety. He had to rely on [God](#) to give the needed rains before harvest and then to hold back the rains until all was gathered in. Once the grain was ripe and dry, he faced the threat of fire that could sweep across an entire farm and wipe his livelihood away, at least for the next year.

Pentecost is a harvest of firstfruits of God's creation. What does it mean to be first? Those who have children have heard them say, "I want to be first!" or "I want to go first!" or "Pick me first!" or "I want the first bite!" Human nature has a desire to be first. God has certainly created us with the ability to compete or a desire to win. Maybe a better way to put it would be a desire and an ability to overcome. There are good lessons to be learned from striving to prevail.

But, much like everything else in [the world](#), [Satan](#) has twisted it, and men are forever competing against one another. How many times have we heard commentators refer to the teams or players as "bitter rivals"? The NBA and NHL are currently beginning their championship series to determine who will stand atop the heap of their sports.

A hundred years ago, there were few professional sports. We now have "World Championships" for everything from Little League Baseball to Competitive Eating! Recently, a championship series has been launched for noodling, a sport where competitors wade in rivers and lakes, sticking their arms underwater in an attempt to lure big catfish to swallow their arms so that they can then pull the fish out of the water! Oh, what an honor to be the world noodling champion!

The former head coach of the Washington Redskins, Joe Gibbs, once said, "God must love competition because He created us and we are competitive." Mr. Gibbs did not understand the whole

picture. Satan challenged God because he wanted to be first. God, on the other hand, competes with no one. Nor does He desire us to compete with each other.

Our society seems to be driven by competition. *Competition* is defined as "conflict between individuals, groups, nations, animals, etc., for territory, a niche, or allocation of resources." At some levels, competition can be informal, that is, more for fun or just plain bragging rights. However, other competitions can be extremely serious with even wars breaking out between nations or ethnic groups.

This winner-takes-all mentality with no concern for the cost to others has no place in the Christian's life. This type of competitiveness is just another form of self-exaltation, elevating the self and putting down others, which soon leads to conflict. It all boils down to self-centered pride, which is worthless in God's eyes.

Nevertheless, we strive or compete with one another to be on top, to be first. In [Mark 9:33](#), [Jesus](#) asks His disciples to tell Him what they had disputed about while they had been traveling. "But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest. And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all'" ([Mark 9:34-35](#)). A few translations go so far as to call their dispute a "rivalry." It seems to have been an ongoing argument. Perhaps they began to think that, if Jesus were dead, who would be in charge? Still carnal in their thinking, they were doing what men do: trying to exalt themselves and get ahead. Knowing their thoughts, Jesus tells them if they desire to be first, they must serve as if they were last.

We have all experienced this type of behavior, whether in the family, in the church, in the workplace, and even in ourselves. In marriage, the husband desires to be king of his castle, and the wife wants to be queen! Competition is alive and well right in our homes. This is human nature rearing its head, desiring to be first over others. This type of competitive spirit does not come from God, but is one we must fight to overcome to be in the image of Christ.

In [Ecclesiastes 1:2](#), Solomon says all is vanity. We can understand a little of what he means using sports as an example. How many of us remember who won the World Series last year? How about the Super Bowl, the Daytona 500, or the U.S. Open? We may remember last year, but how about the year before that? Who knows what games they played in Solomon's day, but he understood what vanity was. Where is the real worth in all this competition?

Living in a world under the rule of Satan, what does a person get for finishing first? While there are lessons to be learned and opportunities to build character, for the most part, these accomplishments still leave the player lacking, wanting more. After the fulfillment of such lifelong dreams of being the best, the euphoria is short-lived, and the desire soon returns to compete again. Most likely, the winner has only a worthless trophy to dust the rest of his life!

One type of competition is called "cooperative competition," which is based on promoting mutual survival where everyone wins. As defined by economist Adam Smith, this is a process where individuals compete to improve their level of happiness but do so in a cooperative manner through peaceful exchange and without violating other people. In other words, individuals or groups work together against something else for the benefit of all. This is the kind of competition that fits in a Christian life, as we all have the same enemy (see [Ephesians 6:12](#)).

We do not have time to waste competing against a brother. We do not want to be caught up in this world's distractions, competing for a worthless trophy. We have been called by God to become His firstfruits ([James 1:18](#)), so we are already first in His eyes! According to God's law, the firstborn in the Bible always received a double portion of their father's inheritance ([Deuteronomy 21:17](#)). The firstfruits belong to God; they are sacred to Him ([Exodus 23:19](#)).

The apostle John saw God's firstfruits in [Revelation 14:4](#): "These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb." We do not have to worry about being first in this world. The NBA champions, the World Series champions, even the noodling champions of the world have nothing on us! We have been chosen to follow the Lamb of God in this world and in the world to come!

Since He knows the end from the beginning ([Isaiah 46:10](#)), God can already see the finished product. This should give us great [hope](#), knowing that He has promised to finish what He has started in each of us ([Philippians 1:6](#)). We need to keep this great hope always in the forefront of our minds: In God's eyes, we are first, and nothing in this world can top that!

- Ronny H. Graham

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## From the Archives: Featured Sermon

### [Pentecost and Hope](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Richard Ritenbaugh, reflecting on the account of Simeon in Luke 2:25-30, speculates about the specific things Simeon did to sustain his hope. Simeon's life serves as a precursor to that of God's called-out ones, demonstrating the elements necessary to bring a person to spiritual maturity. The first is hope in God's law. Like Moses, we as firstfruits stand as a kind of mediator, meticulously digesting God's law in order to teach it to the rest of mankind. The second is hope in God's Holy Spirit, which enables us to overcome, produce fruit, and provide witness. The third is hope in God's judgment of the Pentecost offering, representing us, presented to God for inspection, evaluation, and acceptance. The fourth is hope in being God's firstfruits, the wave loaves that are totally consumed by the Priest in His service, giving us hope that we will indeed be in His Kingdom.

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## From the Archives: Featured Article

### [The Pentecost Witness](#)

by David C. Grabbe

Pentecost is known for its stupendous signs, particularly the display of power in Acts 2. David Grabbe shows that Pentecost teaches us of another, more personal witness: our own display of Christ's way of life in us.

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