

**SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY SEPTUAGESIMAE**  
(Cape Town - 31 January 2010)

**Text:** <sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> 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 forever. <sup>26</sup> Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. <sup>27</sup> No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize (1 Cor.9:24-27)

Near the end of last year I went through the experience of our eldest daughter Martina getting a driver's licence. Getting a drivers' license is a quite a feat these days and far more difficult than in my own days. There are numerous lessons to be taken and you almost strain your neck because you need to look at all the blind spots when you are driving. Initially it is a nerve racking experience for all involved: The driver, the driving instructor and of course the parents. I am not sure how many times I shouted: "Break! Break! Break. You are far to close", or made some other harsh comment on her lack of driving skills.

But eventually after a few months she was ready for her driver's license test. When she came back I could see for a mile that she had passed. She was beaming and extremely proud of herself. She gave me a hug and immediately asked me whether she could use the car to drive to school ... on her own. At that moment I felt a bit of regret as I was letting go of my car (and my daughter).

But Martina drives well. As everybody it was a slow start. Initially it was a matter of figuring out which pedal to push when, or in what direction to turn the wheel and exactly how far. But once she got the car "under control", it was a good feeling. For many a young driver being in control of a powerful vehicle is an exhilarating feeling. You push the petrol pedal down and the car takes off with a roar. You turn the wheel and it cuts the corner exactly the way you want it to do. You break and it immediately slows down. It is always nice to be in control of something as powerful as a car.

But if you cannot control *yourself*, it is worth nothing. The feat of controlling a car is something. But it cannot be compared to controlling yourself, your temper or your tongue. Do you have "self-control" and do you have "self-discipline"? - that is the question posed by the apostle Paul in this sermon text.

When we think about the word self-control or discipline there are probably several things that come to mind. To a child it could mean a spanking, being disciplined for doing something wrong. To a student it could mean lots of classes and hours of study. To the young Christian it could mean going to church every Sunday and reading the Bible although you would prefer to sleep

And it is true, those are all forms of discipline. But the examples given are all forms of "imposed" discipline, which means a person or a group pressurises you *from the outside* to do something. A parent disciplines a child to teach obedience. A school sets study periods to force a scholar to do home work. And a pastor may preach "law" and shake his finger to get everybody to church on a Sunday.

It is like controlling a dog on a leash. You pull it back and don't allow it do what it wants to. But usually when you take the leash off, the dog sets off. Imposed discipline has some value, but it is always limited value.

Here in our sermon text Paul is not talking about imposed discipline, but "self-discipline". It is a discipline that I impose *on myself* because I *want* too and because I have recognised the value. The Bible usually uses the word "self-control". It is listed as a fruit of the Spirit: "***Love, joy, peace, patience, faithfulness ... (and the last one is) self-control***" (Gal.5:22-23). If you like, it is special gift from God made available to all Christian.

This fruit, although it may grow slowly over a period of time, is extremely important. It is important because as

Christians, especially when we are older, we don't always have somebody who tells us what we need to do. Nobody checks on my Bible reading. Nobody checks on whether I pray or don't. Nobody checks whether I give a tithe or just a few cents. Nobody sees to it that I give testimony of my faith. There is only one thing that will keep me doing these things, and that is self-discipline - not because I have to, but because "I want to".

Self-discipline reflects good character. You need a lot of character to be self-disciplined. And indeed we need self-discipline and self-control in every aspect of our Christian life.

The apostle Paul recognised that for himself. In our sermon text he uses the illustration of an athlete in a race. This is an illustration that was well understood in Corinth. The ancient Greeks had two great athletic events. The one was the Olympic Games (as we know it today) hosted originally in the ancient city of Athens. The other event was the Isthmian Games which were held in the city of Corinth every three years. In fact, if you go to Corinth today you can still see the areas and part of the tracks where these games were held. Even in those days more than a hundred thousand people flocked to the stadium to watch the races.

In the time before Christ these games were the most prestigious games in the world. It was an athlete's dream to win just one such race. For winning the athlete only received a wreath, but for three years he was lauded and honoured by all as if he was a king.

Every athlete who participated in the Isthmian games had to take an oath that they had been training for at least 10 months and that they have given up certain foods in their diet to enable them to endure the demands of the race. As you can imagine, these athletes subjected "themselves" to a rigorous training programme. The key was "self-discipline", driven by something that they wanted to achieve.

I am trying it myself at the moment. Realising that I need more exercise, I have started to jog every morning, or if I don't, I cycle. And in order to keep to have a clear goal and to keep motivation I have entered both the Argus Cycle race and also the two-oceans half-marathon this year. Others who may see me slogging it out on the road, may think that I am totally mad. They may even feel sorry for me. But it is not an imposed discipline. I am doing it because I want to and because I have realised the need.

Discipline, by the way, is what we need the most in today's world. We have a country filled with students dropping out of school dropping out of varsity. There is great potential out there. But so many just don't want to buckle down and they will never reach their goal. We have a society that believes in self-enrichment, but not self-discipline.

The Theologian Max Anders said: "Only the disciplined ever get really good at anything". And it is true, whether it is hitting a cricket ball, playing a music instrument, study for your grades, or a running a race - only the discipline get really good.

Now Paul sees life like a race. We are in a race towards God. It is the most important race we are in. It is imperative that we make it. And Paul says: "You can". But what is needed to complete the race is not just discipline, but *self*-discipline. It doesn't work if the pastor "tells" you, that you must do this or that. It must come from *within*: I *want* to be there. I *want* to make a difference. I *want* my children to have a Christian upbringing, to go to Sunday school.

It is a fallacy if you think, you are going to make it without any discipline. For Paul the road to God is scattered with obstacles. There are temptations and distractions all the time. There are steep hills of quiet endurance, where "perseverance" is needed. There are times when you read your Bible, go to church, pray to God and nothing happens. There are times when fellow Christians irritate you. Life on the "race track to God" is not easy. It is awkward in this world. But the goal is so great. We are not talking about a perishable wreath and three years of

honour. We are talking about a crown of gold and eternity of unmatched glory in the presence of God.

The church has always been filled with people who love to be mature and rich in the knowledge of God's word. But they are not willing to pay the price to achieve it. One day a young Christian said to the renowned Bible Scholar, Gus Nichols: "I would give my life to know the Bible like you do". And Gus answered: "You can, but it takes a lifetime of study and dedication".

Of John Wesley it is said: He traveled on average 20 miles a day (on horse back) for 40 years. He got up every morning at 4am. He preached 40000 sermons, produced 400 books and knew 10 languages. At the age of 83 he was annoyed because he couldn't write more than 15 hours a day without hurting his eyes. At the age of 86 he was ashamed because he couldn't preach more than twice a day. He complained in his diary that there was an increasing tendency to lie in bed until 5.30 in the morning.

Luckily for us John Wesley is not the yardstick. It is not about being the best. We don't have to win any race. The race of life has been won for by Christ for all of us. But we do need to fight. It is not about perfection, but is about running in the right direction. It is not critical if we stumble or fall. But is important that we pick ourselves up and try again. We are never comfortable about our performance, but we are assured of our victory.

So don't misunderstand this passage. We are all saved by grace - by grace alone. But for us to "complete" the race, we need the Spirit of God, in particular the fruit of self-discipline and self-control. I get up in the morning, I read my Bible, I pray. I make a difference in another person's life. I promote life in the Christian community that I call my home. Here in St Thomas, I make a difference. And I do so because I want too. I do so because God's Spirit within me drives me. And even if I don't "feel" the Spirit of God, I do so nevertheless. Why? Because I know what my destination is. And I want to hold onto that prize which Christ has ready for me.

So be committed and goal oriented as you follow Christ, who was and is the perfect example of self-discipline and self-control. Amen.