

Isaiah 40: 21-31
Psalm 147: 1-12, 21c
I Corinthians 9: 16-23
St. Mark 1: 29-39

Epiphany V 2024.

“Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one.”
I Corinthians 9: 25

I want to begin by presenting two contrasting scenarios: First, I happened to be walking near my home recently when I heard a young couple quarrelling. I don't know what had started the quarrel... They were outside; by the time I passed by, the antagonism between them both was at a fever pitch. Neither of them was listening to the other person; neither of them seemed to be aware where they were. What was perhaps saddest of all to me was the crude stream of obscenities which streamed out of the young man's mouth. It was utterly vulgar and crude. I don't believe that Christians are to be prudes... We need a certain toughness, not being quick to take offense, not delicate – these are some of the hallmarks of a mature discipleship... But I was saddened by what I could not help but hear...

It led me to pray for them both during my walk. I believe that those young people had lost all self-control – of their emotions, their language, and their respect for one another.

(We might say that when someone physically assaults someone else, that is also a lack of self-control – not showing self-restraint in what they do...)

I'd like to contrast the behaviour of that young couple with a true story, of 2 long-distance runners at the University of Cambridge, England, in the 1920's. Their story was made into a popular movie, *Chariots of Fire*, which was released in 1981...

One of the athletes in this story was a Scottish young man named Eric Liddell... Eric was a very devout Christian, a son of missionaries who served in China. A lot of the story of *Chariots of Fire* was devoted to the self-discipline of that young man, as he trained to run. Eric understood that he was honouring God, by stewarding well his God-given gift of being able to run very quickly. Here is a scene from that movie:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGc9pWan-FY> (.46-1.36)

Eric Liddell is a great example, I suggest, of exercising self-control as a way to honour the Lord...

This same point is made in today's second reading, from First Corinthians. St. Paul is teaching members of the congregation that developing our capacity for self-control and focus is vital, to have close fellowship with the Lord:

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things. (vv. 24-25)

Just as an athlete exercises self-control to honour God with their bodies, so too Christians develop and exercise self-control, so that we can live beautifully for the Lord, and honour him...

In the ancient world, a man who won a foot race would receive a garland around his neck. (It would be something like getting an Olympic gold medal around the winning athlete's neck today.) Paul continues, "[Athletes run their race] to receive a perishable garland, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air..."

The leaves of a perishable garland will wither and die. Our *imperishable* garland is eternal life... We are to develop and to exercise self-control – not running around aimlessly, but with determination, grace, and focus. A boxer doesn't wave his or her hands around in the air; their aim is to deliver a strong punch to overcome their opponent. A bit like that, we need to develop self-control...

Self-control by Christians is stated elsewhere in the New Testament. Here are a few examples: "For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline (II Timothy 1: 7)."

Titus writes of Christian leaders, that we are to be "hospitable, a lover of goodness, prudent, upright, devout, and self-controlled (1: 8)."

II Peter 1: 3 indicates that self-control is a step toward true love:

Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love (II Peter 1: 5-7).

We read that self-control is one of the gifts of God the Holy Spirit to us: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5: 22-23)."

These are just a few examples from the Bible that make it clear that we are to learn to live self-disciplined lives. We could also refer to so many martyrs in the Christian tradition, who chose obedience to God in Christ over their very lives...

(Incidentally, the Cambridge running athlete Eric Liddell is not officially recognized as a martyr of the Church. However, after running those races, including running in the Paris Olympics, Eric went to serve as a Christian missionary in pre-war China. He was captured by the Japanese during World War II, and died in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp... One can make a direct line between Eric's devotion to Jesus Christ, and the place and manner of his death...)

The evidence is clear: We who are Christians are called to live self-disciplined lives. Like all that the Lord calls us to be, this is not meant to be a burden, but a joy; a privilege; a gift...

What do we do, though, if we see that self-discipline is a Christian virtue that we're not very good at? While we might not go to that extreme, does the behaviour of that quarrelling young couple sounds somewhat familiar to us?...

All of us have areas of weakness... None of us are immune from temptation... But different people experience temptation in different forms. At one time or another, many of us are vulnerable to failing to exercise self-control – for example, when we're tired, or have had a difficult day... What can we do about that?...

I suggest that we begin by being moderately serious about how God has called us... It's somewhat like our baptismal vows, or other solemn promises: We should take our baptismal vows seriously!... The same is true for other sacramental vows, such as in marriage, or ordination. No one ought to think "it doesn't matter what I promise." Of course it matters! If we don't take these standards seriously, they we shouldn't make those promises to begin with...

Yet, it's still possible to go to the other extreme: We can hold the standard before us so high, that we give up before we start; or whenever we stumble, we begin to doubt if we were ever Christians to begin with!... We're all fallen human beings... We aren't in heaven yet; so, it's predictable that, sooner or later, we will fall... Let's not stay in the dust, frustrated, miserable, and full of self-condemnation. With God's help, let's get up, and get started again... God has forgiven us; let's be prepared to forgive ourselves...

So, the standard of self-control is important. It's not meant to be ignored, but neither is it meant to be an impossible standard either. With God's help, let's do our best!...

I suggest 2 other tools in the toolbox, to help us exercise self-control: First, take a long-term view... Take a long-term view. If we just focus on our feelings in the moment, of being tired or frustrated, it can be easy to give up!... In contrast, when we see the benefit of walking the narrow road for a greater good, we often can muster the effort to develop self-control, with God's help... Take a long-term view...

A second strategy for exercising self-control is to help one another be accountable, in the community of the Church family... When we're spending time regularly among people who are learning to live and love like Jesus, then *we* are encouraged to do better ourselves... We can encourage one another, and support one another. Many of us in this congregation belong to small groups, or have spiritual directors or mentors. It helps to be accountable to someone, or a few others – those who love us enough to look us in the eye and say, “So, how did it go this past week?...” This is a very effective way to help us be accountable, and to grow in self-control and other spiritual disciplines...

Just as athletes learn to control their bodies in the pursuit of sports excellence, we are called to develop self-control in our lives... God will help us, but will not do it *for* us... Seeing the long-term picture, and being accountable, are 2 great strategies to help us develop self-control... Let's also remember that self-control isn't to make us miserable, but to lead us to glory. Victory and self-control brings us joy, and points us to God! How can we want anything less, or different?...

Thanks be to God...