



Applied Faith Men's Bible Study

South Hills Baptist Church

7350 Granbury Rd.

Fort Worth, TX 76123

Proverbs, Self-Control

Lesson #2

Book of Proverbs

The Human Heart---Self-Control

Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life. 4:23

The emphasis on the inward man is the key point which separates Christianity from all other religions. The control of the inner man is the secret to a righteous life. Free-spirited and spontaneous living is irresponsible and destructive. The book of Proverbs encourages us to exercise self-control, because disciplined living refines and strengthens character.

Proper living is developed and controlled at the source of one's actions—the impulses of his heart (4:23, 23:7). This may be man's most difficult challenge, but it will be his greatest victory!!

As the Hebrews were promised the land, but had to take it by force, one town at a time, so we are promised the gift of self-control, yet we also must take it by force. (Ed Welch, "The Battle Against 'One More'")

The very concept of "self-control" implies a battle between a divided self. It implies that our "self" produces desires we should not satisfy but instead "control." We should deny ourselves and take up our cross daily, Jesus says, and follow him (Luke 9:23). Daily our "self" produces desires that should be "denied" or "controlled."

The path that leads to heaven is narrow and strewn with suicidal temptations to abandon the way. Therefore, Jesus says, "Strive to enter through the narrow door" (Luke 13:24). The Greek word for "strive" is *agonizesthe*, in which you correctly hear the English word "agonize."

The Narrow Door

We get a taste of what is involved from Matthew 5:29: "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away." This is the fierceness of self-control. This is what is behind the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:12: "The kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force." Are you laying hold on the kingdom fiercely?

Paul says that Christians exercise self-control like the Greek athletes, only our goal is eternal, not temporal. "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable" (1 Corinthians 9:25). So, he says, "I discipline my body and keep it under control" (1 Corinthians 9:27). Self-control is saying no to sinful desires, even when it hurts.

A Superior Pleasure

But the Christian way of self-control is not “Just say no!” The problem is with the word “just.” You don’t just say no. You say no in a certain way: You say no by faith in the superior power and pleasure of Christ. It is just as ruthless. And may be just as painful. But the difference between worldly self-control and godly self-control is crucial. Who will get the glory for victory? That’s the issue. Will we get the glory? Or will Christ get the glory? If we exercise self-control by faith in Christ’s superior power and pleasure, Christ will get the glory.

Fundamental to the Christian view of self-control is that it is a gift. It is the fruit of the Holy Spirit: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace . . . self-control” (Galatians 5:22–23). How do we “strive” against our fatal desires? Paul answers: “For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Colossians 1:29). He “agonizes” by the power of Christ, not his own. Similarly, he tells us, “If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13). “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts” (Zechariah 4:6). We must be fierce! Yes. But not by our might. “The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord” (Proverbs 21:31).

And how does the Spirit produce this fruit of self-control in us? By instructing us in the superior preciousness of grace, and enabling us to see and savor (that is, “trust”) all that God is for us in Jesus. “The grace of God has appeared . . . training us to renounce . . . worldly passions . . . in the present age” (Titus 2:11–12). When we really see and believe what God is for us by grace through Jesus Christ, the power of wrong desires is broken. Therefore, the fight for self-control is a fight of faith. “Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called” (1 Timothy 6:12).

The apostle Paul compared life to a race. He wrote: “Remember that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize. You also must run in such a way that you will win. All athletes practice strict self-control. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize.

“So, I run straight to the goal with purpose in every step ... I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:24-27, New Living Translation, emphasis added throughout).

In the greatest of all races, the race for eternal life, everyone can be a winner. Thankfully, there is no need to compete with another person. In fact, we should be coaches and cheerleaders for one another! But Paul said, “run in such a way”—as an Olympic athlete competing for a gold medal.

Those of us who want the “eternal prize” should ask ourselves some questions:

- Am I as dedicated and zealous as an Olympic athlete?
- Do I study the Holy Scriptures as much as any athlete studies how to perform well in his sport?
- Am I quick in seeking advice (through prayer and Bible study) from my Coach?
 - Do I stay focused on my long-range goal?
 - Am I willing to make sacrifices to reach my goal?
 - Am I determined to endure to the end—to cross the finish line of life—and to never quit? (Matthew 24:13).

We probably can't say yes to all those questions every day. But we surely must be heading in that direction. This requires taking charge of our lives—the final listed aspect among “the fruit of the Spirit.”

Self-control: last but not least

Paul listed nine godly virtues that constitute the fruit of God's Spirit—the inward and outward effect of having the gift of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. They are “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

What a stark contrast they are to the actions of man's sinful nature that Paul listed in the previous three verses!

(Where the New King James Version has “self-control,” the earlier King James Version used the word “temperance,” meaning self-restraint. Today, however, this word usually has the narrower sense of moderation or, when referring to alcoholic drinks, total abstinence. Therefore, as commonly understood today, temperance is only a small part of self-control.)

Is the sequential order of the nine godly virtues significant? The first listed, love, is clearly the most important (1 Corinthians 13:1-2, 1 Corinthians 13:13). Is self-control, then, last because it's least important? On the contrary, self-control is extremely vital. Paul emphasized it alongside “righteousness ... and the judgment to come” (Acts 24:25).

Perhaps self-control is listed last as the capstone—since it takes a lot of self-control to exercise the other eight virtues! It takes a lot of self-control just to “bridle” one's tongue (James 1:26; James 3:2).

Maybe Paul was thinking of love and self-control as the two great bookends for the set.

Clearly these nine virtues work together and support each other. Consider long-suffering, which is the opposite of short-tempered. Many people are ruled by their feelings and can't control their anger. In fact, one measure of maturity is emotional control. Some adults still have temper tantrums!

The best form of self-control may be fleeing

We all face temptations to sin—all our lives. When confronted with temptation, we must strive, as far as possible, to get away from it— flee! Even if you think you have a lot of self-control, don't put it to the test unnecessarily.

Consider some of the things we are told to flee: "Flee" from a "stranger" (a teacher of lies), "flee sexual immorality" (as Joseph had to literally flee, Genesis 39:12), "flee from idolatry," flee "all kinds of evil," "flee also youthful lusts" (John 10:5; 1 Corinthians 6:18; 1 Corinthians 10:14; 1 Timothy 6:10-11; 2 Timothy 2:22).

We need self-control to avoid not only outright evil but also too much of the good things. Proverbs 25:16 cautions: "Have you found honey? Eat only as much as you need, lest you be filled with it and vomit."

People often lack the self-restraint to stop when they should. People overeat, over-drink, overspend and overindulge in lots of things. We must rule over our appetites rather than letting our appetites rule us. Overindulgence can lead to intoxication and/or addiction. In either case, the person is then really out of control!

Self-control often means resisting sexual temptations, a subject addressed many times in the Bible. Tragically, standards of morality and modesty are plunging around us. Sexual sins are especially damaging—physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually (1 Corinthians 6:13-20).

Because of lust, even smart people do stupid things. Just think of all the prominent people who've been caught cheating on their spouses! They may be "ruling" over many people, but they fail to rule their own lives. They trade integrity for instant gratification, and everyone loses.

Jesus and the apostles made it clear that God holds us strictly accountable for even sinful thoughts as well as sinful actions. We must wage spiritual warfare, "bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

Jesus said, "Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). We should follow the example of Job, who said, "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl" (Job 31:1, New International Version).

And women need to understand how easily they can be partly responsible for men sinning in their minds. When a woman is exposing parts of her body that only her husband should see, others can be tantalized and tempted. Women who want to please God should "resolve this, not to put a stumbling block [a temptation] or a cause to fall [into sin] in our brother's way" (Romans 14:13).

Is willpower powerful?

The Greek word translated "self-control," *egkrateia*, is derived from two other Greek words— *en* and *kratos*. *En* means "in" and *kratos* means "strength" or "power." From *kratos* we get such English

words as “democracy” (power or rule by the people) and “theocracy” (government by God).

From these Greek roots, we see that *egkrateia* essentially means power or strength within. But whose power?

Even apart from God’s direct help, some people have relatively strong character. Their good habits may be the result of good upbringing plus wisdom gained from experience—perhaps combined with innate determination. But we shouldn’t confuse this with the erroneous New Age claim that everyone has a reservoir of righteous power deep within himself just waiting to be tapped.

Paul plainly said that “the mind-set of the flesh is hostile to God because it does not submit itself to God’s law, for it is unable to do so” (Romans 8:7, Holman Christian Standard Bible). Thus, the normal human mind by itself is not capable of being in complete subjection to the law of God! Therefore, we need “power within” that comes from God!

Jesus said, “The spirit [one’s attitude] indeed is willing but the flesh [human willpower] is weak” (Matthew 26:41). For example, 11 of Jesus’ disciples intended to stick by Him, but when things got really scary, they all deserted Him (Matthew 26:56).

Therefore, “self-control” can be somewhat misleading. Effective self-control is not ultimately self-controlling self. To have truly effectual control over our lives, we need God’s power to be in control.

“Power from on high”

Just before Jesus’ ascension to heaven, He said to His disciples, “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you”

(Acts 1:8). Luke 24:49 adds that the disciples were to wait in Jerusalem until they received this “power from on high.”

Indeed, 10 days later when 120 of Christ’s disciples were together observing the annual festival of Pentecost, suddenly “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit” and God’s power was spectacularly demonstrated (Acts 2:1-4).

A vast crowd of people gathered about, and Peter explained to them what a person must do to receive God’s Spirit: “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission [forgiveness] of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

What are the benefits of having the Holy Spirit? There are many, but of crucial importance is that it enables spiritual understanding — the capacity to truly understand the Bible (1 Corinthians 2:9-14).

Then, once we have spiritual “knowledge,” we must add “self-control” (2 Peter 1:5-8). In other words, God’s Spirit imparts the strength of character to apply and live by that knowledge. And as it transforms us, we can increasingly see the effects or “fruit” of having God’s Spirit within us.

The aim of discipline through discipleship

What is the purpose of parental discipline? It should be to teach a child to exercise self-discipline. The self-discipline gradually becomes a good habit that is valuable throughout life.

Jesus Christ wants you to be His disciple. He said, “If you obey my teaching, you are really my disciples” (John 8:31, Good News Bible). Therefore, discipleship includes learning the self-discipline of

obedience. And that has great rewards! Choose to follow Christ—choose to be His disciple!

Jesus also said, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me” (Luke 9:23). Jesus was not suggesting penance, asceticism or a monastic life. But very often, we need to say no to selfish desires in order to say yes to God’s will.

God will not take away a person’s free will to make choices in life. But as long as you keep inviting Him into your life, He will empower you “to will and to act according to His good purpose” (Philippians 2:13, NIV).

Two proverbs draw a stark contrast between not having self-control and the priceless value of having it. The first says, “Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control” (Proverbs 25:28, NIV). He is defenseless and doomed to defeat.

The second states: “It is better to be patient than powerful. It is better to win control over yourself than over whole cities” (Proverbs 16:32, GNB).

As with all of us, certainly your biggest spiritual enemy has been yourself. But take heart. With God’s great help, you can increasingly conquer the enemy!

Each of us must rule over self before we can, as promised to those who overcome in Revelation 3:21 and Revelation 20:6, reign with Christ in His Kingdom!

Application/Activity

This week's application is two-fold. First, continue to read through Proverbs as we have done last week. Begin with Chapter 15 and 16 on Wednesday, 17 and 18 on Thursday, 19 and 20 on Friday, 21 and 22 on Saturday, 23-25 on Sunday, 26-28 on Monday and 29-31 on Tuesday. Also, pick one day (preferably a day that you are home all day) and perform a 24 hour fast. Drink plenty of water. When you get hungry, and YOU WILL, that is your cue to pray to God for strength. You absolutely know you will not die nor suffer any harmful effects by not eating for a 24-hour time period. As our lesson has stated, do not rely on your own willpower, it will fail. Instead, rely on God's power to make it all the way through.

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