

9. The Fruit of Self-control

1 Corinthians 9:25-27 & Galatians 5:23

Intro

Lolo Jones is an Olympic track and field star who competed in the London Olympic Games in 2012. But you know what was really hard for Jones? It was keeping her virginity intact for her future husband. On HBO's Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel, Jones talked about her struggles:

"It's just something, a gift that I want to give to my husband. But please understand this journey has been hard. If there are virgins out there, I just want to let them know, the hardest thing I've ever done in my life—harder than training for the Olympics, harder than graduating from college—has been to stay a virgin before marriage."

Jones adds, "I've been tempted. I've had guys tell me, like, 'Hey you know if you have sex it will help you run faster.'" She joked that her response has been: "If you marry me, then yeah."

(Source: Rene Lynch, "Lolo Jones: Olympian Says She's a Virgin" Los Angeles Times May 23, 2012).

That is very rare this day and age to maintain your virginity. Promiscuity is rampant everywhere. Promiscuity, by the way, means having sexual relations with a number of partners on a casual basis. We live in a time of moral relativism or a post-modern world, where people want to be free to do whatever they feel like doing. Many people struggle to control their feelings, finances, anger, behaviors, worries, lusts and relationships. They are not governing themselves well and the consequences are destructive and damaging.

Without self-control we are prisoners to the sinful nature's tendencies. The Apostle Paul warns: "*The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*" (Gal. 5:19-21).

We need the Spirit's empowering to experience victory over the temptations of the world, Satan and our own sinful nature.

Defining Self-Control

Self-control is the ability to keep one's self in check. It is restraining passions and appetites. The Greek root for the word "self-control" means, "to get a hold of" or "to get a grip on."

To the Greeks self-control was the proper ordering and balancing of the individual. The well-known Greek philosopher Aristotle once said, "*I count him braver who overcomes his desires than him who conquers his enemies; for the hardest victory is the victory over self.*"

Plato, another philosopher, believed that our animal urges must be governed or else they will produce "*a feverish state in the soul, a city of pigs which knows no limits.*"

To be self-controlled is to not live in bondage to the desires and lust of the sinful nature. My body is a good servant but it can be a miserable master.

But the reality is that we all know that we can't control ourselves simply through our own willpower or self-determination. The Apostle Paul speaks of our dilemma in Romans 7:18: "*I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good but I cannot carry it out.*"

Paul gives us a fuller meaning of self-control in 1 Corinthians 9:25-27, “*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.*”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.”*

In this passage, Paul contrasts exercising control over his body with running “aimlessly” in verse 26. He argues that athletes exercise self-control because they have a clearly defined purpose or goal. They cannot afford to be distracted by every desire that comes along. Exercise control over the body.

Therefore we can define self-control as the control of self by the Spirit for the sake of the gospel. In 1 Cor. 9:23 Paul says, “*I do this for the sake of the gospel...*”

The virtue of self-control is one that we long for, yet few attain it. In fact, most people do not even try because they don’t want to say “no” to themselves. Self-control, while it is highly respected and greatly desired, is tough. It is saying no to one’s self when self gets out of control.

The Danger of Losing Control

In Proverbs 25:28 we read, “*Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control.*” This verse provides a dramatic description of the individual living out of control.

In biblical times one of the main sources of strength and protection for a city consisted in the building and maintaining of its walls. A broken down wall was considered a breach in security. Also a city with walls in disrepair was a city with a shameful reputation.

That’s one of the reasons why Nehemiah was so motivated to rebuild the broken walls of Jerusalem in the book of Nehemiah. Those who lived in the capital were in “*great trouble and disgrace*” (Neh. 1:3) because the wall of Jerusalem was broken down. It was open to attack and ultimate destruction.

The person who lacks self-control is like a city that has no effective defense. They are not able to resist those things that can destroy their lives and the lives of others. They are weak and vulnerable. Likewise, when we forfeit the fruit of self-control, we are opening ourselves to great risk and harm and we are also feeble in the hands of the enemy, Satan.

Example of Samson

One example of a person who lived an out-of-control life is Samson, found in Judges 14-16. He is a portrait of self-destruction. As one of Israel’s judges, the Spirit of God empowered him. He was known for his strength and led God’s people for 20 years. One of his primary tasks was to protect his people from the influence of the pagan Philistines. But because he did not have self-control he instead visited Philistine prostitutes and eventually told Delilah about the secret of his power. Lacking sexual self-control, he soon lost not only his hair (the source of his strength), but his power and his life.

Unfortunately, some of us have allowed our walls to be broken down. Instead of governing our desires and appetites, most of us are “bingers” by nature. Some of us binge on food, some on work, some on inappropriate internet sites and TV programs. Others binge on sports, shopping, over spending, over drinking and sexual lust.

It’s so crucial for us to keep a watch on how we’re doing. In Proverbs 4:23 it says, “*Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.*”

Areas of Losing Self-Control in Proverbs

- Uncontrolled lust: “*Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes. For an...adulteress preys on your very life.*” (Proverbs 6:25-26)
- Uncontrolled spending: “*In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has.*” (Proverbs 21:20)
- Uncontrolled ambition: “*Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint.*” (Proverbs 23:4)
- Uncontrolled drinking: “*Whose heart is filled with anguish and sorrow? Who is always fighting and quarreling? Who is the man with bloodshot eyes and many wounds? It is the one who spends long hours in the taverns, drinking new mixtures.*” (Proverbs 23:29-30)
- Uncontrolled anger: “*A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control.*” (Proverbs 29:11)

Some time ago I saw a sign on an office door that was good. It said, “*If you could kick the person responsible for most of your troubles, you wouldn't be able to sit down for weeks.*” The whole issue of self-control starts with self.

People who diet sometimes feel that just thinking about food can make you fat. Dr. Alan Xenakis in his book “*Why Doesn't My Funny Bone Make Me Laugh?*,” says dieters may be right. In certain people, thinking about food increases their insulin level, which makes them feel hungry. Thinking about food doesn't actually add weight, but an increased appetite may.

Our thoughts stimulate other appetites as well, appetites that can lead to sin. To control our conduct we must first control our thoughts.

Conclusion

These fruits we have been talking about are difficult for us to produce by our own efforts. As a matter of fact we can't. Only the Holy Spirit can give us the power. If we are filled with the Spirit and walk in the Spirit we will be able to manifest them in our everyday living. Without the Spirit we will fail miserably. That's why Paul says in Ephesians 5:18, “*Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.*”

To be filled with the Spirit means every day, and continually. It is to allow the Holy Spirit to control our lives.

Under Christ's Control

Ultimately, controlling ourselves is about being controlled by Christ. When “*the love of Christ controls us*” (2 Cor. 5:14), when we embrace the truth that He is our sovereign, and God has “*left nothing outside His control*” (Heb. 2:8); we can rely not just on our own strength but we can find strength and power in the person of Jesus.

Christian self-control is not finally about bringing our bodily passions under our own control, but under the control of Christ by the power of His Spirit.

Because self-control is a gift, produced in and through us by God's Spirit, Christians can and should be the people on the planet most hopeful about growing in self-control. We are, after all, believers of the most self-controlled man in the history of the world – Jesus Christ!

In Christ, we have a source for true self-control far beyond that of our feeble selves.