

Fighting for Self-control, part 4 of **From Election to Perfection**
October 26, 2013

Good morning! Boy it sure is a big difference standing up here versus sitting over there listening to the sermon. No, I do appreciate Pastor Robin giving me the opportunity to speak this morning. I must say that it was a bit intimidating when he initially asked me to preach – I told him “let’s call it talking instead of preaching,” because I can definitely talk....that runs in my family! But you know, I think any one of us can talk about how we’ve seen the Lord work in our lives. Especially in this sermon series, I think we can all empathize with these Christian traits and where we specifically need to improve. For the topic or theme today of “Fighting for Self-control,” I think I need this sermon more than most of you....so even if ya’ll don’t get anything out of it, I will...and already have just in preparation.

Well, I’ve been in the United States Army for about 17 years now. Within those 17 years, Lindy and I dated for about two years, engaged for a year and married now for almost 13 years. We’ve moved about seven times with four deployments mingled in there to Kuwait, Afghanistan and Iraq. Along the way we’ve had three children and most of them came right after one of those deployments. But moving every two years, you realize that you only have a little time to really get out and enjoy your surroundings. So we try to capitalize on any opportunities to get out! Being in MD is no exception – we’ve been apple picking up at Baughers Farm in Westminster, D.C. several times to the Smithsonian, camping at Solomon’s Island, and most recently we went camping at Assateague Island over on the Eastern Shore. And on one of those days, we went to Ocean City and strolled down the famous boardwalk, did the Ferris wheel, and ate some delicious seafood. And it was hot that day right at the end of summer! I mean one of those scorchers! And what do you do when you’re hot? You get some ice cream.

So we went to one of those old ice cream parlors right beside the arcade, probably been there as long as the boardwalk has. Well, everyone got a few scoops of this creamy, hand dipped, peanut butter flavored, chocolate chip cookie dough, rocky road, you name it! And as soon as the kids get it, they start slowly licking their ice cream cones. Meanwhile, I’m just sitting here in the 95 degree heat, watching it melt and just drip all down their hands/arms. To make matters worse, the wind starts blowing down the boardwalk and the ice cream is blowing on to other people passing by! This was so hard for me just to watch...I mean I was just frustrated....I just wanted to snatch that ice-cream cone from my kids and either eat it up in two or three bites or throw it away!

So that leads us to our scripture reading from 2 Peter 1:5-8. (NIV) For this very reason, 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, brotherly-kindness; and to brotherly-kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The very concept of "self-control" implies a fight between a divided self. That basically our "self" produces desires that we need to "control" verses satisfy.

This fight started way back in the Garden of Eden – man and woman desired to be like God, so they ate of the fruit, although they knew better.

Paul explains it further to the Galatians when he says "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish." Galatians 5:17 (NKJV) He goes on to say "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, reveling....that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God." Galatians 5:19-21 (NKJV)

In Luke 9:23, Jesus says we should "deny ourselves" and "take up our cross daily," and "follow him." To me that means that this is a daily battle that each and every one of us face.....our "self" produces desires that should be "denied" or "controlled."

Self-control and temperance are used interchangeably depending on your biblical translation. Webster defines self-control as restraint exercised over one's own impulses, emotions, or desires. Temperance is defined as habitual moderation in regard to the indulgence of the natural appetites and passions. The most common Greek word for self-control or temperance is en-kra-teia. Its root meaning is "power over oneself" or "self-mastery." So self-control, in a broad sense, is mastery over our passions. The opposite of self-control is self-indulgence.

So I would ask you this morning - what are your desires, passions, or pleasures in life? Do you like to eat? Do you like to drink? Do you like retirement? How about traveling? Do you like working? Gambling? Being intimate? Fishing? Hunting? Hanging out with friends? How about just being alone in your favorite recliner? How about all those other things Paul talks about in Galatians?

Just think back to that ice cream cone on a hot summer day. Al had a picture of a parfait last week, but I've got an ice cream cone – seems we're on a dessert kick.....so what is your favorite ice cream in life and how to you exercise self-control so you don't just gobble it up in two bites?

I know we all remember the target Jim showed us the first week of the series and now we all kinda understand what self-control is, let's explore what it means to be full of self-control, void of self-control, and how we can become more effective Christians all the while getting closer to where God wants us near the center of that target.

Part 1: Full of Self-control

When I think of someone full of self-control, an athlete or soldier comes to mind. Words such as rigor, vigor, loyalty, respect, diligence, duty, honor, integrity, discipline, training, selfless service, persistence, and personal courage are associated with these two vocations. In fact, that is exactly how Paul explains it to us in his letter to the Corinthians....

1 Corinthians 9:25-27 (NLT) All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. 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."

One of the best examples of a soldier/athlete can be seen every year on ESPN called the Best Ranger Competition. Coined as the "Ranger Olympics," this grueling three day continuous competition places extreme demands on each two-man buddy teams' physical, mental,

technical and tactical skills as a U.S. Army Ranger. Some of the events include day/night land navigation, an airborne jump, 20 + miles of road marches carrying over 50 lbs on your back, buddy runs, combat water survival assessment, stress shoot, and an obstacle course.

I just got a taste of this when I went through Ranger School almost 15 years ago, but I'm fortunate enough to work with many of these Best Ranger Competition winners from the 1990s and talking to them, there is a common theme – training! Many of them started a year out training and preparing for it....and they're already in pretty good shape! There is an important lesson for us here: these buddy teams, commonly referred to as "Ranger Buddies" must start and finish together with their respective rifles – you can see that in the picture as they cross the finish line. And throughout this competition, they have to continuously encourage one another and maintain extreme stamina even with little food and no sleep.

When I ran the Army Ten Miler a few weeks ago right through the middle of Washington D.C. I didn't just get up one morning and say, "HmMMM, think I'll go out and run 10 miles today." No, I started with two, then moved up to four, then up to 6, etc. Now when I hit mile seven, I was starting to hurt a little so I said a prayer and asked for a just a little extra motivation and guess what? I run into a classmate of mine that I hadn't seen in over 10 years! This is out of almost 35,000 people! Now this was a guy who lost his temper very easily and would curse and yell at you and just seemed angry at the world back in college. Well after we greeted each other with a sideways hug while running, he said "Josh, I want to apologize if I ever said or did anything that might've offended you. You see God got a hold of my heart and hit me upside the head with a holy 2x4." So as we're running, he's telling me about his family and how he is leading a men's' discipleship training class...he was encouraging me for this sermon today.....and before you know it, those last three miles just breezed by, like they didn't even happen....it was like we had a running prayer meeting!

My point is self-control requires intense training! And just like those in the Best Ranger Competition, we as Christians have the ultimate Ranger Buddy called the Holy Spirit! And he sends other Ranger Buddies along the way to encourage us! And the choice weapon or rifle is the word of God! In Ephesians 6:17, it says "Take up the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." Now most Soldiers nowadays carry a rifle versus a sword but to me they're very similar. They're both weapons that can be used to deter, protect, and fight.

So how do we train ourselves? First you must anticipate the greater reward....and that is heaven – eternal life with our heavenly father! That is at the finish line! And our reward is eternal versus temporal. You may not have to jump out of an airplane, but you may have to witness to a family member - that was one of the hardest things I had to do was talk to my grandfather after he had left my grandmother for over a year to pursue his own desires. Or you may have to go somewhere very austere outside of your comfort zone. You may feel obligated to lead Sunday School or a bible study.

And you should always have your rifle (or sword) with you at all times...remember that this is for deterrence, protection and fighting. You've got to have your finger on the trigger just in case it's needed. In 1 Peter 5:8, it says "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."

I had a dear friend who had a problem with idle time so the Lord convicted him to write down scripture that addressed a specific temptation. The scripture would go on a note card inside an envelope and the temptation would be listed on the outside. Given time, he eventually memorized most of the scripture he needed either to shoot at the devil when tempted or to witness to others when an opportunity presented itself. That's an example of a very practical step to train ourselves.

I've also learned that you have to apply the knowledge that Al spoke about last week. Lots of people have read the Bible, but are you prepared to apply scripture to a specific situation. You're usually not going to have time to dig out your bible when an opportunity presents itself to witness to someone. This is just in my limited experience.

BLUF is that we must show improvement and progression as Christians. When you are convicted to do something by the Holy Spirit – DO IT! Just last week I was talking to our daughter, Cady about becoming a Christian....and now today I'm talking to all of you. This is a big jump for me but I felt an obligation from my Ranger Buddy. So I ask you today where are you in your training program? Are you leveraging your Ranger Buddies and rifle?

Who has been to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, raise your hand? Those Soldiers from the 3rd Infantry Regiment march back and forth guarding the tomb day and night, in sun, snow and rain...even blizzards and hurricanes....and they are unwavering in their focus and discipline regardless of the conditions.

Fortunately we have a great biblical example of one who practiced self-control in the pits, in slavery, in prison, as a house attendant, and even as the number two man in all of Egypt! We're talking about Joseph. Steve Farrar sums it up in his book "Finishing Strong." Joseph was stripped of his cloak, but not his character. Joseph was stripped of his family but not his future. Joseph was stripped of his position but not his purity. Joseph was stripped of his accomplishments but not his attitude.

I wonder if our "self" would have done the same thing while in times of disparity and prosperity. In Genesis 39:21, it says "the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden." Just knowing that the Lord is with us in the good times and bad times, throughout the seasons of our lives should help us maintain focus and stay on course. Because you know the second you lose that focus, Satan will kick that ladder out from underneath you and abandon you. Like Joseph, in our life, self-control requires focus and discipline regardless of the conditions.

One of my favorite scriptures that helps me stay focused is out is from Joshua 1:8-9. And I've probably got a hundred letters from my parents while deployed with this verse inside: "Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. 9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." (NIV)

Part 2: Void of Self-control

What does it mean to be void of self-control? Proverbs 25:28 (NKJV) says "Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down without walls."

These are pictures of the great city of Babylon. I had an opportunity to go there back in 2003 when our unit was deployed to Baghdad, Iraq. You can see the top left depicts what it would've looked like around 600 B.C. during the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar. That portion of Babylon has been rebuilt with the high walls and strong fortifications.

However, there is another portion of the ancient city that has been left in ruins you can see on the bottom....almost looks like big piles of rocks/bricks.

Walls represent protection and security. When we were deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, we had these places called Forward Operating Bases or FOBs. It was a heavily fortified outpost where Soldiers would go to rest, eat, and refit in preparation for the next mission. You could somewhat let your hair down and relax knowing that there were walls and guards between you and the enemy.

The church today is where we go today to recharge our batteries as Christians. And it may not necessarily be physical walls. We need the fellowship, friendship, encouragement, love...we need to praise and worship together...and to be spiritually fed....before we get back out there in the combat zone or mission field. You see, we cannot "rule our spirit" or achieve self-control without God being in control. Your church family is a key enabler to help you accomplish that.

So I ask how strong are your walls today? Are they fortified or crumbling?

Let me share a true story with you...there was this young boy who became a believer when he was about 8 years old. And this boy had true excitement about what God was doing in his life and he talked about it, sang about it, and even played it on the piano.....songs like "At Calvary." Do you remember the lyrics?

Years I spent in vanity and pride,
Caring not my Lord was crucified,
Knowing not it was for me He died
On Calvary.

About a year after he was saved, he was exposed to pornography by an older boy in the church. These images plagued him and resurfaced again years down the road even in his marriage. Very quickly this lapse of judgment had spiraled out of control and caused the young man to be disillusioned, confused, and even addicted. It severely impacted his testimony and he felt ashamed to tell others about Jesus while he was struggling with this terrible sin of lust. If you can picture an EKG, he was flat-lining for Christ and the walls were crumbling. For many years he avoided getting too close to others within his church, until one day a Christian friend had the courage to tell him that he too was struggling with the same sin. Together they sought counseling and truly repented of their sin! Now he has finally gained self-control after years of training, focus, and discipline. He may be tempted but he is no longer tormented by it.

Now lust is just one of the many things that can spiral out of control in your life. Paul mentioned several that I showed you earlier....but I use lust because it is so prevalent in our culture today just like it was thousands of years ago.

In Titus 3:3 it says, "For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another."

Instead, back in Titus 2:12 it says “Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world.”

We see lust and pleasures used side by side – but lust alone is mentioned 53 times in the KJV! You heard Al last week talk about the pastors and church leaders that were down in Jacksonville, FL for a conference and more than half had rented an X-rated movie! When I go to a hotel room, I immediately put the back of a chair up against the TV....I'd rather fill my time with other things. I've got all my internet sites saved under “favorites,” and to those are the only sites I go. I do not go hang out with the guys after work at the bar because I do not want to satisfy my self's desires or pleasures, but control it.

In Matthew 5:29 (NIV), it says “If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.” That is pretty extreme; however, the character Kirk Cameron plays in the movie “Fireproof” realized that his computer was putting their marriage in jeopardy. So what did he do? He took a baseball bat to it! But some of you don't have worry about that because you have more self-control than he or I. I remember my dad could walk into a fish fry and be the only person not cursing and drinking. And people would come up and ask him why. And he would tell them about his Godly convictions.

What are the negative impacts to our testimony when we lose self-control? Our mission in Matt 28:19 is “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” It is hard to do that if we've lost control in our lives and something else has consumed our time, money and efforts. BLUF is that loss of self-control can wreak havoc on our effectiveness and testimony.

Part 3: His Divine Power and Promises

I'm sure I'm not the only one that has had issues with self-control.....we probably all have somewhere in which we are missing the mark.

The good thing is that we have a lifeline called the Savior, who has given us divine power and great and precious promises.

Just a few verses back in 2 Peter 1:3-4 it says “By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who called us to himself by means of his marvelous glory and excellence. And because of his glory and excellence, he has given us great and precious promises...”

I've witnessed God's power crushing that innate fear. There's no way Josh could've made it through those situations without God's power....and it was a fight! In 2 Timothy 1:7 (NKJV) it says “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”

And Pastor Robin just did a series on all the promises that God provides....envision and anticipate that finish line at the end of our race...and the prize we're going to claim....it could be today or it could be 20 years from now.

In Philippians 3:12-16 (NKJV) it says "... but I press on...forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

In Colossians 1:12-14 (NKJV) it says "... giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood,[a] the forgiveness of sins."

In conclusion, I ask you, have we let pleasures and desires of this world control us or are we suppressing them through God's amazing power? If your desires are more for the things of this world versus glorifying God, then you may be spiraling out of control.... Here's how John Piper puts it:

"If you don't feel strong desires for the manifestation of the glory of God, it is not because you have drunk deeply and are satisfied. It is because you have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Your soul is stuffed with small things, and there is no room for the great." - John Piper

What a great illustration! Are we drinking deeply from the fountain that will always quench your thirst? Because the pleasures and desires of this world will only temporarily satisfy and crowd your soul.

As Charles Spurgeon put it, we must have temperance of lips, temperance of heart, temperance of thought, and temperance of life.

There is hope! With God's help, we CAN exercise self-control and be effective Christians! And it doesn't matter how out of control your life is! Look at Paul!

In 1 Timothy 1:12-14, he writes, "And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy... And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus."

In Ephesians 2:3-5, he writes, "Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love.....even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved)"

See the transition? We start out at blasphemers and fulfilling the desires of the flesh and mind. THEN God, who is full of love, extends his mercy and grace to us. I go back to the chorus of "At Calvary"

Mercy there was great, and grace was free;
Pardon there was multiplied to me;
There my burdened soul found liberty,
At Calvary.

Like Paul, if you have been rescued or delivered, give God the glory! If you have been in the fight for self-control and come out on top, give God the glory...because there is no way you could've done it alone. In our scripture from 2nd Peter, faith comes first. So if you have not accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, today can be that day! And you can start living an abundant life where God is in control and you can suppress those evil desires...and you too at the end of the race can be told "Well done, good and faithful servant.....Enter into the joy of your lord.' (Matthew 25:23)

