

**Pursue Self-Control**  
**May 5, 2013**

(Robin Shifflett)

This series of sermons has been about how to be happier in your life. We have focused on things that will contribute to making a happier life for yourself. If you've missed one of the sermons in this series, they are available for reading on our church website: EBCGambrills.org, under the "Resources" tab.

Everyone wants to be happy. Everyone is pursuing happiness. Yet most people aren't as happy as they would like to be. Deep happiness is illusive. In magazines, newspapers, books, and online you can find lots of answers to finding happiness. Some are just opinions, but others are based on real science.

Scientists have taken up the study of what happiness is and how we can achieve it. For example, let me read an excerpt from an article written by the staff at the Mayo Clinic. This concerns what they have observed about creating happiness in your life.

*"Although you may have thought, as many people do, that happiness comes from being born rich or beautiful or living a stress-free life, the reality is that people who have wealth, beauty or less stress are not happier on average than those of who don't enjoy those blessings."*

*"Only 10 percent or so of the variation in people's reports of happiness can be explained by differences in their circumstances. It appears that the bulk of what determines happiness is due to personality and — more importantly — thoughts and behaviors that can be changed. So, yes, you can learn how to be happy — or at least happier."*

And then they give a short list of five things to do to become happier.

1. **Invest in relationships:** Surround yourself with happy people.
2. **Express gratitude:** Gratitude is more than saying thank you. It's a sense of wonder, appreciation...
3. **Cultivate optimism:** Develop the habit of seeing the positive side of things.
4. **Find your purpose:** People who strive to meet a goal or fulfill a mission — whether it's growing a garden, caring for children or finding one's spirituality — are happier than those who don't have such aspirations.
5. **Live in the moment:** Don't postpone joy waiting for a day when your life is less busy or less stressful. That day may never come. Instead, look for opportunities to savor the small pleasures of everyday life. Focus on the positives in the present moment, instead of dwelling on the past or worrying about the future.

(Stress Management - **How to be happy: Tips for cultivating contentment;**  
<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/how-to-be-happy/MY01357>)

So the Mayo Clinic agrees, in part, with several of the sermons in this series. They have observed the truth of God's Word in people's lives.

The subject today is one thing that every list has in common. They don't all say it. But it is certainly implied on every list. There is one thing that every person wanting to be

happier MUST do in order to be happy. One of the wisest men who ever lived speaks of it in the Bible.

**Proverbs 25:28 (NIV)**

Like a city whose walls (of protection) are broken down is a man who lacks self-control.

The one thing that every list about how to be happy implies is self-control. Self-control is implied because every list has suggestions of what to think and then do to become happier. Every list implies that you will practice the self-control to do the things on the list. You have to practice self-control if you are going to make the changes that will make a happier life.

You aren't going to become happier by doing what you have always done. If you continue to do what you've been doing you will end no happier than you are now. Whatever the situation you are currently living in, it is due to your actions and inactions. **You are living the life you created. If you want a happier life, you have to create the conditions of that happier life.**

We do this by focusing on the attitudes and actions necessary for a happier life, the thoughts and behaviors that we need to change.

In a department store a young husband was minding the baby while his wife was making a purchase. The infant was wailing, but the father seemed quite controlled and unperturbed as he quietly said, "Easy now, Albert. Control your temper, Albert." A woman passing by remarked, "Sir, I must congratulate you! You seem to know just how to speak to a baby." "Baby nothing!" he said. "I'm Albert!"

Self-control starts when we choose to control our thinking and feeling so we can control our actions and behaviors. So God instructs us to do that very thing.

**1 Peter 1:13 (NIV)** Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled;  
(1 Thessalonians 5:6-8; 2 Timothy 1:7; Titus 2:2, 5-6, 12; 1 Peter 4:7; 5:8; 2 Peter 1:5-9)

Self-control starts in the mind and then carries over into behavior. Focus on truth and desired outcomes. Then take the actions necessary to see those outcomes realized. If you want to be happier, you need to change your thoughts and actions.

Now many people claim to have trouble with self-control. They find self-control to be very hard. The truth is, there is a secret to self-control. And I'm going to let you in on it this morning. Understanding this secret could be the key that helps you pursue self-control and brings you greater happiness. This will change your life. If enough of us do this, it could change our church. It could change your family. It will change your present, and if you keep it up, will definitely change your future.

So here is the secret to self-control. Here is the secret to self-discipline. Are you ready? Here it is. **The secret to self-control is to make yourself do what needs doing.** The secret to self-control is to make yourself do what needs doing.

Self-control isn't that hard. You all know how to do it. You all know how to make yourself do what needs doing. If you have had a steady job, the same job, for a year,

you know how to do this. You make yourself get up in the morning and go to work, and arrive on time. I know this because if you consistently arrived late, they would have fired you. The only reason you may not have gotten fired is that your boss didn't practice the self-control necessary to fire you. But most places will let you go if you keep showing up late.

You who are students, you show up on time for school, consistently. You do it most every day. It isn't that hard. The alarm goes off, or a parent wakes you, and you make yourself get out of bed. You make yourself dress, eat, grab your books, and head out the door.

When you find yourself consistently running late for work or school you adjust your schedule. You get up earlier or you get some of your morning preparation done the night before. You make your lunch the night before. You set out what you are going to wear the next day. You carefully decide what you need to take with you to work or school and get it altogether, setting it by the door, ready to go.

You know the secret to self-control. You simply make yourself do what needs doing. Apply the same self-control to the rest of your day that you use to getting to work or school on time. Why is it that when you don't have parents, school administrators, or a boss holding you accountable for doing what needs doing, you let yourself slide? You are only cheating yourself out of the benefits of self-control.

#### **Benefits to self-control:**

I am a fellow struggler when it comes to self-control. But I am making progress. For example, I became convinced years ago that I needed to exercise. I have tried various times of day to exercise, and what works best for me is in the mornings.

Now, I do not like to exercise and am often tempted to just skip it. And sometimes I do. Sometimes I fail to make myself exercise. Here is what I have observed in myself with self-control and exercise.

I experience two negative consequences when I skip my exercises. The first consequence is guilt the rest of the day. The second consequence is that I find I am less self-controlled about other things the rest of the day. I more easily give in to snacks, to laziness, to letting chores slide. That leads to more guilt, more stress.

However, when I make myself exercise, especially when I really don't want to, I am very glad I did when it is over. There is a satisfaction, a joy, at having done something that needed doing. In addition, I have more energy to face my day. But there is one more positive and this is the first benefit of self-control.

#### **1) Some self-control leads to more self-control.**

When I make myself exercise in the morning, I find more inner strength to be self-controlled when facing other temptations during the day. I say to myself, "Hey you resisted the temptation not to exercise. You can resist this temptation too." And more often than not, I resist temptations the rest of the day. This is the first benefit of practicing self-control. Look at the next one.

## 2) Do the hard or unpleasant things first for a double blessing.

Let's say that you are served a plate of food with two items on it. One item you like a lot. The second item you don't like much at all. Some people eat the food they like the best first. They avoid till the last the food they don't like at all.

This may be your approach to life. You put off the things you don't like to do or that are hard to do. So that report, that special project, that term paper, cleaning out the garage, apologizing to someone, these kinds of things and more, you put off.

This is procrastination. I am good at procrastinating. I put off doing things that I find hard or unpleasant to do.

Some people put off eating the food they don't like until last. There are other people, though, who eat first the food they do not like. This brings a double blessing. Once they are past the unpleasant food, they have the joy of eating next the food they like, and the added joy of having taken care of the food they did not like. When you eat first the food you like, you think to yourself, "Oh this is good. Yeah, but that's coming up. That nasty stuff is still sitting over there waiting for me." So the dread of the nasty dulls the joy of the good.

It would be so much more enjoyable to eat the food we like knowing that the food we don't like is gone. A preacher of long ago said it this way.

*No unwelcome tasks become any the less unwelcome by putting them off till tomorrow. It is only when they are behind us and done, that we begin to find that there is a sweetness to be tasted afterwards, and that the remembrance of unwelcome duties unhesitatingly done is welcome and pleasant. Accomplished, they are full of blessing, and there is a smile on their faces as they leave us. Undone, they stand threatening and disturbing our tranquility, and hindering our communion with God. If there be lying before you any bit of work from which you shrink, go straight up to it, and do it at once. The only way to get rid of it is to do it.*

-Alexander MacLaren (1826–1910), Scottish preacher

Do the term paper this month instead of dreading it this month and doing it next month. I wish I had learned that lesson in college. Do the chore you hate most first thing in the morning and get it over and done with. The rest of the day will be so much more enjoyable if you do. Give God praise all the day.

## 3) It earns the respect of others.

Let's say that you are in a meeting, at school, work, or church, and everyone on the team is given an assignment. Do your assignment as soon as you possibly can. In addition to the benefits already mentioned, others will look at you with respect. They will admire your self-control and commitment to the work of the group. They will see that you are a person of good character. They will know you are dependable. They will also know God was part of it. Remember that self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit. Therefore Jesus will use your self-control as a witness to attract others to Himself. God wants you to be self-controlled, in His power, and to His glory.

Now I am sure some of you have already raised your defenses against this idea of making yourself do what needs doing. You've got lots of excuses for avoiding such action. And they aren't new. You've been using them for years. You tell yourself, and the Holy Spirit, if He is in you, why you aren't going to do what needs doing.

Then you have the audacity to complain that life isn't as happy as you think it should be. Make the connection between your lack of self-control and your lack of happiness. They are connected.

If you aren't willing to make a habit of self-control you will never, NEVER, achieve the kind of life you should have as a follower of Jesus Christ. You have to make yourself do what needs doing. And you know how to do it. In addition, if you are a Christian, God has put His spirit in you to give you the power to be self-controlled. You have to make the choice and follow-up.

So pursue happiness. Do it by pursuing self-control. Pursue serving, pursue contentment, pursue humility, and first and foremost... pursue a right relationship with God by faith in Jesus Christ.

This last must be first. Pursue a right relationship with God by faith in Jesus Christ. You will never achieve the happiness God has for you apart from a right relationship with Him by faith in Jesus.

So today, right now, choose to receive Jesus as your savior and turn your life over to Him as your Lord.

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*“Educate your children to self-control, to the habit of holding passion and prejudice and evil tendencies subject to an upright and reasoning will, and you have done much to abolish misery from their future and crimes from society.”*

— Benjamin Franklin

*“Self-control is the chief element in self-respect, and self-respect is the chief element in courage.”*

— Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*