

5 / *The Dreaded Problem of Self-Control*

Adding the Self-Control to Our Knowledge

There has never been, and cannot be, a good life, without self-control.

Leo Tolstoy

Dying to ourselves is a powerful-sounding ideal —until we realize that we've never done it. And, we never plan to.

Now, on to a less exciting topic—*one that has almost no one clambering to hear the sermon, sit and read the book, or take the class*—self-control.

For those of you who read further, you are unique and special.

Not even the author. Here, I would state that if the subject matter didn't demand it, I myself would avoid it. What does that say about our hearts?

Dying to ourselves is a powerful-sounding ideal —until we realize that we've never done it. And we never plan to.

There seem to be two separate Greek word families that express this idea of self-control in the New Testament.

The first is enkrateia family, which is the ability to restrain one's emotions, impulses, or desires; it is the ability to tell yourself "no."

The second is sophron family, which is more the thought out calculated side of the idea above. Careful consideration of responsible action.

God works in Christians through the Holy Spirit in both of these ways. He, if we but submit to him, gives us the ability to calculate and think about moderation in actions and attitudes and also gives us the ability or power to make it such control happen.

Now, what's funny about this to me, is the idea in general, particularly as it is related to the Fruit of the Spirit. Paul states...

Galatians 5:22–23 (ESV) / ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, **self-control**; against such things there is no law.

Now, we see that these qualities flow from the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, that dwells in our hearts in contrast to the old nature, the flesh, that is contrary to God. What is being said here is that the Spirit gives us the ability to “say no” to the flesh, our old nature. This is very important. It's not as if the Spirit is taking over or overtaking our actions and attitudes, it is giving us the ability, should we choose to submit to His work, to move beyond our flesh.

This is not an automatic thing in our lives as Christians, it takes our focus and our submission. Why would Paul and the other writers of the NT push us in so many ways to action when it comes to the Spirit. Consider the following...

- Serve in the new way of the Spirit / Romans 7:6
- Walk in, or according to, the Spirit / Romans 8:4, Galatians 5:16
- Be led by the Spirit / Galatians 5:18
- Live by the Spirit / Romans 8:13, Galatians 5:25
- Set Your Minds on the Spirit / Romans 8:5-6
- Keep in step with the Spirit / Galatians 5:25
- Sow to the Spirit / Galatians 6:8
- Be filled with the Spirit / Ephesians 5:18
- Take up the Sword of the Spirit / Ephesians 6:17

So Christian, let us focus on Christ and his Spirit and let him live through us. Let us go through the great discipline of telling ourselves “no” and telling his Spirit “yes.” Work through the above, take time to study these things. They are infinitely important for our growth as Christians.

The Spirit's work makes obedience possible, not through the keeping of a list of actions, but From a Change of Nature

Remembering what we are talking about, we return to 2 Peter 1:5;

2 Peter 1:5–7 (ESV) / ⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with **self-control**...

Christians, we have salvation in Christ (2 Peter 1:1-4), to that faith we are to add virtue (the pursuit of excellence, improvement), to that we add knowledge of Lord (the Word of God), as we gain knowledge we add to that the ability to move from inaction to action; from disobedience to obedience. But it is more than just a checklist, God is changing us from the inside out.

Consider Peter's words below...

2 Corinthians 3:18 (ESV) / ¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Here we see God's action in our lives as we look at Jesus through unveiled, unblinded, eyes. We look at him as he is through the Word, and he transforms (changes our very natures) us into Christ's image, from degree to degree, all degrees glorious!

This is no checklist, this is no others-imposed list of rules, but God and his Word working on you and I — be careful not to try to take the place of the Holy Spirit in the lives of others.

This process we are talking about needs to be cultivated in our lives and allowed to work out.

Not only is God working in our lives giving us the desire to obey, and the power to do so, **we are commanded to be people of Self-Control**. This is the point where the truths of scripture contact the real aspects of our lives. Not just in "knowledge" but in action. This is the part James was so concerned with — do we believe God? If so, it should be evident in the things we do.

We see those commands in the following passages;

- This passage, **2 Peter 1:5-7**
- **Titus 2:6** / Younger men, be self-controlled...
- **1 Peter 4:7** / be self-controlled and sober-minded...

It is seen as a good thing in the following passages;

- **Acts 24:25** / Paul speaks of self-control in terms of the gospel
- **Galatians 5:23** / The fruit of the Spirit is... self-control
- **1 Corinthians 9:25** / Athletes use self-control, we should control ourselves.
- **1 Timothy 3:2** / Leaders and Elders are to be people who exercise self-control / See also, Titus 1:8

- **Titus 2:2, 2:5, 2:6** / People of all ages should have self-control evident in their lives.
- **2 Timothy 1:78** / God has given us a Spirit of love and self-control, not a spirit of fear.

As I was studying this idea, I was researching the word meaning, and one of the lexicons gave the following definition; restraint of one's emotions, impulses, or desires, self-control.⁵

This got me thinking over the those areas that we need to exercise self-control.

Self-Control over Emotions

Consider the following;

The Bible has much to say about the emotions we experience. Our emotions, like our minds and bodies, are influenced greatly by the fall of man into sin. As such, they are tainted by our sin natures. For the Christian, however, the Spirit of God who resides within us is capable of controlling our emotions and not allowing them to control us (Romans 8:9–11). From within believers, He directs, guides, comforts, and influences us, as well as produces in us the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23). The emotions we experience are then His emotions, produced in us so that we exhibit the benefits of His presence in our hearts—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Out-of-control emotions are the product of a heart which is not saturated with Scripture. The way to control our emotions is to control our minds, renewing them by the daily input of scriptural principles, the knowledge of God, and meditation on His attributes. Then the Holy Spirit, along with the Word of God, will bring about appropriate emotions based on truth. When we immerse ourselves in the only means of our sanctification—the Bible—we arm ourselves with the only effective weapon against out-of-control emotions. Then we can control our emotions instead of them controlling us. In themselves, emotions are not unbiblical, but they are indications of what is in our hearts (Luke 6:45).⁶

Self-Control over Impulses and Desires

Consider this;

The Bible calls us “overcomers” by faith (1 John 5:4). We are not at the mercy of our impulses. We can control them through the power of God in us (Ephesians 3:20). As we learn to say “no” to our sinful impulses, we may experience pain and a sense of deprivation, yet we trust the promise of Hebrews 12:11 that we will eventually reap “a harvest of righteousness and peace.”

⁵ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 274.

⁶ Got Questions Ministries, *Got Questions? Bible Questions Answered* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2002–2013).

In the struggle to control impulses, many people derive benefit from accountability partners or counselors. Sometimes, impulse control is made more difficult due to underlying anxiety or some type of brain abnormality. Overcoming an impulse involves both knowing God's truth and using the functional tools of behavior modification. Regardless of the exact methods we employ to control our impulses, we say with Paul, "I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14).⁷

⁷ Got Questions Ministries, *Got Questions? Bible Questions Answered* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2002–2013).

Activity Example / The Rubber Hitting the Road

VIRTUE / I determined an area of growth I need to consider;

I struggle with forgiving people who have sinned against me

Knowledge / I Researched and Found as Much Biblical Truth As I Could About the Aspect I Need to Work On

See the information I gathered from scripture in the last chapter. It was a lot, and it was convicting. But have I put it into action?

Self-Control / I need to consider whether I am willing to bend my own person (my intellect, my emotion, and my will) to match the will of God.

The Realm of Intellect / If you don't understand it, you might not fully obey it. Let your intellect rule your emotions.

Do I agree with the truth of these matters, particularly the truths in the study on forgiveness? Do I have Intellectual assent?

There is no ambiguity in Matthew 6:12-15 / Forgiveness with God is somewhat connected to our salvation. We should be people who forgive.

There is no ambiguity in Matthew 18:21-22 / Forgive many times, be prepared to forgive.

Matthew 18:21-22 / The parable is wildly convicting / Forgive others as God has forgiven you.

A bit of ambiguity here / Luke 17:3-4 / "if he repents" forgive him. What about this / a bit of research is necessary / If one wants forgiveness, it seems as if the proper rebuke should be part of the formula / repentance before forgiveness...

That brings up a very interesting question: Can you forgive somebody if they have not yet repented? No! The Bible says, "If your brother sin against you seventy times seven and come and say, 'I repent,' you forgive him" (Matthew 18:21-22). Now, if he's not repented, you can't forgive him. And yet, you cannot have a unforgiving spirit. So, what do you do in a case like that? Well, if he repents, you always forgive him. But, what if he continues to sin against you? You can't just say, "Well, I forgive—I forgive." Even Jesus didn't forgive like that. God doesn't forgive unless there's repentance. When Christ was on the cross, He didn't say to those who were nailing Him to the cross, "I forgive you." He

prayed for their forgiveness. I believe that prayer was answered on the Day of Pentecost for many of them.

Adrian Rogers, "Faithful in Fellowship, Part 2," in Adrian Rogers Sermon Archive (Signal Hill, CA: Rogers Family Trust, 2017), 1 Co 12:12-25.

How can I forgive if people don't repent and change their ways? I can forgive in my own spirit, but it makes fellowship hard.

Eph 4:32 / no issues here. Should be done / forgive as Christ forgave you / repentance a part of that.

Colossians 3:12-15 / Be ready to forgive. This is a great and convicting passage. I intend to have these characteristics before me at all times, and do desire to treat all people in these ways...

Compassionate / kind / humble / meek / patient / loving /

I intend to not let any of these things hinder my relationship with you, oh Lord, or let them get in the way of your ministry to others.

Do I have any nagging questions that I yet do not understand?

Still thinking about the idea of "if your brother repents, forgive him." I need to look at cross-referencing this. Matthew 18:15 / James 5:19 / But also Luke 11:4, forgive everyone who is indebted to us. / I guess three things must happen (1) if someone sins against you (2) you must confront them and be prepared to forgive them, and (3) if they refuse to repent we must not hold it against them, but it does become a wedge between our relationships. This is on the unrepentant.

Is there any barrier to my obedience from an intellectual standpoint?

No.

The Realm of Emotion / If it bothers your emotional side, there might be a reason; but, that reason might be that your emotions are not right. Don't completely ignore your emotions; sometimes, they accurately assess things.

How do I feel about the application(s) my study is pushing me toward? (Not that this should be an inhibitor, but it does inhibit. Reality is sometimes not so black and white as truth demands.)

I feel conflicted. I know that sometimes we should confront problems, but I also find that ignoring the problems is the current culture, so going along with the culture is easier by far.

Fear / I feel afraid of sharing my feelings with others, and I feel that others don't want to hear them.

Do these emotions erect barriers to my obedience? In what way? How must I deal with them?

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Are there positive things, Biblical things, I can do to remove this barrier of emotions?

Pray for those more / Remember that they are human / look for the good in those that have frustrated me / Believe in God's ability to change them and ME.

The Realm of Will / What is keeping you from acting?

Am I willing to submit to God when all is said and done, when I look at the truths of scripture?

While I am stubborn, I feel as if my desire to be unified with others is strong.

What am I holding back at the moment?

[Redacted]

When will I be willing to change that piece of my obedience? Ever?

I'm getting there!

What still do I need to move forward?

Perhaps a bit more time, and some proper dialogue.

An Activity for You /

VIRTUE / I determined an area of growth I need to consider;

Write it out:

Knowledge / I Researched and Found as Much Biblical Truth As I Could About the Aspect I Need to Work On

Refer to your study, see last Chapter:

Self-Control / I need to consider whether I am willing to bend my own person (my intellect, my emotion, and my will) to match the will of God.

The Realm of Intellect /

Do I agree with the truth of these matters, particularly the truths in the study on forgiveness? Do I have Intellectual assent?

Do I have any nagging questions that I yet do not understand?

Is there any barrier to my obedience from an intellectual standpoint?

The Realm of Emotion /

How do I feel about the application(s) my study is pushing me toward? (Not that this should be an inhibitor, but it does inhibit. Reality is sometimes not so black and white as truth demands.)

Do these emotions erect barriers to my obedience? In what way? How must I deal with them?

Are there positive things, Biblical things, I can do to remove this barrier of emotions?

The Realm of Will /

Am I willing to submit to God when all is said and done, when I look at the truths of scripture?

What am I holding back at the moment?

When will I be willing to change that piece of my obedience? Ever?

What still do I need to move forward?