

## Self-Control

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“The *fruit of the Spirit* is love, joy, peace, longsuffering (patience), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and *self-control*. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.” (*Galatians 5:22-25*)

Christianity addresses self-control in a fundamentally different way than the world does—both the pagan and the religious world.

Before I was a Christian, I was a pagan and did whatever pleased me. If you had asked me then if self-control was a desirable trait to have, I would have answered “yes.” Self-control then was basically telling myself “no” now so that I could get something even better for myself later. I desired to get a college education and a good job, so I had to hit the books and study hard now (delayed gratification) to get something better in the long run. I wanted praise for my muscular build, so self-control enabled me to beat my body with grueling workouts in hope of admiration later. Sexual self-control meant waiting until the time was ripe to seduce and gradually move in for the kill. Self-control was a delay mechanism to receive the greater good and avoid the greater trouble of shame or embarrassment. It basically was just another form of selfishness.

Self-control in religions and cults is also primarily different from true Christianity. Self-control is something in religion that is generated through one’s own will power to attain to a higher spiritual level and to be pleasing in God’s eyes— to warrant eternal life, salvation and rewards. Unfortunately, many churches teach a form of false Christianity as a religion that views religion in this way.

One example of a religion that focuses on self-control is the particularly "attractive" teaching of Buddhism, which has become popular lately in America. Indeed, the current craze of New Age beliefs finds its origin in Buddhism and Hinduism. Here's an overview of Buddhism related to our topic of self-control<sup>1</sup>: Buddhism has four noble truths and an eight-fold path to spiritual growth. According to Buddhism life is suffering, and suffering is caused by desire. If we cease desiring, we will cease suffering. To cease from desiring, we follow the Right View, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Concentration and Right Ecstasy. In relation to self-control, Right Effort is the emptying of the mind, directing your attention toward final liberation from the world of suffering. Right Ecstasy is achieved when all the sense experiences cease and universal knowledge is obtained. This release is obtained where we become one with the Impersonal, the state of Nirvana. It is often described as the blowing out of a candle. You lose all personality (“you” cease to exist) and awareness and merge into nothingness. Buddhism is atheistic, denying any need for God or gods—all power comes from within to attempt to change the inner self. In practice, countries

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<sup>1</sup> Material obtained from: Fast Facts on False Teachings, Ron Carlson/Ed Decker, p. 23-24

where Buddhism is the major religion, such as Thailand, are countries where we actually see many temples and idols contrary to the teaching of Siddhartha Guatama Buddha (circa 563-483 B.C.). In addition we see a society filled with licentiousness, sexual immorality and prostitution. Tell people that there is no God, and indeed, they will find their own way to still worship God or gods or sex or money or whatever. Vacuums don't work in the heart! As famous Chemist Louis Pasteur said, "In each man's heart is a God-shaped vacuum."

Buddhism sounds appealing to our ears at a basic level, doesn't it? Some Buddhists claim that Jesus was a Buddha, and copied many of his teachings from Siddhartha Gautama Buddha. After all, didn't Jesus say that you must deny yourself, just as Buddha did? Didn't Buddha fast for over 40 days?

Actually, there's a fundamental difference between Buddhism and Christianity on the issue of self-control. In Christianity, there isn't merely an emptying of self, but a filling with the Holy Spirit while self is being emptied. As the Bible promises, "Having believed (in Jesus), you were sealed with the Holy Spirit." (*Ephesians 1:13*)

A vessel cannot remain empty for long- self can never cease to exist without being replaced by something. This should be intuitively obvious to all of us, yet amazingly we often attack the lusts of the flesh through saying "no" to the flesh on our own will power. We say, "self, don't lust," and the more we tell ourselves not to lust, the more we lust. We say, "self, no more cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, food binges or shopping extravagances" and find that our desire just increased. If this weren't true, then why are there so many failed diets out there? We can never find self-control through the mere emptying of ourselves- we must be filled with the Holy Spirit.

One story of Jesus vividly illustrates the dangers of a person trying to clean their own "house" of sin without the power of the Holy Spirit of God: "When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none. Then he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first." (*Matthew 12:43-45*) The humbling truth of Jesus is this: we don't have the power to keep clean our own house! The more we try, the more desperate we get. We need His transforming power to transform us from the inside out.

Paul wrote of his misery as a legalistic Jew, bound by thousands of laws to restrain the flesh, before he found the answer to self-control and eternal life in Jesus Christ, "the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me...I delight in the law of God...but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God- through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (*Romans 7:24-27*) Have you in humility come to a point in life of realizing your complete inability to manage your flesh on your own strength? If not, then

the words of Christianity are foolishness to you. However, if you've come to a point of realizing your spiritual bankruptcy, your utter lack of self-control, you have come to a point where God can fill you with His power to transform you from the inside out. The solution, as Paul realized, was not "How will I be delivered?" but "Who will deliver me?" Jesus Christ our Lord!

Paul wrote to the Galatians a scathing rebuke. Paul had preached the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ in the city of Galatia and many came to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, were born again and were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit to transform their lives. After Paul left town, false teachers came in after him, teaching the Galatians that they needed to go back to obedience to a set of Jewish laws to control their behavior, be pleasing to God, and be saved. Paul wrote, "O foolish Galatians! ... This I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law [attempting to obey a set of laws], or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?" (*Galatians 3:1-3*) I too often am like the foolish Galatians Paul spoke about. I've seen over and over again the power of the Holy Spirit to save me and transform me, but there is a constant temptation to take back the control of my life from the Holy Spirit, and say, "I can do it! I can handle it! God, it's ok- I can handle this one!" If your life is like flying an airplane, is God your pilot or your co-pilot whom you wake up from His slumber only in case of emergency?

My friend, what areas of weakness do you have with self-control? Is it with diet, exercise, drinking, a stubborn habit you know you must stop but can't stop? Do you struggle with lust or covetousness? Do you find yourself buying things that you don't really need? Where does your mind go to when you have extra time for your mind to wander? Do you struggle with habitually poor decisions regarding time management or laziness? Do you lose control of your temper whenever the heat is on? Are your conversations honoring to God, even among the ungodly? The Bible promises to use your very weaknesses to demonstrate God's power in your life as you lean on Jesus Christ and listen and follow the Holy Spirit. Is God your pilot, or your copilot? Today it may seem that there are issues of self-control in your life that loom like a huge, immovable mountain. By God's grace that mountain will be removed, but God can't do anything unless He is the pilot- unless you've given Him the reigns of your life. In the Old Testament book of Zechariah, the man Zerubbabel had some mountainous, humanly impossible tasks to accomplish- to rebuild the temple in the midst of immense opposition. This was the promise God gave him: "'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the Lord of hosts. 'Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain! And he shall bring forth the capstone with shouts of 'Grace, grace to it!'" (*Zechariah 4:6-7*) And so it was recorded that indeed through God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit that Zerubbabel was able to not only build the capstone and foundation, but to finish what God had called him to do. God's grace, poured out through the Holy Spirit, will also move mountains in your life, if you let the Holy Spirit be the pilot.

I've got some close Christian male friends at work and church that get together and

encourage each other in our weaknesses, one of them being struggles over lusts. Here is a revised letter to a male friend of mine about lust and self-control (a letter I could just as easily written to myself for guidance)...

You know that we all battle with issues of self-control- and this truly is an issue of self-control. Self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit- it is something we can't manufacture, but God does the transforming work in our lives. We cooperate through faith and obedience to His voice, spoken by the Spirit and the Word.

God has allowed temptation in this area, because He knows the end result will be your spiritual growth (*James 1:2-4*) and will produce character in you. These trials by fire are resulting in a faith that is more precious than gold and will "be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (*1 Peter 1:5-7*) These trials are agonizing, but I encourage you to look at them from a larger picture instead of focusing on how you've failed the test in the past.

The fact that you're grieved over lust is an indication, a warning light, on the dashboard of your heart, like a warning light on a car. The light has prompted you by the Holy Spirit to take action. Knowing the flesh has absolutely no power to manufacture self-control, we turn to the only source of power- Jesus and His Word. As you know, we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but our war is a spiritual one, which uses spiritual weapons to win (*Ephesians 6:10-20*).

God sees you as justified in Christ because you are born again through your faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ dying on the cross in your place. Nothing you can do, no sin you can fall into will make you any less holy and perfect in His eyes- you have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ, and there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ (*Romans 8:1, 5:1-2*).

We recognize as Christians by faith that our flesh is dead, thus in the Spirit we have complete power over it (*Romans 6:1-10*) and we're to reckon ourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Just as sin reigns in the unbeliever who is dead spiritually, so also grace reigns in the believer who is alive spiritually (*Romans 5:17-21*). God has allowed these trials to come to you to build self-control in you, and He will do it- He needs your cooperation to see that His plans for your growth in self-control are so beneficial that you will continually step out in faith in Him. As you gain victory and growth over the area of lust, you will experience self-control that will aid you in many ways, especially regarding confidence in the Lord that He will give you control over your behavior toward a future girlfriend, fiancé or wife. In addition, self-control over the body in one area leads to confidence in other areas (eating, drinking, temper, conversation, finances, laziness, etc. How self-controlled are we when our bodies are deprived of sleep, or weak from illness, or tested in extreme trials such as the apostle Paul was exposed to (*2 Corinthians 1:8-11, 6:4-10*)? God longs to pour into us His self-control, and use it in a way that builds our confidence in Christ's all-sufficient grace to meet our every weakness and need, and shines His glory to a lost world. Unbelievers don't have the fruit of the Spirit of self-control (*2 Timothy 3:3*) and the further they step away from

God, the more evident it is. Thus the growth in your life is a powerful witness to those who lack self-control.

Self-control is very desirable, along with her sister, patience (long-suffering). The two often go hand in hand. They are both issues of faith. Peter wrote, "But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins." (*2 Pet 1:5-9*)

Here are some insights from this passage:

1. Self-control combines with other qualities as a chain- each building on the other. A chain is as strong as its weakest link. God has revealed to you a weakness- thank Him for showing you where you need to focus your energy in prayer and faith. It's great that you've received this wisdom from God. Now cry out for further wisdom (*Proverbs 2*) and His power and watch God do the amazing work of building your self-control from the inside out and leading you in steps of faith, speaking solutions to your heart which you hold fast to as your trust in Christ and His all-sufficient Word grows. You can be sure that God will continue to allow more tests in this area because He loves you and is preparing you for greater things as He conforms you to His image. Imagine the tests Jesus went through with self-control- after forty days fasting in the desert he was tempted by the master tempter to turn stones into bread. He knows what your trials are like. His were so much more difficult.

He's using these trials in all of us to grow us day by day and show us how to die to self and live in Christ and for Christ. "That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death." (*Philippians 3:10*) One of the deaths we die is the area of self-control- giving it over to Him and dying to our own control over self which never works (*Galatians 3:3*), yielding instead to His power in the Spirit to control us, guide us and lead us in resurrection power.

2. We need to keep coming back to the cross. We must not forget that He has cleansed us from our sins as Peter said. We must every day come back to grace and what Christ did on that cross- it needs to continually filter through our hearts. The cross is our power- we have to go to it often and remember our forgiveness, redemption and justification.

Let us learn from those who came before us who desperately needed help from God. We learn so much from the Psalmists who cried out to God about their every weakness and trouble. We recall the persistent widow that kept pleading with the unjust judge until she was rewarded with justice. So, also, when we're aware of our need, we cry out heartily, continually and expectantly until God gives us relief. "Ask, and it shall be given to you..." (*Matthew 7:7*) We ask, expecting to receive His wisdom, and when we believe

we've got His message, we wholeheartedly obey it (*James 1:5-8*). "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and follow Me" (*John 10:27*). The verb tenses of hear, know and follow are continual- it's a continual journey of dependence, listening and following the Holy Spirit. In this way we grow in our relationship with God. The more we grow, the more intense the trials tend to get, that we grow more and more in His grace, His all-sufficient power that is perfected in our weakness (*2 Corinthians 12:7-10*).

God is looking for leaders with self-control. "For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, *not self-willed*, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, *self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word* as he has been taught..." (*Titus 1:7-9*) Notice many of the requirements are actually demonstrations of self-control and giving up on our own control, which is being self-willed instead of controlled by the Spirit. One's ability to be sober, not getting violent (losing control of temper), not losing control over money, and holy are all related to self-control found in the Spirit as He is our pilot. How does the bishop manage that? "Holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught"- he relies on God's Word and the Holy Spirit to implement that word in his life.

I have every confidence of your victory and growth in self-control, because you are a man seeking after God's own heart. "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." (*Phil 1:6*) The burden is on God, not you, to demonstrate His faithfulness and power to give you what you need when you step out in faith- and He will do it- He's promised to do it (*1 Corinthians 1:9, Jude 24*)- and in the midst of it you will be shouting glories and praises to God for His continual regenerating work in you. I rejoice in knowing that though you will have your moments of weakness and failure (*Proverbs 24:16*), that you will have victory in Christ and will be a shining testimony of the work of God in a weak man- in an "earthen vessel" a "jar of clay" (*2 Corinthians 2:7, cf. 2 Timothy 2:21, 1 Thessalonians 4:4*) bringing honor and glory to God, and being useful to the Master.

In Christ's Love,

Mike Porter