

Increasing in Holiness The Holiness of Self-control

Intro: British statesman Edmund Burke once contended in a political debate, “Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains on their own appetites. Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there is without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters. (Imprimis, Vol. 20, #9)

Hopefully the message is not obscured by Burke’s eloquence. The point is, either people must learn to control themselves; or they must surrender their freedom to the control of something outside themselves. Without self-control, they are destined either for slavery or self-destruction.

This is not only true in our political life, but also in our spiritual life. Self-control gets the last word in Paul’s list of the holy fruit which the Holy Spirit seeks to produce in us in order that we can be like our holy God.

Though the word “self-control” is found only six times in the NT, that does not at all diminish its importance in the Christian’s life. In fact, it must be a core characteristic of all those who want to please the Lord.

A look behind the translation to the Greek term

:egkravteia means “dominion over the self or something,” with the nuances of “steadfastness” and “self-control.”

This group takes its sense from the Greek stem krat denoting power or lordship. For example the word kravto means “strength”.

Barclay offers this insight into egkravteia: “When the word enters the moral and ethical sphere, it describes that strength of soul by which a man takes a hold of himself, takes a grip of himself, is in full control and possession of himself, so that he can restrain himself from every evil desire (Barclay, p. 123). Hence it is “victory over desire.”

Aristotle, writing frequently on this virtue, wrote, “To enkrateia belongs the ability to restrain desire by reason, when it is set on base enjoyments and pleasures, and to be resolute and ever in readiness to endure natural want and pain” (Barclay, p. 126).

There are times when we feel the need to say to someone, “Get a grip!” or “Get a hold of yourself!” Such expressions capture the idea of the word.

Where self-control is especially needed

Actually self-control is needed in all areas of Christian living, but there are some key areas where self-control is especially important.

In our attitudes toward those who wrong us

Like a city that is broken into and without walls is a man who has no control over his spirit. (Prov. 25:28)

Self-control is our protection in times of provocation. We may not be able to control what people may do to us; we can control our response. And the Scriptures encourage us to use that power to avoid doing wrong.

He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city. (Prov. 16:32)

In our sexual desires

Self-control is needed in respecting God's laws about marriage.

Today our society assumes that young people will be sexually active and urges them to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy. In contrast, God's word teaches young people to exercise self-control and abstain from sexual relationship before marriage. Joseph demonstrated this self-control when Potiphar's wife "came on" to him. He said:

There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil, and sin against God?" And it came about as she spoke to Joseph day after day, that he did not listen to her to lie beside her, or be with her. (Gen. 39:9-10)

Self-control does not end when marriage begins. Couples need self-control to avoid the sin of adultery so common in our society either through so-called "affairs" or through divorce and remarriage. Jesus taught that adultery was an issue of self-control over our desires.

...but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. (Mt. 5:28)

In our recreational life

No discussion about self-control would be adequate that did not address the problem of things that put us out of control—so-called recreational use of alcohol and drugs to get drunk or high. The deliberate choice to be out of control is itself a sin.

Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor. 6:9-10)

In our pursuit of wealth

We see the mad quest for wealth at the expense of everything else. Such people need to be warned about the dangers of a love of money. *But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and*

some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang. (1 Tim. 6:9-10)

In our pursuit of pleasure

If there are those who can't stop pursuing riches, then there are the rest who can't admit they aren't rich and who pursue pleasure with a sense of entitlement that says I deserve the good life. Millions of Americans are up to their eye-brows in debt because they have no self-control over their desires for pleasure.

To live beyond one's means not only shows a lack of self-control but it raises the more fundamental issues of contentment and humble acceptance of our portion from God.

But godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. (1 Tim. 6:6-8)

In our spiritual life

It takes a great deal of self-control to live a disciplined spiritual life. There are times when you get up in the morning and you may not want to read the Bible, you may not want to pray, you may not want to go to worship, you may not want to teach Bible class, you may not want to go to visitation. We need the self-control to do right things instead of convenient things.

And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. (1 Corinthians 9:25)

How can we develop this kind of self-control?

We must be crucified with Christ.

We must give up self-control and replace it with Christ's control through the Holy Spirit.

"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; (Gal. 2:20)

We must acknowledge both the temporal and eternal consequences of intemperate behavior.

In all the areas where we've talked about the need for self-control, one can easily see the immediate consequences of failing to exercise proper self-control.

Broken relationships

Personal addiction

Economic ruin

Incarceration

And even death

Surely, no one would want to play around with these potential earthly consequences; but even more significant are the eternal consequences of intemperance.

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life. (Gal. 6:7-8)

We need to focus on and value the future rewards of personal discipline.

When we learn to control our desires, we can look forward to the blessings that come from good personal management of our lives--the benefits of solid relationships, the enjoyment of disciplined spending, and the spiritual growth.

But more importantly the hope for the Lord's approval at the judgment. *for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. (1 tim. 4:8)*

Conclusion: We all have a choice as to whether we will exercise control over our desires or whether we will be enslaved to them. The proof of our claims to salvation and discipleship are found in what we are in our core being. Consider the list one last time: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are the evidence that the Holy Spirit is working in our lives; and they are the standards if we are to be "increasing in holiness."