

SELF-CONTROL

By Melissa McFerrin

Self-control is one of those balanced topics that is straightforward in its essentials but layered with meaning the more you study it. We have something of a love-hate relationship with this virtue: We like the idea of being disciplined and composed, but situations that develop self-control are universally guaranteed to be unpleasant.

The first several places where “self-control” appears in the Bible describe strong emotions. Joseph was “deeply stirred” by his interaction with his brothers (Genesis 43:30-31). God was moved to wrath by the unfaithfulness of His people (Psalm 78:37-38; Isaiah 42:13-14). However, these did not allow their emotions to determine their actions, but rather overruled emotions with appropriate behavior. These individuals didn’t feel any less deeply. They just weren’t overtaken by those feelings.

Emotions are not bad. God made them part of our human design, and they are a natural product of life. We’re supposed to express feelings. God delivered justice zealously. When Joseph gave vent to his joy at seeing his brothers, he wept, which is a healthy, fitting response (Genesis 45:1-2). Self-control, then, is not some unfeeling dictatorship of one’s being, but rather keeping our thoughts and behavior righteous even when our emotional impulse tries to take over.

Proverbs likens the one without self-control to “a city that is broken into and without walls” (Proverbs 25:28). As long as you command yourself, your defenses are strong. When you turn over command to some spiritual enemy, however, you open yourself to further attack. It is a progression; a small crack in the wall can be repaired easily, but demolished walls take much time and effort to rebuild. Likewise, self-control can be mastered, and sometimes lost, in degrees.

Proverbs also speaks to the importance of self-control in our speech. She who exercises restraint is “wise” and unlikely to sin with her lips (Proverbs 10:19). Restraint in speech is connected to having a “cool spirit” (Proverbs 17:27). It reminds me of James 1:19-20: “This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.” Much of our Christian influence comes through our speech, but it is easy to carelessly let slip something harmful. We must filter what we say.

The prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:39; Mark 14:35-36; Luke 22:41-42) as well as His statements at other times during His ministry (John 5:30; 6:38) demonstrate how we should submit our will to God’s will. God works through us, but we have to participate (Philippians 2:12-13). My husband, Clay, made a powerful comment about turning over control. He said, “We can’t give God something we don’t have.” Maybe it’s part of free will that we

have to take responsibility for ourselves to make submission to God workable. Then can we truly align our will with God's will.

Other passages discuss the importance of both doing and wanting to do the right thing. Anyone can spread the gospel, but doing it of your own will makes the difference between temporary obligation and eternal reward (1 Corinthians 9:16-17). Goodness by choice is superior to goodness by compulsion (Philemon 1:12-14). If you struggle with acting from the heart, exercising self-control can help you bridge the gap. If you force yourself to do the right thing often enough, eventually it will become your natural response.

There is a limit to what self-control can accomplish. We don't make salvation possible (John 1:11-13). We can't tell God how to treat us (Romans 9:14-16). We can't fabricate a work of God (2 Peter 1:20-21). And we can't control circumstances or other people. We shouldn't wear ourselves out trying. However, we do control our responses to all of these. God makes a spiritual relationship available to us, and our choices determine how deeply we partake of it.

Some people, like Felix in Acts 24:24-25, shy away from Christianity because of the restraint it demands of them. They don't understand the promise of Galatians 5:1: "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery." Without self-control, we are actually slaves to whims and outside influences. With self-control in Christ, we remain free. If we refuse to control ourselves and keep sinning on purpose, we will be punished in a bondage that can never be escaped (Hebrews 10:26-27). If we exercise self-control, we will be free in this life and in the one to come.

Romans 7:15-21 is famously difficult, exploring issues of the nature of man and the interplay of right and wrong. It also features a high concentration of "will" words. It seems to me that Paul is contrasting the goodness of the law of God with the evilness of sin and explaining how the struggle between good and evil is revealed in man. Most creatures are amoral. But man, because he was given the knowledge to do good, was also given the ability to sin. The spiritual side of man provides the mental and moral drive to do good. Still, even when he wants to do right, there is the attraction of doing wrong. Paul says that one's will determines which force wins. Ultimately, mind must triumph over impulse in order to serve God.

Self-control appears in several lists of Christian qualities. It is part of the fruit of the Spirit and directly related to having "crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:22-24). This implies that someone with fully mature spiritual fruit won't give in to the flesh, although one with developing fruit might occasionally. An overseer must be self-controlled (Titus 1:7-9). The things an overseer must not be - selfish, easily angered, alcoholic, quick to fight, greedy - are all related to lack of self-control. Finally, self-control is the building block between knowledge and perseverance (2 Peter 1:5-7). It aids the development of other virtues.

In the negative, men who are "lovers of self" and "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" lack self-control (2 Timothy 3:1-5). Ephesians 5:28-30 makes it clear that it is good to love

yourself, in the sense of nourishing and cherishing yourself. The problem arises when you indulge yourself to the detriment of serving God. Self-control keeps you from sliding too far.

Finally, a note about the usefulness of self-control. It carries us through rough parts of life (1 Timothy 2:14-15). It goes hand-in-hand with discipline and perseverance, helping us win the race without being disqualified (1 Corinthians 9:25-27). She who is self-controlled is better prepared for challenges and more likely to handle them well.

Righteous self-control doesn't mean that you never get excited or never enjoy pleasures. It doesn't mean you have to be stoic or stifle your personality. Righteous self-control means keeping yourself within the parameters God has established and, in the face of temptation to let other forces take over, instead behaving in a way that is pleasing to Him.