

Classic Christian Writings:

I recently read a little book entitled "The Young Christian." It was a reprint of a work written by Matthew Henry some 300 years ago. It did me good. Its chief theme was "sobermindedness," or to use a more contemporary idiom--self-control. It is a book with a challenge and it led me to look a little more at the biblical teaching concerning this important subject. I hope and pray that the following reflections may help you to know and experience more and more each day of a life led and controlled by the Spirit of God.

Some Misconceptions

A superficial consideration of this matter of "self-control" might lead us to assume it is something I DO to restrain my sinful desires. The Greek philosopher Plato believed that temperance--the control of appetites and passions--was possible through an instructed reason and the power of the will. The New Testament, however, teaches us that true self-control is the fruit of the Spirit in the life of the believer. See for example, Galatians 5:22-23. It is a control from within. It is a control of self, but by and through the Holy Spirit's enabling.

Another misconception regarding self-control relates to its more traditional name--temperance. This idea has often been communicated in a negative way. For example, in the nineteenth century there arose the Temperance Movement which sought to address the drink problem and began to advocate total abstinence. Temperance as a fruit of the Spirit, however, is a much broader and more positive idea.

Paul speaks of the athlete's need for self-control and daily discipline, and reminds us that we need self-control for effective Christian service (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). Athletes who break world records do so only after years of diligent training. As Christians we have a greater prize and goal in view which should energize us in this desire for self-control.

Defining Self-Control

There are two or three New Testament words which identify this Christian virtue. Our Bible translations use words like: temperance, restraint, sobriety, etc. to describe it. Jerry Bridges in his helpful book, "The Practice of Godliness," defines it as "the exercise of inner strength under the direction of sound judgment that enables us to do, think and say the things that are pleasing to God." The Spirit controlled Christian is a self-controlled Christian and will be a blessing to the church and the world. Above all else he will bring glory to God.

The Practice of Self Control

One of the characteristics of these "last days" is that people will be "without self-control" (2 Timothy 3:3). In the name of freedom all kinds of immorality are excused. Here is an area of our lives where we can display the transforming power of Christ so that "each thought and each temper" may be seen to be "beneath His control."

Self-control will be demonstrated by a humble, patient and gentle spirit. Pride, impatience and anger must be put to death. Our emotions and thought life must be under the rule of Christ.

"...casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things" (Philippians 4:8).

"God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7).

Our tongues likewise must be tamed. Personally, my temperament and my place of origin incline me toward turning everything into a joke. The gift of humour is a wonderful gift but it must be controlled like anything else. James 3 reminds us that our words ought to be few and wisely chosen. We have one mouth and two ears! Are we prone to gossip or lies?

If the tongue is difficult to control so are our appetites. Some are in danger of gluttony, and many have a continual struggle with lust. The body is meant to be our servant but too often it becomes our master. Luther struggled with temptation in his monastery cell, but no amount of penance could give him victory. He had to discover the grace of God for that to happen. Some suffer in the opposite direction. They don't know how to

stop and be still. The tyranny of work and time can rob us of our Christian joy. Like Martha, we can be preoccupied with the good and miss the best.

God's Wisdom For Today

Paul, writing to two young pastors, Timothy and Titus, repeatedly stresses the need to teach by word and example the exercise of self-control. Church leaders must demonstrate it (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8). The older men and women must teach it to the younger (Titus 2:3-6). The Cretans were notorious for their laziness, lies and gluttony (Titus 1:12), and there is therefore a great need for the church to display the opposite.

In the Old Testament and particularly in the Book of Proverbs we have detailed warnings about all these matters. The Old Testament history abounds with illustrations concerning the practice and neglect of self-control. If Jesus is Lord of our lives then we are to be faithful stewards of the gifts He has given us. Am I demonstrating self-control in my use of time and money? Am I self-controlled in my relationships? These are a few questions we need to ask ourselves.

The Sufficiency of God's Grace

Perhaps you already feel defeated in the light of all that Scripture teaches. You may have tried to overcome anger, lust or laziness, but feel you've failed God once too often. If so, let me encourage you to keep coming back to the Lord, seeking His pardon and cleansing for a new beginning. There is no temptation so great that His enabling grace cannot help you overcome. There is no sin so heinous that He is unwilling to forgive if you come to Him in true repentance.

This battle with sinful self is lifelong, but the victory is assured in Christ. Meanwhile, He gives us His Word--the Bible, which is our guidebook to heaven. It is the sword of the Spirit whereby we may fight against the world, the flesh and the devil. There is a race to be run and a heaven to be won. Let us be looking unto Jesus that we may win the prize.

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