

## Self-Control

Basketball has always been my pastime of choice, but when I became a pastor and moved to Iowa in 1997, I didn't play much for the first few years. But eventually, I decided I wanted to get back into it. So, one Sunday afternoon, I headed to the local Y because I heard there were a lot of pick-up games at that time.

The gym was packed when I arrived. In order to get into a game, you had to find the person who had the next game and ask him if you could be on his team. The problem for me at the time was that no one wanted an overweight white guy in his mid-thirties on his team. So, I waited...and waited...and waited. Finally, after a lot of guys had left the next guy was out of options and was forced to pick me up. This was my chance to teach them not to underestimate me!

The other team had the ball first, but when they threw the first pass, they greatly misjudged my quickness and agility and I stole the pass and rushed at lightening speed to the other basket. I measured my steps as I went in for the layup—I was going to dunk it, but I didn't want to show off. When I jumped off my left foot, my knee buckled under the sheer weight I was carrying.

As I was falling, I flipped the ball up toward the basket and a kid about 5 foot 6 (he might have been a fourth-grader) came flying by and swatted my shot out of bounds. The

guys on the sideline ducked for cover and the sound it made when it ricocheted off the wall reverberated through the whole gym. The guys watching made a huge scene!

Well, that incident validated two things. First, don't pick an overweight white guy in his thirties to play on your basketball team. Second, I needed to lose some weight.

Now, it's not that I didn't *know how* to play basketball or that I didn't have the *skill*—I'd played far longer than most of them had been alive. The problem was that over the previous ten years, I lived with a serious lack of self-control. I ate what I wanted, when I wanted. I did little exercise to speak of. Why? Because it was easier—at least in the short-term.

Who wouldn't love to be able to eat anything they want and stay thin? But that's not the way the world works. In fact, I don't know why, but God designed the world so that we continually have to make trade-offs between now and later; between instant gratification and building character. When we choose instant gratification, we pay the price later with interest. Most of us know this from experience.

You know it because you're paying the bill right now. You couldn't control your spending and now you're up to your ears in debt. You couldn't control your eating and now you have aches and pains and health issues. You didn't reign in sexual fantasies and now your marriage is strained, or you've become addicted to pornography. Or unrestrained anger has ruined relationships.

Now, I don't bring this up to make you feel guilty, but to confront us with the truth that many of the problems we experience today stems directly from the fact that we have failed to exercise self-control in certain areas of our lives.

But we don't *want* self-control. We want technology. We want pills. We want tricks and techniques that will magically solve our problems without having to intentionally change things about our life or deny ourselves pleasure. [fat shaker video] We don't want to exercise off the weight, we want to stand on a machine and shake it away. Did any of you have one of these? Self-control is hard, so we try to replace it with short-cuts.

But the Bible shouts the value of self-control. Proverbs 16:32 says, **"Better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one who takes a city."**

Proverbs 25:28 says, **"Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control."** The Apostle Paul tells us that self-control is one of the Fruit of the Spirit.

Self-control is on all the lists the qualifications for leadership in the church. Titus 2:11-12 says, **"<sup>11</sup>For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. <sup>12</sup>It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age."**

So, if self-control is a Biblical virtue, we should try to figure out what it is and how to do it. Self-control has typically been described as *mastery over our emotions and desires*. When we define it that way, it's easy to identify two reasons self-control is hard.

The first problem is that we tend to view ourselves as *victims*. Victims of our feelings, desires, personality, upbringing, gender or genes. Now there's no doubt that things like personality and genetic makeup can make things harder or easier, but there's not a single one of us in here who isn't capable of some measure of self-control.

The second problem is that that we get little help from popular culture. Virtually everything we see in movies and media, music and culture, tell us that the way to a good life is to let our emotions and desires guide us. Follow your heart. Do what you desire. Let your passions take over! It can't be wrong if it feels so right! This is because society values happiness and gratification, not character.

Now don't misunderstand, it's God who created us with the ability to feel emotions, passion and desire and they're not bad in themselves. They're fantastic motivators. In fact, Emotions and passion are part of what make life amazing sometimes. For instance...[Minneapolis Miracle video] Without things to be passionate about, life would be a far cry from what Jesus said in John 10:10, **"I have come that they may have LIFE!"** He's not talking about some detached, mechanical robot life.

How terrible would life be if food wasn't enjoyable? What would life be like if marriage was only a utilitarian contract and didn't involve longing, romance, and sex? I suppose you could imagine a world like that, but we would all hate to live in it, because God created us to experience beauty, emotions, passion and desire.

But there is an inherent danger in them. That danger is that if we're not intentional about mastering them, they will make us slaves.

Now, I'm not saying we should get rid of all desire and deny ourselves every kind of pleasure. Neither does Scripture. In Colossians 2, Paul is addressing a group of teachers who teach that denying all pleasure is the key to spiritual growth, **"<sup>21</sup>Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"**<sup>22</sup>**These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings.**<sup>23</sup>**Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence."**

Both New Testament Greek words that are translated as *self-control* emphasize the idea of *moderation*. Enjoy life, but keep things in their place. That's self-control.

Take eating for instance. We know overeating is bad for us. Extra weight puts stress on your joints and your heart. It makes you less able to do things you want to do. It lowers your motivation and energy.

But you don't solve overeating by not eating at all because you would die. You also don't solve being overweight by running 24 hours a day until you lose a bunch of weight.

Instead, discipline yourself to eat healthy and sensibly. Stop when you need to stop. This means is that you will need to master the momentary desire to have another

piece of pie so you can be what you want in the long-term. If you've taken Financial Peace University, this will sound familiar. Dave Ramsey has a saying, *"Live like no one else, so later you can live like no one else."* If you learn to exercise self-control right now, it will free you to be able to the things that are really valuable.

What we're talking about it two different definitions of freedom. On the one hand, we have the popular definition of freedom, which is *"freedom from."* Freedom from outside rules and constraints telling me how to live my life. But Biblical freedom is a *"freedom to."* The freedom (or ability) to do what's valuable and important. Right now, in the first sense, I'm free to play the drums. There's no law against it and no one is stopping me. But in the second sense, I'm not free to play the drums—that would be terrible...for everyone. But if I self-limit my freedom to do other things for a time, and practiced the drums, eventually I would be free to find a rhythm and go for it.

This is the encouragement the Apostle Paul makes in 2 Timothy 1:6-7. It says this, **"<sup>6</sup>For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. <sup>7</sup>For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline."** But if it was easy, we would already be doing it. So, the real question is, HOW?

**First, remember you have a limited supply of will-power** Even though God has given you everything you need, you also need to know that you have limitations. Even the

best marathon runners can't run forever. Not only do they get tired, but their body breaks down. Us regular people break down even faster.

But it will serve you well to remember that your will-power is limited. So, what do you do with that information?

*Well, first, don't put yourself in situations where you need to exercise self-control beyond your ability.* If you don't want to give in to sexual fantasy, don't go to strip clubs or watch movies with sex and nudity or use the internet in secret when there's no one else around. Some people might say, "Well that's legalistic!" No, it's just smart. Alcoholics have known this for years. If you can't control your drinking, then don't drink. This is where last week's message on humility can help. Don't deceive yourself. You have to be willing to admit where you're weak and adjust accordingly. You might be surprised to know that Mark Kinde has a weakness for gambling. He realized when he was younger that he couldn't control it once he got started, so he stays far away from anything resembling gambling. That's not legalistic, it's smart.

Others might say, *"Well, that's cheating. It's not really exercising self-control if you completely cut yourself off."* Actually, it IS self-control. You're just doing it before you're tempted. Don't wait until you're 10 feet from the cliff before you slam on the brakes. Put up guardrails before the moment of temptation and the chances you'll fall into temptation will be pretty slim.

Here's another: *Practice self-discipline to increase your self-control.* We often use the words "self-control" and "self-discipline" interchangeably, but I want to distinguish them. Self-control is the energy you expend in resisting a desire or temptation in a moment. Self-discipline on the other hand, is an intentional practice of denying yourself daily pleasures to wean yourself from the need to indulge your desires.

Now, when you practice self-discipline—it might be getting up and reading the Bible, doing your devotions in your focus book, working out, or whatever—it increases your capacity to resist when the temptation is intense.

It works similar to physical training. You start out lifting small weight—and you have to put in some effort. It's still not easy, but it's doable. When you do it more, you can lift more weights and increase your capacity.

The reason we have such a hard time resisting temptation is because we've spent so long training ourselves to yield to temptation. It would be unreasonable for you to expect anything different if you've spent the last 20 years allowing your feelings to control your actions.

A couple of passages hint at this. 2 Timothy 2:16 says, **"<sup>16</sup>Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly."** James 5:5 says it even stronger. **"<sup>5</sup>You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter."** You get the idea. When you indulge in



worldly desires, you're training yourself to become good at them. So, you have to make consistent, intentional decisions that won't feel natural at first, but eventually, they will. So, create small non-negotiables, discipline yourself every day and practice succeeding.

Here's another: Pay attention to your physical health. We know that when you eat healthy, exercise, and get good sleep, your physical performance improves. But there is also *there's a direct connection between physical health and spiritual health.*

Toddlers illustrate this well because their emotions are an open book. What happens when a toddler is tired or hungry? He gets cranky. You'll tell him, "you're tired and you need a nap" and he'll yell at you, "I'm not tired!" Right? His physical state affects his behavior because he hasn't learned to hide it yet.

You probably don't even notice it, but when you're tired and worn out or in bad health you're more susceptible to temptation. That's why they say that if you struggle with clinical depression, it's imperative that you eat right, get out of bed in the morning, and go for walks because it decreases the symptom of depression.

That's why I believe that for many of us, sleep can be a spiritual discipline. The daily habits of prayer and Scripture reading are spiritual disciplines that refill your tank and keep you spiritually strong.

*One more: since you have a limited supply of will-power, borrow some from others.*

Some people might think this is cheating, because you're not doing it yourself. But I don't

know where we get this silly idea that faith is an individual thing. Drawing strength from each other is actually one of the greatest values of living in community.

This is a strong motivator for me. You see, I stand up here and preach to you most Sundays (and most Sundays my wife is sitting out there and she knows me better than any of you). And there are times when I'm tempted, I think about you or I think about her and I know you're counting on me. I'm aware that if I have a moral failing, it affects more than just me. It affects my family and a whole church. It used to bug me that I needed this motivation, but I've come to accept that it's OK to feel some social pressure. When you do, you borrow will-power from your community.

So be a part of a small group or get what we call a spiritual "running partner." I think you get the idea—exercise is always easier when you have someone to do it with. Some people call them accountability partners, but they're more than just accountability. They're encouragement, too. And you borrow will-power from them. So, ask a friend to meet regularly with you. If you care more about your character than your reputation then you can be honest about your struggles and your community will help you.

OK, you have a limited supply of will-power—that's enough of that.

*Second, treat your emotions as yellow lights rather than green lights.* Most people don't think much about our emotions so we mostly just assume they're reliable guides to

live by. So, if we feel angry or hurt or offended, we think it automatically means someone else did something wrong—so we just go with it and react.

But listen to this from James 4, **“<sup>1</sup>What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? <sup>2</sup>You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.”** Do you hear what he’s saying? He saying that sometimes when you feel angry or hurt or offended or annoyed—the problem isn’t someone else, it’s YOU!

So, when you feel those emotions—especially negative emotions, that’s not your signal to go for it. It’s your signal to use caution, to choose your words carefully; to ask yourself, why am I so mad right now? Do I have a right to be mad or am I mad because I have a selfish desire that’s not being fulfilled? It takes courage and self-control not to just give in your emotions, but if you want to develop godly character, you have to.

*Third, focus on the goal, not the temptation.* Listen to Hebrews 12:1-3, **“<sup>1</sup>Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, <sup>2</sup>fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup>Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”**

One of the best ways to give into temptation is to be obsessed with sin, just like one of the best ways to fail on a diet is to think about not eating. That's why Hebrews says, "leave behind" sin and whatever else hinders us and fix our eyes on Jesus. Have that goal in mind. To be honest, this is one that drives me a lot. Whenever I face temptation to sin or just to be undisciplined, I think about what I want to be when I grow up.

**Don't let shame fuel failure.** This is a huge one! Shame is incredibly dangerous because it always starts a vicious cycle. The reason anyone sins is because most sins are pleasurable in the moment. They give you a hit of dopamine and make you feel good. So, when you're sincere about following Jesus but you fail anyway, you feel terrible. And for a lot of people the shame can be almost unbearable. And to top it all off, you think you're the only one who struggles and so you isolate yourself from others. So, in order to feel better, you return to the thing you know will make you feel good for a while. But when you do, you feel even worse and the vicious cycle continues.

There's only one solution to the cycle of shame—it's grace. Please understand that God is not reluctant, but he's eager to forgive. He's eager for restored relationship. So, understand that the path to character is a long journey with twists and turns. It's growth, so don't expect to get it right the first time, stay on the path.

**Finally, enjoy and be grateful for healthy pleasures.** I can't find the clip, but I saw a promo for the TV show Young Sheldon. And it's two 10-year-old boys talking about

religion. One of them says something like, “When I go to church, I feel really terrible about myself.” And the other one says, “That’s how you know it’s working!”

That’s kind of seeped into people’s thinking about what it means to follow Jesus. But that’s far from the truth. In 1 Timothy 6, the Apostle Paul is warning believers against the accumulation of wealth. And at the end of the section, he writes something that seems contradictory on its face. He writes, **“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.”**

God is good. And he is the creator and giver of all good things. But without self-control, we cannot fully experience the good things God gives. It’s not about blind indulgence—that just makes us slaves. But it’s about learning to enjoy the good things God gives but to keep them in their place.

Many years ago, the pastor John Piper coined a phrase. He said, *“God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.”* Self-discipline is about finding our satisfaction in God alone. And it’s only when we do that, that we find out that God is really good.