

# Self-Control

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## Introduction.

- A. Once again, this evening, we're going to be turning our attention to some of the truly important things we need to work on as Christians, as revealed by 2 Peter 1:5-8. Our explorations thus far have taken us to the point where next, we're going to be looking at the significance of self-control.
- B. Throughout this, it seems like it's been a theme that these character attributes that are so highly valued by God are not highly valued by the world. This is particularly true in the case of self-control. In fact, a significant part of our society denies that self-control is possible at all. They argue that we are simply the slave of our desires, that our genetic code or our upbringing or our something forces us to drink or gamble or behave immorally. According to this worldview, sin is not our fault. It's just a sickness for which we are not responsible and that we cannot control, like multiple sclerosis or Alzheimer's. To people who believe this, the thought of being able to resist our desires by practicing self-control is laughable.
- C. To an even larger portion of our society, whether self-control is possible or not, it is not desirable. This point of view is constantly reinforced by advertising campaigns that are variations on the theme of "If it feels good, do it." As a result, millions of Americans are devotees of instant gratification. They aren't concerned about tomorrow; they don't care about the consequences of their actions. They just do what they want.
- D. We could listen to these messages from the world and imitate those around us, but we are far better off listening to the word of God instead. It tells us that not only is self-control possible; it is required. Furthermore, rather than dismissing the consequences of our actions, we should pay attention to them and learn from them. Let's look at some of these passages tonight. Let's learn the value of self-control.

## I. Definition and Sources.

- A. In what is quickly becoming the norm for this series of sermons, let's begin this evening by looking at the definition of self-control and the sources from whence it comes. A passage that illuminates both is 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. From Paul here, we learn that the Christian's self-control is the discipline of the athlete. Just a few months ago, we finished with the most recent round of the Olympics. During the broadcast of those games, there must have been several dozen different features on the way those athletes train to compete. Their level of dedication is frightening. Every day, they live off of a special diet. Every day, they start training early in the morning and finish late in the evening, pushing themselves to the limit in a contest that is as much against themselves as it is against anyone else. They go through this punishing routine day after day, knowing that if they slack off even for a moment, they're going to get passed up by someone hungrier than they are. Why do they go through all of this? Because more than anything else, they want to go home with the prize.
- B. Brethren, that's exactly what it means to have self-control as a Christian. It means that day after day, we live a disciplined life that the people around us think is crazy. It means that we pass up sins and fleshly pleasures that the world considers an everyday part of life. It means that we don't let ourselves slack off or relax for even a moment, not because our competitors want to beat us, but because the devil wants to destroy us.
- C. Why do this? Why go through this constant endurance test? It's not because we want to go home with the prize; it's because we want to go home TO the prize. We are competing to win eternal life in heaven, and if we are not self-controlled people, we will be disqualified. That understanding is the basic source of self-control. We want to go to heaven so much that we are willing to do anything or give up anything to get there.
- D. However, help with self-control can come from other places as well. We see an interesting one mentioned in 1 Timothy 2:12, 15. In this passage, Paul is zeroing in on the teaching role of women. They aren't supposed to instruct publicly in the assembly. Instead, their job is to instruct their children, and as those children live godly lives, they bring honor to their mother. One of the main areas of instruction that this points out is the area of self-control. Mothers are the ones who teach their kids that sometimes you don't get what you want, that you have to sacrifice now to achieve more important goals later. It seems like just about every time I go to the grocery store, I see a mom failing in this vital task. We all know the scene: Mom and kid are in the check-out line, kid sees some candy or a toy that he wants, and he howls and raises a fuss until Mom gives in. Friends, if a child is raised in that way, how easy is it going to be for him to control himself when he gets older?
- E. Another important part of self-control is knowing our own limits. Just as the Olympian puts himself in a situation where it's easiest for him to train, we need to make maintaining our self-control as easy as possible. Consider Paul's advice on the subject in 1 Corinthians 7:5. The point that Paul is making is that separating ourselves from our spouses for the sake of more prayer might seem like a good idea, but the loss of their companionship quickly turns that into a very bad idea. Likewise, I suspect that all of us can think of things we can do that would tax our self-control to the limits. If we are wise, we will avoid those things, so that our self-discipline won't snap under the strain. Only with this kind of vigilance can we keep in training.

## II. What It Causes.

- A. If we embrace this kind of self-control in our lives, it will cause all sorts of beneficial things. Paul describes just one of them in Galatians 5:22-25. Here, the apostle is making the point that if we want to live a Christian life, if we want to walk by the Spirit, there are a number of things that we must do, and developing self-control is one of them. As we've seen already, we can't make it to heaven without it. As we think about it, we quickly see why self-control is so vital. Whenever Satan tempts us, we call upon our self-control to resist. Whenever God's word challenges us to do something difficult, our self-control that leads us away from what's easy and toward what's right. The world around us likes to present a mooshy-gooshy view of Christianity, but the truth is that the child of God needs a backbone as well as a heart. Self-control is that backbone. It's what gets us started in the footsteps of Jesus and it's what keeps us in them, even when we see where they're headed.
- B. Likewise, we need self-control because only the self-controlled Christian is useful in the Lord's work. Consider the significance of self-control appearing in Titus 1:7-8. As the context makes clear, self-control is one of the things that the aspiring elder must already have developed. No matter what other attributes a man possesses, unless he is self-disciplined, he is unfit for the office. It's fair to say that in all the other work we do for God, self-control is just as important. If we don't have self-control, even though we volunteer to teach a Bible class, we can't be counted on to reliably appear each time that class meets. If we don't have self-control, even if we sign up for one of our new service groups, we aren't going to fulfill our commitment for more than a couple of weeks. Essentially, the Christian who does not possess self-control is useless to the work. I know that sounds harsh, but it's true. What good to God or to our elders is a commitment from a man or a woman who can't be counted on? If somebody like that told me they were going to help me out with something, I'd just assume they weren't going to show up and do it myself. If we want to be useful in the kingdom, we need self-control.

## III. What Its Lack Causes.

- A. Just as the Scripture describes a number of things for which self-control is necessary, so too it paints a vivid picture of what happens to those who lack self-control. One of the first problems with a lack of self-control in us is that it corrupts those around us. Look at the scenario that Paul describes to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:2-3, 6. In particular, this passage points out the disaster caused by lack of self-control in the church leadership. Simply because of the nature of the work of an elder or a preacher, they often find themselves dealing with people who are weak and spiritually vulnerable. In such situations, particularly when the leader is counseling a woman, a great deal of temptation is often present. Unless the elder or the preacher is self-disciplined enough to remain pure, he will often succumb. That's why I myself follow what I call the "grandmother rule." Unless a woman is old enough to be my grandmother, I will not talk with her unless another person is present. So if you're a sister and you come by the building some afternoon to work on Bible-class material, don't be surprised or offended if I shut my office door and don't talk with you. It's not that I don't like you; it's that I believe I need to be self-controlled, and something that I make impossible to happen will never happen.
- B. Of course, the corrupting effect of lack of discipline is not limited to church leaders. Any one of us, if we fail to have self-control in our dealings with others, will sooner or later entice another Christian into sin. This can occur in ways that are obvious and ways that are not so obvious. For instance, if we are thoughtless with our words, something that we say idly can entice a brother into anger or hatred. If we practice drunkenness, and another brother finds out about it, he can easily be led astray. Self-control is for others too, not just ourselves.
- C. Similarly, lack of self-control is damaging because it exposes us to charges of hypocrisy. Consider the way that Jesus condemns the Pharisees in Matthew 23:25-26. Brethren, people today, inside or outside of the church, don't have any more trouble spotting a hypocrite than Jesus did, and if we preach Christ but don't discipline ourselves, a hypocrite is exactly what we are. From that point on, instead of being an influence for good, we may actually be an influence for evil. Let me give you an example. I know a brother who fell away because he had an affair with another woman and ultimately ended up divorcing his wife over it. In the same town, my sister, Susan, had a good friend who happened to work in the same building with this hypocritical brother. Just like she does with all her friends, Susan tried to bring this young lady to the Lord. When she brought the subject up, her friend's reply was something like, "And go to church with that cheating slimeball? No thanks." My sister's friend may never be saved now, because of the example of one hypocritical Christian. Let me tell you, brethren. I have absolutely no desire to stand before the throne of God on the day of judgment and explain just how it was that my hypocrisy caused a soul to be lost. Do you?
- D. And that brings us to the final problem with lack of self-control: it gives us reason to fear on the day of judgment. Consider the response of Felix to the gospel in Acts 24:25. I don't imagine that Paul minced many words on this occasion. I think he spelled out very plainly to Felix where Felix's lack of self-control was headed, and Felix didn't like it one bit. Let me be equally plain. If we are not people of self-control, we will never see the inside of heaven. Now, we can refuse to hear the message. We can hide from the fear. But sooner or later, our inability to control ourselves will catch up to us, and we'll spend eternity regretting it.

**Conclusion.** If you don't like where your life is headed, repent and return to God tonight.