

## 11 ||| Self-Control

Sometimes people notice how out of control they really are, but not very often. On these rare occasions, people notice how little control they have over what they are doing. This lack of control is easiest to notice in relation to our bodies.

### Out of Control

Sometimes my body seems attracted to the refrigerator. I have marveled at how many trips I can make to the refrigerator to get something to drink in the course of an afternoon. Other people will make just as many trips to get something to eat. They get nothing much, just something. The compulsion to eat takes control. At such times, we lose control of our bodies. Chain smokers know the meaning of being out of control of their bodies. Alcoholics live with the same lack of control as though they must obey the commands of some other voice. Money can affect other people the same way. Those who feel compelled to spend money feel the same inability to control themselves that the chain smoker experiences.

The opposite situation holds the same lack of control. Some people have such a compulsion not to eat that they literally starve themselves to death. Karen Carpenter, a famous singer of the 1970s, suffered from the inability to control her own body's needs and desires.

Though all of these expressions of being out of control have a physical dimension, they are governed by spiritual motivations. Emotions can control people just as physical addictions or habits can. When people lose control of their emotions, they become as enslaved as a person who is physically addicted to a substance. Feelings of anger, fear, depression, or inferiority may become characteristic of a person just as wine is for the wino.

When people lose control of their feelings, they become as addicted

to and controlled by their feelings as someone whose life is controlled by drugs or sex. They depend upon their habitual emotional fix to cope with life and get through the day. They become comfortable with and learn to rely upon the emotions that control them.

The subtlety of this emotional slavery makes it easy to ignore and deny. The alcoholic who denies that drinking is a problem has the benefit of alcohol's physical nature to help him see the problem. (It must be purchased, poured, and drunk; it has an effect on the body; and alcohol's effect can be observed.) The spiritual nature of an emotional slavery, however, lacks the external physical agent that can be both recognized and blamed. To recognize an emotional addiction, one must confess guilt.

Among the works of the flesh, we find more than drunkenness, fornication, and murder. The works of the flesh also include envy, jealousy, selfishness, enmity, strife, dissension, and factionalism (Gal. 5:19-21). People can become just as—if not more—addicted to these emotions and attitudes as other people become addicted to physical stimulants. People can be just as hooked on jealousy as on alcohol.

When we become addicted to a habitual form of behavior or to a physical craving, we tend to surrender passively to the force of it. We simply give up and let it have control of us. Self-control, the last quality in Paul's list that manifests the Spirit of God in the life of a Christian, deals directly with this problem.

### Getting a Hold

The Greek word *self-control* is a compound word. Literally, *egkrateia* might be translated inward power or power and strength to hold on. It draws the visual image of persons wrapping their arms around themselves and holding themselves. It is reflected in the modern phrase, "Get a hold of yourself." The word itself tells us that we are not powerless or helpless. We can do something about these compulsions in our lives. It also tells us that we are responsible for ourselves.

One would think that such an important word would be found over and over again in the New Testament, but it only occurs a few times. There is a good reason for its rarity, however. It might be confused with an idea in Greek philosophy. Christians living in the Hellenistic world, such as Ephesus, Galatia, Corinth, and Rome, might have confused the Christian concept of self-control with a Greek philosophical

idea—definitely not Christian—linked to the same word. Unfortunately, that philosophical idea has found its way into Christianity, and many people have accepted it through the years as orthodox.

The Greeks developed one school of thought that advocated self-denial, but not in the Christian sense. They believed in the avoidance and denial of the physical world. They believed they would attain immortality by personally overcoming the world. They viewed the material world as evil and not the result of creation by a loving God. Physical reality was a mistake or worse. A state of perfection, however, could be reached by strict discipline and asceticism.

In the modern world, this self-centered approach to one's place in life might be expressed, "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul."<sup>1</sup> Hemingway subscribed to this type of philosophy, though not in its ascetic form. In Hemingway, this philosophy of self-control came in his choice to die. When faced with cancer, Hemingway decided that he would choose the moment of his death, and he committed suicide.

The emphasis in the New Testament on the concept of self-control is quite different. It emphasizes the unnaturalness of self-control. People do not naturally have self-control. It comes as a gift from God. Instead of my being the captain of my ship, "the master of my fate," and the ruler of my life, I am a steward. I am a servant who has been entrusted with this life. Self-control is an aspect of my stewardship responsibility to God. Though God has given me life or made me alive, I am still His possession.

Jesus told a parable about a lord who went on a journey into a distant country. Before going, the master left his servants in care of certain goods. God has given me the care of my life, but to take of it He has given me gifts and abilities and has equipped us to carry out the task. A passage in 2 Timothy tells how self-control comes to people: "God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control" (1:7). God gives self-control as a possibility when His Holy Spirit comes to abide in the heart of a believer.

Unlike Hemingway, the apostle Paul faced death with the Christian view of self-control. Paul's death lay within the control of his captors, but he had control within himself. He expressed that sense of control with the words, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:13, KJV). Paul knew that he had the ability through

Christ to stand up to, face, and deal with whatever happened in life. That knowledge, personal knowledge of Christ and confidence in Him, gave Paul full control of his life. Self-control freed him from fear or depression or any other enslaving compulsion which might have threatened the experience of that other quality of the Spirit's presence: joy.

Self-control in itself is not a human characteristic. Rather, it is a divine gift, alien to the human nature. It involves more than merely abstaining from something. It involves more than trying to conquer a habit, compulsion, or addiction. People can do that to a certain extent. Breaking habits and fighting compulsions can be frustrating because the human effort at control only deals with the negative dimension of trying to stop. In trying to stop, people dwell on the very thing they are trying to avoid. The battle makes the obstacle even more present in the mind.

Producing fruit involves pruning out the bad, but it also involves fertilizing. Something positive and life giving must be added for fruit to appear. Abstaining is only one dimension, and it is the negative dimension. But what about the more important life-giving dimension?

### Gaining a Balance

In the old authorized translation of the Bible, commonly known as the *King James Version*, the translators chose to render this word as temperance. They retained the word from the Vulgate, the old Latin Bible used by the Roman Catholic Church, which dated back to the fifth century. *Temperance* comes from the Latin word *temperare* which means to mix in due proportions. In applying this idea to life, it becomes a matter of having an appropriate balance and mixture in life. Temperance involves the appropriate mixture and balance of all the elements of life.

Temperance or self-control depends upon having this balance. It involves having a balanced temper. To lay the charge that someone has a temper confuses the point we mean to make. The explosiveness usually associated with *having a temper* rarely occurs when someone truly has a balanced temper. Instead of saying, "John has a temper," we ought to say, "John has a bad temper." This expression captures the faultiness of one's ability to maintain a temper or balance. A corruptible temper may not be relied upon to maintain control of the

delicate interactions of one's emotions in a crisis. We might also say, "John has lost his temper." When we lose our tempers or our balance, we have lost our ability to control ourselves. We have let go the mechanism by which we exercise sovereignty over ourselves and become like a machine without a driver. When someone tells us to keep our tempers or hold our tempers, what are they saying? They are urging us to hold on to our balance, not to fly off on a tangent, and to control ourselves.

To temper something involves reducing its intensity by the addition of something else. When we make iced tea, we put three bags in a small tea pot and let the tea steep. But the brew is too intense to drink like it is. It has to be diluted or tempered by the addition of cold water. Even though we set out to make tea, when it becomes too intense it ceases to be good. The tea becomes overpowering when the balance with water is not right. Just like the tea, the emotions that play a part in our health and happiness can become bitter and overpowering when one grows out of balance with the rest.

A person with a good sense of humor is a pleasant person to be around. He or she brings joy to a conversation. On the other hand, a person who constantly tells jokes, monopolizing the conversation and attention of others, is a tiresome bore. We normally avoid bores. They have no temper or balance to their conversations. Whether the practical jokers, the workaholics who can only talk about jobs, the hypochondriacs who can only talk about poor health, or the socialites who can only talk about connections, those who allow one small passion to dominate their lives have lost control of themselves. They are out of balance and have no temper.

The first computer game I played involved maintaining the right balance in resources. The game involved a hypothetical trip across the continent by covered wagon in pioneer days. The player was allowed a ration of supplies, animals, and money at the outset. In the course of the game, the player was beset by Indians, snowstorms, and other disasters which depleted the resources for the trip. The only way to win the game was to maintain the proper balance of resources so that none ran out before the journey was complete.

Like the hypothetical pioneer in the game, people must bring together a variety of resources to temper the excesses in their lives. An alloy has strength that its constituent metals lack individually. Self-

control involves bringing together resources which create strength in proper balance. How we view ourselves determines what qualities we can bring to bear to temper the excesses of our lives. When people focus their lives and energy on just one dimension of life, regardless of how good that dimension might be in proper balance, they have lost control. They have a false idea of just how varied and strong their potential resources are. People who focus on a sense of inferiority and failure become too consumed by that passion to notice just how many resources they actually have to keep them balanced and give them control. An old folk proverb testifies to this truth: all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. Focusing on just one dimension of life takes away the possibility of self-control.

Self-control or temperance involves balancing the budget of human resources and activity. Failure to have this balance breeds disaster. Anyone who has tried to run a home knows that one must keep one's income and expenditures properly balanced, or personal financial disaster will follow. The homemaker soon learns to exercise control in what and how much one buys. Some expenditures must be put off for a long time. Corporations that fail to maintain the right balance in cash flow and inventory go bankrupt. People become personally bankrupt when they fail to maintain a balance of their emotions, passions, and desires.

Without self-control, we become the slaves of what we focus on. Persons can become slaves of gossip just as easily as to drugs. Persons can become addicted to feeling sorry for themselves just as they may become enslaved to sexual perversion. Such slavery destroys our opportunities and potential for free living. When our lives become focused on one object, that object becomes our ruling passion.

Paul almost frantically warned the Galatians about this form of slavery, for "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (5:24). The works of the flesh which Paul enumerated do not constitute an exhaustive list. Rather they indicate the variety of passions and desires that can control and bind us. Things—whether they be objects, ideas, or people—to which we give up our freedom and responsibility are the works of the flesh. Paul pointed out a small category of areas in which the work of the flesh can be seen, but he added that the works of the flesh include not simply these things listed in Galatians 5:19-21 but also "the like." Works

of the flesh which prevent people from inheriting the kingdom of God include anything like these compulsions to which people give up the control of their lives. Any passion which people allow to dominate them is a work of the flesh. Any desire which people allow to control them until it becomes a ruling passion in thought and action, so that they no longer feel they have freedom of action, constitutes a work of the flesh. Whenever people feel moved by compulsion, addiction, or habit they have lost control.

The essence of the demonic is to be possessed and out of control of oneself. The tragedy of such possession lies in the human invitation and surrender to the passion that becomes the master. The entire soul becomes the slave of a desire.

### Confessing What Controls Us as Sin

How can we deal with the passions and desires that control us? First of all, we must name the passion that controls us. Freedom begins in knowing our weakness and susceptibility. Not everyone has the same weakness. Not everyone is subject to the same passions and desires. Some people are subject to physical addictions while others have emotional addictions. The desires of some will offer no allure to others. Even the physical addictions, however, have some ultimate emotional/spiritual origin. While some people may fall unknowingly into a physical addiction, most people are aware of the potential danger, but they are driven on by some passion within them before they have ever tasted what will eventually be their master.

Alcoholism has had a prominent career in my family. It was a curse to the Poes long before Edgar Allen. I might have become an alcoholic, if I had begun to drink recreationally. In the southern genteel society in which I was reared, it was expected of men to drink. A socially prominent woman once explained to a group of my friends as teenagers that it might be possible for a woman to survive in society without drinking, but it was impossible for a man. The passion and desire to conform to the expectations of others has led many people into physical addictions of one kind or another. Any number of other emotional tyrants could bring about the same result. In reclaiming self-control, naming the original passion is as important for the physically addicted person as recognizing that one has a physical addiction.

When I became a Baptist minister, I removed myself from polite

society by virtue of my new status. Polite society has never known exactly what to do with ministers. Since polite society no longer claimed me as one of its own, it no longer insisted that I drink, and I have never had the inclination to begin. I do not know the struggles of the alcoholic, but I have other passions which are just as destructive to my soul.

Not long ago, I had lunch with a pastor friend. Another pastor friend of ours had recently been called to serve as pastor of an enormous church, and my friend asked how I thought the other would do in his new position. In a flash, my heart filled with envy and jealousy as I thought of our friend in his prominent and wealthy church. I had to confess to my friend those feelings that went through me. Once I had recognized my feelings and confessed them to someone else, their power waned to a barely perceptible memory. Then in reflection as we talked about it, I knew just how ridiculous my passion had been. The last thing I wanted at that point in my life was a large church to administer. The church my friend went to, though prominent and wealthy, is riddled with problems and caused the last pastor no end of headaches. Despite my passion, the reality was that I did not want to be in a situation like my friend. The great deceit of the works of the flesh is that they are not really what we want.

The works of the flesh are substitutes for what people really want and need. Lust is a substitute for love. Sorcery and idolatry are substitutes for a personal relationship with God. When we name and confess the thing that is controlling us, however, we begin to have an upper hand. Self-control does not emerge from our strengths. On the contrary, it grows out of our weaknesses. In confession we face and acknowledge our weaknesses while calling on God for help. When we realize we cannot do anything about the passion and cry out for help, the focus of our attention suddenly turns from the problem to God, the Giver of help.

Paul says, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25). We are not saved by our own efforts, and we are not sanctified by our own efforts. Both are brought about by the Holy Spirit. In developing those spiritual qualities that the Spirit makes possible, Christians have something to mix with their lives and give balance to the urges that obsess them. Battling the demon keeps us tied to the passion. Worrying about the demon keeps us tied to the passion.

Dwelling on the demon keeps us tied to the passion. When Christians focus on the qualities that describe what a Spirit-led life is like, they drown out the passions of the flesh. Life becomes tempered by the fruit of the Spirit in a Christian's life. Self-control brings other good qualities to bear on a Christian's life.

These qualities that Paul has enumerated to describe the fruit of the Spirit are part of the transforming consequence of the presence of the Holy Spirit in a person's life. In each case, God is the Model for these qualities. Self-control models or reflects the marvelous perfection of God by which all of His attributes are perfectly balanced. God mingles His wrath with love. He mingles His justice with mercy. When God has mingled all of His qualities together in perfect proportion, He is not a God to hold in terror. He is a God of perfection to whom we are drawn.

It is His Spirit that dwells in us when we have faith in the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He urges us to walk in His Spirit in order that His character will begin to appear in our lives. The Spirit will transform a person until their character conforms to the image of the Spirit Himself. The only inhibiting factor is the person's refusal to be transformed. When a person is willing to be transformed, the transformation takes place until the human spirit corresponds to the character of the Holy Spirit. It occurs as a result of the new nature.

### Notes

1. William Ernest Henley, "Invictus," *Masterpieces of Religious Verse*, ed. James Dalton Morrison (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1977), 575-76.