

Self-Control: Controlling our Passions

Various Passages

21 June 2020 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: Why is self-control so difficult when we can see that it's so important?
Big Idea: The Holy Spirit helps us control ourselves so that we're not controlled by our sinful desires.

Introduction

*Once I had a knot in my shoe and it would not come loose,
I tried and tried and pried and pried,
But it would not come loose.
I got so mad I kicked the door and stubbed my little toe. Oh!
If only I had learned a little bit of self-control.
Self-control, is just controlling myself.¹*

We all know that awkward “oh” moment – that moment of realisation.

Disaster strikes – like stubbing our toe – and all of a sudden we can clearly see where we've gone wrong and what we SHOULD'VE done.

Things are always so much clearer in hindsight.

Some of us just shrug our shoulders and move right along – nothing to see here.

It hurts, but that's the way it is. No big deal.

Others of us wish we'd done things differently.

“If only I had learned a little bit of self-control.”

Self-control seems so uncomplicated – it's “just” controlling myself.

But for something that's so simple, it's actually quite difficult.

Being self-controlled isn't really a “just” at all.

There's room for all of us to grow in self-control.

Outline

This's the last instalment in our series on the Fruit of the Spirit.

Perhaps you're feeling quite relieved because it's been uncomfortable at times, hasn't it, as the Lord has shone light on our lives and holiness?

When we compare our lives with these virtues, it can feel like we've got a long way to go.

Just feeling that tension is a really good start.

Because we're all sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, we all follow our flesh.

By nature, we all do what Paul calls "acts of the flesh" in Galatians 5:19.

These are expressions of our sinful nature and they cause discord, disruption and difficulty.

But when we're following Christ, his Spirit begins to work in our lives.

If we're walking in step with the Spirit, we have the Spirit's power to put these "acts of the flesh" to death and to continue putting them to death.

The fruit of the Spirit in our lives are these virtues that foster fellowship, rather than disrupting it.

Today, we're going to be considering self-control.

At the most basic level, we all understand what self-control is: it's controlling yourself.

It's about having mastery over yourself – what you do, what you think and what you feel.

Here's my definition of self-control:

Strength to govern the desires that drive your actions, thoughts and feelings.

On the whole, the Bible seems to have far more to say about controlling ourselves than it does about controlling our circumstances.

Self-control is an important part of being a Christian, not just the cherry on top or something that the "super spiritual" people do.

In Titus 2, Paul writes to Timothy with directions for different groups of people in the church.

He tells all of them that they need to be self-controlled.

Older men need to be self-controlled, older women need to be self-controlled and younger women need to be self-controlled too.²

It speaks volumes that there's only one thing to teach young men.

Yep, you guessed it, it's self-control.

Lots of people have said that Paul put love at the beginning of his list because it's the virtue that controls all the others.

I'm not sure if that's what he had in mind or not, but it certainly makes sense.

If that's what he was doing, I think it's probably also not a mistake that he put self-control at the end of the list as well.

Lots of these virtues – like peace, patience, faithfulness and gentleness – all need self-control, restraint to make them happen.

The big idea is that **the Holy Spirit helps us control ourselves so that we're not controlled by our sinful desires.**

We'll be looking at three different points this morning, each with a 'P' word:

- Passions. Passions need Self-Control
- Power. Power to be Self-Controlled
- Practice: Practicing Self-Control

Passions

The place that we're going to start is thinking about our passions.

Over time, the pendulum swings back and forwards between different ideas.

For instance, there's much less of a sense of duty in our culture today as there was 100 years ago.

Duty that sent young men off to fight for their country has been replaced by the belief that you can marry into the royal family for the title and the wedding, without having any obligations.

On the other hand, people used to hide their true selves by putting on a face a lot more than they do today.

You might be thinking, "Yawn, BORING!"

But this stuff influences how you and I think.

We live in a culture that doesn't think that self-control is really all that important.

Even suggesting that we NEED self-control implies that we've got a battle within our own desires, thoughts and emotions.

That pushes in the opposite direction to a whole heap of our cultural values.

We're in the age of authenticity.

You just need to be true to yourself – to be anything else would be a lie.

I am what I am and I won't apologise for it.

Unless, of course, I'm not saying what's popular on social media and then I'll go with the flow.

Our culture also cares a lot about our feelings.

Feelings often rule – if something feels good, then do it.

But if something doesn't feel good, then it's wrong.

It's important that you don't get your feelings hurt.

The absolute worst thing you can do is hurt someone else's feelings.

If we use the language that the Bible uses, we would say that we're strongly driven by our desires.

But the Bible tells us that not all of our feelings and desires are good.

Our desires can mean that we want too much of a good thing.

Or not enough of good things.

Or even things that will ultimately harm ourselves and others.

The Bible warns us that we need to be careful of wholeheartedly following our desires because they've been tainted by sin.

We can have good desires, but not all of our desires are good.

Some of our desires are evil.

James 1:14 NIV11 ¹⁴ but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.

Our desires offer the world and then don't deliver what we need to make us happy and satisfied.

They just leave us wanting more.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 4 that some of our desires are deceitful – tricking us.

Peter tells us that some of our desires are even at war with us.

1 Peter 2:11 NIV11 ¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.

Come back with me and have a look at the list of the acts of the law that Paul talked about earlier in Galatians 5.

He describes wrong desires that haven't been controlled.

He says that because of our flesh, we won't control the things we think will make us happy.

It's almost a shopping list of what most 18-30 year olds would consider to be a good Friday night.

Galatians 5:19–21 NIV11 ¹⁹ The acts of the flesh are obvious: **sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery**; ²⁰ **idolatry** and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of

rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; **drunkenness, orgies**, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Can you see how excess is celebrated in these verses?

Sin is never, ever satisfied and it doesn't give up easily.

There's a continual desire for more. Just one more, Ben, just one more.

Even though sin needs to be restrained, it keeps calling out for us to indulge it.

Let's not kid ourselves: sin is often pleasurable.

At least in the short-term, otherwise we probably wouldn't do it.

We do it because we enjoy it or we think it'll bring us enjoyment.

The gambler likes to be able to escape from the real world for a bit.

The alcoholic wants the pain to be numbed.

But the pleasure and relief is temporary.

Ultimately, though, just living for our desires is bad for ourselves or others.

That's what the preacher in Ecclesiastes discovered.

Qoheleth knew what it was like to live the self-indulgent life.

He had wine, women and song, yet it was all meaningless and depressing.

And his experience is recorded for us in the Bible so that we don't have to make the same mistakes he did to find out what a disaster it is.

Even still, I reckon that many of us wouldn't mind trying it "just to be sure" if we were given half a chance.

Self-control means living within boundaries.

We were made to live within the boundaries God has set.

Life without boundaries isn't freedom; it's slavery to our desires.

And it causes all kinds of misery rather than happiness.

So, we need to know what Jesus' boundaries are so that we can bring our boundaries under control.

There's a proverb that talks about a person without self-control being like a city without walls.

Without a protective boundary, the city is open for the taking:

Proverbs 25:28 NIV11 ²⁸ Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control.

Self-control brings our desires under control.

We know that we need following Jesus means taking up our cross, but he also says that we need to deny ourselves:

Luke 9:23 NIV11 ²³ Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.

Paul is a good example of this.

He wanted to be with the Lord – Philippians 1:23 – but he knew that his desire wasn't in line with God's will for him at that time.

He told the Corinthians to look to the example of others, especially in the Bible and the Old Testament people of God to learn from their mistakes of following their own desires – 1 Corinthians 10:6.

A lack of self-control is dangerous to ourselves and others.

When we don't have self-control, then we just keep on sinning without any restraint.

When we sin, we hurt other people.

So much of our sin would be stopped if we had self-control.

That's the problem with a lack of self-control.

Power

Secondly, godly self-control takes power.

Living in Brisbane, Australia, it's at least as easy, if not easier, to be self-indulgent than at any other time or place.

We have an abundance of physical resources that mean that we CAN actually indulge ourselves.

In many ways, that's harder when you don't know where your next meal is going to come from.

We're able to anesthetise ourselves by blowing our resources on pure entertainment.

Being self-controlled isn't nearly as easy as being self-indulgent.

Self-control is easy to define, but much harder to do.

We need power to be self-controlled.

There's actually nothing uniquely Christian about self-control.

In fact, it's interesting that there's no word for self-control in the Hebrew Old Testament.

It's there a few times in our English translations, but to translate the idea and not the word.

It was really the Greek philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle who made self-control a big thing and came up with the word.

They list it amongst their four big virtues – justice, wisdom, courage and self-control.

So, it was a really common idea in the wider culture by the time the New Testament was written.

The Stoics were into the idea that we need bring our desires under control by denying ourselves.

We'll become the best people we can be by saying "no".

That means they essentially thought that any kind of desire for pleasure was bad.

Sometimes that works and quite effectively.

I'm sure you've met people who were smoking a pack of 50 heavies one day and then simply gave up the next.

They were able to give up their addiction with pure self-control.

But I'd question whether they're able to do that with everything.

The Bible makes it clear that when it comes to sin, willpower and self-control alone won't win out the day.

There will be some things that even the strongest person will find difficult to say "no" to.

Like something as mundane as having the self-control not to scratch that itchy skin.

We need more than just, "Stop it."

In fact saying that can make it worse because we focus on it.

If I say to you, "Don't think of an apple," that's probably the only thing you can think of.

It's common to struggle to say "no" to food and drug addictions and "Stop it" doesn't work.

Self-control is about self-mastery.

The beginning of self-mastery is being mastered by Christ and his Spirit.

When Christ is Lord of our life, that makes all the difference in the world.

With Jesus as Lord, we can rightly order everything else under him.

Paul told the Corinthians that he refused to be mastered by anything or anyone other than Jesus:

1 Corinthians 6:12 NIV11 ¹² “I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”—but I will not be mastered by anything.

Christian counsellor, Ed Welch, talks about the dry drunk of Alcoholics Anonymous.

AA teach that once you’re a drunk, you’re always a drunk.

That’s the case if you don’t have a new master.

But with Jesus, that’s exactly what we’re offered.

Jesus died to pay for our sins and has been raised as both Lord and Christ.

Christians have a new master we serve.

The Holy Spirit gives us the power to say “no” to sinful desires and keep our sin in check.

He does that by changing our desires.

Romans 8:13 NIV11 ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

Self-control isn’t just about saying “no” to stuff.

It’s also about saying “yes” to the right things.

Christians don’t just say “no” to ungodliness, we say “yes” to grace.

When we can see the beauty of God’s grace, we can see the beauty of God himself and living his way.

Titus 2:11–12 NIV11 ¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. ¹² It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,

The best life is the life that’s found in the Spirit: desiring Jesus and the things he desires.

Sometimes we feel like life isn’t as good because of the things that we’re missing out on.

It’s actually not a second-class life though, because those boundaries are good for us.

Yes, there are things that we miss out on, but Jesus is absolutely better.

So much of our world is working against us trying to master us and prevent us from being self-control.

We have advertising coming out of our faces telling us that we need what they're selling to be happy, even though we know it's garbage because it didn't work last time.

There are notifications on our phones that are designed to suck us into that Facebook hole with the lights and dings and rings.

The wise person turns them off.

Streaming services deliberately play the next episode to defeat your self-control so that one episode becomes ten.

We know that the gambling industry invests in working out how to use sound, light and small rewards to keep you stuck and focused.

There are practical steps we can take to say "no" and avoid these things.

What we really need for victory though is to say "Yes" to Jesus.

We must have him as our master.

It's the power of his Spirit that will help us to have self-control.

This's something that deep-down, people want.

Everyone wants to know they can make life better.

There are lots of questions, but not many answers that work.

Self-indulgence isn't working so we're turning the other way and try rules.

We need Jesus.

If you were evangelising, would self-control be one of the things you think you'd naturally be talking about?

If it was me, probably not!

Yet that's exactly what Paul did when he was talking to Governor Felix in Acts 24.

He started by talking about God's righteousness and how we can't be righteous on our own.

Then, he talked about self-control (or our lack of it), which is really a way of talking about sin.

And then he talked about judgement that will come for our lack of self-control.

Acts 24:25 NIV11 ²⁵ As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you."

Having Jesus as Lord and with the help of his Spirit, Christians can have the power of self-control that others can't.

Practice

How do we become self-controlled?

It seems like hard work.

Worse, it seems like it mustn't be very spiritual if we need to do stuff to make it happen.

Perhaps you might be worried that if this is something that the Spirit produces in us, that we'll somehow be undermining grace if we say that we need to work at it.

That doesn't seem to be how the Bible puts it though.

Self-control takes practice.

Self-control is something that needs training so that we can do it over the long-term.

It's also something to keep on doing, rather than something you just do it once and that's it.

It takes training – exercising the muscles over and over until it becomes automatic.

Paul uses the analogy of an athlete who needs self-control in their training to be able to win:

1 Corinthians 9:25 NIV11 ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.

That training starts with our minds.

To some extent, self-control takes a mind shift for all of us.

We need to have healthier patterns of thinking and acting.

Romans 8:5 NIV11 ⁵ Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.

We need our minds to be renewed and have old ways of thinking replaced with new ones.

Christians live their whole lives under the gaze of Jesus – not in a creepy stalker kind of way.

Our old firmware needs to be overridden by a new, updated version that does things his way.

Romans 12:2 NIV11 ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

And it takes a plan.

You all know that verse that says, "Failing to plan is planning to fail."

Actually, no you don't because it's not a verse, but the point is a good one.

You need to work out how you're going to respond in a particular situation.

Self-control often takes prior preparation and thinking about how you're going to act.

Yep, you'll make mistakes, but practice means learning from them.

We need to be growing in self-control.

It isn't something that you go to bed one night without and wake up the next morning having it.

Peter says that self-control is an important part of growing in Christ.

The fact is that self-control isn't a nice little add-on.

In fact, if you're not increasing in it, then you're spiritually blind.

Keep pursuing it because growing in self-control helps to keep us from being ineffective and unproductive.

2 Peter 1:5–9 NIV11 ⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷ and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. ⁸ For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.

This side of heaven, we won't ever achieve self-control in all areas of life.

Over time though, we should start to see some winning.

Self-control takes practice.

Conclusion

Paul finishes this section by saying, "Against such things there is no law."

There's no law needed against these fruit because they're all good things.

They're virtues we can all have because of the Spirit working in us.

May the Lord grow each one of us – especially in self-control – for his glory and our good.

Amen.

¹ From Music Machine: Fruit of the Spirit

² Although Paul uses a word with a slightly different shade of meaning compared to Galatians 5.

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Big Question: Why is self-control so difficult when we can see that it's so important?

Big Idea: The Holy Spirit helps us control ourselves so that we're not controlled by our sinful desires.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe a moment when you either did or didn't use self-control. What difference did self-control make or what it have made?
2. Why is controlling our desires important?
3. How is the Bible's understanding of desires different from our culture's?
4. How does living within God's boundaries help us to enjoy life?
5. How does the Holy Spirit make a difference to the way we do self-control?
6. Do you think most people want self-mastery?
7. How does a person go about gaining control over what he or she thinks about?
8. What are some practical ways to grow in self-control?