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LEARNING TO CONTROL YOURSELF

Galatians 5:22-23

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December 31, 2006
Special New Year's Message

Learning to Control Yourself
Galatians 5:22-23

What do the following people have in common: the drunk on skid row; the student flunking out of college because he never studies; the person who is always late for appointments; the compulsive eater; the smoker; the man who frequently looks at pornography on the Internet; the drug addict; and, the Christian who never grows because he doesn't spend time alone with God? Answer: They all lack the fruit of the Spirit, which is self-control.

In my almost 30 years of pastoral ministry, I would say that the presence or absence of self-control is one of the most determinative factors in whether you will do well or have serious problems in your Christian life. It affects how you manage your time; your money; your ability to overcome temptation; your development of godly character qualities; controlling your temper and your tongue; regulating your health (through proper diet, exercise, and rest); and, most importantly, whether or not you spend consistent time in the Word and prayer.

Since we are on the eve of a New Year, which always reminds me of how quickly life flies by, I thought that it would be helpful to look at what God's Word says about this often-neglected fruit of the Holy Spirit, self-control. I have a tough sales job on my hands, because we're all suckers for the quick fix for problems that require sustained discipline. An ad promises, "Just pop a pill and you can eat chocolates all day long and lie around on the couch watching TV, but you'll lose 50 pounds!" People actually spend their money on such gimmicks! But you can promise them a sure-fire way to lose weight that won't cost them a dime, but they won't do it: Eat healthy food in the proper amount and exercise for an hour every day. Why won't they do it? Because it requires self-control!

The spiritual fruit of self-control, while guaranteed to be effective, is not a quick fix. It requires a lifetime habit of discipline for the purpose of godliness (1 Tim. 4:7). You will be tempted by spiritual snake-oil hucksters, who tell you that if you will just get slain or baptized in the Spirit, all of your temptations will evapo-

rate. Don't believe them! Discipline for the purpose of godliness is God's prescribed means to godliness. Our text shows that...

God wants you to learn to control your life under the control of His Holy Spirit.

We will examine the subject by answering three questions: What is self-control? How do you get it? Where do you need it?

WHAT IS SELF-CONTROL?

ü Self-control is the inward rule or regulation of every area of your life under the ultimate authority and control of God's Spirit in line with His Word.

The Greek word comes from a root word meaning power or lordship. The Jewish writer, Philo, described it as having superiority over every desire (Walter Grundmann, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel [Eerdmans], 2:340-341). In our text, it stands in opposition to the deeds of the flesh, which are (Gal. 5:19-21), "immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these." Paul lists "self-control" as a qualification for elders (Titus 1:8). Peter includes it in his list of godly qualities that we must develop (2 Pet. 1:6). By definition, self-control means overruling your emotions because of a higher goal. Because you want to please and honor God, you must go against your feelings of the moment.

1. Self-control is primarily inward and only secondarily outward.

Jesus said (Mark 7:21-23), "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man." It follows that if we only control such evil desires in order to look good in front of people or to avoid being prosecuted by the law, we are just putting a Band-Aid on the cancer of the heart. The control of the Holy Spirit extends to the heart level, allowing us to deal with temptation before it goes any farther.

2. Self-control operates under Spirit-control.

There is a paradox here: to be Spirit-controlled results in being self-controlled. As we walk by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16), He produces in us the ability to control every area of our lives in line with His holy purposes. This implies active responsibility on your part. Sometimes, speakers on the spiritual life state that you are to be completely passive: "Just let go and let God." "If you're striving, you're not trusting." This is clearly unbiblical. Paul wrote (Col. 1:29), "For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me." Both are true. The fruit of the Spirit is *self*-control.

3. Self-control is not self-willed, but it is connected with your will.

In Titus 1:8, Paul says that an elder is to be self-controlled, but in the previous verse, he says that an elder must not be self-willed. Clearly, both are connected with our responsibility to choose (our will). But the difference is, the self-controlled person is submitting himself to God's will as revealed in His Word, whereas the self-willed person is acting for his own selfish desires, disregarding what God wills. Because God has given us new life in Christ and has given His Holy Spirit to indwell us, we have both the responsibility and the ability to yield our self-will to His revealed will.

4. Self-control is not legalism.

If you develop this fruit of the Spirit, some Christians will label you as legalistic. But this quality appears in the Book of Galatians, which was written to combat legalism. Legalism is the attempt to earn standing with God by performing certain duties or behavior. Also, legalists attempt to look spiritual to others by keeping their man-made rules and they judge those who do not keep their rules. To live as a godly Christian, you must live openly before God, who examines the heart (1 Thess. 2:4).

Living under God's grace, by the way, does not mean that God gives you a bunch of free passes on sin each day, or that you can live a, hang-loose, sloppy, unproductive life. Paul wrote (1 Cor. 15:10), "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them [the other apostles]; yet not I, but the grace of God with me."

5. Self-control is not asceticism.

Asceticism means denying yourself certain legitimate comforts and imposing certain hardships for some spiritual value. Join a monastery where you eat a meager diet, sleep on a hard mat in a cold room, and take a vow of poverty in order to control the flesh. Paul describes that approach (Col. 2:20-22) and concludes (2:23), "These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence."

At the same time, Paul does mention the example of an athlete, who exercises self-control in all things in order to win (1 Cor. 9:25). He goes on to say that he disciplines his body so that he will not be disqualified from preaching the gospel. Thus your motive for controlling yourself is crucial. For example, a missionary to the Muslims may not eat pork, because to do so would be a needless offense to Muslims. But not to eat pork because you think it will make you more spiritual would be asceticism.

6. Self-control is not rigid, but flexible.

There is the danger of being so self-controlled that you lose the ability to relate spontaneously to others in love. For example, it is good to be disciplined to read your Bible and pray every day. But suppose you're in the middle of your quiet time, and your two-year-old exuberantly jumps into your lap to show you his picture that he colored for you. I would suggest that you are not properly self-controlled under the Spirit's control if you push him away, saying, "Can't you see that I'm reading the Bible!" The fruit of self-control is also accompanied by the fruits of love, patience, kindness, and gentleness. The aim of self-control is always to enable us to love God and to love others. If we use self-control merely for selfish purposes, we are not exercising this fruit of the Spirit.

HOW DO YOU GET SELF-CONTROL?

Some, by natural temperament and perhaps by upbringing, are more inclined to self-control than others are. If you are not so inclined, then you will have to fight harder to develop it. Paul does *not* say that those who by nature are more free-spirited or disorganized are exempt from this quality! A study of both Paul and Jesus will show that they exhibited this fruit. To be godly, you must be self-controlled. In one sentence:

ü You get self-control by walking in the Spirit's control as you live in accordance with God's purpose for your life.

Here is how to implement this step by step:

1. Write a one-sentence purpose statement for your life.

Granted, there is no verse in the Bible that specifically tells you to do this. But many verses show that Jesus and Paul both were clear about their purpose for living. Consider:

Matthew 6:33: "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

Luke 19:10: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

John 17:4: "I glorified You on earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do."

1 Corinthians 9:23: "I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it."

Philippians 3:8a, 12b: "More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.... I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus."

1 Timothy 4:7b: "discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness."

These and many other verses show that Jesus and Paul were men of godly purpose. Picture yourself on your deathbed and ask, what do you want to have accomplished with your life? Here is my personal purpose statement: "To glorify God by being a godly husband and father, and by using my gift of pastor-teacher for the building up of the body of Christ and the furtherance of the gospel." Every Christian will desire to glorify God. Beyond that, your statement will vary, depending on your personality and gifts. But write it down and look at it often, so that you are clear on why God has you on this earth.

2. Establish biblical goals for every area of your life to help move you towards your life purpose.

Paul illustrates this with the analogy of an athlete who wants to win (1 Cor. 9:24-27). To get to that goal, he brings every area of

his life under that purpose. He controls his diet, he gets the proper rest, and he schedules regular workouts to move him towards the goal of winning the prize.

Again, this will vary with each person, depending on where you most need to grow. You should determine these goals from the Bible, not from some worldly self-help book. They will include biblical character qualities that you need to develop, and biblical activities that you need to practice. Your goals should include developing loving relationships, properly managing your time and money in light of God's purposes, and being a good steward of the spiritual gifts that He has given you. Write down your goals.

3. Commit yourself to these goals.

Biblical goals provide the motivation to change, but you must count the cost and be willing to commit yourself to them. I've often wished that I could speak a foreign language, but I've never committed myself to achieve that goal. As you know, there are no easy ways to learn a language. It takes time and discipline to do it well. Before you commit to some spiritual goal, think about what it will require and whether you are willing to commit to follow through. Your motive has to be to please God.

4. Plan specifically how to reach these goals.

You need to prioritize and schedule your goals. If your marriage is falling apart because you have a bad temper, you should make controlling your temper a top goal! If your life is dominated by drug or alcohol abuse, you can't begin to glorify God until you get those sinful practices under control. Prioritize them!

Also, you must rearrange your schedule to put these new priorities in place. It will mean getting up in time to spend time in the Word, in Scripture memory, and in prayer. It may mean scheduling a weekly time to meet with a small group for growth and accountability. It may mean breaking off certain harmful habits that pull you down, whether ungodly friendships at the local bar or watching TV shows that defile you. You may have to limit computer use.

5. Implement, evaluate, and correct your goals as necessary.

Put your plan into action and then take a few minutes every week or two to evaluate your progress and make necessary correc-

tions. You may decide that some of your original goals need to be modified or changed altogether. When you get certain things into place as godly habits, you can add new goals.

6. Walk by means of the Holy Spirit every day.

This undergirds the whole process. Note Galatians 5:16, "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh." He goes on to talk about the strong desires of the flesh that war against the Spirit. If you do not conquer these desires, you will not grow in godliness. You don't win wars accidentally! You must devote yourself to the battle, committed to fight with everything you've got. Anything less will result in defeat.

To walk by the Spirit means to depend upon and yield to the indwelling Holy Spirit moment by moment every day. Walking is not as spectacular as leaping or flying, but if you keep at it, you'll get where you're going. Also, the picture of fruit implies a slow, deliberate process. There will be setbacks and difficulties along the way. The question is, are you actively, purposefully walking by the Spirit, coming back to dependence on Him when you have fallen, so that over the long haul, the fruit of the Spirit, including self-control, is growing in your life?

WHERE DO YOU NEED SELF-CONTROL?

If you haven't been convicted yet, this ought to do it! In a nutshell,

ü You need self-control in every aspect of your life.

Let me briefly mention seven areas. Rather than being overwhelmed because you need to improve in all seven, prayerfully evaluate where you most need to grow and prioritize these.

1. Control your body.

Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and you are to glorify God with your body (1 Cor. 6:19-20). This includes getting proper rest (avoiding the extremes of laziness and being a workaholic). It means getting proper exercise and eating a healthy diet of moderate proportions, so as to avoid the problems that come from eating junk food and being overweight. This will vary from person to person, but none of us can do it without self-control.

Controlling your body also requires godly control over your sexual desires. God made you with those desires, but He also designed them to be restricted to the marriage relationship.

2. Control your mind.

Our culture, more than any other in history, bombards us through the media with ungodly ways to think and live. To be godly, you must control your mind (Phil. 4:8; Col. 3:1-4). What do you think about? You cannot engage in a secret life of lust after sex or greed and become godly. To control your thought life, control what you read. Saturate your mind with the Bible and with books that help you grow in godliness. Set some goals, such as reading through the Bible in a year, or reading a certain number of Christian books this year. Put these things in your schedule.

Control what you expose your mind to (TV, movies, Internet, etc.). You cannot watch certain types of movies without those evil images embedding themselves in your brain.

3. Control your emotions.

You are not the helpless victim of your emotions! If you are genetically prone to depression or anxiety or impulsiveness or lust, you may have to battle harder to gain control than someone else will. But these fruits of the Spirit are promised to all that walk by the Spirit, not just to certain personality types. If you live by constantly yielding to your emotions, you will not grow in godliness. Self-control means controlling your emotions for a higher goal.

4. Control your time.

Often we excuse our ungodliness by saying, "I don't have time." But we all have time to do what we want to do. The question is, do you want to be godly? If so, cut out of your schedule the unnecessary things that hinder spending time with the Lord.

5. Control your finances.

We often complain that we don't have enough money to pay bills, let alone to give consistently to the Lord's work. But usually the problem is that we do not properly manage what the Lord has entrusted to us. Let me put it bluntly: Cable TV, dinners out, and expensive entertainment are *not* necessities! If you can pay your bills and give generously to the Lord's work, those things may be

permissible. Unless you need it for work, believe it or not, a cell phone is not a necessity! Running up credit card debt is almost always due to poor financial management.

6. Control your tongue.

Abusive speech or words that tear down others (even in jest) are sinful (Col. 3:8). Angry words and name-calling are sins (Eph. 4:29-32). Lying is sin (Eph. 4:25). Talking inappropriately about sex and telling dirty jokes are sins (Eph. 5:3-4). Gossip and slander are sins (Eph. 4:31; James 4:11). Taking the Lord's name in vain is sin (Exod. 20:7; Matt. 6:9). Paul wrote (Eph. 4:29), "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear." To please God, you must learn to control your tongue (James 3:1-12).

7. Control your relationships.

I do *not* mean to act in a controlling manner towards others! I mean that you must take the initiative to distance yourself from anyone that pulls you towards the world or the flesh. Be careful about relationships with unbelievers, especially those that yoke you unequally, whether in marriage or in business (2 Cor. 6:14-18). If you are single, do not date unbelievers, even to witness to them. If you develop friendships with unbelievers, be careful to keep in mind the aim of being a godly witness, so that you do not join them in godless pleasure (Luke 5:29-32; 1 Pet. 4:1-5).

Positively, work on developing godly, loving relationships, beginning with your mate and children. Practice biblical love on a daily basis. Ask God for a more mature person (men with men, women with women) who can help you grow in Christ.

Conclusion

The danger of a message like this is that you will feel so overwhelmed by all that you need to do that you will be paralyzed by procrastination. My advice is to pray through the areas that I've mentioned, asking God to help you prioritize them. Work on the one or two areas that would bring the most needed results. If you fall, get up and keep walking by the Spirit. As you do, He will work in you the fruit of self-control for His glory.

Application Questions

1. Have you ever written out a purpose statement for your life in light of God's purpose? When will you make time to do it?
2. How does self-control differ from legalism? Why does God's grace not lead to sloppy living, but to self-controlled living?
3. When is it okay to yield to an impulse or mood and when is it sin?
4. Someone may argue that to deny your emotions for a higher goal will lead to repressed feelings and psychological problems. How would you answer this biblically?

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