

SELF - CONTROL

A friend of mine told me about an argument he had with his wife last week—some silly thing about their house. The next morning she complained about having a sore neck. Without thinking, he quipped, “Must be from that big chip on your shoulder last night!” He said he knew he shouldn’t have said it even as the words were coming out of his mouth. It would have spared him an uncomfortable night on the basement couch.

We’ve all said and done impulsive things like that. Some of them merely embarrass us. Others get us into serious trouble—or could have. I remember in junior high having an M-80 firecracker that I just couldn’t wait to light. I decided to put it under a #10 can to see how high it would go. Then, since we lived in town, I thought I’d better hide my adventure in a shed where at least I wouldn’t be seen.

I put the M-80 under the can, lit the fuse, and with my last shred of sensibility thought: “This is going to be really loud.” So I ran outside just as it went off. The blast was satisfyingly terrifying. I fully expected to hear sirens. When I went back in the shed to see the damage, I couldn’t find the can. Then I discovered the walls ringed by shrapnel and the bottom of the upside-down can stuck to the ceiling. I had come within a gnat’s eyebrow of being a victim of my own terminal stupidity.

Fortunately, most of us survive our youthful impulsiveness, but we rarely escape unscathed. At best, we have funny stories to tell. Sometimes the damage is more serious. We hurt ourselves or others in ways that follow us all our lives. We have memories we’d rather forget, memories that make us cringe with private shame.

Learning to manage our impulses is part of growing up. Parents provide *external* discipline for their kids in order to build *self*-discipline into them. But sometimes, often by our own temperament and foolishness, we never fully develop impulse control. We eat too much. We drink too much. We talk too much. We buy too much. We act out sexually. We vegetate when we should be doing chores or homework. We drive too fast. We react instead of responding.

To make matters worse, we live in a culture that has deceived itself with the notion that controlling our desires is unhealthy: “Don’t repress—express! Restraint is quaint. Do it!”

And we live with the consequences.

Something Paul wrote almost two-thousand years ago is fast becoming a painfully graphic description of the American culture. As you listen to his list, what images from pop culture or the news jump into your mind? “...mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, *without self-control*, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them” (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

When we asked you to identify uncommon virtues in our day, no wonder you put *self-control* on your lists.

The New Testament Scriptures use three words which we translate ‘self-control.’ Each add a nuance to our wider understanding. First of all, self-control is a kind of *sanity*.

Sanity

“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live *self-controlled*, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:11-14).

The word translated self-control here is a compound word whose roots go back to the idea of a safe mind. It’s a word that expresses sensibility, the capacity to think straight and reason correctly. Self-control is a kind of mental and moral sanity, a wisdom that considers outcomes and consequences before it acts.

Dierks Bentley wrote the CW song: *What Was I Thinking*. He describes a crazy date with a girl that involved a load of buckshot in his tailgate from her father, a police chase through a cornfield and a fight in a honkey-tonk. He sings: “I know what I was feeling, but what I thinking?”

He wasn’t—thinking. And that’s the problem. Self-control begins with mental muscle. Your mind matters. That’s why it is so vital, as Paul says, that we be “...transformed by the renewing of our minds.” Christ-followers exercise self-control as an expression of spiritual sanity. Their transformed minds discern good and evil, connect conduct with outcomes and so monitor their choices.

Our world labels that repression. It says we should be free to fully express ourselves. That kind of freedom is what got the human race into the mess of sin to begin with. Satan tempted Eve with the enticing idea that God was holding out on her. She had the freedom to decide for herself about right and wrong, good and evil. What was she thinking?

Don’t let the world press you into it’s mold. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. And let your renewed mind bring sanity to your choices: self control.

Sobriety

The second word often translated *self-control* in the New Testament literally means ‘sober.’ It’s sobriety in all the ways we use it:

- “Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be *self-controlled*; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:13).
- “So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and *self-controlled*. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be *self-controlled*, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet” (1 Thessalonians 5:6-8).

When we think of *self-control* as sobriety, we’re coming very close to what we meant by sanity. We’re responding with an unimpaired mind so that we’re less likely to respond irrationally.

Think about what happens to people who get drunk. Their speech slurs. They lose coordination and balance. Alcohol reduces moral inhibitions and they may act out of character. It affects their emotions so that anger is angrier, sadness is sadder, lust is lustier, happiness is happier—all of their emotions control them.

Mickey Gilley wrote the honky tonk lyrics: “All the girls all get prettier at closin' time. They all begin to look like movie stars.” Guess what? Students of human behavior have quantified Gilley’s observation.

Marcus Munafo, a researcher in experimental psychology at the University of Bristol,

discovered that students who had drunk alcohol rated faces in photographs as being ten per cent more attractive than a control group that had no alcohol. He added: “It was quite a big effect for quite a small amount of alcohol.” In fact, the results of the study indicate that as little as a large glass of wine or a pint-and-a-half of beer is enough to make the girl or guy sitting on the barstool next to you appear more attractive than you might otherwise think. So next time someone tells you they did what they did because they had their beer goggles on...believe them (ABCNews.com).

Sobriety is not just about alcohol. When I lit the fuse to that M-80, my thinking was impaired. Any number of things can impair our judgment: peer pressure, shopping, athletics, hormones, extreme sports.

Be sober. Be self-controlled. Be morally and spiritually unimpaired. Ditch whatever gets in the way of sound thinking and sober judgement. Lose the beer goggles.

Strength:

The third word translated *self-control* in the New Testament has to do with strength—an empowered, disciplined will. This is the word we studied in our series from 2 Peter: “For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, *self-control*...” (2 Pet. 1:5ff).

Paul used the related verb when he wrote: “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training [exercises *self-control* in all things—NASV]. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever” (1 Corinthians 9:25).

Self-control in this sense comes from capacities in the inner person of the heart. It is strength of will, personal discipline that puts the self in control of the passions and desires. Self-control as inner strength gives us the backbone to say “No!” to our impulses and walk away from them.

Doing what we want to do is what usually gets us into trouble. We have a sinful nature deeply infected with the insanity that doing what we want will serve us well, even if what we want runs against what God wants, even if doing what we want is destroying us.

Sanity, sobriety and strength are interdependent components of self-control. Many men and women who have struggled with alcoholism have made their way back to healthy living through Alcoholics Anonymous and their Twelve Step Program. Listen to the first two steps:
Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over our addiction—that our lives had become unmanageable

Step 2: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity

Do you see the connections. They weren’t sober, they were out of control because they lacked power and sanity. They had neither the internal strength nor the mental and moral sanity to say no to something that was tearing their world apart.

We may not struggle at the same level of addiction, but all of us have places where we slip out of control. Maybe not wild and crazy out of control, but not in control either.

So how do we get this? How do undisciplined people get self-discipline? That was the quandary I faced as a new believer. How does someone with poor impulse control gain control of their impulses when it takes what you haven’t got to get what you need?

Listen: “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and *self-control*” (Gal. 5:12; 22-23).

Self-control is an expression of God's presence in our lives. It's not automatic. We partner with the Spirit in what the Spirit does. But we have the Spirit of the living God residing inside us. As we live by the Spirit, yielding to God's Spirit, walking with God's Spirit and keeping step with God's Spirit, one outcome will be self-control. God's Spirit in our life will give us spiritual and moral sanity. He will impart sober restraint and moderation. And he will strengthen us with power in our inner being.

Do you want self control? Be filled with the Spirit. Walk with God. Stay close to God, and let the indwelling Spirit of God transform your life. Do this with the confidence and expectation that the Spirit of God in you is as substantial and real as the temptations and impulses that seduce you. Think of it. The God who created all that is lives in you and wants to give you power over your own self. Believe it. Act on it. Let the Holy Spirit of God build discipline into your life.

There are lots of reasons why this matters. Self-control is vital for godly character, good morals and a productive life. That's obvious. But the Bible especially notes three other applications of self-control.

The first is leadership. Self-control is a qualification for spiritual leadership in local churches: "...he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled [sanity], upright, holy and disciplined [strength]" (Titus 1:8). Godly character is impossible without a Christlike sanity, sobriety and inner strength.

The second is prayer. "The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded [sanity] and self-controlled [sobriety] so that you can pray" (1 Peter 4:7). All of us struggle with focused attention in prayer. And all of us want to pray effectively—to communicate with God deeply. We can't pray impulsively, with minds wandering wildly. We need self-control. Pray in the Spirit.

Third, we have an enemy bent on our destruction. Self-control is part of our defense: "Be self-controlled [sobriety] and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Just as a drunk soldier is a liability on the battlefield, you can't fight spiritual wars spiritually impaired. If we're going to stand against the attacks and temptations of the enemy, we need sober self-control.

Solomon observed: "Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control" (Proverbs 25:28). Without self-control we're defenseless against our spiritual enemies, our demanding urges and our infinite appetite for diversions. We'll never even come close to fulfilling the dreams God has for us.

May this uncommon virtue be common among us. May self-control in all its forms—sanity, sobriety and strength—mark us as uncommon people, giving clear witness to the presence of the living God among us.