

Christian Character - Self-Control

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[0 : 00] Father, I'll just pray. Thank you for bringing us together this evening, for allowing us to look at your word, to sing worship and praise to you, to acknowledge you as king in our lives and of the world.

Lord, would you speak what you want through the text and the message tonight? Would you convict us where we need convicting, encourage us where we need encouraging and love us through it all? We know you will. So we pray in Jesus name. Amen. Amazing. Excited to do this. We're going to be looking at self-control and I'm going to say very little because I want the interactive bit to be here at the beginning.

But we're going to start in the book of Titus. So if you want to flip there, 1198 in the church Bibles. Titus 2 will be there. We'll also look in Galatians and we'll also look in Romans.

So I don't know if Bible drill was a thing in the UK. You have to close it and get to it really fast. I was much too cool to be on the Bible drill team at church growing up, but there was a such thing as a Bible drill team and they went in like competitions and stuff.

[1 : 24] It was pretty wild. But anyway, basically the encouragement is to be able to flip quickly to the passages that we want to look at. So self-control, again, before I say anything about it, I want to ask the question, what comes to mind?

And this is the interactive bit, so please shout out as you have something there. What comes to mind when I say self-control? When we think of self-control, what are the first things that you think of?

Slow to anger? Is that what you said? Yeah, yeah. No sugar. Careful, yes. Saying no.

Saying no. Yes. Trying to control. Food.

Interesting. In our culture and society that self-control is connected to food a lot of times. What else? Anything else that just jumps immediately to mind?

[2 : 32] Speaking, yeah. Holding your tongue. Self-controlling of that. Social media. That's another one that can be big.

What about in relation? So this is a study in Christian character, maybe largely kind of the fruits of the spirit and things like that.

As it relates to the others in that list that you're immediately thinking of, how do you think of self-control? Does it seem outside of the list or it's the last one in some lists?

I'll tell you what I was thinking. It's kind of lost. Yeah. So Steve got to talk on love and joy and some other fun ones are coming.

And I looked at my list. I've got self-control. And then later I think I have patience. So I don't know if Steve's trying to tell me something or what. But to me, it feels almost, if we're encouraged to be loving and gracious and gentle and good and kind, and then there's self-control, which almost feels like, and then don't do any of the bad stuff, right?

[3 : 56] It almost feels different than the others. And so my discouragement in being in this one, notwithstanding, what I hope for and what I think has been on my heart as I've thought about this is that we actually don't look at self-control in that light.

Even if that's our natural bent to be like, oh, self-control, it means limiting myself. It means holding, doing something else. That it's actually as beautiful a fruit of the Spirit as love or joy or any of those others.

That while compared to those things that feel like we want to grow and add, that it's actually a growing and adding of Christlikeness. And it would result in something that is a life and a character in yourself that you would certainly hope for and desire as a Christian.

So I think it's something that, you know, if we think of the fruit of the Spirit, it's a gift. Self-control is a gift to us more than something we must master.

And I think, you know, if you don't remember anything else that we say tonight, I would think something in that vein would be helpful to us to remember self-control as a gift from God, a fruit of the Spirit at work in our lives more than something we have to level up to live out this life.

[5 : 21] So in light of that, let's look at Titus chapter 2. Titus chapter 2. Let me read it. It's the whole chapter. It's not very long. So I'll read it with us.

It says, You, however, must teach what is appropriate to sound doctrine. Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love, and in endurance.

Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can urge the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands so that no one will malign the Word of God.

Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled. In everything, set them as an example by doing what is good. In your teaching, show integrity, seriousness, and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.

Teach slaves or bond servants to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.

[6 : 46] For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, while we wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory 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.

These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority, and do not let anyone despise you. So, one more.

Who needs self-control based in Titus? Everyone, right? I think we covered them all. Older men, younger men, older women, younger women.

We all need to control our self, right? There's something in us, the implicit command or the thing that is implied there is that there's something about us that needs to be put under control, that something is out of control such that it needs to be controlled, right?

And so, you start thinking about what that might be. I mean, there was a few listed in there, but, you know, what is it in humanity, in people, in us, in me, that needs to be put under control, right?

[8 : 20] This morning, 2 Timothy chapter 3 gave us a list of things that would describe someone that is out of control. He said this morning, There will be terrible times in the last days.

People will be lovers of themselves, self-absorbed, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of good, treacherous, rash, conceited, and lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

Right? Having that form of godliness, but denying its power. So, there's this idea that all of these attitudes and activities are somehow someone that's gone out of control.

They've left that. Galatians 5, before it gives the list of the fruits of the Spirit, he talks about the acts of the flesh.

You can flip over there if you want. We'll go back if you want to put a finger in it. I don't have the page reference for that one. 1-1-7-2 for that.

[9 : 35] So, yeah. So, I'll read from 19. The acts of the flesh are obvious. Sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy, drunkenness, orgies, and the like.

There's a lot of big things in there that would fairly easily be described as being out of control.

Right? But it's, we know, and if we're honest with ourselves, we know, that it's not just the big and forbidden things that are listed in these.

It's all the things. Right? We have a propensity to overindulge in God's gifts just as much as we want to indulge ourselves in the things that he has forbidden.

Right? We listed earlier things like eating an extra biscuit, staying up a little later than we know we should, sleeping a little later than we know we should.

Right? There's all of these things that are, we're letting ourselves be out of control. C.S. Lewis in the Screwtape Letters, if you've read that one, one of the, when, I think it's Wormwood is talking to one of the nephews, he refers to this.

[10:53] He says, all we can do, we being the demons in the story, is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our enemy, that is God, has produced.

So take the pleasures that God has produced and help encourage the humans to take them at times or in ways or in degrees at which he is forbidden.

Right? So the demon's greatest success is getting us to look at the things that God has given, but to take them at times when we shouldn't, with whom we shouldn't, or in an amount that we shouldn't.

Right? So a good gift becomes a negative gift when we abuse it, when we indulge in it, when we overindulge in it. Right? And so what we see is that's a lack of self-control.

Right? Self-control is truly at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. Right? It's inherent in following Christ and not following me.

[11:56] Right? We are called to control our self. And I think that's helpful in terms of framing it. Titus, in that chapter 2 verse, he says in verse 12, it teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions.

Right? So what do we actually mean when we say self-control? You know, the verses and the words that are translated into self-control here. What does that actually mean?

Because when I think of self-control, initially it conjures things that the control piece, I think, trumps in my mind initially.

And what I think of is autonomy. Right? To be in control on my own, by myself. Right? And I think in the Bible, that's not really what it's talking about.

Because our self is in control. That is our natural state. We're running to do whatever pleases us at any given time. Right? The self is already in control.

[13:11] So it's not that we're being encouraged in the Bible to let that happen. Right? So that must not be what it is. Because our self is already in control.

Rather, it is to control our self. Or to allow our self to be controlled. And that's by something different than what it would naturally be.

Right? My self, when I wake up in the morning, is in control. And it tells me, like, I don't want to wake up. I don't want to, you know, do those things that, you know, I don't really want to take the dog out today. Right?

That's my self talking. But wisdom and maturity says put self into its place. And do the thing that's required of you so that you can go on and do life.

Right? So naturally, just in the course of living, we have to exercise a level of control over ourselves such that we can be, you know, useful members of society.

[14:10] Go to work. Maintain jobs. You know, be respectful. And people, you know, trust us and do all these things. Right? We have to put our desires that are inherent in us into some level of control.

Right? And so this is what we're after. Derek Prime, if you know that name, he's a Scottish pastor. He said, self is one of the toughest weeds that grows in the garden of our lives.

Right? It's this thing that is tough to root out. And it's us. Right? Right? The sinfulness.

Just to cut to the chase. Sinfulness is not, we're not tempted by something and then submit to it.

No. So the problem in our lives is not that we sin.

It's that we want to. Right? It's in us already. Right? You know, imagine a bank robbery. Right? The guys on the outside, they have a man on the end that opens the door to let them in to steal.

[15:20] Right? It's an inside job. Right? All of sin is an inside job. It starts inside of us and we let it in. Right? And so this is what must be controlled.

Right? It's a call to godliness. If we look back at that Galatians passage in verse 22, he starts, he moves and he says, don't be like this.

Right? The list that we read earlier. He says, but no, the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Against these things, there is no law. Those who belong to Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Right? We see scripture encouraging us toward self-control.

Right? In fact, this was a difficult topic to study for because there's so much that references the idea of self-control.

[16:23] I mean, every epistle is talking about self-control in some capacity. It's just everywhere because, as I said earlier, it's just core to being a Christian is to deny oneself and go a different direction.

Right? So this is what it is. So the reality here is that we must find this thing. The problem is it's incredibly hard.

Right? We all recognize this. We know it in our lives to be the truth. Paul himself says in Romans, he admits, he says, I am a slave to sin. I don't understand what I do.

What I want to do, I don't do. But what I hate, I do. And so you look at this and what is going on in Paul, you know, Apostle Paul.

If he's struggling with it, certainly I'm struggling with it. And the reality is there's a war going on inside of us at all times. The desire that we have, and as Christians, if we have placed our faith in Christ, we've repented of our sin, and we have now decided to go in a different direction to follow Jesus and not follow the ways of the world.

[17:44] We have now created a scenario in us that is at war at all times. Right? The Westminster Confession puts it really well.

Chapter 13, section 2, not that I expect you to go look it up, but it talks about this in sanctification. It's, you know, the growing in Christlikeness that happens to us that we hopefully do.

It says, This sanctification is throughout in the whole man, a yet imperfect in this life. There abideth still some remnants of corruption in every part, and arises a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh warring against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh.

Right? And this is what we see in Paul's words of, I don't do what I want to do, and yet I do the thing that I hate. Right? This is what's at war here. So you have this war inside of us, and the Bible says we must have self-control.

We must control the self. Right? It's in there. And so the danger in it, I think, is that it's hard. And so the danger is that we fall off on one of two failures.

[19:05] Right? We either fall off to lawlessness. Right? We give up, and we just do whatever we want, whatever pleases us, because it's too hard to resist.

Right? We've seen and we know people that land in that category. But the other side is just as dangerous, and that's legalism or even asceticism, where we make following the rules the most important thing, and we've turned that into an idol.

Right? And so we've got this challenge that we have to battle with.

And controlling what wants to bubble up in us is important. And yet we find it difficult. And what we find, even in the verses in Titus and elsewhere, is that we need a power outside of ourselves.

We can't do it on our own. We can't do it on our own. Right? There's nothing in us that allows it. And so the power to control oneself is outside. So we, in the best case scenario, we might be able to trick ourselves into some semblance of self-control.

[20:20] Right? We might be able to will ourselves to say no to the bad things and to resist the temptation and be the most moral, good person that we can be.

And even if we could do that. Right? Even if we were able to live that out, you know, most of us couldn't make it a day. But even if we were able to, maybe I'll just say for myself, even if we were able to, the result would be that I would get the glory.

Right? And that God would not. So even if I was the most moral human that's ever lived, the only one who benefits from that is me.

And then I die and it's over and it doesn't matter. So the truth is, we want God to get the glory. And so looking at Titus again, to finish this thing, we've seen what, who all is encouraged to self-control. We've seen that we need some power. So at the end, it goes to that 13, verse 13. He says, where's the number 13?

[21:30] It's blinding my eye. So while we wait for this blessed hope, right? So we're in this present age. We're in this kind of already not yet moment. While we wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself up for us to redeem us from the wickedness and to purify us for himself.

Right? That his, Jesus was, who gave himself to redeem us from our wickedness. Jesus gave himself to purify us. So there's something in that, that Jesus is there.

In that Galatians passage, it says, The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The fruit of the Spirit.

Not the work of the saint are these things. It's the fruit of the Spirit at work in the saint. And so self-control is a fruit.

It's a gift of God given to those who believe. And so it's not incumbent upon us to level up in our ability to control our desires and ourself.

[22 : 40] It's God's gift to us to put under control the things that were in us and worked. But there's so many passages that are like flooding to mind that if I said them all, we'd just be here all night.

But let me say one more. So we had that Romans passage, right, where Paul in chapter 7 is saying, I don't do the things I want to do. The things that I hate, I find myself doing.

And he's, you know, he's kind of at this moment where he's like, well, what now? Right? How do we do? And then it flips to chapter 8. And he says, Therefore, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Because Christ in Christ, through Christ, the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what was the law, for what the law was powerless to do, because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be that sin offering.

And so he condemned the sin in the flesh in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met. And us who do not live according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. Bear with me.

[23 : 53] 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.

The mind is governed by the flesh is death. But the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.

Right? If we are filled by the Spirit, then we will think of the things that the Spirit thinks.

Right? We will do the things that the Spirit prompts. We will... The Spirit will control the desires of our heart. Right? The beginning of self-mastery, the beginning of self-control is being mastered by Christ.

By proclaiming that he is our master. And that he is one that we follow. Right? It seems so simple. And it is super simple.

And yet the profoundness of it. That the only way that we can overcome what exists inside of us. Is by allowing us not to be a slave to those things anymore.

[25 : 00] But as the Bible says, to be a slave to him who saves us. Right? And so you've got this whole thing. Let me try to pull this together with an illustration.

Right? In Greek mythology. I don't know if any of you are fans or interested in Greek mythology. But Christopher Nolan, famous director, is in the middle of production of putting together an Odyssey film of the Odyssey.

And so it's going to be star-studded and whatever. But one of the scenes in the Odyssey features this character is called Sirens.

Right? And so they're half woman, half bird or something. And basically they sing these beautiful songs. And what the sailors, as they're sailing, they're on this island. And as the sailors are sailing, they hear this song.

And they're enticed to come this way. And so they end up steering the ships on rocks and then all perishing because they've done that. Right? So what you see in the Odyssey, Odysseus is the character.

[26 : 05] He knows this is coming. And so he fights against that. He tells all the sailors to put wax in their ears so they can't hear. And then has them tie him to the mast so that no matter what he says, they can't listen and follow the sirens.

Right? And so they're able to steer safely past the temptation of the sirens. Interestingly, there's another Greek story, the Argonautica.

And this character in that is Orpheus. And instead of tying himself up on the mast and putting wax in his ears, this one, when they start to hear the song of the siren, he pulls out his lyre and he plays a song more beautiful than the song of the sirens.

And so the sailors are not tempted because they're encaptured by this beautiful song that's being played on the ship. So they don't have to, they're not enticed by the temptation of the sirens.

And this is what we see, right? This is how the Spirit allows us to control our self and to put those things aside.

[27 : 14] Not because we are so powerful that we can resist. And not because we have some sort of special ability to avoid temptation or that we've trained ourselves in such a capacity in the gym of life to put ourselves in this way.

But know that we are more entranced by the beauty and the wonder of God's grace and goodness. That we find that we have no time for the fleeting and temporary pleasures of the world.

Right? The self-control is not trying to control. It's looking at Jesus and saying, this is what I want.

Now, the other things are not going to please me.

They're not going to satisfy me. But Jesus will. And so this I don't, I can resist because it's not any good. Because Jesus is so much better. And self-control is not resisting something that you really do want.

It's accepting something that you want even more. And so it's not control in the way that we think we have to do it. It's not putting shackles on ourselves and saying, no, I can't do that.

[28 : 23] It's saying, yes, God, you're amazing. You're so good to me. I don't want anything else. And so we're at this war with our flesh.

But it's a war that we're assured victory. Because Jesus has done everything that's needed. He's given it all. He's come to earth.

He's taken our sin. He's taken the things that, those exact things that tempt us. And he's put it on himself. And he's put it all on the cross. And the victor has given us his spirit from which to live with.

To carry on. To look at him and the beauty and the amazingness of what he's done for us. The things that we sing about and praise God with. It should well up inside of us such that we only want that.

And the other things seem trivial in light of. So there we go. Self-control. It's not quite what I initially thought when I started to do it.

[29 : 28] So let me pray. I think we've got one song to sing before we end. Let me pray. Father, thank you.

Thank you for loving us. For like the story of the prodigal, the father standing on the road looking for his son.

And when he sees him coming on a long way off, he runs to him. Lord, father, you ran to us and you sent Jesus for us. Even though we were ones who squandered our inheritance in the pigsty.

The temptation of life and the things that look good. God, we've run after those things. We've taken you off the throne of our lives and put whatever it is on top.

And God, in light of that, in spite of that, you came for us. And you put Jesus on the cross with those things on his back. And he died.

[30 : 38] But then he rose in glory. And he comes back like he looks at Peter and restores us into relationship with him. Into relationship with you, Lord. We can be with you forever in eternity.

We can enjoy the true good pleasures and gifts that you give for all of time. And not be scammed into the thinking these other things are what we want.

So, Lord, thank you for that. Lord, help us to see it. Help us to see you as more beautiful. More amazing. More worthwhile than any of the things that might pull us aside.

And when those things tempt us, God, may we look to you. May we look at you again afresh and anew and see your beautiful face and hear you calling out to us like that father on the road and like the father that you are.

And may we turn back to you and follow you once again. Lord, give us your spirit. Give us what we need.

[31 : 48] Be with us as we go, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.