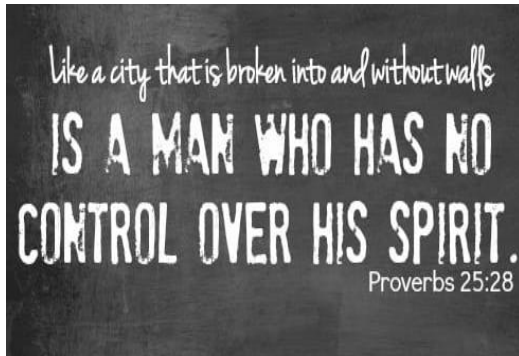


Topic 17: Self-Control

"Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control."

Proverbs 25:28

In spending time with Jesus, we really become like Jesus.



Looking at the Text

Self-control

The Greek word translated "self-control" in Galatians 5:22-23 is *enkrateia*. It speaks of corralling one's emotional impulses, bridling one's appetites or passions, and resisting temptation. The result is a person who is purposeful and in harmony with the will of God.

A self-controlled person is wisely restrained, not wildly reactive. A self-controlled person is intentional not impulsive. When we are self-controlled, we refrain from indulging our momentary selfish whims. Instead, we choose actions that will result in long-term joy.

In biblical times, a city whose walls are broken down has no defense against an enemy. And the person who has no discipline, willpower, or self-restraint (rule) has no defense against anger, lust, impatience, or other unchecked emotions. Without self-control, we are wide-open to sin.

Not ruling your spirit, makes you vulnerable to say or do things that could cost you dearly. It is your wisdom to learn how to control and manage your feelings to only do what is right.

Your spirit is your inner self, which controls your actions. When you do not rule your spirit, you are exposed and vulnerable to all sorts of folly and trouble. Like a defenseless city without walls in former times of marauding armies. Your spirit includes your affections, appetites, and passions. Surrendering that spirit to God is the key.

Self-control is God-empowered restraint (see Psalm 119:101), but also God-driven desire and discipline to do what is right.

Keeping self-control is challenging sometimes, isn't it? Yet, Paul in Galatians 5:22-23 writes that it is evidence of the Spirit-controlled life. He writes that we are either living in the flesh or we are living in the power of the Holy Spirit. Do not trust your own strength; you need His. You cannot relax, for your spirit will take control unless you rule it. By the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, you can rule it.

Jesus Christ ruled His spirit and submitted to God's will, in spite of being very amazed and intimidated by His coming crucifixion (Mark 14:33). Though tempted by the devil at various times, He never considered the devil's suggestions (Matt 4:1-11). But not only that, He will provide grace and strength for those who ask (II Cor 12:9-10; Phil 4:13).

1. *"When [Jesus' accusers] hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly"* (1 Peter 2:23).

How did Jesus demonstrate self-control? What might he have done instead?

2. *"Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified."* (1 Corinthians 9:24-27, nasb)

Paul refers to runners and athletes. What can they teach us about self-control?

The gospel shows us that self-control doesn't come from a hardened resolve or willpower. It comes from a humbled heart. Rather than steeling our wills . . . we need to surrender them. Instead of grabbing the steering wheel of our lives, we give the wheel to another – to the Holy Spirit.

In the six short chapters of Paul's letter to the Ephesians you will find a masterpiece of theological writing, a beautiful summary of the Christian life.

- In chapters 1-3, Paul doesn't tell Christians to *do* anything; instead, he gushes about all the amazing things God has done for us in Christ.
- In chapters 4-6 Paul shows how all those spiritual blessings make a difference in the way we live from day-to-day. He rattles off thirty-five specific commands for how we should be interacting in the home, in the church, and in the world.

Reading this divine "to do" list for Christians in Ephesians 4-6 can be intimidating – unless and until you pay close attention to Ephesians 5:18. That verse commands, *"Don't be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit"* (nlt).

3. Why do you think Paul compared and contrasted life in the Spirit with drunkenness?

Being filled with the Holy Spirit isn't something we make happen; it is something that happens *to us*. God does it—but only when we desire his control and open ourselves up to his guiding, transforming presence.

Life Application

Important Points to Remember

- If you're a Christian, God's Spirit lives in you (Romans 8:9)—whether you "feel" him or not. As someone once quipped, "He's *resident* in you—even if you're not allowing Him to be *president* of you." This means Christians don't need to "receive the Spirit"—we need to unleash the Spirit.
- We can't be *filled* with the Spirit when we are *grieving* the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30) or *quenching* the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19). Being filled with the Spirit is a way of saying we are surrendering to his control and allowing him to lead us (Romans 8:14).
- There's no secret prayer for "being filled with God's Spirit." It requires acknowledging and confessing any wrong attitudes or actions so that you will be a clean vessel, useful to the Lord (see 1 John 1:9; 2 Timothy 2:21). Jesus said the Spirit would be like a river within us (John 7:38–39). Not letting the Spirit fill us is like damming up that "holy river." However, when we confess known sin, we "blow up the dam." After confession comes expression, telling God about our desire to have his Spirit rule in our hearts and minds and lives.

Every day—and all through each day—we must choose:

Will I yield control of my life to the indwelling Spirit of God?

Or will I try to power through situations in my own strength?

Those who have tried human willpower know the futility of such an approach. You may be able to resist temptation for a time, but wrong impulses and fleshly desires are like the waves at the beach. They keep coming at you relentlessly.

The disciple realizes *Though I cannot truly control my behavior, I can control who controls my behavior*. Biblical self-control is choosing to say "no!" to the flesh, our old fallen human nature, and surrendering control instead to the Holy Spirit. This means listening to his promptings, soliciting his guidance, relying on His power. The fruit of such a life is divine strength—being able to resist sin, confess when we fail, get up again, and carry out God's will.