

BETTER TOGETHER

When We Practice Self-Control

2 Peter 1:5-8

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Big Idea: *The most complete expression of spiritual maturity is self-control.*

Our old yellow dog was about four or five years old when Cindy brought him home. His name was Brain (as some of you know) and he had already been trained before he came to us. In fact, if we can believe the story, his previous owner was a K-9 police officer. So Brain was pretty responsive to us.

I can honestly say that Brain's greatest love in life was our family. But a close second was the game of fetch. As a Labrador Retriever, he was built to chase things down and bring 'em back. And he loved it best when Nathan or I was the thrower. (No offense, ladies, but most of you throw like girls!) As a matter of fact, Brain could be kind of annoying about it. Every time we went outside for any reason, he would go track down a slimy old dirty tennis ball and drop it on my shoe.

One day, I decided if we had to play, I was going to make it worthwhile. I had Brain sit next to me and told him to stay. Then I faked a throw. The first couple of times, he started up out of his crouch, and I stopped to remind him he was supposed to stay. Finally, when he wouldn't move for any of my fake throws, I tossed the ball a little way out into the yard. Brain stayed, but I could see every muscle in his body shivering. He started to lean forward. Finally, I gave him the command to go so that he wouldn't fall and hurt himself.

That image came to mind this week as I was planning what to say about self-control. And I can't think of a better way to illustrate my own personal battle with it. Sometimes I wake up to realize that I am being tugged back and forth by every whim that dances through my senses.

Proverbs 25:28 (NLT)

²⁸*A person without self-control is as defenseless as a city with broken-down walls.*

I have mentioned before that I regularly read the transcript for a daily commentary by the founder and chairman of Prison Fellowship, Chuck Colson. On Friday, he reflected on the fact that it has now been four years since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Since then, President Bush has designated September 11 as "Patriot Day." A little later in our service, we will take a moment to commemorate the people who lost their lives on that day. But on Friday, Colson reflected on the factors that fueled the extreme Islamic vision behind the attacks.¹ Citing a quote from Pope Benedict from the days when he was Cardinal Ratzinger, he says that "Islamist activity derives energy from a seemingly unlikely source: the West's own spiritual poverty. Ratzinger, who has been involved in interfaith dialogue with Islamic leaders, sees a connection between 'the great moral crisis of the Western world' and the 'reawakening' of the 'Islamic soul.'" In other words, as our moral convictions relaxed and we indulged our physical appetites, we lost the sense of morality that shaped our spiritual identity. We gave up our self-control and we lost who we are supposed to be.

¹ Chuck Colson, "On Our Own Doorstep: What We're Lacking in the Fight against Terrorism." BreakPoint radio commentary for September 9, 2005 and available at the BreakPoint section of the Prison Fellowship website (www.pfm.org).

Is that really what happened? Certainly, there were other factors involved. But it is interesting to note, as Colson did for his listeners, that the Egyptian author who influenced Osama bin Laden “blamed the West’s decline on the lack of Christian influence in society.” Perhaps it is at least worth thinking about.

And even if you end up disagreeing with Colson’s analysis, you must agree that people suffer when self-control breaks down. In a sermon about how the lack of self-control harms relationships, Rick Warren of Saddleback Church in California briefly listed five scriptures that talk about the damage that is caused when something in our lives is out of control.² Here they are, in case you want to review them later on your own.

The damage when we are out of control...

- **Proverbs 29:11** – uncontrolled anger
- **Proverbs 6:26** – uncontrolled lust
- **Proverbs 21:20** – uncontrolled spending
- **Proverbs 23:29-35** – uncontrolled drinking
- **Proverbs 23:4** – uncontrolled ambition

It’s easy to see how each of those uncontrolled behaviors can damage our relationships, and the most significant relationship they damage is our relationship with God. So it should be no surprise that we find self-control listed here with these other eight characteristics that naturally bloom in our lives when we belong to God’s family. And **Galatians 5** isn’t the only place in the Bible that recognizes that connection.

2 Peter 1:5-8 (NLT³)

⁵So make every effort to apply the benefits of these promises to your life. Then your faith will produce a life of moral excellence. A life of moral excellence leads to knowing God better. ⁶Knowing God leads to self-control. Self-control leads to patient endurance, and patient endurance leads to godliness. ⁷Godliness leads to love for other Christians, and finally you will grow to have genuine love for everyone. ⁸The more you grow like this, the more you will become productive and useful in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Over the next few moments, you might want to refer back to that text as we think together about how to building self-control in our lives.

Let’s start with the blueprint...you have to PLAN GOODNESS.

Luke 14:28 (NLT)

²⁸But don't begin until you count the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first getting estimates and then checking to see if there is enough money to pay the bills?

Finish this statement – *when you fail to plan, (you plan to fail)*. I wouldn’t even dream of coming in front of you without planning what I was going to say...although there have been far too many times when my week’s schedule didn’t allow me as much time as I would like. This past week, I talked with the kids at our youth group meeting about time management, which starts with planning your day. If we want to be successful in

² Rick Warren, “The Secret of Self-Control.” From a sermon series entitled *9 Secrets of Healthy Relationships*, available at www.Pastors.com.

³ Scriptures quotations followed by NLT are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation (copyright©1996 by Tyndale Charitable Trust). Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers.

developing self-control, we need to have a plan for the boundaries that need to be in place and what to do when circumstances push us close to lines.

One of the best examples of this I can think of happened one day while I was having lunch with a friend who is also a preacher. Suddenly, his phone rang. When he saw the number on the caller ID, he excused himself and answered. After a few minutes of conversation, he said good-bye and explained. His friend had called because he was on the internet and was feeling a terrible temptation to visit some online pornography because of some pop-up ads that appeared on his screen.

Maybe you could have something like that with a friend – whether it’s about lust or gossip or even the temptation to buy something you really don’t need. It’s like the older couple that was walking through the mall holding hands. A young lady was watching and she couldn’t resist the opportunity to go up and tell the couple how much she admired them for being so affectionate after so many years. The old man just winked and said with a smile, “I started holding her hand in public thirty years ago because I found out that if I let go, she goes shopping.”⁴ Any temptation can be overcome when you have a plan to call a friend and get your self-control reinforced.

Of course, all the best planning in the world is useless proper execution, and that takes a tool that I’m going to call PRACTICE GRIT.

Do you recognize that face? John Wayne brought Marshall Rooster Cogburn to life in the 1969 movie *True Grit*. It is a story about determination...never give up.

I’ve learned that grit is necessary for everything worthwhile in life. And people generally have an enormous capacity to practice grit in their lives when they believe there is a good enough reason. In sports, for example, the players that make it to the professional level and become stars don’t just rely on God-given talent – they focus...they make sacrifices...they work out...they practice specific points of their game thousands of times so that they will become automatic responses to the circumstances they will face. People in business don’t just sit back and wait for customers to walk through the door – they devise strategies to attract attention...put together proposals to entice potential customers to make decisions...if their strategies and proposals don’t work, they come up with new ideas until they find something that is successful...and when the deal is done, they continue to refine their product or their service to get it better and better. We’ve learned that we have to practice grit to start a church.



God has created us in His image. Part of what that means is that He has made us capable of living up to high moral standards. He’s promised us His presence and His active involvement in our lives to help us. But the Bible makes it clear that He also intends for us to exert some effort.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (CEV⁵)

²⁴*You know that many runners enter a race, and only one of them wins the prize. So run to win!* ²⁵*Athletes work hard to win a crown that cannot last, but we do it for a crown that will last forever.* ²⁶*I don't run without a goal. And I don't box by beating my fists in*

⁴ Adapted from Cybersalt Digest, August 31, 2005. Cybersalt Digest is an email publication of www.cybersaltshaker.org.

⁵ Scriptures marked as CEV are taken from the *Contemporary English Version*. Copyright © 1995 by American Bible Society. Used by permission.

the air. ²⁷*I keep my body under control and make it my slave, so I won't lose out after telling the good news to others.*

I want that. I want my body to be my slave. And I know from watching the lives of many people who do not have a vibrant relationship with God that it's possible...IF. Self-control is possible if the "pay-off" we get in the end is valuable enough to us.

That's why this last tool is the most important tool of all. It is the only thing we take with us out of this world. It is more significant than your job, more significant than your hobbies, more significant than your marriage or your kids. The most important tool to build self-control in your life is the passion to PURSUE GOD. In comparison to that, everything else is...



As I watch people in our generation, I'm afraid the vast majority are engaged in pursuits that are trivial from an eternal point of view. We get so obsessed with our properties and our jobs. When eternity comes, they won't matter. We get so upset with each other in our relationships over issues that will be long forgotten when it is time to leave this world. From now on, every time you play that board game, I hope you will remember that the most important pursuit in your life is your pursuit of God. It is the key to pure living. It is the key to self-control. Peter said that *knowing God leads to self-control*. He can make that promise because when we set our focus on a relationship with God, He gladly works in our lives.

John 14:26 (CEV)

²⁶*But the Holy Spirit will come and help you, because the Father will send the Spirit to take my place. The Spirit will teach you everything and will remind you of what I said while I was with you.*

1 John 1:7 (MSG)

⁷*But if we walk in the light, God himself being the light, we also experience a shared life with one another, as the sacrificed blood of Jesus, God's Son, purges all our sin.*

I wonder if you believe that has really happened in your life. I wonder if some of you feel like I talked about earlier...viciously wrenched back and forth by every whim that dances through your senses. I wonder if you are experiencing damage today in your relationships because something is out of control in your life. I don't know if I've said anything here today that will bring relief into your life immediately. It takes more than 20-30 minutes to undue behavior patterns that have developed years.

But perhaps today you can take the first step. Perhaps today you can start a new behavior pattern built on the simple routine of putting your life down before God and asking Him to shape you...asking Him to bring you under control.

Why not take that first step right now?

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