

CHARACTER MATTERS

Week Eleven | March 17, 2019 | Self-Control: Revealing the Gospel with Our Strength

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Before your group meets next time, spend some time alone in God's Word reading through this week's texts. Pray that God, through His Spirit, would bring to life the truth of this text and how it applies to your life.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Displaying self-control is a mark of a Spirit-filled (Spirit-controlled) life.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

You cannot be filled with the Spirit and completely lack self-control.

MEDITATE

"A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls" (Proverbs 25:28).

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.

Character matters. It is what we have been saying and studying for the past ten weeks. It matters for your personal holiness and your witness in the world. It matters for how you relate to and are perceived by your friends, family, spouse, and children. But how can we prove it matters? What evidence is there to show that our

character matters and that it bears fruit in our lives and relationships and for the kingdom of God?

The Stanford Marshmallow Experiment provides some interesting evidence of the importance of character, specifically self-control. The Stanford Marshmallow Experiment, a famous psychology experiment conducted by a group of Stanford University researchers led by Walter Mischel, began in the late 1960s. The experiment was simple—a group of children ages three through six were given the choice between receiving one small reward immediately (often a marshmallow, but sometimes a cookie or pretzel) or waiting 15–20 minutes until the researcher returned to the room, when they would be given two rewards.

The experiment concluded that a willingness to wait for the second reward (displaying more significant self-control, willpower, and delayed gratification) was indicative of greater success later in life. When follow-up studies were done on each participant to observe their growth and development, they discovered that the kids who waited for the second reward had significantly higher SAT scores, a lower Body Mass Index, were physically healthier, and were more competent overall. The study concluded that exhibiting self-control and delaying gratification were markers and characteristics indicating greater success in life.

Scientific research reveals that self-control has a positive effect on personal well-being. So, what is the evidence of self-control for personal holiness? For one, self-control allows you to better resist temptation and flee from sin. Self-control allows you to better love and serve others while keeping you from the works of the flesh (impurity, sexual immorality, drunkenness, gluttony), as you are instead walking by the Spirit (Galatians 5:19–21).

🗨️: *Do you have good self-control? Are you able to delay gratification on a regular basis? What is a recent example or an area of your life that shows evidence of your self-control?*

🗨️: *Where does your self-control, or lack of it, come from? Why are you or aren't you a self-controlled person?*

📖 UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

You cannot be self-controlled and live in habitual, unrepentant sin. Removing and renouncing ungodliness and worldly passions are the result of a self-controlled life. If you walk by the Spirit—and one of the fruits of a Spirit-filled life is self-control—you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. It is through self-control, and only

self-control, that avoiding sin and glorifying God with your holiness is possible. A life of self-control keeps you protected and fortified from the lies and threats of the enemy so no deadly and dangerous threats can shake you. There are two things we see about how to gain self-control. In one regard, we receive self-control as a gift through the grace of God, and in another regard, we work hard to achieve it through our grace-driven effort.

1. SELF-CONTROL IS A GIFT AND FRUIT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT
2. SELF-CONTROL COMES THROUGH PERSISTENT AND PATIENT EFFORT

GOING DEEPER

+ This next section will help show what God's Word says about this week's particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week's biblical truth.

SELF-CONTROL IS A GIFT AND FRUIT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

☞ GALATIANS 5:16-26

- ❓ *What does it mean that you are not under law if you are led by the Spirit? How is living by the Spirit easier than living under law, and how is it harder?*
- ❓ *What is the evidence of self-control? How does it manifest itself in the other fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23? For example, how does self-control impact the way you love? How does it make you more faithful and kind?*

Any Christian seeking to pursue a relationship with the Lord would say they want to sin less. A lot of times it seems the goal of the Christian life is simply to sin less. So, we have a love-hate relationship with it. We selfishly love our sin, or why would we continue to do it? But, we also hate it because we know God has called us to abstain from it, and we know good Christians ought to sin less and less. One of the primary reasons we struggle with our sin is that we lack the self-control that is necessary to stop us from following our sinful desires.

Why do we lack self-control, and where do we get more? According to Galatians 5:16–26, we walk and live and abide by the Spirit. Paul says if we have the Holy Spirit, then we have self-control. The Spirit produces fruit in our lives, and one of them is self-control. You naturally become self-controlled, evidence of the working of the Holy Spirit in you. Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit is a gift given to believers when they trust in Christ, self-control is a gift given through that same Spirit.

Self-control comes from being filled with the Holy Spirit. If you lack self-control, you lack the filling of the Holy Spirit. This doesn't mean the Holy Spirit isn't in you, but it might mean you're not fully invested in the Holy Spirit and His work and purposes for you. The fruit you produce through the work of the Holy Spirit is directly related to how deeply in Christ your roots grow. Walking by the Holy Spirit and living a life of self-control come organically because of how your life has been changed by Jesus's love for you and the good news of His death and resurrection.

A lot of people mistakenly think self-control is just a personality trait some people are better at and more suited for than others. But if self-control is a result of the power and work of the Holy Spirit in you, then any believer is capable of it since we all have access to the Holy Spirit through Christ. Self-control is available to us because Jesus resisted the devil in the wilderness, never sinned, and was willing to suffer and die on the cross when He could have chosen not to. Self-control is only possible through the power of the Holy Spirit and because of the gospel, both of which were given to us as unearned and unmerited gifts.

Self-control isn't something you work to get as much as something that naturally flows out of you. It demonstrates your grasp of God's love for you and the power and working of the Holy Spirit in you. It's not a trait you master as much as a reality you live by because the gospel has changed you. In Christ, you are a new creation, and one of the markers and distinguishing characteristics of that new creation is self-control.

Q: *How can increasing in your self-control help you overcome and avoid certain works of the flesh listed in Galatians 5:16–26? Which specific areas of sin do you struggle with that self-control would help you overcome, and how?*

Q: *How well do you feel you grasp and understand the role and work of the Holy Spirit? After seeing what Galatians 5 says, what would better knowing and living in the power of the Spirit look like in your day-to-day life?*

SELF-CONTROL COMES THROUGH PERSISTENT AND PATIENT EFFORT

☐ PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13; TITUS 2:11-14

🗨️ *What does Titus 2:11-14 tell us we are to do with the grace of God that has appeared? How should we respond to receiving God's grace?*

🗨️ *What does it look like to work out your salvation? Who is the one ultimately accomplishing the work? How does working toward greater self-control apply to working out your salvation?*

There are times when Scripture appears to say contradictory things. The Bible says self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit that comes as a gift. The Bible also says we are to train ourselves to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions through self-controlled living (Titus 2:12). We are to train, working out aspects of our salvation in order to get the results and bring about the fruit we want. Yes, you get self-control through the gift of the Spirit. But, yes, you also get self-control through persistent and patient effort of disciplining yourself and working hard to be self-controlled.

Christian counselor Ed Welch compares what the Israelites were called to do in walking into the Promised Land to what the believer is called to do in putting forth the effort to gain self-control. God had promised them the land, but they had to go in and take it. Welch writes that “as the Hebrews were promised the land, but had to take it by force, one town at a time, so we are promised the gift of self-control, yet we also must take it by force.” Self-control is given to us by the Holy Spirit, but that doesn't replace or remove the work of accomplishing it on our end. As pastor Kevin DeYoung writes, “Trusting does not put an end to trying.” We trust that by the power of the Holy Spirit we will be made self-controlled. At the same, we train and seek to be more self-controlled through patient and persistent effort.

The apostle Paul connects these two seemingly competing thoughts when he says, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Corinthians 15:10). We work, but we work in and through grace. We try really hard to be self-controlled, but it is the Holy Spirit empowering and enabling the effort we give. God's commands are given to us to accomplish, but His Spirit and the good news of the gospel

are also given as the means by which to accomplish them. We are told to say *no* and to live self-controlled, but we are reminded that, in so doing, we are to wait and remember the glory of God our Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us to redeem us (Titus 2:13–14).

A good indication of whether self-control is something you are working to grow in is if you have a clear and public strategy to accomplish it. Do you just say you want to be more self-controlled, or do you have a plan in place by which to become more self-controlled? This is hard in a day and age when we believe limitations and boundaries are antithetical to the gospel. We believe, and rightly so, that the gospel has made us free and we are no longer under law. Tim Keller says true freedom is not the absence of restrictions, but in finding the right and liberating restrictions.

Successful self-control is not about living however you want, waiting and believing the Holy Spirit will magically make you a self-controlled person. Rather, self-control comes as the Holy Spirit gives you wisdom to make decisions that enable you to be self-controlled. It is as much the result of having a healthy lifestyle that establishes appropriate boundaries and restrictions on things as it is the process of avoiding them. Sometimes you don't realize you've gained self-control in a certain area until it's already been accomplished.

Self-control comes through patient and persistent effort. You can't expect immediate results, but you also can't achieve it without any effort. You rely on and trust in the Holy Spirit, and then you try, work, and train for self-control through Spirit-filled and grace-driven effort. Sanctification is a process through which Christians become more like Christ, something that is accomplished through their work and Christ's work. Self-control is part of sanctification and is accomplished through our work and Christ's work, simultaneously and together.

Q: *What clear and public strategy do you need to put into place to gain self-control in a specific area of your life?*

Q: *What areas in your life need more self-control? With honest evaluation, are any of them areas you simply need to try harder in? How does realizing your personal responsibility in working toward self-control and God's grace and Spirit working in you encourage you to try harder?*

NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God's Word to your daily life. Process how what you've learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

- 🕒 *Who do you need to bring into your life to help make your self-control strategy public and hold you accountable for growing in self-control?*
- 🕒 *Which area of self-control do you need more growth in—trusting and relying on the Holy Spirit and the grace of God, or the personal effort of working hard to do it in His strength? How can you use the area you're stronger in to help you grow in the area you are weaker in?*
- 🕒 *What restrictions or limitations do you need to put in place in your life that will lead to growing and gaining self-control?*

PRAY

+ *Use these prayer points to connect your time in prayer to this week's focus.*

Our most gracious heavenly Father:

- Thank You that it is by Your grace that I am what I am. May Your grace be what defines and shapes my life and my growth and effort in self-control.
- I want to be more self-controlled. By Your Spirit, help me renounce ungodliness and worldly passions and the desires of my flesh that lead me to disobey and dishonor You.
- Thank You for the gift of Your Holy Spirit who is my Helper, the one who enables me to live an upright and godly life.
- I acknowledge that true freedom is found in Christ. Thank You for making me free from the bondage of my sin and from the control of the powers of this world.

- I thank You that the gospel saves me apart from anything that I do. That I am saved by grace and not works. I want to be self-controlled in response to the love You have for me, knowing that my self-control doesn't earn Your love. Your love is already mine.

COMMENTARY

Two helpful resources for thinking more deeply about self-control and what it means to work out your salvation with grace-driven effort:

- “Self-Control: The Battle Against ‘One More’” by Ed Welch, *The Journal of Biblical Counseling, Volume 19, Number 2, Winter 2001*
- *The Hole in Our Holiness: Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness* by Kevin DeYoung