

☒ LIVING FOR ANOTHER WORLD

June 19, 2022 | Self-Control

PREPARATION

A WORD ON THIS SERIES

This series will study the seven qualities found in 2 Peter 1:5–7. Peter said after stating them, “If these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:8). None of us aspires to be ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of Christ. Instead, with the help of His divine power, we must seek all the things pertaining to life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). The word “life” in this verse refers to the transcendent life of one who has received salvation in Jesus Christ. It is a life lived now but with eternity in mind. C. S. Lewis described this life as “another world.” Each lesson in this series will examine the life of a biblical character who exhibits one of these seven qualities. None of these individuals was perfect, but they modeled these qualities for us and inspire us to do the same. This week’s lesson will examine self-control in the life of the prophet Elisha.

GETTING READY

In what area of your life do you most lack self-control?

Pray that this lesson on Elisha’s life will make the need for self-control evident in your life.

Read 2 Kings 2–8.

THIS WEEK

☒ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

There is more joy to be found in repentance than in persisting in sin.

☒ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Repent from sin instead of rebelling against God.

☒ MEDITATE

“Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord” (Psalm 32:10).

GETTING STARTED

+This section will explain the importance of self-control within the context of 2 Peter.

Q: *Why would self-control be considered a virtue?*

Q: *Was Peter known for self-control in the Gospels?*

In one sense, it should not be surprising to find self-control in Peter's list of Christian qualities or virtues. It was considered one of the four primary virtues in ancient Greece. Literature contemporaneous with the New Testament frequently references self-control. Not long after the completion of the New Testament, self-control was a central virtue among the Christian ascetics, monks who lived in the desert and deprived themselves of home, food, and comfort. Strangely enough, however, self-control is not a common New Testament theme even though it was so popular outside of the Bible. No biblical author makes self-control a central part of his theology or presentation of Christian doctrine. We cannot be entirely sure why this was the case. Perhaps the New Testament authors were concerned that an emphasis on self-effort could easily distract from the gospel of free grace in Christ. Whatever the case, self-control does appear in Peter's list and in Paul's writings (1 Corinthians 7:9; 9:25; Galatians 5:23), so the idea of self-control is certainly consistent with the gospel and Christian theology.

It is possible that Peter's appeal for self-control was an attempt to address false teaching among the community to whom he was writing. Although he did not give enough information to identify the false teaching, his frequent allusion to the false teachers and their followers paints a picture of over-indulgence and gratification (2 Peter 2:2, 10, 13–14, 19). It seems some members of the community had thrown off moral constraint and were teaching others to do so as well. Peter's call to self-control opposed the developing cultural trends in the community.

Q: *In what ways does the outlook of the false teachers that Peter was addressing parallel the outlook of our culture?*

Q: *How can we pursue self-control without compromising the grace that is central to the gospel?*

APPLICATION POINT – We also live in a society that favors purging all restraints in pursuit of desire. Life is about what you want to do. Jettisoning cultural norms is praised. Pushing the bounds of decency will get you noticed. Yielding to your every want and pampering yourself is what you are entitled to. We need to hear Peter’s word—self-control. The gospel is not based on our own efforts, but Peter recognized that self-control is an essential characteristic of anyone who confesses Christ as Savior. Those who are pursuing godliness in Christ are able to restrain their desires and live according to biblical norms.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+To understand self-control, this week’s lesson will examine the life of Elisha. Elisha was a prophet to the nation of Israel in the ninth century BC. His life models self-control for us. Additionally, it offers a contrast to other characters in his story who failed at self-control.

1. A SELF-CONTROLLED PERSON HAS A GREATER LOVE FOR GOD THAN FOR SELF.
2. A SELF-CONTROLLED PERSON IS RESTRAINED BY GOD’S WORD.
3. A SELF-CONTROLLED PERSON PRIORITIZES GOD’S GLORY.
4. A SELF-CONTROLLED PERSON TRUSTS IN GOD’S PROVISION.
5. A SELF-CONTROLLED PERSON DOES NOT PLACE LIMITS ON GOD.

GOING DEEPER

+Most of Elisha’s story can be found in 2 Kings 2–8. His calling is recorded in 1 Kings 19:19–21 and his death is found in 2 Kings 13. This lesson does not cover every episode of his ministry.

1. A SELF-CONTROLLED PERSON HAS A GREATER LOVE FOR GOD THAN FOR SELF.

■ 1 KINGS 19:19–21

Q: *What indicated the relative wealth of Elisha’s family?*

Q: *Why is Elisha's killing of the oxen described as a sacrifice?*

We first meet Elisha near the conclusion of 1 Kings. He was chosen to carry on the prophetic ministry of Elijah, Israel's premier prophet, who faithfully contended with King Ahab and the prophets of Baal. He had an incredible ministry, but his life was frequently endangered by those who opposed God.

Elisha was from a wealthy family. We know this because he was plowing his field with twelve yoke of oxen (1 Kings 19:19). Having this many oxen was a luxury few Israelites could have afforded. Upon meeting Elisha plowing in the field, Elijah cast his cloak upon him, an action that signaled the transfer of prophetic power. Elisha would have to leave his family and the life he had always known to become the prophet's apprentice. Elisha did not hesitate. He quickly returned home, killed the yoke of oxen he was working with to have a final meal with his family, and then followed Elijah.

Knowing Elisha's family background sheds light on how yielding to his prophetic call illustrates his self-control. Elisha's family wealth would have afforded him opportunities and benefits unavailable to those in prophetic ministry. Elisha, however, was not swayed by the promise of riches and an easier, safer life. The word used to describe how Elisha killed the yoke of oxen is the word for "sacrifice." The author is showing us how to understand Elisha's actions. He was sacrificing a symbol of his great wealth in order to receive God's prophetic call. Elisha demonstrated remarkable self-control in denying himself a life of relative ease in favor of a life of constant danger. He had a greater love for God than he did for himself.

We may notice some parallels between Elisha's story and Jesus's words in Matthew 8:21–22. When a disciple declared his intent to follow Jesus but only after burying his father, Jesus responded by saying "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead." That is, following Jesus means leaving one's worldly concerns behind. While there are certain similarities between these passages, the details must lead us to conclude that something else was going on in Elisha's narrative. Elijah's response to Elisha's request to return is cryptic, but ultimately Elisha did return and was not excluded from prophetic ministry. The author wanted to show us how Elisha had forfeited his life of ease for a life of service.

Q: *Why does it make sense for Christians to surrender material wealth and worldly comforts to follow God?*

Q: *How would you explain to an unbeliever your willingness to give sacrificially of your time and money to the mission of God?*

APPLICATION POINT – Elisha’s calling helps us understand why self-control makes sense. Why would people deny themselves something that could make life easier or more comfortable? Because they are committed to something more important than their own ease and comfort. For Christians, that “something more important” is God and His glory in the earth. We are willing to make sacrifices to glorify God because we understand that His glory is more important than we are. Apart from this greater concern, self-denial would make no sense. It would either be a temporary preoccupation in order to gain something better for ourselves—which really is not self-denial at all— or a sign of a mental instability, such as masochism. We cannot separate self-control from a commitment to God.

2. A SELF-CONTROLLED PERSON IS RESTRAINED BY GOD’S WORD.

■ 2 KINGS 3

Q: *How did Elisha respond to the king of Israel?*

Q: *What did the armies of the three kings do when they realized their enemy was retreating?*

In the ancient Near East, it was common for one nation to become subject to another. Moab had been subject to Israel under King Ahab. When Ahab died, Moab rebelled against Ahab’s son, Jehoram, the newly crowned king over Israel. Jehoram was anxious to maintain his position among the surrounding nations, so he asked the king of Judah to join him in keeping Moab in line (it is possible that Moab was also subject to Judah). They were joined by the king of Edom. This coalition of kings planned to march into Moab and put down the rebellion. But the journey to Moab was harder than they anticipated. The lack of water began to diminish the armies’ capacity for battle, and the kings were uncertain of what to do. One of the servants suggested they go to Elisha for a word from God. These events took place fairly soon after Elijah had been taken to heaven and Elisha had assumed his prophetic role, so Elisha did not have the notoriety of his predecessor.

Elisha's reception of the kings, especially King Jehoram, was less than cordial and certainly not what they would have expected. When they approach him, Elisha initially declined to help them and rather caustically rebuffed Jehoram's request for help. Jehoram's parents, Ahab and Jezebel, were devoted followers of the god Baal and had led Israel away from God. Jehoram was not as evil as they were (2 Kings 3:2), but he still failed to worship God in the manner He demanded. Elisha suggested that Jehoram go to the false gods of his parents since he refused to worship the God of Israel. He then said he would have nothing to do with the coalition of kings if it were not for King Jehoshaphat of Judah, who had remained faithful to God (1 Kings 3:14). Elisha's reception of the three kings showed remarkable self-control. He was in the presence of royalty! They had the power to make him wealthy and advance his status in Israel if they were willing to aid them. But Elisha did not see an opportunity for personal advancement. He saw an opportunity to remind these kings of the one true God, who deserved their loyalty. Elisha was restrained by God's Word. He knew there was only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4), that He prohibited idolatry (Deuteronomy 5:8–10), and that these kings had fallen short of what God's law demanded for kings (Deuteronomy 17:14–20). Elisha could not disregard God's Word in order to curry favor with the kings. He had to show self-control in order to maintain his faithfulness to God.

Elisha did prophesy for the kings. He revealed that God would provide water for their armies. Furthermore, God's provision for the armies would also lead to the demise of Moab. The Moabites mistook the water for blood. The water likely reflected the red stones common throughout the region. The Moabites assumed the coalition of kings had fought with one another. They raided the Israelite camp to plunder their supplies and kill any remaining soldiers. In doing so, they left themselves vulnerable to attack from the full strength of the combined armies. They fled as quickly as they had rushed upon the camp. Israel routed the Moabites and pursued them throughout their own territory. As Elisha had predicted, however, the armies went too far in their attack. They destroyed the land by throwing stones into the fields, stopping up streams, and chopping down fruit-bearing trees. Deuteronomy 20:19 prohibited the Israelites from cutting down fruit-bearing trees during war. The principle behind this prohibition could be broadened to address the rest of the actions taken by the invading armies. They were not to inflict punishment on the land they were attacking. Furthermore, they were to remember that the land must be able to sustain those who survived their attack. The coalition of armies was unrestrained by Scripture and out of control. When the king of Moab saw that he was losing the battle, he sacrificed his oldest son. Somehow—the text does not clearly tell us how—this act ignited a great wrath against Israel, and the Moabite army fled to its own land. Strangely, Elisha's prophetic ministry was validated, the armies of Israel were sustained and routed the foe, but the king of Israel did not win back the tribute from Moab.

Q: *How does the Bible guide and restrain your natural inclinations?*

Q: *Why are we tempted to compromise biblical truth when it does not allow us to have our way?*

APPLICATION POINT – The Bible is God’s Word, given to us for our instruction (Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:16–17). Part of living in self-control is learning to live according to biblical principles and conviction. The temptation we face is to either neglect the Bible’s teaching when it contradicts what we think should be right or explain it away. Falling to this temptation is a sure sign that we are not living under self-control, because we are prioritizing our point of view over God’s Word. If we are truly living under the authority of Scripture, there may be some convictions we follow not because we fully understand them but because it is what the Bible clearly teaches. A life lived under biblical authority is a life of self-control.

3. A SELF-CONTROLLED PERSON PRIORITIZES GOD’S GLORY.

■ 2 KINGS 5

Q: *Why didn’t Elisha accept a gift from Naaman?*

Q: *How did Gehazi’s actions distort God’s grace?*

During Elisha’s time, Syria, a country to the north of Israel, was one of the major superpowers of the ancient Near East. Naaman was a commander in the Syrian army. He had won many victories, including over Israel. But Naaman was a leper, and his leprosy endangered everything he had secured in life. One of Naaman’s captives was a young girl from Israel who knew of Elisha. She convinced him to visit Elisha in hopes of being cured from his leprosy. Naaman was cured from his leprosy by washing in the Jordan river seven times, as Elisha commanded. And his story is a wonderful illustration of the gospel. Naaman was rotting away, but he was made whole again by the grace of God.

In response to being healed, Naaman wanted to give Elisha a gift. But Elisha refused to even entertain the idea, revealing again his remarkable self-control. Naaman could have made Elisha wealthy. He could have given him status or prestige. But Elisha knew that receiving a gift from Naaman would distort God’s grace. Naaman was not healed because of anything he could provide Elisha. He was healed because of God’s grace alone. Elisha would not allow his personal comfort or prosperity to distract from God’s glory in the grace He showed Naaman.

But Elisha's servant, Gehazi, could not live with his master's decision. After Naaman departed, Gehazi ran after him. He concocted a story about the unexpected arrival of two prophets and requested silver and clothing for them. Gehazi could not let an opportunity for gain pass him by. But his actions made a mockery of God's grace revealed in the healing of Naaman. Elisha was fully aware of Gehazi's actions and condemned him with leprosy, the very disease from which Naaman was healed. Gehazi's lack of self-control did not secure him the riches he desired but rather the disease he feared.

❓: *In what area of your life could practicing self-control reveal God's glory to others?*

❓: *Why does the absence of self-control diminish the glory other people see in the God we worship?*

APPLICATION POINT – Those who bear Christ's name are His representatives among those who do not know Him. When we fail to show self-control, we distort the glory of the God we claim to serve in the eyes of those who do not know Him. When unbelievers see us living only for ourselves and as if we are accountable to no one but ourselves, they can only conclude that our God must not be all that important or that He must not make much of a difference to us. God's glory does not rest on us. There is nothing we can do to detract from God. We may, however, distort His glory in the eyes of unbelievers if we fail to prioritize His glory in our lives and exercise self-control.

4. A SELF-CONTROLLED PERSON TRUSTS IN GOD'S PROVISION.

❑ 2 KINGS 6:8-23

❓: *How did Elisha show self-control in this passage?*

❓: *How did Elisha's servant and the king struggle to trust in God's provision?*

During Elisha's life, Syria was one of Israel's main rivals. Second Kings 6 records an episode in the struggle

between Israel and Syria. The Syrians had been making small incursions into Israel, trying to catch Israel's armies off-guard and gain easy victories. Perhaps they would even seize the unsuspecting king without much of a struggle. But the Syrians had not counted on Elisha the prophet. By divine revelation, the prophet tipped off the king of Israel concerning the Syrian's whereabouts, and he was able to plan appropriately. The Syrian king assumed there must be a spy among his leadership. When he was told there was a prophet in Israel who could discern the hisis every move, he sent an army to capture the prophet. His strategy is rather amusing. We can't be sure how he planned to catch a prophet who knew in advance everything he would do. Nevertheless, the army succeeded in learning of Elisha's whereabouts and surrounded the city. Elisha once again showed remarkable self-control, and the author of 2 Kings once again contrasts his self-control with the lack of self-control on the part of his servant. While Elisha was unconcerned with the Syrian army surrounding the city, his servant was panicking over the imminent attack. Elisha asked the Lord to open his servant's spiritual eyes. And in answer to his prayer, the servant was able to see a vast angelic army surrounding the Syrians. Elisha could show self-control because he trusted in God's provision. He knew that since God was on his side, there was no need to fear any army, no matter the size.

Elisha did not call on angelic armies to destroy the approaching Syrians. Instead, he asked God to strike them with blindness. Elisha then led the Syrians into Samaria where they were surrounded by the armies of Israel. The king of Israel wanted to kill them, which would have provided a small victory over the Syrians, but Elisha had a greater victory in mind. Since they were his prisoners of war, Elisha fed them and sent them back to Syria unharmed. Elisha had been saved by God's provision, and he extended that provision by showing grace to the Syrians. In response, the Syrians from their region stopped raiding Israel. Again, Elisha showed remarkable self-control. The enemy was in his hands. He had the opportunity to win a decisive victory, which was exactly what the king of Israel wanted to do. Instead, Elisha restrained himself and the king and allowed God's grace to win a greater victory.

Q: *What is the link between trusting in God's provision and practicing self-control?*

Q: *Do you feel as though you have to say yes to every opportunity that comes along? How can you find freedom from the tyranny of opportunity?*

APPLICATION POINT – When you trust in God's provision, you have the freedom to practice self-control. Elisha could show grace to his enemies because he trusted in God's provision in the midst of every dangerous circumstance. He did not have to take every opportunity to advance his cause or care for himself. Instead, he could restrain these natural impulses and demonstrate the glory of God's grace instead. If you will trust in God's

provision, you will have the confidence you need to practice self-control. Apart from trusting in God's provision, you will be taken captive by every opportunity that comes along.

5. A SELF-CONTROLLED PERSON DOES NOT PLACE LIMITS ON GOD.

■ 2 KINGS 6:24–7:20; 13:14–25

Q: *How did the captain question God's power?*

Q: *How did King Joash doubt God's power?*

So far, this lesson has focused on identifying godly qualities of self-control as exemplified in the life of Elisha. Elisha has shown that self-control revolves around prioritizing God's glory and saying no to natural impulses. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that self-control demands that we say no when our impulse is to expect great things from God. This is evident from Elisha's rebuke of a captain and a king who placed limits on what they expected from God.

The captain's story is found in 2 Kings 6:24–7:20. This story does not center on him but on God's miraculous deliverance of Israel. The foe once again was Syria. The entire Syrian army had laid siege to the capital city of Samaria. The inhabitants were trapped in the walled city and food supplies had run out. The fall of the city appeared imminent. The author does not explain why, but the king of Israel placed the blame for the siege on Elisha and was determined to execute him. Perhaps he felt Elisha had neglected his prophetic duty by failing to warn the people in time. Whatever the case, the king sent his captain to kill Elisha. When the captain arrived at Elisha's house, Elisha predicted that in one day's time, the siege would be over, and bread would be so plentiful in the city that it would basically be worthless. The captain questioned God's ability to provide in this manner. Elisha responded by saying that he would see it happen but die before tasting God's deliverance. God upheld Elisha's prophecy. He confused the Syrians and caused them to flee from their fully stocked camp. When the Israelites heard, they rushed out of the city to plunder the vacant Syrian camp. The captain was caught in the gate and trampled by the mass running to receive the food God had provided. At first, it may seem as though the captain's measured response to Elisha's prediction came from being in control of his emotions. His death, however, reveals the dangers of placing limits on what God can do. This was not a man practicing self-control but one too afraid to trust God.

King Joash's story is found in 2 Kings 13:14–25. When Joash heard that Elisha dying, he went to receive a final word from the great prophet. Elisha offered him a series of signs pertaining to his military successes. For one sign, Elisha told the king to strike the ground with a bundle of arrows. Joash struck the ground three times, which he likely assumed was a reasonable response. But Elisha chastised him for not striking the ground five or six times, because each strike represented the victories the king would win over Syria. At first, we may think the king showed self-control in his measured response, but his hesitancy had nothing to do with self-control but with limiting his expectations of what God could do.

♀: *How do you see doubt masquerading as self-control in your church?*

♀: *Why would someone in need place limits on what God could do?*

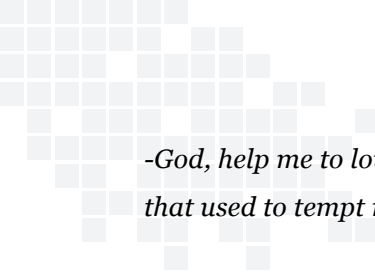
APPLICATION POINT – Peter admonished Christians to act with self-control. We should never make the mistake, however, of confusing self-control with placing limits on what God can do on our behalf. There is no need to restrain ourselves when we seek God's goodness. This does not mean God is obligated to fulfill our every expectation. It does mean self-control pertains to restraining our character, not God's power.

NEXT STEPS

Identify an area of your life in which you need to practice more self-control. What do you always say yes to when the opportunity arrives? How is this lack of self-control disrupting your walk of faith? What steps do you need to take to say no when the next opportunity arrives? Saying no to yourself is extremely hard at first. You are battling years of unrestraint. But every time you show self-control, the easier it becomes. In God's grace your life can be defined by self-control and an unrestrained love for His glory.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.



-God, help me to love you more than anything else in this world. Make it easy for me to say no to the things that used to tempt me. Give me more self-control

-Jesus, thank you for being the ultimate example of self-control.

-Father, show me where I need to practice more self-control.

-God, help me to prioritize your glory over my personal comfort.