

Self-Control

vs. Self-Indulgence

Self-control is the power of the Holy Spirit that results from passing the tests of the Spirit.

Definition

The Biblical term for *self-control* is *temperance*. The Greek word for *temperance* is *egkrateia* from *egkrates*, which means “restraining and controlling one’s self.” It is the virtue of one who masters his desires and passions. Self-control is the inward strength to bring all physical appetites under the control of the Holy Spirit. A word related to *egkrateia* is *egkrateuomai*, which describes the rigid self-discipline practiced by athletes who are intent on winning the prize. Another Biblical word related to self-control is *incontinency* and, by extension, *continency*, meaning “to have power over oneself.” (See I Corinthians 7:5 and II Timothy 3:3.)

The Vital Importance of Self-Control

Self-control is essential for any believer who wants to excel in the Christian life and receive honor from the Lord. Paul used the analogy of a runner in a race. “Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is **temperate** [*egkrateuomai*] in all things” (I Corinthians 9:24–25).

Paul then emphasized the eternal value of self-control and the personal sacrifice he was

making to achieve it. “Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway” (I Corinthians 9:25–27).

Any believer who desires to be a leader in the church must have self-control. “A bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre . . . **temperate**” (Titus 1:7–8).

Because of their age and experience, older men are looked to for counsel and leadership; therefore, they also are to excel in temperance. “Speak thou the things which become sound doctrine: That the aged men be sober, grave, **temperate**, sound in faith, in charity, in patience” (Titus 2:1–2).

The Opposite of Self-Control

The Biblical antonym of *egkrateia* (*temperate*) is *akrates*. It means “to be powerless, incontinent, unable to withstand or resist the desires and passions of human appetite.” Paul describes this condition: “That which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. . . . For the good that I would I do not:



Self-control is transforming desires to please self into desires to please God.

“And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”

—Romans 12:2



The success from meditation includes the secrets of self-control.

“Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all.”

—I Timothy 4:15

“Always do something you don’t need to do for the sake of doing it—it keeps you in moral fighting trim.”

—Oswald Chambers

but the evil which I would not, that I do. . . . O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Romans 7:15, 19, 24).

How Did Paul Develop Self-Control?

1. Joining God's family

Paul's first step to conquer the powerful lusts of the flesh was to enter in to the family of God through faith in Jesus Christ. "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:1).

When Paul became a believer, he, like all believers, received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God" (Romans 8:14). Walking in obedience to the leading of God's Spirit produces self-control, because self-control is the work of the Holy Spirit. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, **temperance**" (Galatians 5:22-23).

2. Obeying the Holy Spirit

Self-control comes by instant obedience to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. . . . Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God" (Romans 8:3-4, 7-8).

3. Listening to God's Spirit

Through the leading of God's Spirit, Paul learned how to conquer wrong desires. Paul stated, "Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live" (Romans 8:12-13). The word *mortify* is *thanatoo*. It means "to put to death."

The same instruction is given in Colossians 3:5: "Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry." The word *mortify* in this verse is *nekroo*, which means "to deaden, to subdue."

Paul described his program of mortifying the flesh in I Corinthians 9:27: "But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway."

The phrase *keep under* literally means "to beat black and blue, to smite so as to cause bruises and livid spots, like a boxer who buffets his body, to handle it roughly, to discipline by hardships." This kind of treatment seems startlingly brutal, and Paul is not saying that every believer should carry it out. The message He is emphasizing is that no sacrifice is too small or too big to win the race and avoid being disqualified. Jesus put it a different way when He taught His disciples, "I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.

"And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from



Self-control is responding to sin in the same way a dead man does.

"How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? . . . Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord."

—Romans 6:2, 11

Freedom from self comes by being a slave to righteousness.

"Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?"

—Romans 6:16

Begin to reform the world by first reforming yourself.

"Temperance is the best medicine—for it is a preventive and a preservative, as well as a cure."

—C. H. Spurgeon



We must conquer self else we become a slave of self.

Self-control is more than moderation. It is absolute resolve to discontinue self-indulgence.

“True self-control means willingness to resign the small for the sake of the great, the present for the sake of the future, the material for the sake of the spiritual, and that is what faith makes possible.”

—Hugh Black

thee . . . And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell” (Matthew 5:28–30).

There is one painful activity in which Paul often participated that has a direct correlation to self-control: fasting. “Giving no offense in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed: But in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings” (II Corinthians 6:3–5).

How Does Fasting Produce Self-Control?

Jesus did not say to His disciples “*If* ye fast,” but rather “*When* ye fast.” (See Matthew 6:16, emphasis added.) Fasting is denying the body food for any period of time. It is a humbling process that God honors, when done for the right reasons. David stated, “I humbled my soul with fasting” (Psalm 35:13). God gives grace to the humble, and it is grace that teaches us “that, denying

ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world” (Titus 2:12).

Fasting is painful, but it has many rewards, especially that of developing self-control. When food appetites are brought under control through regular fasting, it would seem to follow that other physical desires such as sexual appetites would be diminished. Body metabolism changes after the second or third day of fasting, by deriving its energy from the breakdown of fat cells instead of ingested food. The body supplies the energy of vital organs (heart, lungs, kidneys, and brain) by this mechanism while causing other functions, e.g. sexual drives, to go dormant.

Perhaps this is why Paul gives the instruction to married couples to give proper physical affection to each other unless it be during a time of fasting. During that time they would not have a desire to do this. (See I Corinthians 7:5.)

The physical discomfort of fasting could well be included in Peter’s admonition, “Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind: for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin” (I Peter 4:1). When the disciples were unable to free a boy from unclean spirits, they asked Jesus why they were powerless against them. Jesus replied, “This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting” (Matthew 17:21).

The Power That Produces Self-Control

Scripture gives a clear sequence of spiritual steps that, when followed, produce self-control.

Unlike brown bears, the black bear usually refrains from confrontation. Even when other bears enter its territory, it avoids conflict whenever possible.



“Having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust . . . giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance” (II Peter 1:4-6).

These steps are consistent with the functions of the Holy Spirit in a believer’s life. When a person exercises faith by believing on the Lord Jesus Christ, he receives the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Then, as a believer, he can ask his Heavenly Father to fill him with the Spirit. “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?” (Luke 11:13).

Once we are filled with the Spirit, we will be taken through trials and testing that will require us to die to ourselves and our natural inclinations. Passing each test requires that we thank God for His purposes in allowing the tests, rejoice in them by looking for benefits, and then cry out to God if there is need for deliverance. To the degree that these steps are taken, the believer experiences the power of the Holy Spirit.

The resurrection power of the Spirit produces self-control. Paul refers to this in Romans 8:11: “If the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you.”

Experiencing this power was Paul’s great goal; he was willing to go through whatever suffering was necessary. (See Philippians 3:8-10.)

A Prayer That Can Produce Self-Control

Paul said that when he was weak, then he was strong. (See II Corinthians 12:10.) When we acknowledge our weakness, we are in a position to experience God’s power. Jabez was more honorable than his brothers, and he understood his weakness. Therefore, he “called on the God of Israel, saying, Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and that thine hand might be with me, and that thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me! And God granted him that which he requested” (I Chronicles 4:10). The Hebrew word for *called* in this passage is *qara’*. It means “to call unto, to cry out.”

Young men who have been unable to conquer the lusts of the flesh have added this prayer to the other steps described above and for the first time are experiencing a new power over lust through increased self-control.



Self-control is putting self under the control of the Holy Spirit. Then, walking in victory is walking in the Spirit.

“Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.”

—Galatians 5:16

Scripture cleanses our hearts and builds the shields that quench the darts.

Fiery darts are surges of anger or lust.

*“Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.”
“Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.”*

—Psalm 119:11, Ephesians 6:16

Personal Evaluation

How much self-control do you have?

- Do you give more time to spiritual pursuits than to the pleasures of the world?
- Do you bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ?
- Do you control your eating or indulge in foods you know are unhealthful?
- Do you acknowledge your weakness so you can experience the power of Christ?
- Do you literally cry out to God for deliverance from addictions?
- Do you have a wise and Biblical program for fasting?
- Have you asked your Heavenly Father to fill you with His Spirit?
- Do you respond to each test of the Spirit by thanking God for His purposes and then looking for benefits if you respond correctly?
- Do you ever erupt in uncontrollable anger?
- Do you remove provisions for indulgences so you will not fulfill them?