

Christ and Your Self-Control

Proverbs 25:28 (06/18/17)

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Do you realize how much of your life depends on control? You may have the coolest wheels on the road, but without brakes or steering you'll be slamming into the next car heading your way. When United Airlines 232 was in flight from Denver to Chicago on July 19, 1989, Captain Al Haynes radioed the airport in Sioux City, Iowa, "Unless we get control of this airplane, we're going to put it down wherever it happens to be." The three hydraulic systems had been severed, thus losing control of the plane. Miraculously, they made it to the airport and crash landed with 185 out of 296 passengers surviving.

If you're going to be a good musician, athlete, author, soldier, brain surgeon, anything requiring skill and stamina, you will have to practice self-control over an extended period of time. Sadly, brilliant and talented people, many celebrities, have destroyed their lives through excessive indulgence, out of control anger and rage, and failing to keep their lives under control.

This morning we're looking at Christ and your self-control in Proverbs and a few other places in the Bible. Self-control in Proverbs 25:28 is described as a wall.

Proverbs 25:28, *Like a city that is broken into and without walls is a man who has no control over his spirit.*

A city with no wall in ancient times was vulnerable to all kinds of enemies. A man or woman with no control over his spirit is like that city. All the enemies of your soul will swarm in and bring great trouble, maybe even death. When Nehemiah got word of what was going on in Jerusalem, he heard that the "wall of Jerusalem is broken down" (Neh. 1:3). He quickly prayed and got permission from the king to go to his beloved city and the first thing he did was go out and inspect the wall. Then he called all the people together to rebuild the wall and in fifty days they got it done. Their enemies were furious and tried to discourage them every step of the way, but Nehemiah armed the workers so that "each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other" (Neh. 4:17).

That's what we're going to do this morning. If you don't have a strong wall built around your spirit and if you have no control to say no to the bad guys, you are vulnerable to all kinds of temptations. On the other hand, Proverbs 16:32 says if you do have a strong wall and have control over your spirit and don't let your emotions get out of hand, you are better than a mighty ruler. So the question this morning is, how's your wall? How's your self-control? Paul Tripp wrote, "One of the most significant yet neglected biblical character qualities is self-control."

Self-control for a believer is making yourself obey God even when you don't feel like it. It means keeping your heart within God's boundaries. It's the power and wisdom to say no to your sinful, selfish desires and to say yes to God. Even reading your Bible requires self-control. Sometimes you don't want to read, but you control your desires, you sit down there, you open your Bible and read. Paul said, "I beat my body and make it do what God wants it to do" (1 Cor. 9:27). Jerry Bridges wrote, "Self-control is the believer's wall of defense against the sinful desires that wage war against his soul."

I want to give you five tools for building a strong wall of self-control so that you can grow in this all-important quality for pleasing God and becoming like Christ. We may get a bit personal here, so hang on.

#1 Identify where you are most vulnerable to sin. Where is your wall weakest or crumbling? The enemies of your soul will keep up a continual barrage of attacks to break it down, but you must keep your spirit strong. Here are some areas to think about. Lust is certainly a leading enemy. That may include sexual or romantic lust, but also lust for power, for recognition, for other people's honor and respect.

How about all the “over” sins? Over-eating is called gluttony, and we need self-control for that one. Proverbs 23:20, **Do not be with heavy drinkers of wine, or with gluttonous eaters of meat.** “Just one more won’t hurt,” we tell ourselves. Over-sleeping is called being a sluggard; *A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest* (Prov. 6:10). Self-control will get you out of bed and to work or any of your appointments on time.

How about over-spending and over-shopping. You know you shouldn’t buy that pair of shoes, you already have about twenty of them, but these are just so cool, so nifty, so trendy, I’ve just got to buy them. We’ve all seen mothers dragging little Billy kicking and screaming out of Wal-Mart because she refused to cave in to little Billy’s whining and begging for that super-cool, GI Joe-Spiderman-Captain America turbine race car. Proverbs 29:15, *The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child who gets his own way brings shame to his mother.* This is a foretaste of the Proverbs on parenting, but screaming Billy may need the board of education applied to the seat of learning when they get home to give him some wisdom promised in that Proverb.

What about your temper and anger and irritation level? **Proverbs 29:11, A fool always loses his temper, but a wise man holds it back or keeps himself under control.** King Saul, Haman, Herod, and a ton of other worldly rulers were controlled by their jealousy, anger, and rage. Saul went into a jealous rage when the ladies praised David above him. Haman went into a rage when Mordecai refused to bow to him. Nebuchadnezzar did the same. And so did Herod. And so did many of the kings of this world. Alexander could conquer the world, but couldn’t conquer his own spirit.

Here is one of the most important character qualities you want as you evaluate a potential life spouse. Do they have control over their own spirit? Are they willing to receive correction? If they get angry or irritated or nasty quickly, run for your life. You don’t want to be in a one flesh relationship to a man or woman who has a serious problem lacking self-control.

What about your words? Are you quick to speak when you should hold your tongue? Are your hasty words a breach in your spiritual wall? You say the wrong thing at the wrong time in the wrong way, mostly because you’re thinking about yourself above other people and God. You know you’ve blown it when you are provoked and you open your mouth and a pack of mad wasps comes flying out stinging and hurting everyone in sight.

You may be vulnerable in your failures, disappointments, self-pity, depression, loneliness, boredom, or under the influence of worldly friends. You dipped into some substance that brought you a good feeling and covered the hurt, and you decided it made you feel so good, you’ll just try it again, but just one more time. Then you felt stupid and guilty so to calm those ugly feelings, you dipped in again. That’s addictive sin – it feels good, just one more, and then I’ll stop. Sharing gossip and griping and complaining are other drugs of choice we use to make ourselves feel better, and our wall goes crumbling.

Pornography, gambling and easy money are areas that need the wall of self-control. Jesus said you need a protective, self-controlling wall around your eyes. To look on a woman to lust after her is to commit adultery. You need to have protection installed on your devices, but remember this. Outward barriers do not change your heart. They are like a chain on a dog. He may be controlled, but he’s still a dog. You need heart surgery, heart change, a greater love for Christ than for yourself.

#2 Realize God has given you the gift of self-control but you must apply it to your life by faith. Galatians 5:22-23, but the fruit of the Spirit is...self-control. Self-control is a gift, but it’s not automatic. In 2 Peter 1 God says, “I’ve given you all you need, all the power and all the promises you need to live for my glory. Now, you need to apply God’s gifts diligently.” **2 Peter 1:5-6, Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control...**

Here’s the thing. You can’t say, “Well, I just can’t help it. Something comes over me and there I did it again, or thought it again. I just can’t get it out of my head. I keep thinking about her. I keep remembering what he said and it drives me crazy. Is there a simple formula that will take these desires, these thoughts

away once for all?" Answer: "No!" This is a fight you will wage until you get your glorious new body. Your heart is the battlefield. Your enemy wants to batter down and crush your wall and come swarming in with all his reinforcements. This is why God says in 1 Peter 5:8, "Be self-controlled, be on the alert, your enemy, the devil, like a roaring lion is looking for Christians with their walls all bashed down." Paul wrote to Titus on the island of Crete where life was pretty much like America, 2017 with everyone living for their own carnal, self-indulgent pleasures, Paul ordered Titus to tell those older men to be sober minded and self-controlled. And tell the older ladies to lay off the wine. And urge the young guys to be self-controlled. In Titus 2:11ff God assures us His grace will give us all we need to keep our wall of self-control firm and sound.

This is a war for your heart. As surely as Israel's enemies tried to terrorize the Jews while they were building the wall, so your enemies want to keep you going back again and again, vowing to do better but then blowing it again. And this will happen. You'll lose your temper again. You'll say something stupid again. But realize this. God has given you the fruit of self-control with all the power of Christ in it. You don't have to lose control again. Check out these two men put to the self-control test.

A highly decorated army commander brought a young man on staff as his personal assistant. He was responsible to care for the commander's property. When this official travels, he leaves his entire property in the young man's hands. After only a short time, a problem surfaces. The commander's wife is not only beautiful, but lonely. She finds this new handsome young man very appealing. He is just the kind of fellow she'd like to get her hands on. And every day she tries to seduce him. One day she actually physically grabs him. This is a very real test from God to this young man. With a conscience toward God and the self-control that only God can give, he turns her down and flees and suffers all kinds of unjust treatment for his taking God's way of escape. He knew his God, feared His God, and applied what he knew to his life. He had built a solid wall of self-control.

God gave another man a similar test of his self-control. He sits in the executive chair of a powerful nation. His army is winning one battle after another. He is basking in the glory of major success. One day his eye falls on a lovely lady dipping her pretty toes in her Jacuzzi across the way. His wall of self-control melts like butter. He sends his men to bring her to his room. He seduces her and sends her back, only to get a message later, "I am pregnant." You know the rest of the story. He lies, has her husband murdered, and lives a life of guilt and misery for maybe a full year before confessing his wrong actions with a broken, contrite heart.

Both of these men loved God. One kept his wall strong, the other let his crumble for a time.

#3 Think saved as you wrestle with your flesh and build your wall. Another way of saying this is to apply your position in Christ to your temptations and challenges. Romans 6 says you've been baptized into Christ, you've died with Christ, you now walk in newness of life, you've been set free positionally from the power of your old sinful flesh so you can walk in the freedom to please God. **Romans 6:11-12, *Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts.*** James McDonald described these verses as "The absolute centerpiece of Christian victory."

Colossians 3 says you've been raised up with Christ and Christ is your life. Keep setting your affections and desires on Christ and consider yourself dead to all these temptations to lust and greed and anger and bitterness. Romans 6 and Colossians 3 are probably the best self-control wall building passages in the Bible. You have been set free in Christ. You don't have to react in lust or anger. Self-control is the inner heart freedom to stay within God's boundaries.

A block-buster book was written in 1945 by author Gertrude Crampton. By 2001 it was the all time third best selling children's hardback book. *Tootle!* It is one of my favorite books, full of great theology. Tootle is training to be a Flyer locomotive to run from New York to Chicago. But he has to learn self-control. As he is out there on a practice run, a handsome black horse runs up and yells, "Race ya to the river!" Tootle takes the challenge and off he flies. But as he comes to a curve, Tootle jumps the track and finds himself stuck in the meadow. The one rule he must learn is "Stay on the rails no matter what!" As the

story unfolds, his town friends come to help him by waving red flags in the meadow when he is tempted to jump those tracks again. And Tootle's mentor Engineer Bill stands on the tracks waving a green flag. Tootle was never freer than when he stayed on his tracks. You and I are never freer than when we resist the seductive call to indulge our flesh and stay within God's boundaries! You are in Christ and therefore free to say no to your heart lusts and say yes to God's boundaries.

#4 Make no provision for the flesh. Romans 13:13-14, *Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.*

If you struggle with drugs or alcohol or gossip or anger or overspending or worshipping cars, stay out of the bars, get rid of your opioids, don't hang out with other gossips, quit going to Dillards six times a week, and don't be googling all those sleek high-dollar road machines every night of the week. If you can't keep your hands off that young lady you are dating, don't spend time alone. You need the strong wall of "no provision for the flesh."

#5 Pray and delight in all God has done for you in His Son.

Pray Psalm 19:14, *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.* And Psalm 139:23-24, *Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!*

When you cave, don't be like David when he hid it for over a year. Repent quickly. Ask God to forgive you and ask whomever you offended to forgive you. Self-control means taking full responsibility for your out-of-control behavior. And if you blew it publicly, let your circle of confession be as broad as the circle of offense.

Let this thought embed itself into your soul. When you let your feelings, passions, and lusts rule your heart, remember that giving in may lead to loss of character, the respect of others, loss of your Christian testimony, and your name ruined. Proverbs 22:1, *A good name is to be more desired than great wealth.* Plus, your lack of self-control will probably have grievous effect on those who are looking up to you: your children, your grandchildren, or people in your life that look to you as a godly Christian. There have been too many seminary professors and conference speakers who warned their students about their need for sexual self-control who themselves failed the self-control test, just like David.

But most of all, the best tool to build a sound wall of self-control is to delight yourself in the Lord. Our hatred of sin should be passionate and our love and delight in Christ should be passionate. God's sovereign and amazing grace at work in your heart through Jesus Christ will give you all the power and hope that you need to keep your self-control strong.

Tommy Nelson in *The Twelve Essentials of Godly Success* ended his chapter on self-control with this prayer. "Father, we admit that we are weak-willed people who often go our own way. We lack self-control and are tossed this way and that by the desires of our flesh. Give us the grace to love you more than we love our own temporary pleasure. Help us turn away from short-term happiness to the greater joy of worshipping and serving you. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen."