

GROWING IN SELF-CONTROL

By Andy Manning

2 Peter 1:3-7

INTRODUCTION

The title of this sermon is “Growing in Self-Control.”

What do the following people have in common? Elvis Presley. Amy Winehouse. Kurt Cobain. Tom Petty. Prince. Whitney Houston. Michael Jackson. Heath Ledger. Chris Farley. They were all extremely talented entertainers who had made it to the top of their industry, but their lives were cut short by drugs and alcohol because they lacked self-control.

Proverbs 25:28 (NLT) “A person without self-control is like a city with broken-down walls.”

Pastor Tommy Nelson said, “You cannot succeed in life when you can’t control those passions that can dishonor, discredit, and destroy your life.” That’s only partially true. You can achieve some level of success, but not true success, and the success that you do achieve won’t last for long. Eventually your lack of self-control will take you down.

What do these people have in common? Perry Noble. Michael Lukazewski. Tullian Tchividian. Darren Patrick. Bill Hybels. Ted Haggard. R.C. Sproul Jr. Doug Phillips. Bill Gothard. Bob Coy. John Bishop. You may not be as familiar with these names. These are the names of megachurch pastors and worldwide ministry leaders, but they all had their ministries and their reputation taken away from them within the past ten years because they lacked self-control. For some it was adultery. For some it was pedophilia. For some it was drugs and alcohol. But it comes down to the same problem. Lack of self-control. A lack of self-control isn’t just a problem for non-Christians; many Christians struggle with it, too.

People lack self-control in different areas. Sexual immorality; pornography; a quick temper; a dirty mouth; materialism; drugs; alcohol; food; sleep; television; social media.

All of us need to grow in self-control. Nobody has arrived. **Pastor Charles Swindoll** wrote, “Every one of us has gotten angry and lost our temper, only to regret it. Every one of us has allowed our schedule to get so overloaded that, looking back over the week, we must admit to ourselves, if we're honest, we've not stopped to pray even once. Every one of us has eaten too much, even when we swore we wouldn't. Who hasn't fought yet again the old battle with lust or greed or materialism or anger or envy? There is an answer to this daily dilemma, a solution that is easy to identify. There is a secret to holding back. Self-control . . . that's the key . . . that's the answer.”

WHAT IS SELF-CONTROL?

It can be called self-discipline; self-mastery; the moral muscle; mind over body; impulse control; mastery over your passions and impulses. But what is it? **Self-control is doing what is right, even when you don't feel like it.**

I want to focus on the word “feelings” for a moment. Self-control is about letting God’s Spirit and God’s word control your life, rather than being controlled and ruled by your feelings, your passions, your impulses, and your desires. You will often have desires, urges, and impulses that do not conform to the will of God, and that are not good for you. But to be the person that God wants you to be, and to live the life that God wants you to live, the best kind of life you must be able to resist those feelings and desires and do what is right. That’s what self-control is all about.

Characterlab.org says that self-control is “Doing what’s best in the long-run despite short-term temptations.” Often what you want in the moment is not what’s best in the long-run. Self-control is about delayed gratification. It’s about denying yourself what would be most pleasurable and most comfortable in the moment, for what would be most pleasurable and rewarding in the long run.

Focusonthefamily.com says, “Self-control is the discipline of delaying impulse or gratification for a greater purpose or cause. When we exercise self-control, we are saying “no” for the sake of a bigger and better “yes.” We are trading something in the here and now for something greater in the future.”

I love how **Stephen Covey** put it. “The ability to subordinate an impulse to a value is the essence of the proactive person.” That’s self-control. It’s about subordinating your impulses to your values. It’s about do resisting the urge to do what is easy and comfortable and pleasurable in the moment, for the things that you value most.

Galatians 5:22-23 “22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control.” Notice that self-control is the last fruit of the Spirit mentioned. I don’t think that is by accident. Self-control is the perhaps the most important virtue, because it is the sign of maturity. It is about doing the right thing even when it is hard, even when you don’t feel like it. Anyone can be kind to a nice person; self-control is being kind to a mean person. Anyone can be patient, until they have to wait. Anyone can say no to ice cream, as long as they have a full belly and a bunch of people are watching. But it takes self-control to say no to ice cream when you are hungry and home alone.

Pastor J. R. Miller said of self-control, “This is the sum of all learning and experience. It is the completeness of all spiritual culture. The man in us is only part a man—while we are not master of ourselves.”

Self-control is the essence of true spiritual maturity. You’re spiritually strong until you have self-control. **Pastor J. R. Miller** said, “Self-control is self-mastery. It is kingship over all life. At the center of your being, sits yourself. Your seat ought to be a throne. If you are not in control, if there are any forces in your nature which are unruly, which do not acknowledge your sway—you are not the king which you should be. Part of your kingdom is in insurrection. The strength of your life is divided. The strong man is he whose whole being is subject to him.”

There are two kinds of self-control. Self-control is the ability to resist the desire to do what is not good for you, and the ability to resist the desire to not do what is good for you.

The ancient philosopher **Plato** said, “The first and best victory is to conquer self.” Self-control is all about self-mastery. It is about conquering yourself. Do you know who your worst enemy is? It’s not the devil. It’s not other people. It’s not your parents or your siblings. Your worst enemy is you. If you can conquer yourself, gaining mastery over your emotions, your desires, your urges, your impulses, then you could achieve anything God wants you to achieve. Self-control is all about getting control of yourself, so that you can get yourself out of the way, so that God can move through you to accomplish His will.

Jean Paul Getty said, "The individual who wants to reach the top in business must appreciate the might and force of habit. He must be quick to break those habits that can break him - and hasten to adopt those practices that will become the habits that help him achieve the success he desires." That’s what self-control is all about. It’s the ability to break those habits that are bad for you, and to adopt those habits that are good for you.

One author said, “The basic premise of self-control is the use of reason to control instinct, whether that instinct is for something bad or against something that is good for us.”¹ Little children live by instinct. They do not think about what’s best, or what’s wise, or what’s healthiest, or what’s pleasing to God. They do not think in the long-term. They want what they want, and they want it now. But God wants us to grow up. And that means that God wants us live by reason rather than instinct. He wants us to do what’s best, what is right, what is wise, what is righteous, what is loving, rather than what is quick, pleasurable, and comfortable, and easy.

¹ Read more at: <https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ps/self-control.html>

Pastor J. R. Miller said, “Nothing is more pitiful—than a life which is made to be strong, kingly, noble, calm, and peaceful—but which is, instead, the slave of every excitement, every temper, every resentment, every appetite and passion.”

How many people have never fulfilled their potential because of a lack of self-control? How many people’s lives have been cut short by a lack of self-control? How many people have destroyed their bodies because of a lack of self-control? How many people have wrecked their finances, destroyed their families, lost their jobs, ruined their careers, all because they lacked self-control?

Self-control is about freedom. Freedom is not the liberty to do whatever you want, but the strength to make yourself do what you should do, even when you don’t feel like it. You are a slave to whatever controls you. If you don’t develop self-control, then you will always be a slave to your mood, to your emotions, to your feelings, to your desires.

WHY DO WE NEED SELF-CONTROL?

Jesus said in John 10:10 that He came to give you an abundant life. But an abundant life is not possible without self-control. To live an abundant life, you must exercise self-control in the following areas.

1. **You need self-control to master your mood.** To be controlled by your commitments and values rather than your emotions. **Proverbs 25:28 (TLB)** “A man without self-control is as defenseless as a city with broken-down walls.”
2. **You need self-control to watch your words.** **Proverbs 13:3 (NIV)** “Those who guard their lips preserve their lives, but those who speak rashly will come to ruin.”
3. **You need self-control to restrain your reactions.** **Proverbs 19:11 (GNT)** “If you are sensible, you will control your temper. When someone wrongs you, it is a great virtue to ignore it.” **Pastor Rick Warren** said, “A lot of potential influence can be cut short by a short temper.”
4. **You need self-control to tame your thoughts.** **Romans 13:14 (NIV)** “Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.” All sin begins in the mind. If you can’t control your thought-life, then you will not be able to control your actions.
5. **You need to self-control to stick to your schedule.** **Pastor Rick Warren** said, “If you don’t determine how you will spend your time, you can be sure that others will decide for you. You’ll have to become a great steward of time to be successful in life.”

Ephesians 5:15 (Phillips) “Make the best use of your time, despite all the difficulties of these days.”

6. **You need self-control to defeat your sinful desires.** **1 Thessalonians 4:3-4 (CSB)** “3 For this is God’s will, your sanctification: that you keep away from sexual immorality, 4 that each of you knows how to control his own body in holiness and honor, 5 not with lustful passions, like the Gentiles, who don’t know God.” **Ephesians 5:18** “And don’t get drunk with wine, which leads to reckless living, but be filled by the Spirit.” Self-control is saying no to sinful desires, even when it hurts. John Piper
7. **You need self-control to guard your eyes.** **Matthew 5:29** “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of the parts of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.” In order to overcome pornography and lust, you have to exercise self-control.
8. **You need self-control to stabilize your spending.** **Proverbs 21:20 (TLB)** “The wise man saves for the future, but the foolish man spends whatever he gets.” **Pastor Rick Warren** said that successful people “learn to live on less than what they make, and they invest the difference into savings and give to causes that matter. The value of a budget is that it tells your money where you want it go rather than wondering where it went!” **Dave Ramsey** often says, “If you live like no one else, one day you will live like no one else.” If you want to succeed financially and be a good steward of your money, you must have self-control.
9. **You need self-control to maintain your health.** **1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (TLB)** “19 Haven’t you yet learned that your body is the home of the Holy Spirit God gave you, and that he lives within you? Your own body does not belong to you. 20 For God has bought you with a great price. So use every part of your body to give glory back to God because he owns it.” Your body belongs to God, and that means you must not only keep it pure, but you need to keep it healthy. The healthier you are, the more you can accomplish for God, and the more you can enjoy those accomplishments. But good health requires self-control.

THE BENEFITS OF SELF-CONTROL

What happens when we develop self-control? We get to enjoy six benefits or rewards.

1. **Submission to Christ.**

The best life is lived in submission to Christ. But submitting to Christ requires self-control. It requires saying no to your desires and impulses and urges and emotions, and yes to the Word of God.

Luke 9:23 “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.”

Self-control is all about sacrificing my pleasure for God’s pleasure.

Pastor Donald S. Whitney said, “Our bodies are inclined to ease, pleasure, gluttony, and sloth. Unless we practice self-control, our bodies will tend to serve evil more than God. We must carefully discipline ourselves in how we “walk” in this world, else we will conform more to its ways rather than to the ways of Christ.”

The more we develop self-control, the more we will submit to Christ and enjoy all the benefits of the Christian life.

2. Success.

Self-control is a requirement for success in anything in life. And so one of the benefits and rewards of cultivating self-control is that you will become a more successful person.

John Maxwell wrote a book about the laws of growth, and he said that the law that is most important to him is the Law of Consistency. He said, “Motivation gets us going, but discipline keeps us growing. The difference between a winner and a whiner is that a whiner wants to feel good before they do something. Winners say, ‘I have to do something before I feel it.’”

Pastor Charles Stanley said, “Discipline, not desire, determines destiny.” In the end, it doesn’t matter what you want out of life. It doesn’t matter what you want to accomplish, what you want to achieve. Discipline is what matters, not desire. Don’t tell me what your goals are, tell me what your daily disciplines are to achieve those goals.

Brian Tracy said, “The single most important quality of success is self-discipline. Self-discipline means that you have the ability, within yourself, based on your strength of character and willpower, to do what you should do, when you should do it, whether you feel like it or not. Character is the ability to follow through on a resolution after the enthusiasm with which the resolution was made has passed. It is not what you learn that is decisive for your future. It is whether or not you can discipline yourself to pay the price, over and over, until you finally obtain your objective.”

3. Self-confidence.

How do you feel about yourself? How you feel about yourself plays a big role in your happiness, your relationships, and in many other areas. A lot of people feel bad about themselves. They don't like themselves. They are ashamed of themselves. Embarrassed of themselves. Where do you get self-confidence and self-esteem? It's not from other people not criticizing you. It's not from people telling you that you're great when you're not. Self-confidence and self-esteem come from self-control.

Jim Rohn said, "Where does it [self-confidence] come from? Not neglecting the small, daily disciplines. It comes from feeling good about yourself at the end of the day, knowing that you poured it on; you did your best. It comes from the lack of neglect."

The ancient historian **Thucydides** said, "Self-control is the chief element in self-respect, and self-respect is the chief element in courage."

4. **Spiritual growth.**

A fourth benefit of self-control is spiritual growth. To grow spiritually you have to practice spiritual disciplines such as a daily quiet time, weekly church attendance, tithing, Home Group, volunteering. **1 Timothy 4:7** (AMP) "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness [keeping yourself spiritually fit]." If you are not growing it is because you are not disciplined. But as you develop self-control, you will be able to be more and more consistent with spiritual disciplines, and you will grow more and more.

5. **Self-preservation.**

As you develop self-control, you will have the ability to adopt the kinds of habits that lead to good health, like diet and exercise, and you will also have the ability to resist habits and behaviors that are harmful to your body.

Thomas Aquinas, the famous medieval philosopher and theologian, said that self-control is the ability to preserve your life. In other words, it is the ability to do those things that lead to life and health rather than to pain and death.

The great psychiatrist **M. Scott Peck** said, "Self-discipline is self-caring." Self-control is developing the strength to do what's best for yourself, because as you do God's will, you will be doing what's best for you.

6. **Satisfaction.**

The last benefit of self-control is satisfaction, or happiness, or contentment. Inner peace.

Without self-control you will struggle with sin; you will struggle with your health; you will struggle with your finances; you will struggle with your job performance; you will struggle with your academic performance; you will develop a reputation as a lazy, unreliable, underperformer. You will not be happy. You will not be satisfied with your life.

But as you develop self-control, you will be doing those things that are best for you, and for your relationships with God, and for your health, and your finances, and your relationships with others. You will be happier.

Jim Rohn said, “There are two major pains in life. The pain of discipline, and the pain of regret.” **Jack Canfield** said, “Discipline weighs ounces, but regret weighs tons when you allow your life to drift along unfulfilled.” Self-control isn’t the most fun and easy way to live in the short run; it may involve more pain and effort in the short term. But in the long-term, you will be happier.

6 FACTS ABOUT SELF-CONTROL

2 Peter 1:3-7 teaches us several important facts about self-control.

3 His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 4 By these he has given us very great and precious promises, so that through them you may share in the divine nature, escaping the corruption that is in the world because of evil desire. 5 For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with goodness, goodness with knowledge, 6 knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with godliness,

1. It is within reach.

Verse 3 “His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of him...” In verse three it says that God has given us everything we need to be godly – to be like Christ – and then verse six tells us to cultivate self-control. So that means that self-control is something that you can do. It’s not just for some people. You can cultivate self-control. You can become a disciplined person.

2. It is commanded.

Verses 5-6 “5 For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with... self-control,”

Not only is it within reach. But God commands us to cultivate self-control. God demands that you become a self-controlled, self-disciplined person.

3. It requires all your effort.

Verse 5-6 “For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with... self-control,”

John Maxwell said, “Discipline comes with a price tag. Discipline is costly. It demands a continual investment of time, energy, and commitment at the expense of momentary pleasure and ease. Discipline means paying hours of practice to win the prize of skill. Discipline means giving up short-term benefits for the hope of future gain. Discipline means pressing on to excellence long after everyone else has settled for average.”

You can develop self-control. And you are commanded to. But that doesn’t mean it is going to be easy. Self-control takes hard work. It takes all your effort. You have to want it more than anything else.

4. It takes time.

Self-control is placed in a list of virtues that we know take time to cultivate, and in fact that we are supposed to continue to cultivate until we go to heaven. Faith, goodness, knowledge, endurance, godliness -- these virtues are not obtained instantly, and neither is self-control.

Self-control doesn’t just require all your effort. It’s going to take some time. Don’t expect to become completely self-controlled after you listen to this sermon and say a prayer. If you devote yourself to cultivating self-control, then you can expect to grow in self-control a little each year until you die.

5. It demands persistence.

If self-control takes time to cultivate, then that means you need to keep working at. Don’t get discouraged and give up when you fail.

You will fail often. But failure is not a sign that you cannot grow in self-control. It is a reminder that you need to grow. It is a reminder that it takes time. But you cannot grow if you give up.

Pastor J.R. Miller said, “How can we get the mastery over ourselves? It is not attained by a mere resolve. We cannot simply assert our self-mastery, and then have it. We cannot put self-control on the throne, by a mere proclamation. It is an achievement which must be won by ourselves, and won by degrees. It is a lesson which must be learned, a long lesson which it takes many days to learn.

6. It is a part of the pursuit of godliness.

Notice that self-control is only one in a list of virtues, and it is under the subheading, the overall goal of becoming godly, or becoming Christlike. That is significant. There is a difference between the Christian virtue of self-control, and the non-Christian virtue of self-control.

First, Christian self-control is not cultivated for selfish reasons. The purpose of the virtue of self-control is not to get that beach body you've always wanted, or to become more thrifty and fragile and more financially secure. Those are not bad things, but the goal of self-control is to become more like Christ. It's about developing the inner strength to say no to sin, to foolishness, and to the things that are not good for us, and saying yes to God. **Pastor David Mathis** said, "Ultimately, our controlling ourselves is about being controlled by Christ.... Christian self-control is not finally about bringing our bodily passions under our own control, but under the control of Christ by the power of his Spirit."²

Pastor J. Hampton Keathley III said, "The essence of such self-regulation is the ability to delay or refuse an impulse in the service of biblical truth, values, beliefs, and objectives." The focus of self-control is not ultimately so that we can master a craft, or a skill, or get a beach body. The focus is to be able to control ourselves so that we can live according to the Bible.³

Pastor Keathley went on to say, "The essence of self-control, then, is the growing manifestation of the holy qualities and character of the Lord Jesus as Christians seek to exchange their lives, which were formerly dominated by the cravings of the old life, with the new and glorious life of Christ. The means for this is a Word-filled and Spirit-filled." So ultimately the goal of self-control is to be more like Christ – to be more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, gentle, and faithful – regardless of how we feel, or the mood that we are in, or the pressures around us.

Second, Christian self-control is not done in my own strength. It is a fruit, or a product of the indwelling Holy Spirit. And therefore the key is learning how to tap into God's strength in order to gain victory over yourself. We'll talk about how to do that later.

Third, Christian self-control is multi-faceted. Non-Christians may want to develop self-control in certain areas, such as control over an addiction, control over their diet, or the discipline to exercise. As Christians we don't pick and choose where to cultivate self-control. We are to cultivate self-control over all areas of life – our thoughts, our body, our mouth, our diet, our

² David Mathis, DesiringGod.org

³ J. Hampton Keathley III, Bible.org

attitude. The goal is to place every part of our self, inner and outer, under God's complete control.

Fourth, Christian self-control gives God the glory. As we grow in self-control, we don't pat ourselves on the back. We give all the glory. We recognize that we are still sinners, that we still need to grow, and that any and all progress has been enabled by God.

Pastor J. R. Miller said, "A man has self-control when he sits in his place—and has his hands on all the reins of his life. He is kingly when he has complete master of his temper, his speech, his feelings, his appetites; when he can be quiet under injury and wrong; deeply hurt but showing no sign of malice; patient and still under severe provocation; when he can stand amid temptations and not yield to them."

HOW DO WE CULTIVATE SELF-CONTROL?

So let's get down to the nitty gritty. How do you develop self-control? Here's the short answer: Keep growing closer to God, and keep trying to grow in self-control. Over time, you will see results. Let me give you a longer answer.

1. Believe that you can cultivate it.

If you don't believe that you can grow in self-control, then you will give up before you even start. Remember, the 2 Peter 1:3 says that God has given us everything we need for godliness. You have to believe that you are not a slave to your feelings, emotions, desires, urges. God has given you the ability to control yourself.

Self-control is not just for a select few; it's for everyone. In Titus 1:8, Paul says that a man needs to be self-controlled before he can become a church leader. In Titus 2:2 it says that older men are to be self-controlled. In Titus 2:3-5 it says that the older women are to teach the younger women to be self-controlled. And Titus 2:6-7 says that the young men need to be encouraged to be self-controlled in everything. So that's everyone.

2. Have faith in the supremacy of Christ.

In John 10:10 Jesus said He came to give us abundant life. The best life is found in Christ, and in His will. To develop self-control you have to believe that with all your heart. You have to believe that saying yes to Christ is going to be much more rewarding and satisfying and joy-filled than saying yes to yourself.

3. Abide in Christ.

To abide in Christ is to stay close to Him. Keep a constant, close, ever-growing relationship with Christ. You do this through Bible reading, prayer, Sunday worship, Home Group, fasting, etc. And in John 15:5 Jesus said that if you abide in Him, you will produce much fruit. As you stay close to Him, He will produce the fruit of Christ-like character, such as self-control, through your life.

4. Be filled with the Spirit.

Galatians 5:22-23 says that self-control is the fruit of the Spirit; it is produced by the Spirit. We are empowered by the Spirit to cultivate it. At the same time, we are commanded in Ephesians 5:18 to be filled with the Spirit, and Galatians 5:16 says to walk by the Spirit, and Galatians 5:18 says to be led by the Spirit. So what does all this mean? To be filled by the Spirit, to walk by the Spirit, and to be led by the Spirit all mean the same thing. It means let the Holy Spirit – God – be in control of your life. Fully in control. Totally in control. In other words, surrender every part of yourself to God’s control. As you do that, then the Spirit is free to do His work in you, and to produce self-control in your character.

Pastor Rick Warren said, “The more you accept God’s control over your life, the more self-control he gives you!”

5. Do everything within your power.

Finally, to develop self-control you need to do everything within your power. 2 Peter 1:5-8 says make every effort. Jesus said that if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out, and if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off (Mt 5:29-30). Translation: Do everything within your power to be self-controlled. Put all your effort into it.

Pastor J. R. Miller said, “We need divine help in learning the lesson. Yet we must be diligent in doing our part. God helps those who help themselves. When we strive to be calm and self-controlled, he puts his own strength into our heart. Then we shall find ourselves growing strong and gaining in self-mastery. The attainment will come slowly.”

CONCLUSION

Jesus did not come and die for you so that you could live a defeated life. So why do so many Christians live defeated lives? Self-control. One of the main things separating you from the life you want to live, the you that you want to be, is simply self-control. So make a decision to stop letting life happen to you, and take control of your life.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was your key takeaway from the message?
2. Read Proverbs 25:28. How can a lack of a self-control hurt you?
3. How has a lack of self-control impacted you personally?
4. In which areas of your life do you most need to cultivate more self-control?
5. What is self-control?
6. Why is it important not to be ruled by your feelings, impulses, and urges?
7. Stephen Covey wrote that self-control is “the ability to subordinate an impulse to a value.” What are your core values, and how is self-control essential in the pursuit of those values?
8. Plato said, “The first and best victory is to conquer self.” Do you agree with this statement? Explain.
9. How does self-control increase self-confidence and self-esteem?
10. How does self-control help in the pursuit of spiritual growth?
11. Read 2 Peter 1:3-7. What does this passage tell us about self-control?
12. What is the difference between the Christian virtue of self-control, and non-Christian self-control?
13. How can a person grow in self-control?