

## Topic 17: Self-Control

### Keeping It All in Check

“Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control.”

—Proverbs 25:28

### How Much Self-Control Do You Have?

Let's start with a quick personal assessment. For each of the following situations, on a typical day, what are the chances that you would respond in a God-honoring, people-blessing, soul-enhancing way? Place an X underneath the appropriate percentage.

Situation	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%
You're trying to lose weight, but a friend is serving her famous "Death by Chocolate" dessert. You want to resist, but it is the most delicious thing you ever put in your mouth.					
You've been wanting to get up thirty minutes earlier so you can start the habit of reading the Bible before work. But now the alarm is going off . . . and it's so early . . . and ten more minutes of sleep would be awesome.					
On the way home from work, an accident on the expressway causes a delay. As you creep along the guy behind you lays on his horn and gestures wildly at you when you let someone merge over in front of you.					
As you're bringing bags and bags of expensive groceries into the kitchen, your surly, ungrateful teenager complains that you forgot to get a new box of Choco-Carb Clusters cereal.					
On Facebook, someone posts a completely ridiculous video of the political candidate you can't stand, and the candidate is saying something totally outrageous.					
In the most crucial moment of the most important game of the season, the umpire makes a terrible call against your child.					
You walk into the living room to discover that your toddler has "finger-painted" the sofa with the contents of his diaper.					



Situation	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%
The hotel you're staying in (alone) has complimentary premium channels. The movie line-up features several NC-17 films.					
You discover that back-stabbing coworker who is always throwing people under the bus has made a huge mistake and is blaming you.					
It's 4:42 in the afternoon and while prepping for that important business meeting at 8:00 the next morning, you realize the report contains the wrong numbers. And even if you could correct it, the copy machine is on the fritz.					

According to the New Testament, a Christian disciple is a person who follows Jesus for three reasons:

- ▶ To know Jesus and his teaching
- ▶ To grow more like Jesus
- ▶ To go for Jesus, serving and making new disciples.

## Bible Study

Disciples who grow to be more like Jesus take on his character. One important aspect of Christ-likeness is having and demonstrating *self-control*.

1. How would you define and describe the quality or attribute of self-control?

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This virtue is listed as one of the nine "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22–23. The Greek word translated "self-control" there is *enkrateia*. It speaks of corralling one's emotional impulses, bridling ones' appetites or passions, and resisting temptation. The result is a person who is purposeful and in harmony with the will of God.

A self-controlled man is wisely restrained, not wildly reactive. A self-controlled woman is intentional not impulsive. When we are self-controlled we refrain from indulging our momentary selfish whims. Instead we choose actions that will result in long-term joy.



2. Read the following passage from the Bible:

“When [Jesus’ accusers] hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23).

How did Jesus demonstrate self-control? What might he have done instead?

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3. Read the following passage from the Bible:

“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.” (1 Corinthians 9:24–27, NASB)

a. Paul refers to runners and athletes. What can they teach us about self-control?

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b. What would you say if someone said, “Self-control is just another word for willpower”?

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The teaching of the New Testament is that we have more “will-weakness” than willpower. The gospel shows us that self-control doesn’t come from a hardened resolve. It comes from a humbled heart. Rather than steeling our wills . . . we need to surrender them. Instead of grabbing the steering wheel of our lives, we give the wheel to another—to the Holy Spirit.

No book of the Bible illustrates this better than the Apostle Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus, the book of Ephesians. These six short chapters are a masterpiece of theological writing, a beautiful summary of the Christian life.

- ▶ In chapters 1–3, Paul doesn’t tell Christians to *do* anything; instead, he gushes about all the amazing things God has done for us in Christ.
- ▶ In chapters 4–6 Paul shows how all those spiritual blessings make a difference in the way we live from day-to-day. He rattles off thirty-five specific commands for how we should be interacting in the home, in the church, and in the world.

Ironically, we find self-control only when we relinquish control of ourselves to another.

Reading this divine “to do” list for Christians in Ephesians 4–6 can be intimidating—unless and until you pay close attention to Ephesians 5:18. That verse commands, “Don’t be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit” (NLT).

4. Why do you think Paul compared and contrasted life in the Spirit with drunkenness?

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Anyone who’s ever had too much to drink knows the controlling power of alcohol. It takes over a person’s personality—the inhibited person becomes outgoing, the frustrated person wants to pick a fight, the stoic person becomes sentimental. Though it’s always wrong to *drive* under the influence of alcohol, it’s always right to *live* under the influence of the Spirit (Galatians 5:16–18)!

It’s worth noting that this command is in the present tense. That means it’s to be an ongoing, never-ending reality. Being filled with or under the influence of God’s Spirit is to be the moment-by-moment way of life for a disciple.

Also, the verb Paul uses in Ephesians 5:18 is passive. In other words, being filled with the Holy Spirit isn’t something we make happen; it is something that happens *to us*. God does

it—but only when we desire his control and open ourselves up to his guiding, transforming presence.

### Important Points to Remember

- ▶ If you're a Christian, God's Spirit lives in you (Romans 8:9)—whether you "feel" him or not. As someone once quipped, "He's *resident* in you—even if you're not allowing Him to be *president* of you." This means Christians don't need to "receive the Spirit"—we need to unleash the Spirit.
- ▶ We can't be *filled* with the Spirit when we are *grieving* the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30) or *quenching* the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19). Being filled with the Spirit is a way of saying we are surrendering to his control and allowing him to lead us (Romans 8:14).
- ▶ There's no secret prayer for "being filled with God's Spirit." It requires acknowledging and confessing any wrong attitudes or actions so that you will be a clean vessel, useful to the Lord (see 1 John 1:9; 2 Timothy 2:21). Jesus said the Spirit would be like a river within us (John 7:38–39). Not letting the Spirit fill us is like damming up that "holy river." However, when we confess known sin we "blow up the dam." After confession comes expression, telling God about our desire to have his Spirit rule in our hearts and minds and lives.

Every day—and all through each day—we must choose:

- ▶ Will I yield control of my life to the indwelling Spirit of God?
- ▶ Or will I try to power through situations in my own strength?

Those who have tried human willpower know the futility of such an approach. You may be able to resist temptation for a time, but wrong impulses and fleshly desires are like the waves at the beach. They keep coming at you relentlessly.

"Self-control is not control by oneself through one's own willpower but rather control of oneself through the power of the Holy Spirit." —Jerry Bridges

The disciple realizes *Though I cannot truly control my behavior, I can control who controls my behavior.* Biblical self-control is choosing to say "no!" to the flesh, our old fallen human nature, and surrendering control instead to the Holy Spirit.

A disciple of Jesus allows the Spirit of God to fill him or her. This means listening to his promptings, soliciting his guidance, relying on his power. The fruit of such a life is divine strength—being able to resist sin, confess when we fail, get up again, and carry out God's will.



## Verbal Self-Control

Consider these insights from the book of Proverbs, written by Solomon. Each one reinforces our need for spiritual power in restraining our tongue.

- ▶ “Where there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise” (10:19).
- ▶ “The lips of the righteous bring forth what is acceptable, but the mouth of the wicked what is perverted” (10:32).
- ▶ “With *his* mouth the godless man destroys his neighbor” (11:9).
- ▶ “Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (12:18).
- ▶ “The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful” (12:22).
- ▶ “The one who guards his mouth preserves his life; the one who opens wide his lips comes to ruin” (13:3).
- ▶ “The heart of the wise instructs his mouth and adds persuasiveness to his lips” (16:23).
- ▶ “Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones” (16:24).
- ▶ “Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is considered prudent” (17:28).
- ▶ “He who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards his soul from troubles” (21:23).
- ▶ “A lying tongue hates those it crushes, and a flattering mouth works ruin” (26:28).
- ▶ “Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him” (29:2).

## Take-Home Reflections

### Consider Your Speech Habits

Take some time to prayerfully, honestly consider the content of your recent conversations, your verbal interactions and writings (Facebook posts, Tweets, etc.). What do you find? On which side of the table do you find yourself most of the time? What do you need to do?

Sinful Speech Habits	or	Holy Speech Habits?
False teaching—advocating unbiblical ideas	—	Declaring God’s truth with holy fear and trembling
Grumbling and complaining	—	Expressing gratitude and appreciation
Criticizing, critiquing, or fault-finding	—	Praying: “Show me the log in my eye.” (Matthew 7:5)
Bragging, boasting, or taunting	—	Humility in speech
Flattery or insincere speech	—	Speaking the truth in love
Avoiding hard but necessary conversations	—	Confronting with tenderness and genuine concern
Slander, gossip, or backstabbing	—	Talking to others, rather than about them
Exaggerating or misrepresenting	—	Speaking accurately and with integrity
Lying—including shading the truth; telling half-truths, lies of omission, etc.	—	Truth-telling—no misleading, no matter what
Enticing or inciting others to evil	—	Exhorting others to holiness
Blaming others	—	Naming, owning, admitting, and confessing all of my faults
Blasphemy	—	Praising God in words, hymns, and songs
Snide, rude, or insensitive comments	—	Verbal kindness, honor, courtesy, and respect
Belittling, insulting, or cutting remarks	—	Speech that encourages, builds-up, strengthens
Verbal abuse	—	Choosing and using words that bring healing and give life
Idle, careless, silly, or worldly speech	—	Sharing the gospel; discussing eternal realities
Cursing or profanity	—	Talking about what is good, beautiful, and noble



Sinful Speech Habits	or	Holy Speech Habits?
Negativity or pessimism	—	Expressing faith and hope in God's goodness and power
Arguing, bickering, or accusing	—	Seeking peace and pursuing conflict resolution
Expressing bitterness or rehashing old resentments against others	—	Extending and requesting forgiveness
Shaming or "guilting" others with words	—	Blessing others with words of grace and mercy
Heated conversations about God with skeptics and unbelievers	—	Gently giving a reason for the hope within you; using loving words
Talking incessantly	—	Silence

## Life Application

An important part of discipleship is learning how to apply God's truths to your life. Below are just a few ways you can start thinking about what you've learned and apply it to your daily life.

1. Memorize our memory verse, Proverbs 25:28.  
"Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control."
2. Read the Book of Ephesians in one sitting—from a translation you don't typically use.
3. Wrestle with one or two of these questions:
  - ▶ What does our memory verse mean? Why the picture of a wall-less city?
  - ▶ How would you respond to someone saying, "How can you say Jesus had self-control? He went through the temple with a whip, driving out the moneychangers, and turning over tables!"?
  - ▶ What's the hardest thing about giving up control of your life?
  - ▶ In the world of sports, we often hear about the importance of players or teams "buying in" to a coach's system, philosophy, or training regimen. In what ways is being filled with the Spirit like "buying in" to his leadership?
  - ▶ If we rarely see the fruit of the Spirit in our lives (Galatians 5:22–23), is that a sure sign we are not allowing ourselves to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18)?