

Self Control in a Crowd

[Soon after his baptism, when God's voice was heard to proclaim, "This is my beloved son," Jesus went into the desert. Was he running away? It was all so tempting, as God's son, to use his connections for aggrandizement, or was it that he was frightened by the prospects? He had been warned, you know; death had shadowed him from the beginning. Soon after his birth he fled to Egypt while the babies in Bethlehem were killed by wicked King Herod. He then remained in obscurity in Nazareth, avoiding all publicity after the angels and star at his birth. But then, at his baptism, that heavenly voice revealed him. Now everyone knew. He fled to the loneliness of the desert, but even there he found no solitude. He found company that was no comfort, only more temptation. The Devil challenged his self-control, tempting him to use his power in selfish ways. In self-control he resisted.]

Then, the gospels tell us (Matt. 21:1-9; Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:29-38; John 12:12-15), Jesus entered Jerusalem, just before the Passover. It was a triumphal entry, by all accounts. We call this *Palm Sunday*, our children carry palm branches into the church, the sanctuary is festooned with palm branches, all reminiscent of the palm branches laid out on the path before Jesus in Jerusalem long ago. It was the ancient version of "rolling out the red carpet." The boisterous crowd acclaimed him to be the one to deliver the people of Israel from their oppression. There were shouts and slogans... It was almost as if the Devil had returned with a happy face, once again tempting Jesus, as he had in the desert; tempting him to be a great liberator and king in the way everyone expected. But Jesus knew that his destiny was to be the Messiah described in Isaiah 53. "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men ... we esteemed him not ... But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."

It took great self-control on the part of Jesus to keep his head in the jubilant crowd (remember he was human in every way we are). I am reminded of theologian Reinhold Niehbur's book, *Moral Man, Immoral Society*, in which he shows how moral individuals will often do immoral things when in a crowd. Lacking self-control they are easily swayed by the mood of the mob. Jesus could easily have been carried away by all the enthusiasm and marched right to Herod's palace and demand he vacate the throne. He could have found a fine steed and rode in like a great warrior, like King David, the greatest king of

Israel. Living by the Spirit though, he was the embodiment of the Fruit of the Spirit. Instead of choosing a war horse, in self-control he chose to ride into town a donkey.

Anyone who has self-control is a mighty warrior. Anyone who lacks self-control is an accident waiting to happen or a slave in chains. Only through the self-control developed by the Holy Spirit can we ever fulfill Jesus' promise: "Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).

Proverbs. 25:28 "Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control." The signs are everywhere: gang violence, drug-related problems of celebrities, domestic abuse, substance abuse and power abuse...the governor of N.Y. is just one example. Our society is fraught with problems brought on by unrestrained self-indulgence. Lack of self-control kills self respect, friendships, marriages, careers, and ministries. None of us can boast that we've always avoided its grip.

Wouldn't it be great if salvation and self-control were simultaneous? But it's not. Believers continue to struggle with self-control, but thanks be to God it is attainable. The Greek for self-control is ἐγκράτεια which means continence, temperance, restraining passions and appetites. It is the opposite of or self-indulgence, excess.

[Acts 24:22-27 Paul on trial before Felix. Paul speaks on faith in Christ to Felix and wife Drusilla. Paul spoke about righteousness, self-control and judgment to come. Felix said that's enough, I'll call for you again when it's convenient. Jewish historian Josephus refers to Felix as a man of pride, greed, lust, and selfish-ambition. There is never a convenient time to confront the issue of self-control. But without self-control we will experience self-defeat.]

1 Cor. 6:12 Paul says, "...I will not be mastered by anything." Mastered – ἐξουσιασσο meaning "to be ruled by, or under the authority of, or in bondage to." The key to self-control is refusal to allow our enemies (the flesh, the world, Satan) to rule over us or hold us captive. Christ has defeated all these things, and only we can re-extend authority to one of these enemies. They can rule us only when they are invited. Sometimes self-control is not about what? But how much? Not about when? But why? Self-control is about mastery, authority, boundaries.

Ancient cities were protected by walls. Without the wall the city could easily be mastered by an enemy. Paul, after saying "I will not be mastered by anything" goes on to talk about how our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. We are the temple of God and self-control is our wall of protection. The quality of self-control secures our freedom to love, to experience joy, to know peace, to respond with patience, to have a kind disposition, to act with goodness, to step out in faithfulness, and to agree with gentleness. Self-

control is the ability to make choices to remain within the boundaries of Christ's victory. Any out of control area of our lives, no matter how big or how small, is an invitation to the enemy to take advantage of us. The enemy's goal is to hold you captive for as long as possible to your guilt, shame, frustration and failure.

[Example of one who lacks self-control: Samson (Judges 13:1-25; 14:1-20). He disregarded holy law, did not respect his parents, and was fatally attracted to women, and was indulgent of practical jokes to his own detriment. Sadly, Samson was more effective in his death than in his living. From Samson we learn: 1) self-indulgence robs us of sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. Self-indulgence saps us of much needed strength. Samson's strength was not in his hair – that was simply a sign of his consecration. His strength was from the Spirit of the Lord, yet he ignored the Spirit.]

[Example of one who practices self-control: Daniel (Dan. 1:1-21; 6:1-28). From Daniel we learn: 1) Physical discipline and spiritual discipline often compliment each other. Daniel practiced both. 2) Prior discipline prepares us for present dilemmas. The time to prepare for crisis is in advance, through prayer. Practicing self-control in small things (like food) can prepare us to handle larger challenges. 3) Self-control enhances effectiveness. The disciplined life accomplishes more than the self-indulgent one. 4) Self-control for God's sake invites God's blessings. Both Samson and Daniel were young men who had a lot going for them. One was overcome by his enemy. The other overcame his enemy. The difference: Daniel was protected by a wall of self-control.]¹

What are some of the things in our lives where we need to exercise self-control?

Money and Possessions – is it all a chasing of the wind?

We live in a culture that seems to have one major goal – to have more. We have more than enough to live complicated lives, but not enough to be contented.

Ecclesiastes was written by one who seemingly had it all – King Solomon. From someone who had it all we read: “Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless” (Ecc. 5:10). Multi-millionaire oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller was once asked, “Sir, how much money is enough?” His reply, “Just a little bit more than what you have.” [“I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: Wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner. Or wealth lost in misfortune, so when he has son there is nothing left for him. Naked a man

¹For more on self-control see Beth Moore, *Living Beyond Yourself, Exploring the Fruit of the Spirit* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Press, 1998),

comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs." (Ecc. 5:13-15).]

Chasing after money, position, or possessions is vanity if it is self-indulgence. Unfortunately that is what too many people do, even Christians. Our consumer driven economy encourages this form of self-indulgence – so we are tempted daily. However, there are Christians mature enough in their faith who realize what are their true needs and the costs, and then they realize how much money it leaves them to do God's kingdom work. When their wallets get baptized, they discover the power of the Holy Spirit, and their church becomes stronger.

Ultimately, it is God who gives wealth and possessions. Only God can enable us to enjoy them. [Are you finding it difficult to accept your lot? Only God can give you a heart of acceptance. Are you miserable in your job or with you business? Only God can make you happy there.] May God keep us in that place where we never have so much that we forget our dependence on Him, and not such poverty that we are tempted to steal, and dishonor His name.

Power

Most of us do not think of ourselves as having much power. We see public figures, political, or military leaders and attribute power to them. In fact, we are often disappointed in our political leaders who protest their desire to serve people and look to the community's or nation's best interests, but we suspect that they are really grasping for power. We should decry this when we know it is true and remember that the founders of this nation deliberately placed limits on the power of government. At the same time we must look to ourselves. We all exercise power over others in some manner: over family members, co-workers, employees, even strangers we meet. They say you can measure the character of a man, or woman, by how he treats the help. [Remember that gentleness (πραυτες) means strength of character revealed in meekness of manner and responsibility with power.]

The Mind

What we feed our minds has a very strong impact on what happens to us in life, and what sort of person we become. You know the old saying, "Garbage in, garbage out." What are children and young people going to think when 80% of the intimacy depicted on TV is extramarital? What will they be taught by seeing violence and murder so often on TV or movies? Studies in the past have shown that watching TV produces more bad behavior and prevents behavior that helps people connect, communicate, and relate. But now we have the internet and video games to add to the temptation. [Psalm 25:15 "My eyes are ever on the Lord, for only he will release my feet from the snare." How can TV, internet, video games be a "snare?" Psalm 101:3 "I will set before my eyes no vile thing. The deeds of faithless men I hate; they will not

cling to me.” What happens to our minds when we set before our eyes “vile things?” How can deeds of faithless men cling to us? Psalm 119:37 “Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word”].

Think of all the forms of media that you watch – are they mastering you in any way? Are they mastering your children? “Garbage in, garbage out.” It’s equally true for what books you read, the conversations you have, and even the self-talk tapes that you replay in your own head.

Philippians 4:8 says, “...whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.” So, with our minds: good things in, good things out.

The Mouth

Two things regarding our mouth need self-control: the ability to taste, and the ability to talk; what we put in our mouths and what we send out of our mouths.

1. What enters the mouth:

1 Corinthians 6:13 “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food – but God will destroy them both.” It is no accident this follows Paul’s “I will not be mastered by anything.” Many Americans are mastered by food. Since overeating is not illegal nor considered immoral, it is a common outlet for excess. [Craving food, or certain kinds of foods (not to be confused with requiring food) tends to be overlooked by many Christians as an addiction.] Aside from the physical effects of overeating, this loss of self-control brings unhealthy guilt and is self-defeating. On the other side, totally avoiding food can be just as destructive. [Anorexia and bulimia are food addictions. 1 Cor. 6:12 “Everything is permissible for me, but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me but I will not be mastered by anything.”]

The point is a life of freedom to eat that which is beneficial and constructive to the body and our spiritual health. [In addiction, the temporary comfort that food can give is too often followed by guilt and self-defeat. You may have an addiction that is already overpowering you and taken control of your life. You may need help- by confessing it and seeking help from others even as you seek God’s help. He wants us to be free from the obsession of eating too much and from the obsession of not eating.]

2. What exits the mouth:

This is the nitty-gritty of self-control: what we say with our mouths. The only person who is never at fault in what he says is the perfect person. I don’t know any perfect people, though I know some who are moving in that direction. We all struggle with tongues that can be, as James says, “also a fire.” It can set things to blazing. [Although we can tame animals, the tongue is very difficult to tame. The tongue can be a whip – ever get a “tongue-

lashing?” With the same tongues we bless God, and we also curse other people (James 3:1-12).]

Here’s God’s intention for our tongues: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” Words that build up, rather than tear down. [We seek goodness for others – but remember that it must be tempered with kindness. New dean at school described as, “Brutally frank.” Yikes!]

[I read somewhere that on that country music show “Hee Haw” they had a catchy tune that had these words, “No, you’ll never catch one of us repeating gossip. So you’d better be sure and listen the first time!”] 2 Thess. 3:11 “We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busy-bodies.” These verses are telling us to mind our own business and to refrain from gossip. Gossip can tear down a leader in no time (we see it a regular part of political campaigns), and it can create division in a church. It takes great self-control to walk away from a juicy story about someone, but you need to walk-away. You’ll never walk alone, because you’ll walk away with your integrity.

[In all our conversations we would do well to remember this advice from the Bible: Prov. 17:27-28 “A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered. Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue.”]

We’ve spent these Sundays in Lent, now, considering the fruit of the Spirit that St. Paul speaks of in Galatians. I hope, at a minimum, you will remember these nine aspects of the fruit... It’s a start. But more importantly: How can we cultivate the Fruit of the Spirit in our lives? By now you may have discovered that each quality of the fruit of the Spirit is absolutely divine. Yet it seems so devilishly difficult to live with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. However, we *can*. Each of us can invite the Holy Spirit to shape us so that we bear the good fruit of the Spirit. You can begin today by asking God to send the Holy Spirit to help you take an honest look at your own life. Do I admit that I have sin in my life? Am I trusting in His blood shed for me, for the forgiveness of my sins? Have I given my heart to Him and surrendered my life to Him? What passions and desires threaten to master me? Am I willing to let the Holy Spirit nurture all aspects of the fruit of the Spirit within me? [Will I obey Christ, by bearing good fruit? Will I study the Scriptures to learn more of the fruit of the Spirit and be mindful of what I learn, so that I put it into practice?]

All nine aspects of the fruit of the Spirit are graces for the true believer who has entered into Spirit-filled living. They are manifestations of the Father

himself. What or Who will we look like when we this happens in our lives? Our hope is nothing less than *Jesus Christ*.

“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere fragrance of the knowledge of him” (2 Cor. 2:14). If you follow Christ you’ll have to march toward success; it’s the only direction he’s going. On this day when we shout our hosannas to Christ, let us shout because we know that in and through Him we have victory over all the things that would enslave us. He is ruler of all and our self-control is found in his power.

P.S. “For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith, goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins” (2 Peter 1:5-9).