

Self-Control

Gospel in Life – Tim Keller

1 Cor 9: 23 -27 (NIV)

23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

The Need for Self-Discipline

24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. 25 Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. 26 Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. 27 No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

Definitions:

Self-Control - The ability to control oneself, in particular one's emotions and desires or the expression of them in one's behavior, especially in difficult situations.

Being out of Control - Doing something that you desperately want to stop but you can't.

People who are counselors find that there are a lot more self-control problems out there than anybody really thinks.

Classic examples of where people have areas of their lives that are out of control:

- Drug addictions, drinking, gambling, sexual, overeating, undereating

But we shouldn't think of addictions in just those terms because we have trouble controlling;

- Our tongues, thoughts, time, emotions (anger, anxiety, etc.)

Many people have extreme problems with self-control, all of us have some problem with self-control so we better figure out what to do about it because problems with self-control can strip us of our careers, relationships, or even our physical lives.

Three things that Paul is getting at in these passages:

- 1) The centrality of the heart
- 2) The power of the Gospel
- 3) The endurance of Jesus

Centrality of the Heart:

Athletes have to exert self-control in all areas that would negatively impact their performance.

Self-Control

Paul says he beats his body - wearing down resistance in every area of his life so after preaching to others, he practices what he preaches so he is not disqualified.

How do we do that?

Ancient Greeks thought the secret to self-control was will power - Stoicism. The mind over emotions and feelings. In this scenario, your mind is saying "don't do it" even if your heart is saying "do it".

The Bible does not agree with this approach. Every part of you is made in the image of God. The Greeks believed that the mind was the higher form and emotions were a lower form because it had to do with the body.

The Bible says that you have emotions because God has emotions and you are made in his image. Your mind, will, and emotions are reflections of the God but they are all also tainted by sin. As a result, you don't trust your reason over your emotions because they are tainted by sin too.

1) If the secret to self-control is not the mind clamping down on the emotions, then what is it?

Look at the Athletes that Paul references. Don't they want to eat ice cream and stay out late and party with their friends? They want that but they want the prize more.

Self-control is not a matter of the will but a matter of the heart. Setting the heart on the higher thing, the right thing which then orders all the other feelings and wants.

Genesis 29:20 (KJV) - And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her.

2) How is it that seven years of hard work only seemed like a few days?

As hard as this work was, the seven years seemed like only a few days because of his love for Rachel. She was the passion of his life and he was able to exercise self-control in all areas of his life.

Was the secret will-power, no the secret was joy-power. Setting your heart on the one desire that is going to order all your other wants. Self-control is, therefore, a matter of the heart.

Thomas Chalmers, Scottish Presbyterian minister, wrote 'We only cease to be the slave of appetite because another has brought into subordination...There is not one personal transformation in which the heart is not left without an ultimate object of beauty and joy. The heart's desire for one object may have been conquered but its desire to have some object is unconquerable. The only way to dispose the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one.'

3) What are alternatives do we have for heart goals?

Career success – Someone focused on career success may get control of their time because they need to arrive at work early and perform at their best. What happens when this person gets into a place where if they tell the truth, it will be damaging to their career? What if this person gets into a position where if they cheat it will help their career enormously? There is temptation, will this person have the self-control to resist the temptation? No, if career success is the heart goal, they will lie and cheat. If career success is the heart's desire and it starts to slip away, what happens? This person starts to lose control of other areas of their life – emotions (anger, anxiety), addictive behaviors to fill up the emptiness and medicate oneself. Setting Career success as a heart goal will bring control in some areas of one's life but not all areas.

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4) What is the thing that if you set your heart on it, it will bring self-control in all areas of your life?

The power of the Gospel:

The blessings of the Gospel – even though you are deeply flawed, because of what Jesus Christ did on the cross, if you believe in him, you are endlessly, infallibly, and unconditionally delighted in by God.

If this is the joy of your life and this is what your heart exults in more than anything else, you will have self-control in all things.

How could that be? If you set your heart on anything other than the Gospel, that object of your heart could be lost or you might enhance it by lying or cheating. Is there any situation where lying or cheating would enhance your status in Jesus Christ? NO!

Therefore, the radical security of the Gospel makes it unnecessary to do the things that your heart, if focused on anything else, will feel it has to do in order to maintain it, to keep it, or to deal with the loss of it.

The passion of Paul's heart is to see the beauty of Christ and didn't want anything in his life to cause others to miss the beauty of God and stumble.

When Paul was a Pharisee, he was inwardly focused, trying to use self-control to clamp down on passions to rise through the ranks.

So is the prize that Paul speaks of is sharing these blessings, having other people find Christ and share these blessings. He has completely outwardly focused toward God and others turned him into self-controlled person.

5) How do we make Christ the central passion of our life that will bring order to all other areas?

The Endurance of Jesus:

1 Cor 10: 11 – 13 (NIV)

11 These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. 12 So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! 13 No temptation[a] has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted[b] beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted,[c] he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

- 1) Meditating on the Scriptures until the things you know with your head become real to your heart
- 2) Relational, community, and accountability disciplines – we were not meant to do this alone
- 3) Recognize that God is faithful

Hebrews 12:1 (NIV)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Self-Control

Jesus knew he was going to suffer, die, and being forsaken by his Father and he persevered did it. Where did he get the self-control to do this? What was it that Jesus did not have before the Cross that he had after? What was his Rachel? The answer is us.

When we see Jesus enduring because we are his beauty and delight, we will be able to endure because He will become our beauty and delight.

The secret of self-control is not will-power, it is joy power. It is the power of the Gospel. Use the spiritual disciplines defined in the Gospel and self-control will come.

Reflections:

- 1) Do you truly hold Jesus as at the beauty and delight of our life?
- 2) Do you lack control in some areas of our lives? If so, why?
- 3) Do you take advantage of the spiritual disciplines to help us?