

This is the third in our series of messages drawn from Proverbs. I do hope that you have been reading through the book of Proverbs. I know it's kind of repetitive, but repetition fosters understanding.

Today I'm looking at Proverbs 16. It reminds us again that true wisdom comes from God and that being attentive to God's ways will give us understanding ... understanding of life, understanding of morality, and understanding of our eternal destiny. *He who gives heed to the word will prosper, and happy is he who trusts in the LORD*, Proverbs 16:20.

It is unfortunate that some people see precepts taught in the Bible as rules and regulations when many are simply keen observations on life. In that sense, many of the Proverbs are prophetic warnings, telling us which choices will bring us strife and destruction and which will lead us to righteousness and fulfillment. The Proverbs are a treasury of wisdom to guide us toward better life choices.

Key Ingredient

Though you won't find it until near the end of Proverbs 16 there is a key verse that, though 3,000 years old, is about you and me and the success and joy in life we may or may not find. This is verse 32: *Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city*, Prov. 16:32. This is about self-control and the harm that comes when you lack it.

Self-control is the key ingredient of a righteous and selfless life that reflects Jesus and brings glory to God. With God's help we can gain self-control, which is really about diminishing sin our nature.

This is so important that the Bible points it out in numerous places. Galatians 5:23 listing the fruit of the Spirit ... *gentleness and self-control*. Against such things there is no law. 2 Timothy 3:3 describes ungodly character like this ... *without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good...* Contrast that with godly character described in 2 Peter 1:6 ... *and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness...*

Until we learn to control ourselves, our emotions, our temper, our appetite, and our tongue ... until then we're slaves. To be effective our self-control must be practiced in private as well as in public. You've heard the phrase "he's a two-faced so and so," meaning that he shows a good character in public, but in private he's terrible. Self-control in private fosters self-control in public, but not the other way round.

Anger is a trigger for losing self-control. Most of us have had the experience: you're under attack, people are throwing words of criticism, disparagement, and ridicule at you, it gets under your skin and you burst out with something you later regret. Under stress it's hard to remember that *A gentle answer turns away wrath. But a harsh word stirs up anger*, Proverbs 15:1. I confess that on occasion I have lost control with some people who've gotten under my skin. I later regretted not speaking a gentle answer. Here's a good one to memorize: *He who is slow to anger has great understanding, But he who is quick-tempered exalts folly*, Prov. 14:29. Boy, isn't that true? Fortunately, our Lord forgives us when we repent and hopefully people will too.

Then there are emotions. We all have them, and they can be over-powering. But feelings are fleeting and fickle. It is wise to refrain from making decisions while feelings are stirred up. Being self-controlled is the very foundation for living a good, productive, prosperous life.

Author of Self-Control

Soon after his baptism, when God's voice was heard to proclaim, "This is my beloved son," Jesus went into the desert. But He found no solitude. Instead, He found the Devil, who challenged His self-control, tempting Him to use His power in selfish ways. Power always brings temptation. It was so very tempting, as God's son, to use His connections for self-aggrandizement. But, quoting Scripture, He exerted self-control and resisted the Devil.

The gospels tell us (Matt. 21:1-9; Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:29-38; John 12:12-15), how Jesus entered Jerusalem, just before the Passover. We call this Palm Sunday, referring to the palm branches laid out on the path before Jesus. (It was the ancient version of "rolling out the red carpet.") It was a triumph as the boisterous crowd acclaimed Him to be the Deliverer of Israel. Yet ... it was almost as if the Devil had returned with a happy face, once again tempting Jesus; tempting him to be a great liberator and king as the world expects. But Jesus knew that his destiny was to be the kind of Messiah described by the prophet Isaiah: *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,* Isaiah 53.

In self-control Jesus kept his head in the jubilant crowd (remember He was human in every way we are). It is dangerously easy to lose self-control in a crowd. I am reminded of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's book, *Moral Man, Immoral Society*, in which he describes how moral individuals can do immoral things when in a crowd. I think we see this in the riots and looting of recent months. Without self-control you can be easily swayed by the mood of the group you're with. But with self-control the crowd, or peer pressure, will not dislodge you from your principles. Jesus did not ride in on a war horse or demand King Herod's throne. Rather, he chose to ride into town on a donkey.

After a fake trial, with an instigated mob shouting "Crucify him! Crucify him!" then humiliation, beating, and being nailed to a cross, Jesus had every reason to be outraged, or to despair. Yet, the first words He spoke from the Cross were: *Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing,* Luke 23:34.

Your Self-Control

But who can live up to Christ's example of self-control? Could any one of us forgive those who treated us as they did Him? Isn't self-control a scarce virtue, even in us? The evidence abounds: domestic abuse, substance abuse, and power abuse. Lack of self-control kills self-respect, friendships, marriages, careers, and ministries. I venture to say that all of us have in some measure found ourselves in its grip.

It is never convenient to confront the issue of self-control. But without self-control we will continually experience self-defeat. We aren't born with control over our desires, emotions, appetites, tongues, and even thoughts. Part of maturing is developing such control. Wouldn't it be great if salvation and self-control were simultaneous? Believers continue to struggle with self-control, but thanks be to God there is help.

The Holy Spirit has been given us to be Jesus' very presence with us, encouraging and strengthening us to develop self-control. Jesus promised: *Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing...* John 14:12. When we ask for Holy Spirit power we will be able to turn to the word of God, just as Jesus Himself did when Satan tempted Him. It helps to turn

to Scripture as He did. 1 Cor. 6:12 Paul says, *...I will not be mastered by anything.* [Mastered – exousiaso meaning “to be ruled by, or under the authority of, or in bondage to.] Self-control is our refusal (with Holy Spirit help) to allow our enemies (emotions, passions, the ways of the world, Satan) to rule over us or hold us captive. Christ has already defeated all these things, and they can rule us only if we invite them. 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 induce, guilt, shame, frustration, and failure, by which he further controls you.

Do not hesitate to ask for Holy Spirit power to learn self-control. We are the temple of God and self-control is our wall of protection. It protects us from saying and doing foolish and hurtful things. *Prudence is a fountain of life to the prudent, but folly brings punishment to fools,* Prov. 16:22. Self-control secures our freedom to love, to experience joy, to know peace, to respond with patience, to act with goodness, to step out in faith, and to agree with gentleness. Anyone who has self-control is a mighty warrior. Anyone who lacks self-control is an accident waiting to happen. *Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control,* Proverbs 25:28. Self-control is the ability to make choices to remain within the boundaries of Christ’s victory. As the culture around us elevates celebrity status and political answers to life’s problems, we are emphasizing the Fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) in lives that humbly permeate their neighborhoods and workplaces.

Self-Control In Heaven

There is really no place in Heaven for those who lack this important fruit of the Spirit in their lives. Lack of self-control would make it a miserable place for everyone. Jesus said that we must be born again ... born of the Spirit. The Spirit’s power opens the door to Heaven.

The Holy Spirit teaches us His Word and empowers us to obey it. *For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith, goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control...* 2 Peter 1:5-

Ask God daily for Holy Spirit power. That’s how humans can perform divine tasks and be genuine disciples of Christ. It’s about what we do, for sure, but even more so it’s about who we are. Who are you becoming?

If you struggle with self-control, it's time to allow Scripture to work through your heart and mind. When you choose to meditate and memorize verses, your character will be shaped in such a way that God’s manner will be revealed in you even under duress. Memorize the Bible verses about self-control and take a small step each day to bring your thoughts and actions into line with God's plan for your life. Life is His gift to us and He wants us to enjoy it!

Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control, Prov. 25:28.