

This is the fourth 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 ensures that wisdom takes root. Today I'm reflecting on this verse: *"Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city"* Proverbs 16:32. There is another similar proverb: *"Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control,"* Prov. 25:28. This sermon, drawn from this 3,000 year old saying, is really about you and me and the success and joy of life found in self-control versus the harm resulting from a lack of it.

Warnings

Unfortunately, too many people see precepts taught in the Bible as more rules and regulations, when they are really keen observations on how the world, how life, works out. They are warnings – and certainly the Proverbs are in this category – to guide us toward better choices in life. One is this: *if we do not have self-control, we will be slaves to what controls us.* Food, lust, money, our own words... can overwhelm us when we suffer the consequences of not having self-control in those areas of life. Being self-controlled is the very foundation for living a good, productive, prosperous life. Self-control is a necessary ingredient of a righteousness and selflessness that reflects Jesus and brings glory to God. And with God's help we can gain self-control and bring sin under control.

This is so important that the Bible calls attention to self-control 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** speaking of ungodly character *"... without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good..."* Contrasted with godly character in **2 Peter 1:6** *"... and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness..."*

In Private Or In Public

Last week I commented to a parent that we're fortunate that our children generally behave better in public than they do at home. Likely, that could be said about us – the adults – as well. You've heard the phrase "he's a two-faced so and so," meaning that someone shows a good character to some people, but in private he's terrible. How many times do we hear on the news about some terrible murderer or abuser and the neighbors say, "We had no idea. He was a quiet man," or "he always seemed pleasant when we saw him." The neighbors didn't see his "other face," and if we're honest with ourselves we'll admit that we can also be "two-faced." There is within the human heart an enormous

capacity for evil. The Bible says in **Romans 3:23** that ***“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*** **Jeremiah 17:9** tells us that, ***“the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”***

A good-hearted person is unlikely to commit cold-blooded murder, but he might commit hot-blooded murder. In a moment of anger, all of us are capable of horrible deeds that we would never commit otherwise. Surely not murder, but haven't all of us said or done things in anger which we later regretted? Or maybe we weren't even angry but our tongues got ahead of our brains, and we regretted what came out. **Self-control in private fosters self-control in public, but not the other way round.**

There may be times when you find yourself the object of ridicule or disparagement. The old saying is “stick and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me” and that's a good thing to remember when you're under attack. But words can still get under our skin, stirring us to anger and lashing out. With self-control we'll be able to withstand the attacks remembering: ***“A gentle answer turns away wrath. But a harsh word stirs up anger.”*** **Proverbs 15:1.**

It is also dangerously easy to lose self-control in a crowd. 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. Just recall the rioters in Baltimore, Ferguson, Berkeley, and elsewhere. Without self-control you can be easily swayed by the mood of the mob or your peer group. **But with self-control you'll be able to keep your head in a crowd, or under peer pressure, and stand fast in your principles.**

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 even there he found no solitude. Instead he found the Devil, who challenged his self-control, tempting him to use his power in selfish ways. It was all so tempting, as God's son, to use his connections for self-aggrandizement. 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 long ago, 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 deliver 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 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."

In self-control Jesus kept his head in the jubilant crowd (remember he was human in every way we are). Instead of choosing a war horse and demanding King Herod's throne, Jesus chose to ride into town on a donkey. We know how that week ended ...

He was put on trial on vague charges of blasphemy then of treason. A mob was easily stirred up to shout "Crucify him? Crucify him!" He was ridiculed, spat upon, mocked, and humiliated. He was tortured until his flesh hung in ribbons, beaten until he was barely conscious; then condemned to die and forced to carry the instrument of his own death.

Outside the city walls, near a limestone quarry with the strange face of a skull outlined on the side of a cliff, Jesus was nailed to a cross. It was an awful scene as he was put to death. **Jesus had every reason to be outraged, or to be in despair.** Yet, what were His first words from the Cross? **"Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing,"** Luke 23:34.

Your Self-Control

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. As it says: ***"Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control,"*** Proverbs 25:28. Only through the self-control developed by the Holy Spirit can we ever fulfill Jesus' promise: ***"Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing..."*** John 14:12.

Lack of self-control is evident everywhere: domestic abuse, substance abuse, and power abuse. Our society is fraught with problems created by unrestrained self-indulgence. **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.

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 Greek for self-control is ἐγκράτεια which means continence, temperance, restraining passions and appetites. It is the opposite of self-indulgence and excess. I know there is never a convenient time to confront the issue of self-control. But without self-control we will continually experience self-defeat.

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.] **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.

We are the temple of God and self-control is our wall of protection. 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. 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.

The answer to the enemy is to turn to the word of God, just as Jesus himself did. Turn to the Bible for answers. Memorize key verses. Do not hesitate to ask for His Holy Spirit power to learn self-control. 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. We are here to foster genuine Christian character among ourselves at church, so that we are good examples of our faith in Christ. We will all need to develop self-control to make that a reality.

Areas Needing Self-Control

1. Money and Possessions: We live in a culture extolls having more and more. We have more than enough to live complicated lives, but we're never contented. Ultimately, it is God who gives wealth and possessions. When your wallet or purse gets baptized you'll discover the power of the Holy Spirit. I commend all of you who are in the class on "Financial Peace" and I thank the leaders. You're learning self-control.

2. Power: Most of us don't think of it, but we all exercise power over others in some manner: over family, co-workers, employees, even strangers we meet. They say you can measure the character of a person by how she/he treats the help. [Remember that gentleness [πραυτης] means strength of character revealed in meekness of manner and responsibility with power.]

3. The Mind: In my message on Jan. 21 I warned about self-talk. What we feed our minds has a strong impact on what happens to us in life, and what sort of person we become. Think of all the forms of media that you watch – are they mastering you in any way? Are they mastering your children? You know the old saying, "Garbage in, garbage out."

4. The Mouth: Two things regarding our mouths need self-control: taste and talk; what goes in our mouth and what comes out.

a. What enters the mouth: Since overeating is not illegal nor considered immoral, it is a common outlet for excess. 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.] God offers us a life of freedom to eat that which is beneficial and constructive to the body and our spiritual health.

b. What exits the mouth: This is the nitty-gritty of self-control. We all struggle with tongues that can be, as James says, “also a fire,” setting things ablaze. Who among us has not regretted saying something stupid? Gossip tears people and churches apart. 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, though, because you’ll walk away with your integrity.

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. That is the door to Heaven. In a very real sense we must take Heaven with us to enter.

The Holy Spirit teaches you His Word and empowers you 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 1:5-7. 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 its about who we are.** Who are you becoming?

If you or someone you know is struggling with self-control it's time to get into the Word of God and allow Scripture to change your heart and mind. The Bible has power and when you choose to meditate and memorize verses, you will be reminded of the truth in your moment of losing self-control and you will be able to make the right decision! Read these Bible verses about having self-control and begin taking small steps each day to bring your thoughts and actions into line with God's plan for your life to live free and fully alive!

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