

*Pearls from Proverbs*

## **The Challenge of Self-Control**

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Phillip Roth is a computer programmer for NASA in Houston, TX. His job consists of writing software that controls the descent of spacecraft as it returns to earth. When the *Columbia* met its horrible fate a few years ago, one of the things that came to my mind was, "I pray that Phillip did not make a mistake." In dealing with something so tremendously complex, I suppose the slightest error could easily cause a disaster. I was thankful when I learned at least it was not an erroneous computer program that caused the horrible fate of those brave men and women who died that day.

In preparing this lecture I thought of how I felt when I first received the news of that tragedy. It occurred in the skies just south of where we were on that day. There was nothing we could do. We had no control over the events. Men and women had died; that fact was certain and we could do nothing for them. There are things in this life over which we have no control!

### **A GREAT DANGER**

We have all heard the expression, "I just can't control myself!" Yes, we can! I am persuaded that one of the greatest dangers facing our society today is the extreme *absence* of self-control! What a challenge our world faces! The news has been filled with stories of fear

because some country is developing nuclear power. Each of us sees for ourselves on a regular basis incidents of road rage on our highways. Child abuse and spousal abuse and even the murder of families occur because there is a lack of self-control!

Solomon spoke of a lack of self-control in the book of Proverbs. "A quick-tempered man acts foolishly, and a man of evil devices is hated" (Prov. 14:17). [All Scripture references are taken from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.] Solomon wrote, "He who is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who is quick-tempered exalts folly" (Prov. 14:29).

When leaving a restaurant one morning, a young couple had the sidewalk blocked while engaged in a shouting match with each other. My three-year-old grandson was by my side and I was happy they were arguing in a language we could not understand. Scenes like that are so commonplace nowadays. Impulsive behavior is the rule! For that very reason, we have bookshelves lined with "self-help" books of all descriptions. There is a support group for practically every problem we face. Parents wail because their children are "out of control." They give little thought to the fact their own lives have been out of control for years! What can we do?

When the apostle Paul stood before Felix in Acts 24, the Scriptures record the following words: "But as he was discussing righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix became frightened and said, 'Go away for the present, and when I find time I will summon you'" (Acts 24:25). I have thought so often about Paul's words. In the first place, I thought, why would Paul use that occasion to make that statement? He had been accused of some rather serious crimes. I would have been doing all

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I could to persuade Felix of my innocence, not preach to him!

Paul, however, wanted Felix to exhibit “right conduct before God” (righteousness) and to not act impulsively (self-control). Felix needed to simply do those things. If he would consider that some day he was going to have to face God in judgment, perhaps he would make a decision that would save his soul.

When people live their lives with a lack of self-control there are no boundaries. Can you imagine living in an area where no property lines were established? Where each person just did as they chose, built where they wanted to and so forth? Chaos would result. Such is the case in so many ways in our society in regards to the actions of others. Again Solomon wrote, “Like a city that is broken into and without walls is a man who has no control over his spirits” (Prov. 25:28).

### A DECEITFUL MOUTH

A lack of self-control manifests itself in many ways. James spoke of one way in James 3:6 when he wrote, “And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.” What strong words! What a dire warning!

For years I have heard people excuse failure to control their tongues by saying, “They are only words!” In other words, “I’m not using physical force. I have not struck you or physically harmed you.”

When that very tongue that is used to speak words of joy and comfort—to say “I love you” and “I am here for you”—instead speaks evil, how sad it is. When that same tongue that is used to praise God on Sunday spews profanity on Monday, how sad it is. An old chiropractor

we once knew had a sign proudly displayed on the wall of his office that said, "Profanity is a public profession of stupidity."

Solomon and James alike provided such wonderful direction on how to deal with this verbal virus that is so prevalent in the world today. Solomon said in Proverbs 4:23-27, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life. Put away from you a deceitful mouth and put devious speech far from you. Let your eyes look directly ahead and let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you. Watch the path of your feet and all your ways will be established. Do not turn to the right nor to the left; turn your foot from evil."

James tells us that the problem is a lack of godly wisdom. He said in James 3:14-17, "But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exists, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy." However, James also tells us in the first chapter of his little epistle, "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach" (Jas. 1:5).

The control of our "self" has to begin with us! It is a decision *we* have to make. If our tongues present a problem to us, we have to decide that we are not happy with that problem and be willing to do something about it.

### QUICK TO HEAR

James had much to say about controlling the tongue. It is interesting but not surprising that he

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connected control of the tongue with being quick to hear and cool tempers. He wrote in James 1:19, "This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger." One of the fundamental truths about self-control is that we must be willing to listen more and speak less! Solomon wrote, "He who restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding" (Prov. 17:27).

We often taught our children that a person cannot make the best decision until they have all of the information that is available before a decision is made. One of my favorite teachers often says, "A person cannot learn anything while they are talking." How very true is that statement! Most disagreements occur because those involved do not have all of the facts that are available. The parties involved speak rather than listen!

Years ago an argument was often put forth that said a person cannot help getting angry. It went on to say that anger was a natural reaction to events and a person had no control over becoming angry. I am thankful that James either never heard that argument or at least did not subscribe to that theory! He said one must be "slow to anger." That certainly indicates one has control over anger!

In nearly every case that I can think of where I have seen anger occur, the parties involved did not have all of the facts. I might also add that in every case where an argument occurred, one thing was noticeably absent and that was an "innocent" party. Anger negates the ability of people being able to reason. Satan delights in that! Nothing pleases him more than seeing people lose their self-control and let human nature take over!

## JEALOUSY

In the previous passage from James that we have already cited, James spoke of jealousy and selfish ambition. Jealousy and selfish ambition again have as their root cause a lack of self-control. Even though we refer to it as “**self-control**,” in essence, when we possess self-control, what we have is “**God-control**.” Paul makes this very clear in Galatians 5.

But I say, “walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.” For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (5:16-21).

When we are born again and the Holy Spirit dwells within us, we should at that time be under God’s control. Paul expressed it like this in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me.”

If we truly understand that magnificent statement Paul made, we will see that “I” should no longer exist! Our biggest problem is that we continue to be held under the control of “self.” Self should no longer exist! Instead, we should be under the control of God!

## THE HUNGRY SELF

Jealousy, anger, selfish ambition and the many other sins Paul spoke of in Galatians 5 have one thing in common. They are demands by Satan to feed "self." Paul spoke of this struggle in Romans 7.

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good (7:18-21).

When you see a person who is extremely jealous, for example, it seems they are never "un-jealous." They are jealous over the affections of others, they are jealous when someone has good fortune and they do not and so forth. They are never happy because they never can get enough of whatever it is they are seeking. They are constantly afraid someone else might succeed in doing so! They continually have to "guard their territory."

The same thing is true with the person who has a problem with anger or with a loose tongue. They allow Satan to train them and to exhibit anger at the proverbial drop of a hat. They allow their tongue to speak the venomous thoughts their heart contains and make no effort to bring it under control.

In the area in which I live there are numerous gambling businesses owned by various Indian tribes. There is one, in fact, just a few miles from our house. The parking lot is filled just about any time of the day or night that a person passes by. Of those hundreds and thousands of people who frequent those places, only a mere handful

of them are winners! However, once they begin attending those establishments, they lose self-control! We now have "Gambler's Anonymous" for those people to attend to learn how to quit gambling. In reality, what is taught in any of the many "twelve-step" programs is simply self-control!

### WITH GOD ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE

Luke 18 records the time when a young man came to Jesus with a question. He asked, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life" (Luke 18:18)? Jesus gave him some of the commandments, "You know the commandments, 'Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not bear false witness, honor your father and mother'" (Luke 18:19). Notice that Jesus did not list *all* of the commandments. Why? I think it was because by giving only a few of them, Jesus accomplished His purpose. He wanted that man to see the helplessness of trying to accomplish this task on his own. His money kept him from being able to let go and let God! God is willing to help us do everything we need to do to defeat "self." By your own power it is impossible. With God all things are possible.

### FOUR IMPORTANT REQUIREMENTS

If we are going to meet the challenge of self-control, there are at least four things we must be willing to do. **The first is to surrender our self to God.** Paul wrote in Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." Likewise he wrote in Philippians 2:13, "For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and work for His good pleasure." God cannot work in us and we cannot be strengthened by God if our selfish will stands in His way!



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Paul wrote in Philippians 2:21, “For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus.” What a sad commentary on those individuals! The thing that is even sadder, however, is that it’s probably even truer today of our society. If everything that we did was governed with the question—“How will this benefit the Lord?”—we would all be so much more pleasing to Him.

Few people in this world learn how to fully surrender to the Lord! A story was told years ago about someone hearing this man talking as he worked. He was saying things like, “John, quit talking like that! John, don’t quit working! John, don’t get angry.” Finally, a person near by could no longer stand it and they went and asked the man just who he was talking to. They did not see anyone else around! Who was this “John?” “My name is John,” the man replied, “and I am talking to myself! I’m a Christian, you see, but the old John, the old selfish, self-centered John, keeps getting in the way and I have to straighten him out!”

Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.” Again, he wrote in 2 Corinthians 8:5 concerning those in the churches of Macedonia, “but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.”

Surrendering to God means giving up on self! It means waving the “white flag” and telling God you no longer want to serve self. You no longer want to trust in self, to please self and to honor self. You want to belong wholly to God and do all within your power to please and honor Him!

**Secondly, we have to reestablish our priorities.** If we have truly surrendered to Him, our priorities should be totally different. You can always tell what means the most

to any person. The thing to which they devote the majority of their time is the thing that usually means the most. Someone might argue that they still are employed and have to work and so they cannot control that time. We have 168 hours in our week. If 40 or 48 hours are required for our job, and 60 hours are required for sleep, we still have ample time to do what we choose. I repeat, you can always tell what means the most to a person! What do we do with our "spare" time? Billions of dollars would not be made by those in the entertainment and recreation industries if it were not for the fact that that is where the interests of most lie!

Our priorities *will* be reestablished if we truly surrender to the Lord! Self will no longer be in control! We will *want* to be doing things that glorify God and please Him! It will no longer be a "chore" to read our Bibles and visit the sick and look for others to bring to the Lamb of God who takes away sin! We will want to do those things! They will be our priority! Jesus put it like this, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21).

**Thirdly, our system of values will change!** When you travel to another country, one thing that is always most interesting is the exchange rate for currency. It will be posted in various entry points. It is always pleasant if the exchange rate is favorable to you. It is nice when our money is more valuable. We appreciate that sort of value system!

From time to time as fashions change some particular item will be in vogue. Perhaps it will be a particular style of purse, or shoes, and so forth. You will look around and everyone will be wearing that item. It is important that they have the "latest." It means something to them! That's because they have the wrong system of values! Jesus said, "Do not worry then, saying, 'What will

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we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’ For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matt. 6:31-33).

One of the nice things about getting older for some of us is that style just doesn’t seem to matter any more! If it fits and feels good, that is what is really important! Our values change!

When John wrote his description of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 20, he spoke about it in terms of things that are precious to us in this life. There were costly stones and gold. Certainly none of us expect heaven to be made up of material matter. Instead John was painting a picture with his words about how precious heaven will be! The older we get and the nearer to heaven we draw, it becomes more and more precious to us! Things that used to matter just do not matter anymore. Our value system changes!

The fourth and final thing I must mention in regards to the challenge of self-control is mentioned in 2 Peter 1:3-8.

Seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your

godliness, brotherly kindness, and in you brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Our faith must grow!** The disciples asked of Jesus in Luke 17:5, "Increase our faith!" The more fully we surrender to the Lord the greater our faith will become. Faith is believing in Him and His power to accomplish all that He desires in us! The more our priorities allow for God to complete His good and perfect work in us, the greater our faith will be. Finally, the more that our value system changes, the greater our faith will become.

As Peter wrote, we begin our Christian walk by having faith in God. That faith alone will not sustain us, however, unless we add some things. We have to want to become more like Christ who was sinless. We have to add "moral excellence." We then add knowledge. What an important ingredient! When we place our trust in God (faith) and then resolve to live as God wants us to live and then dig into His Word to learn His will (knowledge), we then learn how to control our "self"! Once we master the challenge of self-control, we can go onward, higher and higher! We learn how to persevere, and how to truly be a "godly" person. We learn how to love our brothers as God would have us to (brotherly kindness) and then learn how to truly exhibit the kind of love that comes from God Himself!

May every person's desire to accept the challenge of self-control be one that results in victory! What a glorious tribute to the power of God that will be! And, what glory it will bring to His matchless name!

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