

Self-Control: Getting a Grip

Series: *Glory: Illuminating Life with God's Virtue*

August 7, 2011

2 Peter 1:3-8, etc.

We're returning today to our *Glory* series after a one-month pause for a special series on spiritual warfare. Thanks to Pastor Andrew for putting those spiritual warfare teachings together and walking us through them. The workbook we followed during that series—the version that includes all the answers—remains available on Cornerstone's website. I would encourage you to keep studying it. Let it sink in, because it provides a very solid and thorough biblical survey of a subject that is absolutely vital for our daily lives as Christians, and yet is tragically underappreciated by most believers today.

Understanding that we live in a spiritual war zone goes a long way in helping us to make sense of why the Christian life is often so darned... *hard*. If it *feels* like you're being opposed as you seek to live for Jesus, then guess what? It's because you *are* being opposed! Yes, Jesus said he comes that we may have life to the full, but in the very same breath he also said that the thief, Satan, comes to steal, kill, and destroy (see John 10:10). Thankfully, in Jesus God has given us everything we need to stand against the spiritual forces of darkness. "Resist the devil and he *will* flee from you," says the Bible (James 4:7, emphasis added). Our job is to get ourselves ready—to become equipped and trained—to fight the battle in the Lord's power. Canadian troops aren't sent into Taliban territory with equipment they've never been trained to use. The very thought of it is ludicrous! Just as they are rigorously trained in the effective use of their armour and weaponry, we Christians need to be trained in the use of the all wonderful spiritual armour and weaponry God has so graciously provided for us. Satan's ultimate defeat is a sure thing, but between now and when Jesus comes back, we had better learn how to stand against the enemy of our souls.

Along these lines, I'd like to encourage you to join us at 7:30pm on Friday August 19th, for another special evening of prayer and praise at Markham Baptist Church. The information is printed in your worship folder. One of our themes for that event will be warfare prayer. That evening, among other things, we will actually be providing you with some modelling and training in prayer as it relates to spiritual warfare. We will send you home with some printed warfare prayers that you can use to assert the spiritual authority you have as a child of God—as a person created and being redeemed in the image of God, in the image of Jesus Christ. An old Puritan spiritual warfare expert named William Gurnall wrote words back in the 1600's that remain every bit as true as they ever were: "It is the image of God reflected in you that so engages hell; it is this at which the demons hurl their mightiest weapons."

Indeed, at Cornerstone we've been talking all year long about the fact that you and I have been made in the *imago dei* as it's said in Latin—the image of God.

Even though the human race has fallen into sin, and God's image in us became terribly warped, God desires to redeem and transform us so that we increasingly reflect the image and likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ, in every aspect of our lives. Previously in this series, we talked about how your purpose and mine is Christlikeness. God calls us to partner with him, to cooperate with him, as he works to shape our character to reflect more and more of the virtuous character of Jesus—and that partnership includes learning how to stand against the evil forces that are so viciously opposed to our growth in the virtuous image of Christ.

As we return to our *Glory* series this morning, we will continue unpack each of the character virtues listed in 2 Peter chapter 1, and consider how they can be developed and applied in various areas of our lives—work, family life, friendships, the way we steward our time, talent, treasure, and so on—as you can see illustrated here. The virtue we're going to consider today is self-control, and we'll spend the bulk of the message learning about what it means, and why it's important. I'll conclude by sharing a very vital application that I trust will help you gain some traction in your life when it comes to growth in the virtue of self-control. And after that, we'll celebrate the Lord's Supper together.

Let's begin by reviewing our passage in 2 Peter chapter 1. Again, this is the base text for this entire series. We've been at this series since March, and it's going to take us all the way through to the end of November. If you're using one of the blue Cornerstone Bibles, you find this passage on page 860. Please follow along as I read—2 Peter, chapter 1, verses 3-8:

[God's] divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. 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, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, 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.

This passage shows that God has given us everything we need for a godly life—a life that increasingly reflects the character of Jesus. But just like it's up to us to avail ourselves of all the armor and weaponry God has given us for spiritual warfare, Peter exhorts us in this passage to *make every effort*—to strive, to go all out—in order to add to our faith this whole list of Christlike virtues. To be clear, it is the Spirit of Jesus who changes us, and not we ourselves. But he doesn't do so apart from our willing cooperation. Jesus' job is shape our character, to bring forth in us his virtue; our job is to stay close to Jesus—to create space for him (just like our mission statement says). Here is where we need to "make every effort" as Peter says.

In keeping our lives opened up to Jesus, who alone can transform our character, we'll increasingly reflect his virtue in all dimensions of our lives.

The last virtue we covered from this passage, back in June, was knowledge. The biblical virtue of knowledge, if you recall, is not just about being well-informed, well-educated, having a high IQ. The biblical virtue of knowledge is focused specifically on the person of Jesus Christ. We are not just called to know *something*. We are called to know *someone*. And so, when Peter says in verse 6 of our passage that we are to add to our knowledge self-control, we need to see those two virtues as necessarily linked. My ability to grow in the biblical virtue of self-control flows from my first-hand, personal knowledge of Jesus—from my daily walk with him. My ability to grow in the biblical virtue of self-control—or any biblical virtue for that matter—flows from “prayer-infused, moment-by-moment living with Jesus,” (show 2011 theme image here). That’s an important distinction to keep in mind as we take some time now to discuss what the biblical virtue of self-control is all about.

The original Greek word for “self-control” in our 2 Peter passage is *enkrateian*, and for the ancient Greeks, this was a highly prized virtue. Quite literally, the word means “to take hold of; to grip.” We might say to someone who is out of control, “Hey, get a grip, man.” The term points to having power or dominion over yourself, especially when it comes to your eating and drinking habits, your talking habits (your speech), and your sexual habits. How’s that for a trifecta of issues that hit close to home? Eating, talking, and sex...

Again, the Greek philosophers— whose teachings were very influential when the New Testament was written— spoke about self-control all the time. Self-control for the Greeks, however, was achieved strictly by human effort—the triumph of reason over passion. For the Greeks, self-control was about talking yourself into disciplined behavior. While there is value in that, the Greek view leaves God out of the picture.

When Peter exhorts us to add to our knowledge self-control, he has something different in mind. For followers of Jesus, self-control isn’t rooted in self-effort, although it certainly does require our effort. It’s rooted, as we’ve already discussed, in our first-hand, relational, real-time knowledge of Jesus Christ, who enables us to keep our desires and cravings in their proper place—by the power of *his* Spirit— who dwells within every believer. It’s about Jesus living *his* virtuous life in and through us. Our job is to stay close to Jesus, to practice his presence, so we can receive his Spirit’s power to make the right choices in matters of self-control.

So the *biblical* virtue of self-control has to do with *how the Holy Spirit empowers me* to control the way I respond to my desires and cravings. And this isn’t to say that all of our desires and cravings are to be avoided—that’s something Buddhism teaches. Christianity teaches that the pleasures of life—like food and sex—are good gifts from a good God to be enjoyed in *their proper place*. It’s when we seek the pleasures of life outside their proper place that we get into trouble. Think of a river. A river is meant to bring life—provided it flows within its boundaries. But when a river overflows its boundaries, it becomes destructive.

Peter’s call to growth in the virtue of self-control is so important precisely because our desires and cravings can very readily overflow their proper boundaries—and all the more so in this day and age when we’re constantly

bombarded with commercially-driven messages that say, “If it feels good, do it; if it doesn’t feel good, well then by all means, don’t. If you want it, buy it—right now—and if you can’t afford it, that’s why God created credit. Take the path of least resistance. Instant gratification or comfort or escape is the name of the game.”

So instead of functioning the way God intended, our desires can readily take on a life of their own, leading us into what amounts to idolatry, as we seek illegitimate means to feed our raving appetites. But in our passage Peter says that through God’s great and precious promises in Jesus, we are called to participate in the divine nature—to reflect more and more of God’s image in our lives—and this can only happen as we “*escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires*” (2 Peter 1:4b). Because when legitimate desires violate their proper boundaries, they become evil desires.

Apart from growth in self-control, we can very quickly find ourselves becoming enslaved to the sinful thought patterns and behaviors we’re prone to indulge in. We may try to pile a few sandbags here and there, but when the river has already breached its banks, we often feel powerless to hold back the floodwaters. As the Bible says later in 2 Peter, “*People are slaves to whatever has mastered them*” (2:19). Let me ask you this morning, what has mastered you? Food? Video games? Sexual sin of some kind? The inability to control your tongue? Your spending habits? Judgmental thoughts and attitudes? Something else, perhaps? Would you, in this moment, ask the Lord, “Where specifically do I need to grow in the virtue of self-control? What one area would you have me start with, Lord?” Go ahead. Ask him, and then pay attention to what comes into your mind. Because I find that when we bother to ask him, the Lord will indeed often speak to us, if we have ears to hear. What’s he saying to you right now? Keep that area in mind; we’ll come back to it later.

Now the letter of 2 Peter was written to a cluster of churches that were being influenced by false teachers. These false teachers claimed that God’s grace and forgiveness in Jesus gave them a license to live however they wanted to: “Jesus is just gonna forgive us anyway, so we might as well party hearty!” Out of this theological heresy, these false teachers engaged in all kinds of immoral behavior: illicit sex, gluttony, drunkenness, and the greedy pursuit of money. By their example, they encouraged their hearers to do the same. In this letter, Peter doesn’t really explain much about the content of what these pseudo-Christian teachers were actually teaching. Rather, he concentrates on how they were *living*. If you jump ahead to chapter 2 you can get an idea of this. Peter writes that these false teachers “*mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice [other] people who are just escaping from those who live in error. [These false teachers] promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves to depravity—for ‘people are slaves to whatever has mastered them’*” (2:18-19).

Although these these false teachers claimed to have deep insights into spiritual mysteries—a very special and privileged knowledge of God— Peter shows us in this passage that authentic knowledge of God, authentic knowledge of Jesus, will always lead us into a life that is characterized not by slavery to our desires and

cravings, but a life that is characterized by self-control. **True knowledge of Jesus leads not to license, but to self-control.**

When you look at 1 Peter—Peter’s previous letter—you’ll find he has quite a lot to say about the vital importance of self-control for the Christian life. First of all, Peter shows us that **self-control guards a treasure—God’s great salvation—and produces a jewel—God-like holiness.** In 1 Peter chapter 1, he writes, “...for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls... Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed [when Jesus comes back again]. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy” (1 Peter 1:9, 13-16).

Peter writes of the great salvation God has wrought for us in Jesus Christ. This salvation is the very goal of our faith. Peter goes on to write of how the Old Testament prophets anticipated this salvation; of how angels yearn to understand it; of how the Holy Spirit fills men and women with divine power to proclaim it (see vv. 9-12). Salvation is the name of everything you and I have been made for; everything we ever wanted.

And if you have embraced Jesus as your Saviour and Lord, you have it. You have salvation! Therefore, in light of this great salvation that God has lavished upon you, says Peter, *be self-controlled*. Say what? Come again, Peter? God gives us a gift greater than our imaginations can comprehend, and Peter can’t come up with a better response than “Therefore... be self-controlled?” Author Mark Buchanan jests that this is like saying, “You’ve just inherited a billion dollars, so... don’t forget to floss.”

However, Buchanan continues, explaining that, “great victories have been lost through one unguarded moment. Massive inheritances can be squandered through a single rash decision. Staggering gains have been reversed for a lack of self-control.” He then tells the story of his friend Dale, who was on fire for the Lord when he first came to Christ out of the wild lifestyle he had lived for so many years. He found salvation to be all he ever hoped for. For weeks and months, he thrilled to it. He gave riveting testimonies of the wreck he was before Jesus found him, and how he was now a changed man. He was making plans to become a pastor. He met a lovely, godly woman, and they got engaged.

It all was going so well... until... the adrenaline rush of conversion burned off, and Dale became precariously vulnerable to his old ways. Somewhere in childhood, he had received a deep soul wound, which reopened, reinfected. “And so,” says Buchanan, “I watched Dale, we all watched him, walk away from the only thing that had ever given him life.” Dale walked away from the faith. He walked away from Jesus.

Lack of self-control often indicates a failure to cherish and safeguard the great salvation we’ve received, so that in our carelessness, we let other things—vices, addictions, distractions—walk in and plunder our faith.

Which is why Peter goes on to explain that self-control has a purpose: to make us holy as God is holy. The virtue does not exist for its own sake. It exists as a means to ensure that we become transformed, more and more, into the holy image of

God—saying no to the patterns of our old sinful nature, and saying yes to the life-giving patterns that are consistent with the new creatures we are in Christ. Self-control helps ensure that we become who God intends us to become, and that we fulfill the purposes he has in mind for our lives. If we fail to grow in self-control, we’ll be giving the devil all the more material to leverage against us. And make no mistake about the fact that the devil’s goal is to take us out. Remember the quote I read at the beginning of the message? “It is the image of God reflected in you that so enrages hell; it is this at which the demons hurl their mightiest weapons.”

And that leads to the next thing we learn from Peter about the importance and purpose of the biblical virtue of self-control. **Self-control is required for successful spiritual warfare.** This is explicitly clear in 1 Peter 5:8: “*Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*” The devil prowls. Like a lion hunting his prey on the Serengeti, he looks for the one who has let his guard down, the one who is not paying attention, the one who is has gotten careless. But when we are self-controlled and alert, we will be ready, as Peter goes on to say, “*to resist [the devil] standing firm in the faith...*” (9a).

Prayer, of course, is one of our greatest weapons for successful spiritual warfare, and it is also absolutely essential to our growth in Christlike virtue. Prayer is the way we relate to Jesus moment by moment, and tap into his power to become the people he intends us to become. **Self-control**, we learn next from Peter, **enables us to pray.** Check out 1 Peter chapter 4 verse 7: “*The end of all things is near. Therefore, be self-controlled and alert, so that you can pray.*”

“The end of all things is near.” Peter is talking about judgment day—the great Day of the Lord, as the Bible calls it. Peter closes his second letter with a startling description of it. It will be cataclysmic. Out of wholesale destruction, a new heaven and a new earth will be born (3:10-13). We don’t know when that day will come. It could be a thousand years after we’ve died. It could be tomorrow. With God, says the Bible, a day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years is as a day. As earth-shattering as that day will be, it will also be a great day—because on that day Jesus will finally set everything right, once and for all, and we will see him face to face. So it is also a day believers yearn for. We applaud its coming, and do what we can to hasten it. “*The end of all things is near. Therefore, be self-controlled and alert, so that you can pray.*”

I can almost hear someone saying, “Be self-controlled so that I can pray well in light of the end of all things, when the very elements will melt away? Yeah, right. I lost my self-control this morning when the toast burned! And I certainly wasn’t *prayerful* about it!”

To pray well under intense circumstances takes enormous self-control. How can we possibly get there when we freak out about things as trivial as toast? Well, we have to start somewhere, so we start with the toast. We start with the small things. As Mark Buchanan writes, “If in this relative moment of calm, when the bulk of your troubles are domestic trifles (rather than cosmic tragedies), you cultivate the clear-mindedness and self-control to pray, it will serve you well the day you need it most. Learn to pray before you react. Before you phone, in a flap, your child’s teacher over some alleged mistreatment your child received in the classroom, pray. Before you fly

off the handle over another computer glitch, pray. Before you lose heart because of another unexpected car expense, pray... The habit of prayer will not magically arrive for you amid the flaming debris of the apocalypse. You'll have to get it well in hand now, and work it into your daily rounds..."

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I'd like to conclude this message now with a key takeaway related to growing in self-control, also related to prayer. Christians today often do not take self-control very seriously—we let our appetites master us instead of the other way around—and we do so to our peril. We've drifted far from the Apostle Paul's attitude. Here's what he said in 1 Corinthians 6: *"I will not be mastered by anything"* (12b). Self-control involves gaining freedom *from* bodily vices, so that we can have the freedom *to* live according to God's priorities, and become the people we were created to become. You will never realize your full potential apart from growth in self-control. There's a lot at stake here. For the Christian, self-control is not a peripheral issue.

So again, what's mastering you these days? What did the Lord bring to your mind earlier when I asked you to ask him about the one area he would have you focus on in terms of growing in the virtue of self-control? Or maybe it's hard to limit to one area.

We just talked about the importance of being self-controlled so that we can pray. For today's takeaway, I'd like to flip that statement around, because the reverse is also true. **Pray so that you can be self-controlled.** Specifically, I want to talk about the form of prayer called **"practicing the presence of God."**

In my own walk, I have found that practicing the presence of God—intentionally remaining awake and alert to the reality of his constant presence with me—keeping a running conversation flowing with him—has helped me grow considerably in the virtue of self-control. Remember, self-control flows from my first-hand, personal knowledge of Jesus—from my moment-by-moment walk with him. When we make a habit of continually posturing ourselves toward him, he gives us his power to make right choices in matters of self-control.

So it was through my walk with Jesus—it was through opening myself up to him—that I began to recognize that my habit of night time snacking was more than it appeared. I was practicing the presence of God—engaging in the discipline of remaining awake and attentive, moment by moment, to God's presence with me. I went to open the fridge, as per my habit, but this time, I was conscious of the Lord's presence with me. "Should I have something to eat, Lord?" I asked. Because usually, I would never bother to ask the Lord about something like this. By default, I would just do what I wanted to. I sensed the Holy Spirit whisper these words in reply: "Steve, what are you really hungry for?"

I was really hungry for Jesus, who alone is the Bread of Life; who said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." In that moment, I was really hungry for what Jesus had to say to me—words of love; words of correction; words of forgiveness; words of affirmation and encouragement.

Other forms of practicing the presence of God:

- Breath prayers- conversational intimacy-hearing God's voice: If we ask and listen, he speaks!
- Physical contact point (i.e. touching the chair next to you can help you concentrate on the unseen reality of Jesus' presence with you; or reaching out as it to hold Jesus' hand)
- Inviting Jesus into the center of that place where your desire could go off the rails; don't turn away from him- don't leave him outside of it all (Rev. 3:20- behold I stand at the door and knock)
- Deeper healing prayer may be needed (other issue)
- Community and accountability is important
- Practical and very helpful guide for practicing God's presence: ["The Game with Minutes"](#) by Frank Laubach.

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