

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Learning to be like Christ: Learning Self-control

Mrs. Clarke watched proudly as the scouts paraded through the centre of town. There was her son Thomas in his new uniform, looking smart and full of life. Thomas's pack and all the other local scouts and cubs were marching to the accompaniment of the band. Mrs. Clarke frowned slightly as she noticed that not everything was exactly as it should be. She turned and said to her friend Mrs. Noble, who was standing nearby, "Everybody else is marching out of step except for Thomas!"

It's an old story but it helps illustrate an important point about the walk of the Christian who is faithfully following Christ. That walk will often be 'out of step' with everybody else in the world. Imagine how 'out of step' Christ would seem if He was living in your town today. If He taught in your street about not worrying about what to eat and wear but putting the Kingdom of God first, what would all the people who had spent the night before watching TV programmes about what to wear and what to eat make of it all? How would the One who did not "cause His voice to be heard in the street" be received in a world where it is necessary to spend millions on advertising, appear regularly on TV or be totally outrageous in your behaviour, to get yourself heard? If we are serious about following our Lord and learning to be like Him then **we** will have to get used to being 'out of step' as well.

Today's subject is learning self-control. Learning is especially relevant in connection with self-control. It is not something that comes to us quickly or easily. It is something we spend all our lives learning and developing. Babies have no self control! A newborn baby can't even control its own limbs. When a baby is hungry or uncomfortable everybody knows about it. When it feels tired it just falls asleep. When its bladder is full, you had better hope the nappy is firmly in place! All this changes as the baby grows and develops. He will learn to control those thrashing arms to the point where he can feed himself. She will learn to wait for her food until mealtimes. Though there will be battles along the way. All parents hope to produce a child who can control their behaviour sufficiently to be taken out in public without bringing shame on the family. None of this happens over night. It takes time and effort. In the same way, followers of the Lord Jesus will find it takes time and effort to develop self-control and there will be problems along the way. However, if we are at all serious about our commitment to live for Christ, we must develop and grow.

There is an old proverb that says fire makes a good servant and a poor master. The same can be applied to the capabilities, emotions, urges and passions that make up self. They can be used wisely if controlled and deployed according to God's plan, but, if they are allowed to control my life, they will be hugely destructive. Think of self as being like a powerful car. Imagine a car with a powerful engine, balanced suspension, great tyres and strong brakes, but no steering wheel! It would be a lethal weapon, and the more powerful the car was, the more dangerous it would be. That is just what a person is like without self-control.

We will consider the subject under three headings:

1. Reasons for self-control
2. Aspects of self-control
3. Methods of self-control.

### Reasons for self-control

I will subdivide this into three more sections:

- For the honour of Christ
- For the benefit of others
- For my own happiness

These are in descending order of importance.

### For the honour of Christ

This ought to be the principal motive for all believers. Most of us fall a long way short of this but our main goal should be pleasing Christ and representing Him in a way that reflects well on His name. Since the day you became a Christian, everything that you have said or done has become vastly more significant. You are now connected to the Lord Jesus Christ and when you do something dishonourable you not only bring discredit to yourself, you also bring discredit to Him. This should be an important motive to encourage you to make the effort necessary to learn self-control. Self-control does not come naturally and takes effort. We like an easy life. If something requires effort and self-sacrifice we will only do it if the reward is worth more to us than the effort it will cost. The cost and reward may not be financial. For example, you will only take the time and effort to learn a foreign language if learning that language is valuable to you. The value might be better enjoyment of a foreign holiday, or it might just be that you enjoy languages and get pleasure from the learning. Either way, you must value the outcome. It is the same in the spiritual realm. I will only make effort and sacrifice for what I value. This means that a vague sense of duty is unlikely to be enough to motivate me to seriously pursue self-control. A real sense of the honour due to Christ and a vibrant love for Him, are the things that will make the effort seem worthwhile.

### For the benefit of others

Living with a person who has no self-control is very wearing. The person without self-control speaks out exactly what they feel, without any thought for the hurt it may cause. They lose their temper, and do something that will take years to put right. Families and churches suffer real and lasting damage because we have not learnt to control ourselves. One of the references to self-control in the Bible is in Titus 1:8 where we are told that a characteristic of a bishop or elder is that he must be self-controlled. It is part of his role to encourage and build up the people of God. He cannot do that if his lack of self-control is constantly undermining his efforts. Those of us who are not elders are not excused. The final element of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 is self-control. As Christians, we are all responsible to play our part properly as interdependent members of Christ's body. Lack of self-control by me has a direct impact on the members nearby and this impact then spreads out to others.

### For my own happiness

Most of us tend to put our own happiness first, that is part of the problem. However, even if our outlook is purely selfish, self-control is still worthwhile. It is one of the great myths of our age that real satisfaction comes from doing whatever we want. We are taught to believe that if only we are allowed to do as we please, we will find true happiness. This simply is not true. Doing what we like, when we like, does not lead to freedom and happiness. Take a simple example. Drinking what I want, whenever I want, is likely to lead to alcoholism. Nobody would describe a destitute alcoholic as happy or free. He or she is a miserable slave to an addiction they cannot control. The person who refuses to restrain their behaviour to accommodate others, may *think* they are a liberal, free spirit. Other people are more likely to see them as selfish, indulgent and poor company. After a time, that person will find they have few friends and fewer admirers. On a purely natural level then, lack of self-control is likely to lead to misery. For a believer the situation is even clearer. Every believer knows that we were created to find our pleasure in serving God and enjoying His company. It is simply impossible for a Christian to be really satisfied when living selfishly. Something inside will always be empty. My own happiness then depends on my learning to control myself in ways that please God.

### Aspects of self-control

Self is a very complicated thing, so self-control needs to be exercised in many ways. I will look at five headings to try and help us work through the subject.

- Eating and drinking
- Temper
- Tongue
- Sexual issues
- Thoughts.

### Eating and drinking

If you have any doubts about how unpopular self-control is today, read a few headlines about binge drinking or the epidemic of obesity. I do not want to enter the debate on whether Christians should drink any alcohol, nor do I want to start setting weight targets for believers! My question is, do you control these aspects of your life in a way that imitates Christ and brings credit to Him? The Lord felt hunger and thirst in exactly the same way that you and I do. He was a real human being. However He was master of these appetites and subdued them when necessary. Luke's account of the Lord's temptation says, "In those days He ate nothing, and afterward, when they had ended, He was hungry." Luke 4:2. Satan thought this was an opportunity to use a legitimate hunger to tempt the Lord to act

independently of the Father. The Lord's reply shows us the correct perspective: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God". Food is essential for life, but our relationship with God is even more essential. God knows we need food and drink and promises that, if we put His interests first, He will make sure our natural needs are fulfilled. The Lord Jesus taught, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." Matthew 6:33. The Lord refused to promote His physical needs above His obedience to God. If you are tempted to think that a little issue like what you eat cannot be that important, remember Adam and Eve! The Bible does not teach asceticism, that is denying ourselves needlessly to strengthen our character. It teaches us that we should not let our appetites control our actions. We are to master them, not vice versa.

### **Temper**

Some of us are naturally placid, others have a 'short fuse', but all of us need to learn to control our temper. All of us are unique, so you will find some of the aspects I talk about this morning easier than others. God wants to deal with the whole of our character. We tend to notice one aspect. For example, you might ask God to help you with your temper because your outbursts are causing hurt and embarrassment. No doubt God does want to help you control your temper, but He wants more than that. He wants you to hand over your whole character and way of life to Him so that He can reproduce the life of the Lord Jesus in you. It is not God's method to apply sticking plasters to the parts of our personality that cause us most grief. God wishes to totally transform lives from the inside out. The model to which God works is always Christ. It is not that Jesus was never angry. John 2:13-16 shows Him so angry when confronting the defilement of God's house, that it made the disciples think of David's words in Psalm 69, "Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up". Jesus was angry, but it is not true to say that He lost His temper. God was angry about the state of His temple, and Jesus shared that anger, but it was always under His control. Sometimes we are angry at the things that upset us personally, rather than the things that upset God. At other times we may be angry about the right things, but we let that anger take over, and we lose control of what we say and do. James and John were not called the "sons of thunder" for nothing! When a Samaritan village refused to welcome Jesus they wanted to call down fire from heaven. Jesus had to tell them, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of" Luke 9:55. They had not yet learnt the self-control of their Master.

### **Tongue**

In his epistle, James declares that control of the tongue is the hardest self-control of all. "If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body." James 3:2. What we say can cause damage that is far out of proportion to the number of words spoken. Words are easy to speak and impossible to take back. How often have we tried to bite back some harsh words, but found that they came out anyway: to be bitterly regretted the very next minute? Even the exemplary Apostle Paul had to retract harsh words that he had spoken about the high priest before he realised whom he was addressing. See Acts 23:3. Only the Lord Jesus could live a life before hostile witnesses and leave them with no words that they could repeat back in accusation. However, basic biology tells us that our tongue is under the direct control of our brain! It can't speak without our permission, and the words it speaks go through our minds first and we choose to speak them. Control of our thoughts will help greatly with control of our tongue. I will return to this theme shortly.

### **Sexual issues**

The high levels of sexually transmitted diseases and teenage pregnancies in our country speak volumes about a lack of self-control. For two generations we have lived in a society that encourages sexual permissiveness and experimentation. We are beginning to reap the whirlwind, in the shape of wholesale breakdown of family life and the chaos that children raised without any family discipline create. When such children have become parents themselves the problems have been multiplied. Of course, the problems extend beyond single mums on council estates. Lack of self control in the sexual life destroys respectable families and blights the prospects of decent young people. Christians are not immune. Sexual desire is given by God and therefore not inherently wrong. Like all human appetites, it is good in the right place. In this instance the 'right place' is between a wife and a husband. We are certainly not helped by the sexual images portrayed in films, TV, newspapers and posters all around us. Some of these we can avoid, others we have no choice about seeing. If we deliberately feed any temptation by choosing to be careless about what we view, or even deliberately choosing temptation, then we can expect to fail and we have only ourselves to blame. Temptation begins in our thoughts, so let's move on to our last aspect...

### **Thoughts**

Sins begin in our minds and only come out in our actions if we choose to entertain them. This means that the best way to learn self-control in any part of our lives is to learn self-control over our thoughts. "If only I could!" you might say; but the Bible is very plain about the discipline we need in our thought lives. "Bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" 2 Corinthians 10:5. "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind" Romans 12:2. "Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are

lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things” Philippians 4:8. Paul, who wrote all the verses quoted above, understood that what we think is what we do. We do not do things that we do not think about, it is simply not possible. We should be very careful indeed what we choose to put into our minds. It is true that thoughts sometimes come into our minds, seemingly from nowhere. If the thoughts are wrong then we can choose to dismiss them as quickly as they came. However, most things come into my mind because I have put them there in the past. That unsuitable book that I read, or that film that turned out not to be what I was expecting, but I watched it anyway. I file these things away and they come back and cause me more harm than I ever imagined.

I said a moment ago that we can choose to dismiss thoughts. That is not quite true. Trying not to think about something is impossible. The more you try not to think about bacon, for example, the more it will fill your mind until you are convinced you can smell it! There is only one way to dismiss a thought, and that is to think about something else. That is why Paul gave the instruction I read from Philippians 4. If our minds are trained to dwell on wholesome things, they will start to ponder on those things naturally when we let our minds rest. It will also be much easier to switch our thoughts to wholesome things when a tempting thought comes along.

I have already started to talk about methods of self-control so let's move on properly to our final section.

### **Methods of self-control**

How are we going to learn to exercise self-control in the areas we have discussed, for the honour of Christ? I will try and sum up some biblical principles for self-control under the following three headings:

- Power
- Prayer
- Priorities.

#### **Power**

Controlling something implies having power over it. For this I need a stronger power than the thing or force I wish to control. The problem with self-control is that my instincts, appetites and emotions can be extremely strong. They always seem to overwhelm any restraints I place on them. In short, I have no power, within myself, strong enough to control myself. To recognise this is not to acknowledge the inevitability of defeat. When I recognise my own inability I am actually ready to make progress. Perhaps you have tried for years to be strong willed enough to conquer some weakness, without success. It is time to recognise that one of the reasons Christ sent the Holy Spirit to live in you, was to give you the power for self-control. I have already mentioned that self-control is the final element of the fruit of the Spirit, described in Galatians chapter 5. God does not expect you to produce self-control from within yourself, any more than He expects you to produce love, joy and peace out of your own heart. It is something that God produces, when we let Him. God is greater than any thought or feeling of mine and can therefore give me the strength to control them. He does not give this strength in one magical instant.

#### **Prayer**

Prayer keeps us in touch with God. It invites Him into our lives to help us, and opens our minds to His influence. You might say, “I have asked God before to help me control my habit, but He did not answer”. Perhaps you have misunderstood the use of prayer. Imagine someone has been careless about his behaviour, and got himself into a situation that he knows he will find hard to handle. He has not been regularly keeping his mind clean by meditating on God's word, but has rather been reading some questionable books or magazines. Then he starts to lose control, prays briefly to God for help and blames Him when he fails yet again. That is not the pattern of prayer that the Bible shows us. The biblical pattern is to make a real commitment to Christ to live for Him, and to ask Him to put us into His 'school' and teach us, through our everyday lives, how to please Him. The Bible presents prayer as something woven into the fabric of our lives, so that our first response to problems and pleasures alike is to speak to God about them. This fits together with the instruction to deliberately meditate on spiritually positive things, that we discussed earlier, and Paul's instruction to Timothy to “Flee also youthful lusts” 2 Timothy 2:22. This working together of prayer, thought and avoiding temptation is the way we develop Christian character and learn self-control.

#### **Priorities**

In the end, much of life is determined by our priorities. I am hungry, but I want to go out shopping, so I snatch a quick snack rather than eat a full meal. I am tired, but I have to finish a report for work tomorrow, so I stifle my yawns and keep going. I am absolutely terrified, but I want to impress the person I am with, so I control my fear and keep smiling. It is amazing what self-control we can show when we want to! When speaking to the Corinthians about living the Christian life in 1 Corinthians 9:25, Paul gave, as an example, the athletes of his day. He said, “Everyone who

competes for the prize is temperate in all things". That word 'temperate' is the same word as 'self-controlled'. Athletes who want to win prizes make their bodies obedient servants. Christians who want to win spiritual rewards, and that should be all of us, need to exercise even greater self-control.

### **Conclusion**

All Christians are called to march in step with the Lord Jesus. If that puts them out of step with the rest of society that is how it has to be. I am not responsible for how everybody else marches, just me. Marching in step will require discipline and self-control. It will take practice, effort and self sacrifice. We have the perfect example, and a wonderfully patient teacher, in the Lord Himself. Let's enlist in His school and start training today!

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