



Taking the Self Out of Self-Control

The Fruit of the Spirit

August 23, 2020

Titus 2:1-6, 11-14

Many ancient Greeks considered self-control to be the chief virtue. They listed it first, laying it as the foundation of human maturity. But Paul listed it last. He understood that putting “self” first would lead to legalism and works-based righteousness, which is antithetical to the gospel.

A person needs to start with God, not the self: Love from God, joy in God, peace with God. And then translate those divine virtues into patience, kindness, and goodness toward others. Only then will individuals come into their own, maintaining a faithful heart and gentle spirit, and full *self*-control.

Titus 2:1-6 show us the importance of self-control for everyone, old and young, male and female. Titus 2:11-14 show us how to cultivate this virtue.

1. Stand in GRACE. That’s always the starting point. The grace of God appeared in the person of Jesus Christ and brought salvation to us all. That’s the basis of all growth and change. Social scientists talk about “The Fresh Start Effect”—how people grow and change when they feel like the slate has been wiped clean and they are not under guilt, shame, or condemnation. Obviously the gospel gives this most profoundly through the new birth. In Christ we are a whole new creation.

2. Step into your GODLIKENESS. We use this unusual word intentionally. You see, godliness is the means; Godlikeness is the end. Our piety and devotion to God are meant to make us like God. God wants us to share in his divine nature. He wants us to exercise and enjoy dominion in life. It’s why he created and redeemed us (see Genesis 1:26 and Revelation 22:4-5). And our God-like dominion is exercised in its most basic form with the words “Yes” and “No.” Through the gospel we get a new heart and mind. We get the disposition and power to say “No” to ungodliness and “Yes” to godliness. We can do this. We don’t have to give in to sin. We can be like Jesus. Take dominion; step into your *Godlikeness*.

3. Go with a GROUP. As a small but significant point, we simply note that the gospel teaches “us” the ways of self-control. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness while we wait for the second coming of Christ. Life is a long and arduous journey. We need a group to go with. And the best groups, research shows, are comprised of people who have the same struggle and the same goal. Think of recovery groups as a prime example. Or Christ-centered, authentic-storytelling churches.

4. Keep the GOAL before you. We’re waiting for the blessed hope of Christ’s glorious return. And when he appears, we also will appear with him in glory (Col. 3:4). That’s the goal: Seeing Christ’s glory and sharing it. That future vision inspires self-control in the present. Some social scientists talk about “goal sanctification” which comes from being conscious of God’s presence. People who live in awareness of God “sanctify” or dedicate their goals to him, and thus grow and change more. They develop more self-control. So what is God calling you to do? What’s the next step in your personal growth? Keeping the big goal in mind of seeing Christ, “sanctify” your next step, your intermediate goal, to him.

Discussion Questions

1. Would you describe yourself as being basically disciplined and self-controlled or not? Why?
2. The ancient Greek philosophers put self-control at the head of the list of human virtues, but Paul put it last. What do you think is the significance of this?
3. In his classic book, *The Practice of Godliness*, Jerry Bridges defines self-control like this:
“Self-control is the inner strength, under the direction of sound judgment, to do, think, and say the things that are pleasing to God.”
What insights about self-control do you gain from this definition?
4. Paul teaches Titus that the grace of God, which appeared in the life and ministry of Jesus, teaches us all how to be self-controlled. Grace coincides with what researchers call the “Fresh Start Effect,” the motivation we get to be better when we get a clean slate and new beginning.
 - When is one time that you experienced the Fresh Start Effect?
 - What difference does grace make as a motivator for self-control that guilt, threats, and condemnation don’t make?
5. Social scientists also talk about the “What the Hell Effect.” That happens when failure causes us to feel hopeless, so we throw in the towel and binge. Stanford professor Kelly McGonigal writes:
“Giving in makes you feel bad about yourself, which motivates you to do something to feel better. And what’s the cheapest, fastest strategy for feeling better? Often the very thing you feel bad about. But it’s not the first giving-in that guarantees the big relapse. It’s the feeling of shame, guilt, loss of control, and loss of hope that follows the first relapse.”
 - When is a time you experienced this effect in your life?
 - Having the gospel, how would you help a person trapped in this defeatist mindset?

“The greatest obstacle to living the Christian life in contemporary society is an impoverished imagination. How can we imagine a life different from the one we’re living if we do not immerse ourselves in a different set of narratives that display life and its purposes differently?”
6. God made us for *Godlike* dominion in life, a capacity for command-and-control that is encapsulated in the words “Yes” and “No.” How free and empowered do you feel right now to use your Yes and No well? If you don’t feel strong in this, how can you *step into your Godlikeness*?
7. The sermon made a quick point about “go with a group,” saying that we not only need a group, but that the best groups have the same struggle and the same goal.
 - To what degree do you think we have these in common?
 - How could we cultivate more alignment and camaraderie in our spiritual journey?
8. The final point of the sermon was about “Goal Sanctification.” This begins with seeing yourself as living before a God who cares about your life and choices, and who wants to empower you to grow. But it also involves setting “holy” goals, and dedicating your goals to God.
 - Does this make sense to you?
 - What would be a good, sanctified goal for you in the season ahead?