

Week 9: Self-control

1. Spirit-control – Galatians 5:16-26

Kenneson shares some great insight on the difference in meaning between 'self-control' in the Greek worldview and Paul's worldview. In Greek thought the virtuous person was one who was able to bring his desires under control, who excelled at self-mastery. Yet they believed this was possible only for the elite few. People like you and me would be hopelessly doomed to failure in attaining this virtue. In Paul's thought though, self-control is made possible only by being stripped of 'the self'. Growing in this virtue is possible for everyone through the Spirit's energizing force.

It is important that we are not duped into Greek thinking in our Christian growth, trying harder and working smarter and going to great lengths to get our persistent habits and behaviours, addictions and compulsions under control. We have another power – from outside of ourselves – which makes victorious living possible.

Self-control contrasted:

Greek view = Control of self by the self for self's sake

Christian view = Control of self by the Spirit for the gospel's sake

This brief summary doesn't do justice to Kenneson's insights. Even if you are lagging behind in *Life on the Vine*, try to read the first six pages of this week's chapter. It's well worth the read.

Let's put Kenneson's insights into action by looking at today's text. I encourage you to read verses 16 to 18 and then to pause for a moment. Read those three verses again and then consider prayerfully what signs of the sinful nature are present in your own life.

Rather than reading on to size yourself up against Paul's list (v 19-21), first consider your own behaviours, thought patterns, words and deeds which have troubled you (or others) during the past several days. I encourage you to list the things that come to mind (in your journal or on a notepad), along with your thoughts about what feeds into them.

When you feel ready, carry on and read to the end of the chapter. Then consider the following:

Do any of the acts in Paul's list ring true for you? Are there any which you see in a slightly different light after having made and reflected upon your own list?

Read our theme verses (v. 22-23) and consider how the virtue of self-control fits in with the other fruit of the Spirit. To what extent have you been trying to develop self-mastery by your own self-effort? Pray about becoming increasingly Spirit-controlled. Close your devotional time today by praying verses 24 and 25.

2. David's Self-control

1 Samuel 26

David, the 'man after God's own heart' did not always demonstrate self-control. But the man about whom we know more about than any other biblical character besides Jesus sure does give us some good examples of this virtue.

Read David's story in 1 Samuel 26. This is the second time that David has had his enemy, Saul, in his grip. With Abishai, one of his 'three mighty men' at his side, David's days of being a fugitive would have been history if he only he had ended Saul's life. Yet he restrained himself – and Abishai with him.

As you read, picture the scene and feel the tension in the air. Stop at verse 8 and wonder what might have been running through David's head after Abishai has asked for permission to run Saul through. When David had suggested going down to the enemy's camp, do you think he'd had other ideas than simply swiping a couple of Saul's possessions? Consider what it was that held him back. How do you react to his response to Abishai? To the action he took? To the result?

Before you close the book on this story today, think about your own life. Is there now – or has there been – someone you're tempted to react to outside of the confines of self-control? Consider what David's story has to offer you. Talk with God about this.

3. Reflection on the Journey

Galatians 5:22-23

It's been a rigorous journey that we've undertaken together. Nine weeks is a long time to keep your focus, perseverance and interest strong. I trust it has been a valuable journey for you, both individually and as a community.

As one last devotional exercise, I encourage you to reflect back over the past nine weeks. If you've kept a journal, look back over what you've written. If you've blogged (or if you haven't) read back through the posts, remembering what it was which spoke to your heart and moved you into action.

What have you learned? How have you grown? What has been cultivated in your life? What deeper understanding do you now have of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? And, more importantly, how do you see yourself living out these fruit? Which ones are clearly more visible now in your life? In your community? Which ones need continued cultivation?

Perhaps most importantly of all, how do you *desire to continue* your cultivation of the Spirit-controlled life? What ideas do you have to keep this pursuit alive in your life, your family and your community?

The *subject* of this journey has been the fruit of the Spirit, but the *means* has been engagement with the Word of God. You have probably learned new ways of reading and praying and interacting with the Scriptures and, along with it, of experiencing God. As you review this journey, take note of which means of engagement have been particularly helpful to you, and return to these on your own as you move on to other themes and other texts.

It's been a pleasure to serve you.

Shalom,

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