

CHARACTERISTIC FOUR: SELF-CONTROL

Lesson 10: How to Get & Keep Self-Control

2 Peter 1:6 "...to knowledge self-control..."

In our last lesson we learned how the enemy lies to us by making us think that we are the only ones that have a problem in a particular area, which makes us hesitant to share our struggles with others, thus keeping us isolated and in a continuing cycle of sin. In this lesson, we are going to learn some practical ways to cultivate and keep the fruit of self-control in our lives.

First, why is self-control so important? Proverbs 25:28 says, "*Like a city that is broken into and without walls, Is a man who has no control over his spirit.*"¹ The New Living Translation puts it this way, "A person without self-control is like a city with broken-down walls."² If we think of the biblical times when the Proverbs were written, almost all cities had walls built around them to keep their enemies out. No walls, no protection from the onslaught of the enemy. In the same way, when we don't have self-control, we leave ourselves open to the attacks of the enemy.

James talks about this in James 1:12-15, when he compares the consequences of a person with self-control and one who lacks it when he says:

Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.³

This whole passage is talking about self-control when tempted. The one who endures or has self-control, receives life, the one who doesn't gets death. Notice where the temptation starts, it starts with an inner desire that the enemy tempts us with. At that point is not yet sin, it is only temptation that we have a choice to rebuke and cast down by the power of the Holy Spirit or to embrace and conceive through our flesh. If we don't use self-control, that desire turns to sin, and that sin when fully walked out brings death. The choice is ours, but the necessary consequences always follow. The more you practice self-control the easier it becomes, however the opposite is also true, the more we lose self-control when tempted, the easier it is to lapse back into old habits; it becomes the downward spiral that James talks about— desire, sin and ultimately death.

If self-control is so critical, how does one get it and maintain it? Well, you don't really "get" self-control, it's a fruit and discipline that the Holy Spirit grows in us to resist the flesh's passions and appetites. It must be cultivated by listening to the conviction of the Holy Spirit and making the choice to obey God's Word. In other words, it's not an overnight process. It's not just one moment of saying, "Yes" to the Holy Spirit or "No" to your flesh, but rather the culmination of many yeses and noes along the way. However, I believe it all starts with having a proper understanding of who you are in Christ, that once you've repented of your sins and made Christ the Lord of your life that you ARE a new creation in Christ Jesus, your old has indeed passed away. Further, you now have the power of the living God inside of you to help you overcome sin. As the Apostle Paul puts it Romans 8:11-13:

But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ⁴

Paul says here that when Christ lives in you, then you have the same power to overcome the flesh as Jesus did, but it's our choice to use that power by crucifying our flesh. It's us working in coordination with the Spirit. God has given us the power of the Holy Spirit to resist, but He also gives each of us the freedom of self-will to either follow the Spirit or our flesh.

Given this choice, what are some practical ways that we can learn to have more self-control and follow the Spirit? First and foremost, we must have a daily life of prayer. Prayer is our time of fellowship and communion with the Father. It's in this place of communion that the Holy Spirit speaks words of encouragement and yes, sometimes words of correction. It's also where we get renewed in the Spirit to face the challenges and temptations of the day.

Second, we need to sow the right things into our minds. In one of our previous lessons, we learned that we can only be transformed by renewing our minds and that is only done by putting God's Word into our mind and heart. We must replace what we use to think with what God says in His Word about us and how we should live— this only happens through consistent, systematic and studying of the Bible.

Third, we must deny our flesh and obey what we've learned from the Word. James talks about the futility of hearing the truth and then not obeying it in James 1:22-25 when he says:

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.⁵

It's not enough to just hear or know the truth, the blessing hinges on whether you obey it or not. Is it easy? No! But as previously noted, the more we obey and sow to the Spirit, the stronger our spirit man becomes and the easier it is to have self-control and resist the flesh.

Another very practical way to resist the flesh is by not putting yourself in a compromising situation in the first place. For example, there have been many Christians, both men and women that have fallen into sexual sin. Because of this, I do not counsel women alone or have conversations via social media or texts concerning personal matters. Likewise, you should avoid situations or circumstances where the enemy may tempt you to fall. For instance, If you are struggling with a certain weakness, such as an addiction, it's wise not to put yourself into a situation or around people where you could be easily tempted.

I want to encourage you to make an appointment with God every morning, where you can worship and open your heart to commune with Him, fill your mind with God thoughts by reading the Word daily, purpose in your mind and heart that you are going to be obedient to follow God's Word and finally, don't put yourself in position where you know you would be easily tempted, but rather get around other believers who will encourage you to make right choices.

Lesson 10 Questions

1. What is self-control and why is it important?

2. Proverbs 25:28 says. "A person without self-control is like a city with broken-down walls." In what ways does this apply to our spiritual life when we lack self-control?

3. What is the start and progression of sin according to James?

4. What does it mean to "be doers and not only hearers of the word"?

5. What are 4 practical ways that we can develop the fruit of self-control in our lives?

¹ Pr 25:28. (NASB).

² Tyndale House Publishers, *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015), Pr 25:28.

³ Jas 1:12–15. (NKJV).

⁴ Ro 8:11–13. (NASB).

⁵ Jas 1:22–25. (NKJV).