

Discipleship 101: Making The Grade (Part Two)

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Proverbs 25:28, Titus 2:11-14, 1 Peter 1:13-22

Our final Scripture reading today comes from 1 Peter 1:13-22. Listen now to the Word of God. “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. 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.” Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God. Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.”

Is a lack of self-control cause for grief or for entertainment? America seems to believe the latter. **Jersey Shore** is a train wreck of a show where a cast of twenty-somethings do and say whatever comes to mind, regardless of the consequences. But rather than being a disgrace, it is the top-rated cable series, beating network standards like **House**, **Gray’s Anatomy** and **CSI**.

We may laugh at those without restraint on TV, but in reality, a lack of self-control leads to corruption, abuse, scandal, shame, violence, and far worse. We have seen the outcome when governments, officials, even churches use power and position for their own gratification. It destroys lives when self-control gives way to self-satisfaction. And yet, we still like to justify our selfishness. Asked about her collection of shoes, former first lady of the Philippines Imelda Marcos answered, “I did not have three thousand pairs of shoes. I had one thousand and sixty.”

Friends, God calls us to something far better. The world does not understand self-control, but God tells us that it is a sign of salvation. As we continue our series on discipleship, on being students of our master Jesus, we need to learn self-control. Last week, we studied the flip-side of self-control – discipline, being pro-active, doing what’s difficult rather than the easy thing because it pleases God. We practice self-control, on the other hand, by rejecting and avoiding the sinful and easy ways that come naturally to us. They are similar, yet discipline is the stepping stone to self-control. As we practice spiritual disciplines such as prayer, confession, and time in God’s Word, we begin to experience the grace needed to become self-controlled.

Proverbs 25:28 explains why self-control is so important. “Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control.” What does this mean? In ancient society, a city with broken-down walls was just asking to be attacked. A city could have a huge army, yet without walls, it was impossible to defend. The city’s walls offered protection and safety and the high ground; it was suicidal to attack a well-fortified city with strong walls. Jerusalem withstood the forces of Rome for three years, from AD 67-70, because of its walls.

If we are not self-controlled, we are not only unprepared for spiritual attack, we're actually encouraging it. In our era, it would be like living in downtown Detroit and putting an ad in the newspaper saying, "Yeah, I leave my windows open and my doors unlocked and don't have a security system and just bought a new computer and big-screen TV." Forgetting our self-control is not just an "oops." It is a step on the road to spiritual ruin.

Having said that, what then is it that we should be self-controlled about? Our readings this morning tell us that the grace of God "teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions" and "not [to] conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance." Other Scriptures are more detailed. Here's what Paul says in Galatians 5: "the acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, [carousing], and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." In 2 Corinthians 12:20, Paul adds "quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder."

These warnings are not to overwhelm us but to sober us. Sometimes we see these lists in Scripture and think, "that list doesn't pertain to me because I don't do all that." But here's the thing: nobody does it all! It's not that we see ourselves in the *entire* list; it's that we see ourselves in *any* of it. Most people have never been guilty of witchcraft. But dissension? Envy? Quarreling? Jealousy? Gossip? You bet! And Paul's counsel is serious: "those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." Paul is writing to the church when he says this, not to unbelievers. He's saying, "If you think you are a Christian but your life is characterized by these things, watch out!" Paul immediately follows up his list with descriptions of the fruit of the Holy Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." He is asking those who claim to be believers to examine themselves to see who they really are.

When we look at these traits of self-control, we need to read between the lines. For example, we don't see "gambling" on the list. Our society has decided that gambling is OK, a way to have fun and relieve stress. But the root of gambling is jealousy and envy, a desire to have more than what God has given us, a desire for what the other guy has. "Overeating" isn't on there either, but for most of us, it's rooted in the same problem as drunkenness – taking more than what we need to satisfy ourselves. Eating can be idolatry – we eat because it makes us feel good and happy. We turn to food rather than God for fulfillment.

And when we don't practice self-control within the church, watch out! One of our elders recently got a call from a former member about the latest gossip on the church, which she quickly shut down. Churches have died from factions fighting one another, not only over important theological truths but arrogance about who's going to run the kitchen or quarrels about who's responsible when the garbage doesn't get taken out. Churches fall apart when rumor mills start. And so do individual lives. The seeds of sins are planted when we fail to be self-controlled in word and deed. And if we find the need to justify our actions, it's likely that no matter how we rationalize what we've done, we're still guilty. I say this not to be cruel, but because it affects all of us, myself included. Pastors and elders and deacons are not immune. We must all fight the battle of self-control.

So how do we go about being self-controlled? How do we wage war on our own desires? We turn to Scripture for the answers. This is what I see: first, *God is a deliverer who delivers us through His grace*. Second, we are called to *live our lives as strangers here in reverent fear*. And finally, *because of God's grace, we can be self-controlled in response to God's grace*.

First and foremost, God is a deliverer of His people. Scripture says that God is an ever-present help; God is said to help His people; and yet “help” is a weak word to explain what God does. The Hebrew word for “help” is *ezer*, and the root of it means “to rescue or save through strength.” In English, help means assistance. As a pastor, hopefully I help you, I assist you, by giving you tools and equipping you, but ultimately you’ve got to live your faith out in the world. Sometimes, we have the same picture of God. He’s the guy throwing me the basketball, but I’m the one who’s got to shoot and score. But the Hebrew idea is very different.

In Scripture, God delivers. When the Hebrews call on God for “help,” they can’t save themselves. God delivers them from Egypt through miracles. Throughout their history as a nation, God saves them from overwhelming oppression. Even when Israel collapses and goes into exile in Babylon, God keeps them together and returns them home as a people. When Jesus comes, He comes not to help people be better but delivers us from sin and death. He delivers us from evil, even the evil in ourselves. He delivers us not because of our good deeds but because of His grace – His incredible, wonderful, mysterious mercy to a people in rebellion.

I Peter this morning taught that through Christ, we believe in God. It’s because of Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross that we can even have faith in the first place. God has granted us faith itself. We did not somehow find faith in our own sinful hearts; God transplants that faith into us. In Titus, Paul wrote that Jesus saved us for two reasons – “to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” Jesus delivers us from those things that bind us, over which we have little control.

This reality is something I cling to when I think about self-control. Here’s the reason: those areas of my life where I desperately need self-control, I already would be if I could be. I think all of us who are Christians find ourselves in the same boat. We’re aware of our weaknesses. If I in my own willpower could be self-controlled about my eating and working out, I’d be Justin Verlander or Lance Armstrong. But I don’t. We all have different areas that plague us – gossiping or anger or lust or ambition or whatever. Almost all of us who are Christians have tried to battle these things, and we’ve gotten discouraged when we think we’ll succeed only to wind up running into a brick wall. If we believe, shouldn’t God’s help be enough?

But there’s the key. We don’t need help. We need deliverance. If we say, “If only God would help me more,” or “If God really wanted me to quit, He’d give me more willpower,” we’re coming at it from an unbiblical angle. We will never have it in our old sinful selves to stop sinning. Instead, what we need to realize is that God is a deliverer. God is not going to help in the future. *God has already delivered us*. It’s a done deal. While the process is still ongoing, the victory is already won. There’s a battle to fight, but the war is won. Through His grace, there is no, “If only.” There is only one thought: “I shall overcome because God has already overcome on my behalf.” Not through our will, not through our effort, but by His grace...because, quite simply, He loves us. He loves us, He loves us, He loves us.

Because of that love, we can live out the second point, taken right from Peter's letter: *live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear*. God calls on us to be holy, Peter says, and He judges us impartially. He sees us as we really are, free from excuses, complaints, and justifications. If we are genuinely saved and forgiven disciples learning at the feet of Jesus, then this world is not our home, and God calls on us to act that way.

Much of the problem with self-control is not our desire; our hearts, once they are restored by God, long to be self-controlled. We also know that Christ delivers us and provides for us where we are lacking. The key problem is that we forget where we belong and the God to whom we belong. If believers are God's children, then this world may be our address but not our home. We are strangers here. This shouldn't surprise us. How many of us have been called names at some point in our lives for showing self-restraint? Prude, stick in the mud, killjoy; you know them all. Those are outsider names, names given to those who don't belong. But the irony is, those names are a badge of honor, a reminder that we belong to a far greater Kingdom, the Kingdom of God, that will never fade or pass away.

So many of our issues with self-control originate from not realizing where our true comfort lies. I grew up overeating for a lot of reasons. We didn't have much money and I feared going hungry. I was lonely and teased, so I ate to make myself feel better. My intent was not to make a god of it. But I did. I turned to food rather than God to ease my pain. And after a while, food became a means of rebellion, a way of saying, "I don't care what you think." It grew into a monster because I didn't fully grasp that the only real place I could find comfort was in God. For many of us, our self-control monsters stem from deep inside of us, a place of weakness, of sadness, of pain, that comes out in ways that are hurtful to us and to others. They come from thinking this world is all there is and all we have for comfort.

But that's not the truth, according to Scripture. Our home is with God, and God loves us too much for us to not become like Him in His holiness. When I hear that we are to live in "reverent fear," instead of thinking panic, I think of the awe I feel when I've stood next to a jet engine. There's a sense of wonder of how powerful it is, and a bit of apprehension 'cause I don't want to be anywhere near it when it hits full capacity. If God is infinitely more wonderful and powerful than that, combined with His immense mercy and grace, then I should feel overwhelming awe when I think of Him, and not just a little fear at the incomprehensible authority He wields. If I don't have a little bit of fear of the One who created the universe just by speaking it into existence, there's something wrong with me.

If God's power and goodness and grace are the foundation of my existence, if His love for me knows no bounds, then I don't need to be bound by the things of this world. Not its fears, not its name-calling, not its urges and impulses or greeds and desires, because I'm not from here. I'm passing through and my train is going to a different destination. If I truly believe in God, then I'm going to have an awesome respect and fear of Him that will drive out my fear of the world and will guide me to control my actions. It will even drive out my fear of suffering and loss of things in this world, my fears that lead to a lack of self-control, because I know He has something far better in mind for me. The sooner we understand this, the better our lives will be in the here and now too, not because we'll have more stuff or less of this world's clatter banging in our ears, but because we will live with radical hope – hope we can share with others.

That leads to my final thought for the morning: *because of God's grace, we can be self-controlled in response to God's grace.* We as Christians are not asked to sit around waiting for God to rescue us. That rescue has already happened. The power we have to be self-controlled, to deny ourselves what comes from our sin nature – that comes from God Himself. We have already been empowered to do it. God has justified us through Jesus – He sees us as holy – and He is sanctifying us through His Spirit – He is making us holy. God has promised our sanctification; it's a done deal. God's grace has already been given to us. We are now in the position to be self-controlled, simply responding to that grace we have already received.

Here's what this means practically – you can and should actively fight against whatever temptations and control issues you face, not because you must prove yourself, not because you have the power within, but because God through Christ on the cross has given you His grace, grace sufficient for your need. Not the grace to do it on your own, but grace through His strength alone. You can succeed because you are a chosen, elect member of God's Kingdom! Don't wait to resist; resist now! The time to stand is today because no further help is needed; God has already provided it and paid for it and is waiting patiently for you to rely on His grace.

Now this doesn't mean that it's just a "me and God" thing. As we said last week, God has given us each other to strengthen one another. He uses other people and plans to accomplish His purposes and to show us His grace. A couple weeks ago now, I joined Weight Watchers Online. It'd worked for my college roommate who visited here a few weeks ago, and I decided it was time. Time to stop living denying I had a problem with self-control. We shouldn't reject the help of others, or of well-proven methods like AA or Weight Watchers or whatever, but accept them as means God can use to extend His grace to us.

But we must also be willing to remove this world's temptations from reach. If we know our human will is far too weak to resist this world's allure and we are to live as strangers here, we must stop thinking that we can run in the same circles, associate with the same people, watch the same TV shows, and still defeat those vices over which we have no self-control. If you gossip with certain people, confess it, make amends, and then run away. If TV shows make you angry or lustful or jealous, pull the plug. Nobody said that putting God's grace into practice would be easy. It may look weird to outsiders; it will likely feel weird even to you. But God has made you to be a self-controlled person, full of kindness, grace, and love, not bitterness and division and envy. His grace is there; use it; rely on it. And when you fall, when you fail, when you are not self-controlled, remember, this is a war. One battle one day does not make the war. Confess your sin, grieve it, give it to God, and resolve to stand firm on God's grace still today.

Self-control is one of the hardest topics to preach on and to talk about. In a sense, we all feel like hypocrites. We all know that we are not very self-controlled or disciplined. And yet, God did not send His son to save perfect people. He came to save fallen sinners like you and me, to raise us up to Him, to remake us into His holy image. Who we are now, friends, is not who we will be – for God has promised that His children will become like Him. We do not have perfect self-control yet...but God is faithful and continually extends His grace to us so that we shall be disciplined, self-controlled, children of the King. Thanks be to God!