

1Corinthians 9.24-27
A Reward Worth Training For
Sermon #12 in a Series on Biblical Change and the Fruit of the Spirit

Preached by Pastor Glenn Durham at Dominion Covenant Church, Omaha, Nebraska, on November 13, 2005.

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Main Idea: *It is no loss to give up one thing for a greater.*

Introduction

When he was President of the United States, Lyndon Johnson was somewhat overweight. One day his wife challenged him with this blunt assertion: “You can’t run the country if you can’t run yourself.” Johnson heard wisdom in those words, realized that the first step in learning to govern others is governing oneself—he lost 23 pounds.

Galatians 5 tells us that the fruit of the Spirit is: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” May God give us the victory of self-control.

In his introduction to Athanasius’, *On the Incarnation*, **C. S. Lewis** suggested that a good rule might be, “after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between.” Lewis then gave this reason: “Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books. All contemporary writers share to some extent the contemporary outlook—even those, like myself, who seem most opposed to it.... The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books. Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their own errors, being now open and palpable, will not endanger us. Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction.”

In study this week, I saw Lewis’ wisdom shine brightly. As I read authors from previous centuries, I found them often teaching on self-control—a topic notably absent in much contemporary writing.

It became apparent that our culture despises Biblical self-control. A poll conducted at a prestigious university asked students who were training to be school teachers this: “Suppose you are to teach a 7th grade course in moral education. Which of the following two models would you choose?”

- A. You encourage students to develop their own values and value systems. This approach relies on presenting students with provocative ethical dilemmas and encouraging open discussion and exchange of opinion. There are no right or wrong answers. Each student must decide for himself/herself what will be their morals and they are encouraged to be nonjudgmental about values that differ from their own.
- B. The second approach involves a conscious effort to teach specific virtues and character traits such as courage, justice, self-control, honesty, responsibility, practicing charity, obeying

lawful authority, etc. These concepts are introduced and explained and then illustrated by memorable examples from history, literature, and current events. The teacher expresses a strong belief in the importance of these virtues and encourages his/her students to practice them in their own lives.

Among future teachers in America's schools, 88 percent selected the first approach; only 9 percent, the second. No wonder self-control is so frowned upon in our day.

With that illustration to sensitize us to an old idea, let's begin by confessing that...

1. We Must Embrace the Biblical Definition of Self-control (1Corinthians 9.24-27)

A preacher was winding up his temperance sermon with great fervor, "If I had all the beer in the world, I'd take it and throw it into the river."

And the congregation cried, "Amen!"

"And if I had all the wine in the world, I'd take it and throw it in the river."

And the congregation cried, "Amen!"

"And if I had all the whiskey and demon rum in the world, I'd take it all and throw it in the river."

And the congregation cried, "Hallelujah!"

The preacher sat down.

The song leader stood up and announced, "Thank you, brother Clive, for that moving sermon. In response, please turn in your hymnal to #365, *Shall We Gather at the River*."

In spite of the King James' translation of the word in this passage as temperate, that is not exactly what we are studying. The word for "self-control" over in Galatians 5 is ἐγκράτεια [egkrat'-i-ah]. It is a noun which is only used three times in the New Testament:

- Galatians 5.23, where it is simply *listed*, along with the other fruit;
- Acts 24.25, where all we find is that Paul reasoned with Felix "about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment"; and
- 2Peter 1.6, where we are told to add "to knowledge self-control, and self-control, perseverance." (None of those define the word.)

The *adjective* is used only once:

- Titus 1.8, where the text simply tells us that overseers of the church must be self-controlled.

That leaves the verb form, which is used twice, both times in 1Corinthians. In chapter seven, Paul notes that the single folks in the church, if they cannot exercise self-control, should marry. The only other use is here in 1Corinthians 9 where Paul explains self-control by an extended illustration from the life of an Olympic athlete.

The New King James version translates the Greek word here in 1Corinthians 9 as "temperate," even though two chapters earlier the exact same verb is rendered, "exercise self-control." Since the noun in Galatians 5 is translated "self-control," and since the adjective in Titus is, "self-control," and since the verb in 1Corinthians 7 is translated, "exercises self-control," I think the NKJ clouds the meaning of the word by rendering it "temperate."

That was a long explanation of why the ESV is better here in 1Corinthians 9, but for those of you who prefer the King James, I thought you should know why "temperance" is not really what Paul is talking about. What is he talking about?

Let me propose a definition and then see if I can prove it. *Self-control is the Spirit given desire and ability to limit freedoms today in anticipation of greater rewards tomorrow.*

1.1. Self-control is given by the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5.22-23)

Galatians 5.22-23: “The fruit of the Spirit is...self-control.” That seems strange, does it not? Are we talking about self-control or Spirit-control? And the answer is: yes, absolutely, both.

Before a person *becomes* a Christian, the Bible says that she is dead in her trespasses and sins. She is blind to the beauty of God; deaf to the voice of the shepherd. She has no spiritual life. She cannot please God because all her “good works” are tainted by a lack of faith; and she cannot repent because she does not believe.

Therefore Jesus says: she must be born-again. All who have been born once, physically, from the mother, remain dead, spiritually until the Holy Spirit births a new life. This is the regeneration which is wholly of the Spirit.

But once a person has been born from above, then she has a role in her continued walk with God. Not that it is now 50-50, as some suppose. More like, 100%-100%. Self-control, like all the fruit, is all of God. Remember the words of Jesus: “Apart from me you can do no good thing.... As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.” It is all of God, all of grace.

At the same time, there is something for us to do in exercising self-control. As one writer correctly noted: “the very term implies difficulty, struggle, conquest”—it will feel at times as if it is all of you!

So why is it important for us to embrace the role both of the Holy Spirit and of our efforts in producing this fruit? Three options are before us:

- 1) Overemphasize *our part* to the detriment of the work of the Holy Spirit. This error supposes that life is a race which tests our trust in our strength. When we fail we become discouraged and despondent, because our strength is lacking. The only thing worse is success, which makes us proud and self-righteous.
- 2) Overemphasize the Spirit’s part to the detriment of our work. This error supposes that life is not a race at all! And when we fall into this error we tend either toward licentiousness or lethargy—we either give into sin or seek to avoid any testing of our faith.
- 3) Depends on the Spirit’s work while working it out in our own lives. This biblical balance understands that life is a race—a race which tests our trust in God’s strength. *Biblical self-control is given by the Holy Spirit.*

1.2. Self-control limits freedoms today (1Corinthians 9.25a)

Anyone who has watched a world-class athlete at the top of his game knows the level to which the superstar rises above the competition. Every weekend hacker has thrilled at the beauty and strength with which Tiger Woods drives the green and lays the ball beside the pin. Everyone who has picked up a basketball has been astonished at the ease with which Michael Jordan floats through the air and slams the ball home. Anyone who has pulled themselves up on a pair of uneven bars is amazed at the grace which hides the immense strength of Nadia Comaneci.

Each of these athletes was born with a special gift, no doubt. But the excellence on the field cannot be explained by talent alone. Each gave up much to win the prize.

Of course there is a giving up of certain bad behaviors. It is unlikely that Tiger won the green jacket with a hangover. But self-control for the athlete means more than avoiding damaging deeds. The training of a superstar includes the limiting lawful freedoms. Thousands of hours of fun are traded for tens of thousands of practice chips and puts. Hundreds of hours of TV are shunned to perfect the lay-up and free throw. Foods which we could not imagine living without are ignored to prepare for a perfect score at the Olympics.

Obviously, God calls us to turn our backs on sin; *1Corinthians 9* challenges us to turn our backs on freedoms. The exercise of self-control is not simply *putting off* what is damning, it is *putting on* that which is most edifying. Not simply shunning the sinful but embracing the excellent. Self-control limits freedoms today.

1.3. Self-control believes in the rewards of tomorrow (1Corinthians 9.25b)

Athletes do not train for the sake of training; they train for the race. They run for the prize. They compete to win. But what they win, says Paul, is not much—a perishable wreath.

We have come a long way, no doubt, since first prize was a wreath! It is glamorous to carry home the 25 pounds of bronze named after the famous Georgia Tech coach: John Heisman. The Heisman Trophy is football's greatest award. And tomorrow the statue must be dusted.

But there is another race, one with an eternal reward, one worth running. Will we run to receive the prize? Are we lazy in spiritual matters? Disinterested in the things of God? When we are, is it not because we do not believe that there is a greater prize to be obtained by those who limit their liberties and discipline their bodies to take it?

Self-control is the Spirit given desire and ability to limit freedoms today in anticipation of greater rewards tomorrow.

2. We Must Deny Ourselves the Opposite of Self-control: Gorging on our Liberties

Since self-control is limiting our freedoms today, the opposite is gorging on freedoms. Whether we fritter away time in front of the television or give ourselves over to too much concern for our stocks or waste energy worrying about why we are not treated better, it is easy to forget there is a race to be run. And the more we forget the more we tend to gorge ourselves on our freedoms.

Does we have the freedom to watch movies? Absolutely! Has our love for film deadened our desire to read excellent, old books? Maybe.

Do have the freedom in Christ to spend money on clothing and furnishings? Absolutely! Has our spending made us forgetful of the needs of the poor and the cost of ministry in the church? Maybe.

Do we have the freedom in Christ to eat, drink and be merry? Absolutely! Does our eating and drinking ever dull us to our spiritual sloth? Maybe.

Reading old books, giving to the poor and laboring for spiritual sensitivity will not make us righteous in the sight of God. But for those whose faith in Christ makes them righteous, in doing so there is great reward. Let us deny ourselves the gorging of our liberties and so miss the prize.

3. We Must Be Cautious of the Counterfeit of Self-control: discipline without delight in God's reward

Many great athletes limit their liberties, which God describes as a form of self-control. But the years devoted to free throws and lay ups do not make Michael Jordan full of the Holy Spirit. What is difference? It is whether the goal of self-control is delighting in God and in his reward. Outward forms of self control may “indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (Colossians 2.23).

The difference is delighting in God's reward. Listen to the example of Moses.

Hebrews 11.24-26: “By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.”

Matthew 6.16-18: “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

There is a great danger when exercising self-control—self-righteousness. It is often recognized by the anger you feel when others are enjoying the liberties you have “given up.” You have lost sight of the reward—and this is precisely the warning which Jesus gave in Matthew 6. The promise of self-control is that you lose nothing in giving up liberties—because God's rewards are more than a replacement. Anger comes from imagining that they are enjoying the liberty more than you can possibly enjoy God's reward.

The session had asked members to park far away in order to free the street in front of the building for visitors. Our family arrived 30 minutes before church, parked several streets down and began to trudge through the slush and muck of January streets covered with week old snow piled deep and dirtied by the salt and cinders of the road crews. As we neared the church I saw one of the members climb from their car which was parked right beside the front door. My response was—less than perfect. Until Helen reminded me of this: those who do what is right get the reward. I forgot that and lost control—because I did not believe God's rewards were greater than liberty lost.

The counterfeit of self-control is the limiting of lawful liberties without a belief and delight in God's greater rewards.

4. We Must Actively Cultivate Biblical Self-control

Three steps move us toward a harvest of this fruit:

4.1. Probe

Some of us are like the high-spirited horse which must be kept in line with a bit and bridle. Our wild passions desperately need the tight reign of the Holy Spirit.

Others of us may be more like the clever cat which can move gracefully without disturbing a thing—yet needs the guidance of the Holy Spirit to accomplishing much of value. Maybe you have rarely desired to gorge your liberties—you need the Spirit to lead you to delight in what is excellent more than to deny what is sin.

Either way, we will not progress where we know not our need. Resolve to probe where this fruit is not evident.

4.2. Pray

Biblical self-control does not come by gritting your teeth. Only the Spirit produces this fruit. We must ask a merciful Father for the power of an indwelling Spirit.

4.3. Practice

One author wrote this: “Our appetites are not given us merely for indulgence, but also for restraint. Every one of them has to be kept in its own place. If man surrendered himself, without

restraint, to his natural impulses, he would be a beast. It is by mastering his impulses, and by the exercise of self-control, that he becomes a man.”

Jonathan Edwards: “Resolved: to live with all my might while I do live.”

Let us resolve to begin today to put this into practice.

5. Conclusion

Thomas was an unpopular student, disliked by his peers, his brothers, even his own parents. He was awkward, and shy. His family was rich and influential, but he was not concerned with those things. At 14, Thomas was sent by his father to a private school. The students did not treat him well; all they could see was he was fat and slow.

But a teacher told him about Jesus, and Thomas was converted. One day in class he began to debate the existence of God. He silenced his opponents and amazed his teachers with brilliant arguments. They soon found out that he could write well, too. But his faith in Christ embarrassed his family.

As a young man, Thomas was expected to contribute in the family business and enjoy their great wealth. His brothers were playboys and decided that what was wrong with Thomas was that he had never experienced the pleasures of the world. One night they kidnapped him from the school and detained him as a sort of prisoner for over a year—not in a jail cell, but in the lap of luxury. They offered him everything money could buy, hoping to cause him to lose interest in God and the Bible. They even brought in a beautiful prostitute. But he refused her.

His brothers could not understand his rejection of money, power, and women, but they finally decided he wasn't going to change. So they let him go and he returned to the university, where he became one of the most influential theologians in the history of the church. His writings fill 18 large volumes and he wrote a commentary on practically every book in the Bible.

Self-control. Thomas Aquinas delighted to give up some lawful liberties in order to receive a reward worth training for. Will we?