

SELF-CONTROL

Introduction

There was once a young man from Brooklyn who showed signs of being a promising baseball pitcher. He could throw so hard that he made the ball hiss, and his curve ball seemed to drop off a table, so sharp was the break.

The Dodgers baseball club saw promise in this young man and signed him to a contract. But after two or three years there was a striking disparity between his promised potential and his mediocre performance; he lost at least as many games as he won. He had a great fastball, he had a fantastic curve ball, but what he didn't have was control: for every batter he struck out he might walk another two or three, then he might throw the ball down the middle of the plate and the next batter would hit it out of sight. One day his catcher sat down with him and taught him the secret of control. After that, Sandy Koufax became a Hall of Fame pitcher; some say the greatest pitcher of all time. Without control, his talent was wasted, his performance was mediocre, and his career was in jeopardy.

Scripture teaches that without self-control over your life the consequences are far worse than those experienced by Sandy Koufax before he learned control: *"He whose spirit is without restraint is like a city whose walls are broken down"* (Prov. 25:28.) A city broken down and without walls is defenseless; it is vulnerable to being attacked by wild beasts and pillaged by enemy armies. Likewise, if your spirit (that which governs your words and actions) is not under control, you will be vulnerable to many sinful and foolish deeds that will cause you a great deal of regret. Let us now give our attention to this next topical study from the Book of Proverbs on the subject of self-control.

I. Exercise Self-Control Over Your Temper (Proverbs 16:32; Proverbs 29:11; Proverbs 19:11)

He who is slow to anger is greater than the mighty, and he who controls his spirit is greater than he who conquers a city. (Prov. 16:32)

The mightiest man and the greatest conqueror is the one who can master his own passions, the one who exercises self-control. A great conqueror who was unable to control his own passions was Peter the Great of Russia (1672-1725), one of the outstanding rulers in Russian history. By the time of his death, Russia was a great and growing power ready to play a major role in European affairs. But Peter could not conquer and control his own passions; he was subject to fits of rage during which time he lost all self-control, usually becoming brutally violent. At such times the lives of those around him were not safe. It was necessary to post a guard at his door to prevent anyone from approaching him. Peter himself remarked, "I can govern my people, but how can I govern myself?" (*Europe* by Robert Ergang, Vol.2, p.444 and *Proverbs* by Charles Bridges, footnote on p.251.)

The man who is slow to anger (i.e., the man who controls his anger) is better, or greater, than the mighty; he displays a God-like character: *"Jehovah is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness"* (Psl. 103:8.)

A fool expresses all his anger, but a wise man holds it back and calms himself. (Prov. 29:11)

A fool fails to exercise self-control and self-restraint; if something upsets him (such as an injustice or a disappointment,) he is quick to express his anger. He gives free reins to that anger and allows it to carry him away with reckless abandon like a team of wild horses pulling a runaway chariot to everyone's peril. As Proverbs 12:16 states, *"A fool immediately makes known what irritates him, but a prudent man overlooks an insult."* A fool thinks that the annoyance or injustice that is vexing him is so great and so heavy to bear that he must express himself and unleash his indignation and anger, as Proverbs 27:3 expresses it, *"A stone is heavy and sand has great weight, but a fool's vexation is heavier than both of them!"*

But a wise man holds back his anger and calms it down. Literally, *"he stills it in the back."* He senses that his anger or frustration is mounting and he immediately takes preventive measures to bring it under control before it breaks forth like a geyser and controls him. The wise man recognizes when the pot is simmering and is approaching the boiling point, and he removes it from the flame before it boils over.

A man's discretion makes him slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense. (Prov. 19:11)

That which makes a man slow to anger, and what helps him to control his anger, is his discretion. Discretion, or discernment, is the ability to analyze, anticipate, and then apply biblical counsel to a given situation.

The wise and godly man remembers the biblical word of warning: *"Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger rests in the bosom of fools"* (Eccl. 7:9.) The Psalmist regretfully writes about the awful consequence Moses suffered when he failed to exercise self-control over his anger: *"By the waters of Meribah they angered him, and trouble came upon Moses because of them; ³³for they rebelled against his Spirit, and rash words came from [Moses'] lips"* (Psl. 106:32-33.) This is a reference to the time when Moses lashed out in anger against the people of Israel when they cried out for water in the wilderness, and he suffered the consequence for his rash behavior (Num. 20:1-13.)

The wise and godly man remembers the biblical word of wisdom: *"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry; ²⁰for man's wrath does not bring about the righteousness of God"* (Jam. 1:19-20.) The wise and godly man recognizes that what brings honor and glory and dignity, as opposed to shame and regret and disgrace, is to *"overlook an offense."* To *"overlook an offense"*

this means either to practice forbearance or to extend forgiveness, in both cases leaving justice and retribution to God.

The counsel of Proverbs is: Exercise self-control over your temper. Do so, first, by maintaining a biblical perspective on justice and injustice. Do not be surprised to encounter injustice and to be treated unjustly in this world. As Proverbs 13:23 observes, *"A poor man's field may produce abundant food, but injustice sweeps it away."* The cultivating of the land can produce an ample amount of food, but it is injustice that deprives the poor of their necessary food. We must remember that the LORD Himself is the true source of justice and the final Administrator of justice: *"Many seek an audience with the ruler, but it is from Jehovah that a man receives justice."*

Secondly, we must maintain a biblical perspective on disappointment and adversity. Rather than be surprised by such occurrences and become embittered by them, we must submit unto the will of God and wait to see His hand and purpose, as did Joseph:

*When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, It may be that Joseph will hate us, and will fully repay us for all the evil that we did to him. ¹⁶So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Before he died, your father gave this command, ¹⁷"This is what you are to say to Joseph, I ask you now, please forgive your brothers' transgression and sin in doing you wrong.' Now, we beg you, forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸His brothers also came and fell down before his face; and they said, "Look, we are your servants." ¹⁹And **Joseph said to them, "Fear not; for am I in the place of God? ²⁰As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, namely, the saving of many lives."** (Gen. 50:15-20)*

Let us also put our confidence in the assurance given by the Apostle Paul: *"we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, those who have been called according to his purpose"* (Rom. 8:28.)

Exercise self-control over your temper by practicing discernment, asking the question, "What is causing me to become angry?" Is it justifiable for me to be angry? If so, you must handle that anger in a biblical manner: *"Be angry, but do not sin.' Do not let the sun set on your anger; ²⁷do not give a place to the devil"* (Eph. 4:26-27.) It is legitimate to express your righteous anger, but do not retain it, allowing it to settle into bitterness, for to do so would be to allow the devil to gain control of your spirit. Having expressed your anger, turn it over to the Holy Spirit. Is it not justifiable for me to be angry in this matter? Is my anger caused by envy or jealousy or some other ungodly motive? If so, you must release both your anger and the unholy motivation for your anger to the LORD, asking for His forgiveness and redeeming grace.

II. Exercise Self-Control Over Your Tongue (Proverbs 17:27; Proverbs 20:25)

He who spares his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. (Prov. 17:27)

A wise man controls his tongue. He takes into consideration the warning of Proverbs 10:19, *"In the multitude of words there is no lack of transgression, but he who refrains from speaking acts wisely."* Even words that are true need not always be uttered: *"There is one who speaks rashly, like the piercing of a sword; but the tongue of the wise brings healing"* (Prov. 12:18.) Careless words, in their ability to inflict harm, are compared to the wounds inflicted by a sword; but, conversely, the wise man knows how to speak words that bring healing and health to the soul. Proverbs 17:28 further reinforces this truth: *"Even a fool, when he holds his peace, is thought to be wise; when he shuts his lips he is considered as being prudent."* Even a fool, when he keeps his mouth shut, is considered to be a wise man.

Consider Proverbs 21:23, *"Whoever controls his mouth and his tongue, guards his soul from trouble."* As the commentator Matthew Henry states it, "[He] who thinks twice before he speaks once, keeps his soul from a great deal of guilt and grief and saves himself the trouble of many bitter reflections." Before speaking, we should ask ourselves such questions as these: Is what I am about to say true? Is what I am about to say necessary? Is what I am about to say motivated by godly motives or sinful motives?

Let us be careful to heed the word of Scripture as recorded in James 1:26, *"If anyone considers himself to be religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless."*

It is a snare for a man to rashly say, "I dedicate this to God," and only later to consider his vows. (Prov. 20:25)

The situation described in this proverb is as follows: A man thoughtlessly, irresponsibly and impulsively dedicates something to God; then he later considers his action, asking, "Was this a wise vow to make? It is a vow that I am able and willing to fulfill?" Note the following biblical example of such shortsighted, impulsive speech:

And Jephthah made a vow to Jehovah: If you give the Ammonites into my hands, ³¹whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will belong to Jehovah, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.³⁴When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. ³⁵When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, "Oh! My daughter! You have made me

miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to Jehovah that I cannot break.” (Judg. 11:30-31, 34-35)

The Word of God urges us to think carefully before we make a vow to God (or a promise,) because God holds us responsible to fulfill our obligations and to keep our word: *“When a man makes a vow to Jehovah or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said”* (Num. 30:2.)

The counsel of Proverbs: Exercise self-control over your tongue. Do so by realizing that careless words can get you into trouble. Do so by remembering that God holds us accountable for our words Our Lord Jesus Christ warns us, *“I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken; ³⁷for by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned”* (Matt. 12:36-37.) Do so by asking the LORD to guard your tongue: *“Set a guard over my mouth, O Jehovah; keep watch over the doors of my lips”* (Psl. 141:3.)

III. Exercise Self-Control Over Your Ambitions and Desires (Proverbs 21:5; Proverbs 28:20)

The plans of the diligent tend to lead only to profit, but everyone who is hasty will only come to poverty. (Prov. 21:5)

The contrast is between **well-thought out plans pursued with diligence**, that lead to prosperity, success and profit, **and hastiness (or, impulsiveness)**, that leads to want, loss, and debt. Impulsiveness means you see something and you immediately rush out to acquire it; later you wonder if you really wanted it or needed it or even like it, or can afford it; but now it is too late, you possess the item and are responsible to pay for it. Impatience means you see something, you know you want it, and you refuse to wait for it, you feel that you must have it immediately. But in your hastiness you may have incurred a premature debt that is difficult to pay and you may regret not waiting until you possessed the financial resources to purchase the desired item without incurring debt.

This proverb is describing that lack of self-control that causes us to seek the immediate enjoyment of the benefits of industriousness, frugality, and hard decision-making without going through the bother of investing the time, the effort and the planning that bring about such benefits and make them possible. According to the author Douglas Fairbanks,

... since World War II we Americans have been living beyond our means. We have over borrowed and over consumed and overpaid ourselves.

... Americans are putting *their* homes into deeper debt, second-mortgaging to pay for anything from pleasure boats to vacation trips, in essence financing consumption out of thin air rather than from work and saving.

The owner of a Denver collection agency said, "A lot of people we see now are second- or third-generation bad debtors. People just aren't used to living on what they make anymore." (*Readers' Digest*, Nov. '87, pp.123-126, condensed from the book, *Living Beyond Our Means*)

The consequence of such impulsiveness and lack of self-control over one's ambitions and desires is either a burden of debt (with the harsh discipline such debt imposes,) or the default of the incurred debt, (which can be viewed under certain circumstances as a form of stealing—recklessly incurring debt without the means to repay or without the intent to repay is a form of stealing.)

A faithful man will be richly blessed; but a man who is hasty to get rich shall not go unpunished. (Prov. 28:20)

"A man who is hasty to get rich" is one who is in such a hurry to become wealthy that he allows that overriding ambition to break through the bounds of self-control. The statement, *"[he] shall not go unpunished,"* indicates that the man's runaway ambition will lead him to pursue his goal by means of immoral and unscrupulous conduct, and he will not escape the consequences and the accountability for such conduct. Bear in mind the warning of the Apostle Paul with regard to the unbridled ambition for wealth:

People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction; ¹⁰for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. (1 Tim. 6:9-10)

Conclusion

In Galatians 5:22-23 we are informed that self-control is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit; it is part of the Christ-like character the Holy Spirit is reproducing in the Christian's life: *"the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, integrity, ²³meekness, self-control."*

The Book of Proverbs instructs us to see to it that this fruit of self-control is regulating every area of our lives, in particular, our temper, our tongue, and our ambitions and desires.