

Thursday Morning Bible Study:

What It Takes To Pray

Hymns:

160 – Fight The Good Fight; 237 – You Have Blessed Me With So Much, My God

2. Self-Discipline And Prayer

Read **1Peter 4:1-11**

Self-control (or self-discipline) and her twin sister, sober-mindedness, feature very often in the New Testament exhortations. Perhaps most well known is the fruit of the Spirit, that harvest that the Holy Spirit produces in us as He works the gospel deeply into our character and deeds. Galatians 5:22-23 “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.’ Maybe when we read through this list it all sounds so luscious and delectable – until we come to that ‘sour’ ending, oh... self-control. It seems to me that it is the perhaps the least desired of these outworkings of the Spirit in us. In fact, to many today, self-discipline is seen by many to be the opposite of the life of the Spirit. It sounds all so self-derived, so stringent, so ... boring! It doesn’t sound spontaneous, or authentic, or exciting!

The fruit of self-discipline (or self-control or sober-mindedness) is mastery of oneself, of one’s thoughts, impulses and deeds, through the received, Spirit-given power of God. (See also 1Cor. 9:24-27; 1Thess. 5:1-11; Tim. 2:9; 3:2,11; 2Tim. 1:7; 4:5; 1Pet. 1:13-16; 2Pet. 1:5-7.) It is the Spirit-controlled life in which we conquer all that hinders our love, dedication and obedience to God, and our love, dedication and service to others. It takes all the Spirit-given power of God in self-control to keep the law as it was summarised by Jesus. Self-control is the exercise of an inward power over our passions, wants and impulses so that we live a life shaped by the grace of God, the word of God, the wisdom of God. Perhaps it is most clear in the matter of self-control that Christian obedience is not simply our effort to ‘do something for God’, nor simply God’s control of us and our behaviour. In the matter of self-control we find God at work in us both to will and to work for His good pleasure, and so we work out this great salvation that is in us with fear and trembling (Php. 2:12-13.)

Self-control is the regulated, moderated life that comes to a person so that he or she doesn’t just do whatever comes immediately to heart or mind, but who gives thought and prayer as to what is best to do, and who then, against all fear, discouragement or difficulty, follows that through in action. ‘Self-control signifies the triumph of soul over circumstance.’ (Donald Bloesch.) Self-control entails diligence, the conquest of sloth, and composure, the conquest of anxiety. “I defy you to read the life of any saint that has ever adorned the life of the church without seeing at once that the greatest characteristic in the life of that saint was discipline and order.” (Martin Lloyd-Jones.) “Self-control involves a heart of fire toward God and a heart of bronze toward self.” (Benedict Joseph Labre, paraphrased by Bloesch.) It is “Spirit-empowered conquest of of all that hinders [our] dedication to God.” (Elmer Colyer)¹

Love is what this true, Spirit-given self-control looks like to the beloved one. Self-control is what love looks like to the lover. There is a deep connection between

¹ These quotes are all from Donald Bloesch, his chapter *Self Control* in *The Paradox of Holiness*. Hendrickson, 2016.

love and self-control. Self-control is not loving yourself, but loving others before yourself. It is dying to self, and being alive to God and to others. Perhaps self-controlled is most tested by the presenting to us of the needs of others when it is most inconvenient or demanding, or when we are most put out by the person who is particularly needy.

We live in an extremely *impulsive* age. So much of our lives we are being affected by forces that push us toward impulse, reaction-driven lives. Our polarised politics is a sign of this. Advertising is the beast that feasts on this, living by the manipulatable impulsiveness of human beings. Pornography, gambling, video-gaming, social media – these all require the triumph of impulse, and are structured for it, to give the fix of adrenaline or endorphins that reward the impulse engagement, and that creates through that fix the desire for the impulse again. These forces are at us all day, every day. As Christians in such an age we need alertness, clear-headedness, and a mindset shaped by the word and Spirit of God to walk wisely and carefully. This impulsiveness is particularly destructive to a life which is to be lived in the word of God and prayer. Self-control and sober-mindedness are essential for prayer (1Pet. 4:7.)

Peter links this exhortation (self-control and sober-mindedness that leads to and supports prayerfulness) to the fact that the end of all things is at hand. It is striking how often exhortations to self-control are linked with the truth that the return of Christ, and so the fulfilment of the plan of God, is just around the corner – and maybe even closer!

Just before this verse, in 4:1-6, Peter has urged his readers to have ‘the same mind’ as Jesus Christ. Vv. 1-2: Jesus suffered in the flesh, and so we should arm ourselves with same way of thinking, the same resolve. Ceasing from sin is paralleled or equalled with being ready to suffer in the flesh for doing the will of God for the rest of the time we have in the flesh, rather than for human impulses and desires. This suffering in the flesh will involve the opposition and hostility of those who reject faith in Jesus Christ, but also much more. Think of the sufferings of Paul in 2Cor. 11:23ff, 6:4ff – sleepless nights; hunger, thirst; being in ship wreck; hard and demanding work; often without food, cold and exposed; and the pressure of his concern for all the churches, especially their steadfastness and growth in grace. Self-control escapes the fight/flight response to danger and hardship; it enables us to bear much for the sake of others.

In vv. 3-5 Peter shows how we’ve had more than enough time living impulse-driven lives. The curtain was drawn on the whole history of the rebellious human race in the incarnation, ministry, suffering, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, brought home to us by the gift of the Holy Spirit. So, now we are enabled, and must, say “No!” to the unself-disciplined, to the self-indulgent life. As Paul puts it in Titus 2:11-13 – “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, and training us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for our blessed hope – the appearing of our great God and Saviour.”

Alertness in prayer is essential for a number of things. V. 8 calls us to keep loving one another earnestly. Prayer to the Lord for this is essential; it is not something that we can sustain on our own! Love involves hospitality (v. 9) – not just socialising, but inviting people into your lives and homes when they have nowhere else to turn! And we are to use all our gifts in serving others and

glorifying God. Vigilance is needed in all these things. We must don the armour of God, so we can withstand Satan in the evil day, and we take on this armour prayerfully and for prayer (Eph. 6:10ff.) Prayer is essential because we need wisdom from above, an understanding of the will of God (Eph. 5:15-20, James 1:5-8) that will lead us through the complexities of life in faithfulness. Self-control and sober-mindedness, with all the discipline, persistence and thoughtfulness that is implied in those words, are essential for prayers that are to become more and more a participation in the intercession of Jesus Christ, and not simply throw-away lines.