

Scott Peck was nine years old at the time and it was a beautiful summer morning. He'd recently learned how to ride a bike and was exploring all the fun stuff that you can do on it. About a mile from his home the road went down a steep hill and then took a sharp turn at the bottom. He decided to coast down the hill allowing his bike to go faster and faster. This was more and more fun! To give up that feeling of fun by putting on the brakes seemed, at the time, to be a kind of absurd form of self-punishment. So Scott decided not to slow down at all. The fun came to an abrupt end. A few seconds later, he was propelled about a dozen feet off the road into the woods because he couldn't negotiate that sharp turn at the bottom of the hill. Scott was badly scratched up and bleeding. The front wheel of his new bike was twisted beyond further use from its impact with a tree. What happened? Yes, it was an accident. Scott didn't intend to lose control, crash his bike and injure himself. But it was a preventable accident. The truth is that Scott had failed to manage or discipline himself.

Scott Peck, a psychiatrist and author, tells that story about himself. He concludes that learning to manage, discipline or control yourself – all pretty much the same thing – is an essential building block to being successful in life. If you don't develop that ability, you will crash a lot in life. At the end of the day, managing yourself is an appropriate way to love yourself. You discipline yourself because you're a person of value made in God's image. A lot of what Scott Peck wrote about from a psychological viewpoint was already said first in Proverbs.

I began this message series on the book of Proverbs – *How To Live Wisely and Well* - this past summer. Today begins the second half of that series. Now, Proverbs assumes that life experience is one way God reveals truth into your life – the everyday experiences of life and living. But something else. You could read Proverbs and come to the mistaken conclusion that if you act wisely, live morally and act honestly, you'll go to heaven. No, you'll go to heaven only because God by His grace enabled you to put your faith and trust in Jesus who paid the penalty for your sins through His death on the cross and resurrection from the grave. Proverbs doesn't tell you how to become a Christian; instead, it tells you how to be successful in life once you've decided to follow Jesus.

A primary theme that comes up over and over again in Proverbs is self-management, self-control or self-discipline. This is important to God! Here's our key verse for today. The literal Hebrew there refers to a person who lacks control over his or her own spirit. Godly self-management is the ability to control your feelings, your reactions, your responses and your actions because of your love and respect for God. When you lack that ability, you're like a demolished house. We've all seen pictures of homes devastated by tornadoes or hurricanes. Walls are broken down. Roofs are torn off. No one can live there anymore. When you lack the ability to manage yourself, your life resembles a busted up house good for nothing else but to be torn down and hauled away. Proverbs

supplies a wealth of information on how to manage yourself in a way that pleases God. Let's consider, first of all...

SIGNS OF GODLY SELF-CONTROL

The first sign is the willingness to delay gratification. You're willing to schedule the pain and pleasures of life in such a way that you deal with the painful stuff first knowing that it will make the pleasurable stuff even better. Unfortunately, we live in a culture that worships at the shrine of instant gratification. We want all good things NOW! We want a big house NOW even if we can't afford it. WE want the expensive car NOW even though it will mean excessive debt. We want the great job NOW. Forget paying your dues! All you need to do is examine the attitude of most Americans towards consumer debt to see that delaying gratification isn't high on the values list. Those plastic cards in our wallets whisper, "You can have it NOW. Go ahead, what's a little debt? The thrill of having it now will help you handle the extra stress." Instant gratification shows up in other places. We want a great marriage NOW. Forget the reality that most great marriages are the result of relational work. We want to be a great parent NOW. But learning how to be a better parent is a life long educational process. We want a great church NOW. Forget the fact that no church started out great.

You know what's another word for instant gratification? Envy. Proverbs says, "It's healthy to be content, but envy can eat you up." (Proverbs 14:30 CEV). Envy says, "I refuse to be content with what God has given me today. I refuse to believe that many good things in life take time to receive or realize." Either you put the brakes on that kind of an attitude or you're headed for a crash. We've all heard how stress can affect the human body. That's no surprise to God. He says here that unchecked envy will eat you up. When you manage yourself, you learn how to be content. That leads to health.

Proverbs also says, "If you plan and work hard, you will have plenty; if you get in a hurry, you will end up poor." (Proverbs 21:5 CEV) People who want instant gratification are usually both hasty and lazy according to God. They resist the obvious truth that most success in life happens rather slowly over time: financial success, relational success, spiritual success. Instead, everything in life gets approached quickly, sloppily and half-heartedly. The inevitable result is poverty in every area of life. But self-controlled people plan their work and work their plan. They seek God's perspective and are content to wait for His timing. The eventual result is prosperity in every area of life.

Here's a second sign of people with godly self-control: they avoid temptation. Every last person here has character weaknesses - chinks in our armor - that the devil wants to exploit. When you're managing yourself wisely, you learn how to avoid situations that play to your weaknesses. The Bible says, "Only a stupid fool is never cautious-- so be extra careful and stay out of trouble.... When you see trouble coming, don't be stupid and walk right into it-- be smart and hide."

(Proverbs 14:16, 22:3 CEV) The alcoholic stays away from situations where alcohol is served. The “shopaholic” leaves the charge cards at home. The man who struggles with lust avoids certain movies, magazines or Internet sites. The woman with a hair trigger temper or weakness for gossip knows when to walk away from a conversation. A person who is overly competitive learns to avoid circumstances where the ugly side of that competitive spirit might show itself. How many of you remember that old TV show, “Hee Haw”? In one comedy skit, Doc Campbell is confronted by a patient who says he broke his arm in two places. Doc replies, “Well, then, stay out of them places!” He may just have something there! Godly self-control recognizes that there are just some places you and I need to stay out of. On the other hand, a person who refuses to manage himself – who always thinks he’s going to defeat any temptation that comes along – is a fool according to God’s Word. You’re headed for a crash.

A third sign of people with godly self-control is buoyancy under stress. What’s that? God Himself treasures the ability to take what life gives and stay positive. It’s the ability to say buoyant under stress – not the absence of stress – that’s the sign of wise self-management. God’s Word says, “A glad heart makes a happy face; a broken heart crushes the spirit.... A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a broken spirit saps a person’s strength.” (Proverbs 15:13, 17:22 NLT) All of us have periods in life when our spirits feel crushed for one reason or another. But the child of God can’t let discouragement become a habit or a lifestyle. Every follower of Jesus has many reasons to live life as cheerfully and courageously as possible even in the midst of stressful times. God loves you. Your sins are forgiven. You know God is somehow working out all things – even the bad stuff – for His glory and your good. One day every tear of pain, loss or sorrow will be wiped away because you’ll be in your eternal home in God’s presence forever. Sometimes wise self-management means the ability to say, “I will not allow a negative, crushed spirit rule my life! I’m a child of God. I will not let stress destroy me, because greater is He that is in me than he who is in the world.”

A fourth sign of people with godly self-control is the ability to control anger. When it takes a whole lot to get you to push your anger button that’s wisdom. Proverbs says, “Slowness to anger makes for deep understanding; a quick-tempered person stockpiles stupidity.... Controlling your temper is better than being a hero who captures a city.” (Proverbs 14:29 MSG, 16:32 CEV) Consider the analogy found in those verses. If you were trying to defeat someone behind the thick walls of a fortified city, it would demand loads of personal discipline, courage and hard work. But a person who can control his or her temper is more impressive from God’s viewpoint. It’s God’s will and desire that you control your temper. Anger is not to rule you; you are to take authority over your anger. Don’t ever shrug off a quick temper by saying, “Well, that’s just the way I am. I can’t help it” as if a quick temper is kind of like having blue eyes or brown hair. No, not all anger is sin. Jesus got angry on occasion. But there’s a time and place for anger and a person who manages it wisely knows and understands that. “... you

should be quick to listen and slow to speak or to get angry. If you are angry, you cannot do any of the good things that God wants done.” (James 1:19-20 CEV)

I was fascinated to learn about how top athletes have to learn how to control their anger in order to be successful. Norm Evans, an All-Pro tackle for the Miami Dolphins years ago, once confided, “It’s really dangerous for a pro football player to get angry. In fact, that’s when linemen sustain their most serious injuries. Anger is so harmful in football that if I can get an opposing lineman angry at me, he will concentrate on beating me and forget to attack the quarterback. And that’s my job, protecting the quarterback.” An angry person makes poor decisions, wounds those he loves with his tongue, overreacts, disciplines too severely and does things that calm thinking wouldn’t permit.

Here’s a fifth sign of people with godly self-control: they use words carefully. They know how powerful words can be and use them accordingly. If you want to manage your life wisely, you will manage your words wisely. Proverbs says, “You will say the wrong thing if you talk too much-- so be sensible and watch what you say.... The right word at the right time is like precious gold set in silver.” (Proverbs 10:19, 25:11 CEV) Words can lead straight to sin – critical words, sarcastic words, thoughtless words, controlling words, gossiping words. On the other hand, words can be like this exquisite piece of fine jewelry: carefully planned out and beautifully presented. Wise words are appropriate to the occasion, fit the need of the moment, bring joy, give encouragement, offer comfort, and provide blessing into other people’s lives.

Christian author, John Trent, remembers playing for his high school football coach. Now this man was not prone to use encouraging words with his players ever. John remembers one game that his team was favored to win, but they were losing with little time left on the clock. John thought he’d played a pretty good game, but he groaned inwardly when he was pulled out after making a tackle in the fourth quarter. Since he was the captain of the defense, John braced himself to get a tongue lashing by his coach. But that’s not what happened. “John,” Coach said, “I just want you to know that I wish I had 10 more of you out on the field. I’m proud of how you’re playing today. Now get back in the game!” It’s been many years since John heard those words, but he’s never forgotten them. He still remembers how he sort of floated back out onto the field and played harder than ever. Those are a few signs of godly self-control in people. There are more, but you get the idea! Proverbs also points to another very important aspect of wise self-management.

SOURCES OF GODLY SELF-CONTROL

The first source is both the most obvious and the most forgotten: the fear of the Lord. This is the single most important, most essential attitude for living life wisely and well. It basically means to have a loving and obedient respect for God in all things and at all times. “Fear of the LORD is the foundation of true

knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.... Don't be impressed with your own wisdom. Instead, fear the LORD and turn away from evil." (Proverbs 1:7, 3:7 NLT) A fool isn't someone with a low IQ or a meager education. You can be very educated and highly intelligent but still be a fool. A fool is simply a person who ignores God. A fool may believe in God's existence, but God is simply irrelevant to his or her everyday life. The fool is wise in his or her own eyes regardless of what the Bible says or godly people may advise. If you want to manage your life wisely, start with the fear of the Lord, end with the fear of the Lord and make sure you do everything in between in the fear of the Lord!

A second source of godly self-control is getting corrected in your youth. Moms and Dads, listen up! You can help your kids become self-disciplined and move towards godly self-control if you take seriously your responsibility to correct them when they're young. Proverbs says, "Correct your children before it's too late; if you don't punish them, you are destroying them.... Teach your children right from wrong, and when they are grown they will still do right." (Proverbs 19:18, 22:6 CEV) If someone loved you enough to correct you when you were young, you were actually given a great gift according to God. Habits start when you're young. Bad habits have a way of getting ingrained in your personality. They're much harder to defeat later in life. If you wait until you're an adult to start wise self-management, it will be a whole lot tougher on you than if Mom or Dad got the job started earlier. Foolishness comes naturally to all of us. So does lack of self-discipline. We all have to learn wisdom and self-management.

Picture a young mother with a four year old in tow approaching a bench at the mall to take a much deserved rest. The little girl points and says, "Mommy, just one more store. I know I can spend my money there." Mom replies, "Kimberly, we agreed on three stores. We've done that. You didn't find anything. When Daddy gets here we're going home." "But Mommy, PLEEEZE!" "No." Dad finally arrives, offers Kimberly his hand and says, "Let's go." She responds with engaging charm, "Daddy, can't I please go to one more store. I know that store has something I want." Her parents exchange knowing looks. Dad says no, too. Kimberly pulls out all the stops hoping something will work. She rolls pleading eyes at Dad. She glares at Mom. She refuses to move her feet. She gets angry. She whines. She cries. Finally, Dad says firmly, "When you're done, we'll leave. If you don't wind it up soon, we're going anyway." Kimberly trudges out of the mall the picture of deep dejection and disappointment. Mom and Dad get the cold, silent treatment. Now what were Mom and Dad doing? Teaching self-control. Kimberly had agreed in advance she would visit three stores. But after visiting the third store, she hadn't used her money. In her mind it was time to dismiss the agreement and continue shopping. Mom and Dad just held to the original agreement. They weren't nasty, ugly or mean about it. They just set a limit and stuck to it. That's teaching self-management.

Wise parents know that kids just don't evolve naturally into self-controlled adults. You teach a kid self-control just like you teach him to brush his teeth regularly. I

like how one described this parental task: “saturation leadership.” Wise parents take the time to make these adjustments. They listen, they tighten up here, they loosen up there; they give mini lectures, little hugs and kisses, little pats on the back. The result? In most cases, an adult human being who will much more easily allow God to teach him or her self-control at deeper levels.

The final two sources of godly self-control are closely related. The first is the counsel of wise people. When you want to manage your life wisely and well, develop a healthy, God-honoring caution. Don't become casual about important decisions. Pray and ask God for wisdom. Seek out wise, godly people and listen to their advice. Proverbs says, “Fools are headstrong and do what they like; wise people take advice.... Take good counsel and accept correction— that's the way to live wisely and well.” (Proverbs 12:15, 19:20 MSG) The last source of godly self control is the companionship of wise people – not just their counsel, but also their companionship. Don't confuse self-control with self-sufficiency. You need God and you also need people who know God. Why? Because God often speaks and works through His people. Proverbs says, “Become wise by walking with the wise; hang out with fools and watch your life fall to pieces.... Listen to good advice if you want to live well, an honored guest among wise men and women.” (Proverbs 13:20, 15:31 MSG) Most of the time, you become a lot like the people you choose to hang out with on a regular basis. So find people who want to be better than they are right now, who want to get better, and – above all – who want to become more like Jesus.

I read a story about Columbus' own Jack Nicklaus. It was a cold, wintry afternoon and Jack had just shot an opening 72 at a major golf tournament. Now, a whole lot of people would be ecstatic about shooting a 72, but Jack was unhappy with his round of golf that day. At the end of that dreary afternoon, he took his caddy and a large bucket of shag balls, went to the edge of the fairway and started driving golf balls into the growing darkness. The rest of the field had hurried off to the clubhouse with its warm, refreshing showers and a hearty meal. But Jack just kept driving those golf balls until even his calloused hands became sensitive and sore. Someone watching him do that asked, “Why are you doing this to yourself?” Jack replied matter-of-factly, “Because I refuse to play golf like I played it today.”

What we need are Christ followers who say, “I refuse to keep living life the way I did today. I need to change. I need to do better and be better. I need to be more like Jesus.” What kind of a person do you want to be? Find people like that and hang out with them! I find that a compelling reason to be a part of a local church as well as a Sunday School class or a small group. No, not everybody is wise in this or any church. All of us are struggling to manage ourselves wisely. But there are definitely people here that fear the Lord. There are people here who want to live their lives God's way. There are people here who want to do better and be better. Most importantly, there are people here who want to become more like Jesus. Are you one of them?