

## THE EVIDENCE OF SELF-CONTROL

## GALATIANS 5:22-23

It was a hot, humid day in Kansas City. The 8 hour shift seemed especially long for the veteran city bus driver. Suddenly, a young woman passenger on the bus, obviously upset about something, let loose with a string of unrepeatable words. The bus driver, looking in his overhead mirror, could sense everyone's embarrassment because of her string of profanity. Still fuming and fussing, the young woman got ready to disembark a few blocks later. As she stepped down, the bus driver said calmly, "Madam, I believe you're leaving something behind." She turned and snapped, "Oh? What's that?" The bus driver responded, "A very bad impression."

When you and I lack self-control, it leaves a very bad impression indeed. It does not point anyone to Jesus. Just the opposite. But when self-control shows up in your life and mine consistently, it's clear evidence that you're a follower of Jesus. If you were ever accused or arrested for being a Christian, the presence of self-control in your life might well convict you. Today is the last message in this series on the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Let's find the following passage in your Bible – Galatians 5:22-23 – but let's read those two verses out loud and in unison today. "But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!" (Gal 5:22-23 NLT)

As we get started today, let me clear up three misunderstandings about self-control. One, self-control is not all about denial and being rigidly disciplined every waking moment. Instead, biblical self-control is the pathway to biblical freedom in every area of life. Two, godly self-control is not really about controlling yourself. Ultimately, it means being controlled by the Holy Spirit. It happens only when the Spirit flows through your spirit and touches every area of your life. It's putting yourself under God's control in everything. Three, you will never experience Holy Spirit-inspired self-control unless you want it with all your heart and are willing to work at it. In other words, God will help you become self-controlled, but He will not do it for you. With that clarification, let me share the first of three main ideas about self-control. First ...

### THROUGH SELF-CONTROL, THE HOLY SPIRIT KILLS.

Parts of you need to die. Parts of you need to be put to death. God will need to kill parts of you and you will have to give Him the knife, the gun or whatever it takes to do it. You might say, "Rick, that sounds very harsh. That's awful, violent imagery." Yes, it is and do you know where I got it? The Bible. "... if through the power of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature, you will live." (Rom. 8:13 NLT) "So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you..." (Col 3:5 NLT) Here's an uncomfortable reality you and I need to face. There's stuff in your life and mine that cannot be excused, coddled, negotiated with or compromised with. You just have to kill it. The Bible calls it your sinful nature.

Older translations refer to it as “the flesh.” It refers to an inbred desire to commit certain sins. The Bible says, “When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these....” (Gal. 5:19-21 NLT) That’s not intended to be a complete list, but you get the idea.

This kind of stuff has to be killed off in you and me for at least two reasons. First, because God loves you. God has to kill it before it kills you spiritually. This is a spiritual cancer and God is the loving and skillful surgeon who wants to cut it out of you before it kills you. An Arkansas man had a pet rattlesnake. He found this snake when it was very young. He fed it and made a pet out of it. The snake would come when he whistled and would eat from his fingers. It would coil around his arm. One day he took it town for his friends to see. They were all amazed at how gentle the snake seemed. Yet, later that same day back at home, the snake suddenly turned on that man and sunk its fangs into his arm. The poison killed him. The same thing will happen if you make a pet out of some sin. It’s like making a pet out of a poisonous snake. A second reason you have to kill of some things within you is simply because God is holy. God will not allow manifestations of your sinful nature into His Heaven. Here’s what the Bible says about those who just indulge their sinful nature in this life. “...anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.” (Gal. 5:21 NLT). Yes, of course, God does give any and every sinful person who trusts in Jesus the gift of eternal life – entrance into Heaven forever. But don’t ever conclude that God’s grace is something passive or dormant. Because of His grace and out of that grace, God is all about killing off anything in you or me that doesn’t please Him.

Many followers of Jesus want a relationship with God, but they don’t want to change. They want Heaven, but they want to hold on to their sin at the same time. They want to get away from the threat of Hell but, at the same time, hold on to some of the stuff that’s from Hell itself. Do you remember a Bible character named Felix? Felix was the Roman governor of Israel during a period of time when the great Christian leader, Paul, was in prison. On one occasion, Paul shared the message of Jesus with Felix. The Bible tells us, “As he reasoned with them about righteousness and self-control and the coming day of judgment, Felix became frightened. ‘Go away for now,’ he replied. ‘When it is more convenient, I’ll call for you again.’” (Acts 24:25 NLT) Interesting.... Historians tell us that Felix lacked self-control in several areas of his personal life. He was interested in Jesus up to a point. When it became clear that to follow Jesus meant a complete re-orientation of his life, Felix got a bit nervous.

Do you see yourself in Felix’s words? I see myself there. God comes to us and puts His finger on something in you or me that must die. Like what? It could be some form of lying – just avoiding and evading telling the truth. It could be some form of envy or greed for what others have that you don’t have or think you have enough of. It could be a deep-seated resentment. It could be sex outside of

marriage – premarital sex, extramarital sex, pornography. It could be a vicious tongue or a hair trigger temper. It could be racism or contempt for poor people. It could be chronic indebtedness or the irresponsible use of money. The Holy Spirit comes to you and says, “Child of God, this must go. It must die. You cannot tolerate it or excuse it. Give Me permission to put it to death.” But even though we know that the Spirit of God is right, we try to dodge the issue. Like Felix, we can say, “God, you can go away for now. When it’s more convenient (like when I want You to do something for me), I’ll call for you again.”

So, how do you let the Holy Spirit kill off this ugly stuff in you and me? This is hard to do! Why? Because – let’s face it – a lot of sin is just flat out fun – at least in the short term. But, then, like the fun and excitement of having a pet snake, it turns on you when you least expect it and bites you. First of all, realize that you can indeed defeat every sin in your life with God’s help. The battle starts in your mind. If you think you’re just a powerless victim against all this ugly stuff, you will be. But the Bible makes it very clear that everything changes when the Holy Spirit comes into your life. It says, “Sin is no longer your master.... Instead, you live under the freedom of God’s grace.” (Rom. 6:14 NLT)

Second, remember that defeating sin is a lifelong process. The Bible is most perceptive in this regard. For instance, it says, “...Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.” (Ph 2:12-13 NLT) Do you see it? On the one hand, work hard. On the other hand, realize God has to work in you. So, don’t get discouraged. If you fail, ask God for forgiveness, get up and move on. Sometimes, killing of something that needs to die will seem agonizingly slow. And, indeed, there are some manifestations of your sinful nature that will likely take your entire lifetime to kill off and put to death. Just get started, stay at it and God will begin to grant you victory.

Third, begin to desire the benefits of godly self-control more than the pleasure provided by your sinful nature. The late Scott Peck, a psychiatrist, gives an example in one of his books. One night he decided to spend some time with his then 14 year old daughter. She had developed a real interest in chess so he suggested a game. She eagerly accepted. After playing for a while, it was starting to get late. Because it was a school night, his daughter wanted him to hurry up his moves so she could get to bed. Peck resisted. “Please, Daddy, please hurry your moves,” his daughter pleaded. “No,” Peck said. “Chess is a serious game. If you’re going to play it well, you’re going to play it slowly. If you don’t want to play it seriously, you might as well not play it at all.” Ten minutes later, his daughter burst into tears, yelled that she conceded the stupid game and ran weeping up the stairs. It took Scott Peck about two hours to accept the fact that he had botched the evening by allowing his competitiveness to become more important than his desire to build a relationship with his daughter. How did he resolve it? “I have given up part of my desire to win at games. That part of me is gone now. It died. It had to die. I killed it. I killed it with my desire to win at

parenting.” You and I have to get to a place where we say to God, “I give you permission to kill this off in me. Yes, it gives me pleasure, but I want the pleasure of pleasing and honoring You far more.” Now a second thought ...

### **THROUGH SELF-CONTROL, THE HOLY SPIRIT BALANCES.**

Self-control is more than just putting bad stuff to death. It also involves keeping good things in their proper balance. As sinful human beings, we are by nature out of balance. We tend to lurch from one extreme to the other. For example, the Bible says, “Do you like honey? Don’t eat too much, or it will make you sick!” (Prov 25:16 NLT) Is eating honey a sin? Of course not! But eating too much is bad for you. When you get too much of a good thing or you use a good thing in a wrong or extreme way, you fail to show self-control.

Is eating a sin? No. But one extreme is gluttony while the other is self-imposed starvation like anorexia nervosa or bulimia. Both are failures in self-control. Balance is having a healthy appetite and satisfying it appropriately. Is dressing up and looking nice a sin? No. One extreme is to let yourself look like you just got run over while the other extreme is to dress in order to get noticed by the opposite sex. What’s balance? Modesty. The use of time is another area where we struggle to stay balanced. On the one hand, you can be a workaholic who just steals time from God and your family. On the other hand, you can be lazy and waste time. Both are examples of a lack of self-control. Balance offers God all the hours in your day and asks Him for wisdom in how to divide it appropriately between work, sleep, recreation, ministry for the Lord, whatever.

Is sex sinful? No. One extreme sees any and all sex as displeasing to God. The other extreme is to tolerate any and all kinds of sexual expression as OK. How does God define sexual balance? Balance is a robust, free, mutually enjoyed sexual relationship between a husband and a wife. From God’s perspective that disqualifies any kind of premarital, extramarital, homosexual or pornographic sex from ever being considered balanced. Is money sinful? No. The Bible says the love of money is the root of all evil – not money itself. What is balance when it comes to money from God’s perspective? Work hard for it. Save it. Stay out of debt. Give a tithe to the Lord. But most Christians think giving 10% to the Lord is just asking too much. Isn’t that telling? God says that returning back to Him gratefully just 10% of your income will help you keep financially balanced, but many of us think that keeping 90% for ourselves is just not enough! Is it any wonder that our financial lives are out of balance?

Getting and staying balanced demands self-control. It’s kind of like driving down a road with a deep ditch on each side. The name of the road itself is freedom – the freedom God wants you to have. On one side of Freedom Road is a ditch called “legalism.” What does legalism do? It limits freedom by getting you to buy into all sorts of non-biblical rules and regulations. On the other side of Freedom Road is a ditch called “looseness.” What does looseness do? It attacks freedom

by insisting that there is no such thing as excess or extremes. Anything goes! Everything is OK from a certain perspective! As long as nobody gets hurt, who cares? You stay on Freedom Road and live out self-control in a God-honoring way when you avoid the ditch of either legalism or looseness. Former pastor and author, Stuart Briscoe, puts it like this, “Self-control means I say no to all that God forbids and yes to all He ordains. In addition, I am prepared to say no to that which might not be expedient, even though it is not forbidden, and say yes to what is not directly ordered, if it would be a blessing.” A third principle...

### **THROUGH SELF-CONTROL, THE HOLY SPIRIT TRAINS.**

Before you became a follower of Jesus, you were out of shape spiritually. In fact, the Bible says you were dead! When you begin to follow Jesus, you don't magically get into shape spiritually by some kind of instantaneous miracle. Just like your body, it takes time and effort to get your mind, your heart and your spirit into shape spiritually. Imagine an Olympic athlete. Everybody starts out in life being out of shape. But a world class athlete begins to live differently in order, hopefully, to get a gold medal one day. He eats differently. She exercises differently. He spends the hours of each day differently. She reads and studies stuff that is probably different than what you and I do. That's training.

Paul used the imagery of athletic training. He says, “You've all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. Run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades. You're after one that's gold eternally. I don't know about you, but I'm running hard for the finish line. I'm giving it everything I've got. No sloppy living for me! I'm staying alert and in top condition. I'm not going to get caught napping, telling everyone else all about it and then missing out myself.” (1 Cor 9:24-27 MSG) What's his point? First, every follower of Jesus needs training. You have to get into shape spiritually and stay in shape. Second, that decision to be trained, to get trained and to stay trained is yours and yours alone. No one can make that decision for you. The Holy Spirit will help you, but He won't force you.

Third, every follower of Jesus has to decide to take this training seriously or not. You can train just enough to jog slowly around the track gasping for breath or you can train to run fast and hard the whole time. In other words, you can play at worshipping God or you can give yourself to it here every Sunday and in your own personal time with God. You can play at getting to know the Bible better or you can get better acquainted with it by reading and studying it diligently. You can play at sharing your faith with lost people or you can pray for them by name, patiently build a relationship and be ready to get into a spiritual conversation at the first opportunity. You can play at killing off that spiritual junk the Holy Spirit has revealed in your life or you can begin taking concrete steps to execute that stuff in the name of Jesus. You can play at putting your spiritual gifts to use in Kingdom work or you can begin to serve King Jesus faithfully in an actual place at an actual time on an actual day. Are you in training seriously?

Fourth, the benefits of spiritual training are of the greatest value both for today and for eternity. Godly self-control results in sweet, personal freedom. You live life at your very best. Godly self-control improves your relationship with God because it honors Him. When you consciously bring your life into alignment with God in some area, it glorifies Him and enhances the relationship. Godly self-control gives your life a spiritual authenticity and credibility that time cannot take away and eternity will only confirm. It changes you for the better forever.

Dr. Ben Carson has become known throughout the world as a premiere brain surgeon. He has successfully separated numerous Siamese twins and continues to refine the techniques of several complicated surgeries. What many don't know is that Ben Carson had an uncontrollable temper as a child that almost cost him a career in medicine before it even began. One day something happened that caused Ben Carson to invite God to help him deal with this critical character flaw. Ben was 14-years-old in ninth grade. He was hanging out at the house of his friend, Bob, just listening to his radio. Suddenly, Bob leaned over and switched stations. Ben had been enjoying the song playing on the first station, so he reached over and flipped it back. Bob switched stations again. A wave of rage just welled up inside of Ben. Almost without thinking, he pulled out the pocketknife he always carried, flicked open the blade and lunged viciously right at his friend's stomach. Incredibly, the point of the knife struck Bob's large metal buckle and the blade snapped off in Ben's hands. Bob was too surprised to say anything. But Ben could read the terror in his friend's eyes.

"I...I...I'm sorry!" Ben sputtered. He dropped the knife and ran home. He was horrified by what he'd just done. He burst into his empty house, locked himself in the bathroom, and sank to the floor miserable and frightened. He could no longer deny that he had a severe anger problem. He also knew in that moment that he'd never achieve his dream of being a doctor with an uncontrollable temper. He admitted to himself there was no way he could control it by himself. He began to pray. "Lord, please, you've got to help me. Take this temper away! You promised that if I ask anything in faith, you'll do it. I believe you can change me." He went and got a Bible. Back on the bathroom floor, he opened to the Book of Proverbs. God led him to Proverbs 16:32 (NLT), "Better to be patient than powerful; better to have self-control than to conquer a city." That convicted Ben Carson, but also gave him hope. He felt God telling him that although He knew everything about Ben, He still loved him. Because He made Ben, God was the only one who could change him and that He would. He was filled with the assurance that God had answered his prayer. Ben Carson says that uncontrolled anger has never again been a threat to him or those around him. God has provided whatever strength he needs to control his anger.

Through self-control, the Holy Spirit kills, the Holy Spirit balances and the Holy Spirit trains. Self-control is really allowing God to control you. And when that happens, it's enough to prove that you're a follower of Jesus.