



THE  
MENTORING  
PROJECT

# SELF-CONTROL: THE PATH TO TRUE FREEDOM



MATT DAMICO

**SELF-CONTROL  
THE PATH TO  
TRUE FREEDOM**

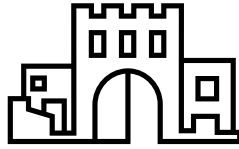


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# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	5
PART I: DEFINING SELF-CONTROL .....	7
PART II: SELF-CONTROL AND THE HEART .....	12
PART III: APPLYING SELF-CONTROL .....	18
CONCLUSION .....	26
ENDNOTES .....	28

# SELF-CONTROL: THE PATH TO TRUE FREEDOM



# INTRODUCTION

Imagine a group of a dozen jazz musicians gathered together, ready to play: a few trumpet players, a few trombonists, a few saxophones, a pianist, bassist, and drummer. They have no music on their stands. To get started, one of them says, “play whatever notes you want at whatever tempo you want. Go!” What do you think the result is going to be? It will assuredly be musical anarchy, blurring the lines between music and noise.

Now imagine the same group of musicians, but one of them decides what key signature the group will play in (thus limiting the options for what notes should be played), clearly sets the tempo and time, and even gives direction on when different people will play. The outcome will be discernibly and unquestionably music. And, depending on the quality of musicians, it could be quite good.

What’s the difference between the two scenarios? The difference is the presence of boundaries. The first scene *sounds* like a recipe for freedom, but the absence of defined boundaries leads to chaos and disorder. The second scene makes room for *actual* freedom, putting the musicians in a position to create something good and beautiful.

Wise limits promote order, goodness, and joy. And the absence of limits prevents those very qualities, often leading to confusion and disarray.

This principle holds true in music and in life. If we remove limits and allow ourselves to indulge every urge we feel — be it for food, drink, sex, sleep, or otherwise — we will assuredly find ourselves miserable and burdened with regret. The so-called freedom of indulgence turns out to be bondage.

Meanwhile, the presence of limits — the ability and skill to say “no” to certain things — enables us to say “yes” to the right things and to build lives

## SELF-CONTROL: THE PATH TO TRUE FREEDOM

that bring glory to our Maker.

This ability to install boundaries and live by them is what the Bible calls “self-control.” And self-control is the path to freedom from bondage of all kinds.

One challenge for us is that we live in an age and culture with radically divergent approaches to self-control. For some people, self-control is antithetical to cultural virtues like authenticity and self-expression. If boundaries encourage you to live in ways that are “inauthentic” because you don’t always “feel like” living by those boundaries and withholding yourself from pleasure, then the boundaries have got to go. Or if boundaries threaten to stifle the true you from being expressed, then self-expression must win.

On the other end of things, there are books, podcasts, and programs that promise to help people be more productive, form good habits, and develop life hacks. Clearly, some people want to bring their passions and lives under control. More on this phenomenon below.

God calls his people to something better than authenticity and offers us better promises than life hacks. Through this field guide, we will seek a more full understanding of the Bible’s teaching on self-control, explore biblical motives, and then apply these concepts to different areas of life. I pray you come through the other side with a renewed zeal to live with self-control for the glory of God, for your own good, and the good of those around you.

# 1

## DEFINING SELF-CONTROL

The meaning of “self-control” is rather self-explanatory, so we need not overcomplicate it. But it’s worth noting that there are a couple different words that get translated as “self-control” in the New Testament. And, while there is significant overlap in their meanings, there are some differences. Let’s consider two examples.

### ***Galatians 5:22–23***

These well-known verses list out what Paul calls the “fruit of the Spirit” — evidence that we belong to Christ and are indwelt by his Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. “Against such things,” Paul says, “there is no law” (5:23).

The final item on the list is “self-control,” a word that the King James Version renders as “temperance.” The word here in Galatians carries the idea of control over one’s appetites and passions, perhaps with a particular focus on sexual passions.

The focus on passions makes sense in the broader context of what Paul says in Galatians 5. Just before listing out the works of the Spirit, he provides a sampling of the works of the flesh, which are opposed to the Spirit: “sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these” (5:19–21).

Do you notice something about this list? Many of the vices listed could be described as indulgence to sinful passions. If our lives are marked by these works, we can be sure that we are walking according to the flesh and not the Spirit. To walk in God-honoring ways, we need Spirit-wrought self-control. As Tom Schreiner puts it in his commentary on Galatians, “Those who have self-control are able to restrain themselves, unlike those who are dominated by the desires of the flesh.”<sup>1</sup>

## SELF-CONTROL: THE PATH TO TRUE FREEDOM

What Paul wants for Christians is to live in freedom. If we walk in the flesh, we're walking in slavery. If we walk in the Spirit, we are free, for "against such things there is no law" (Gal. 5:23). It is for such freedom that "Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1).

### ***Titus 2***

If you've read Paul's letter to Titus closely, you've likely noticed how frequently self-control appears. This is especially the case in chapter two, where different forms of the word show up five times. In these verses, Paul advises Titus on how to exhort the different groups of people in the church: older men, older women, younger women, and younger men.

Paul writes:

- "Older men are to be...self-controlled."
- Younger women are "to be self-controlled."
- Younger men are "to be self-controlled."
- Older women are to "train the young women," and the verb translated as "to train" shares the same root as "self-control."

In other words, self-control is to be evident in the lives of all Christians — young and old, women and men.

Before going any further, a brief word to the younger men reading this. In Titus 2, Paul lists a number of qualities that ought to mark the lives of older men, older women, and younger women. But when it comes to you — younger men — he supplies no such list. Rather, it's just one quality for the younger men: Titus should "urge the younger men to be self-controlled" (Titus 2:6). That's it. Why does he keep it so simple for the young men? Because if young men can attain self-control, they will be spared many of the ills that typically plague young men. Think of some of the sins that are common to young men, albeit to varying degrees for different men: laziness, pride, over-aggression, lust, anger. There are more that could be mentioned, but beneath and behind each of these vices lies a lack of self-control. Young men, therefore, should devote as much energy as they can to cultivating this virtue. It will be for your good and the good of those around you.

Back to Titus: the word that Paul uses for "self-control" in Titus is different from the one in Galatians 5. And while we don't want to overstate the differences, this word in Titus has a slightly different emphasis. Rather than describing control over one's passions, it carries the idea of "a sound mind."<sup>2</sup>



## FIELD GUIDE

As in Galatians, the sense of the word is reinforced by everything else Paul says in the surrounding verses. The kinds of virtues he wants Titus to encourage include sober-mindedness, dignity, steadfastness, reverence, purity, integrity, and others like this. These qualities are less about restraining passions and avoiding indulgence, and more about cultivating a moderation of spirit and stability of mind. In fact, the word Paul uses here in Titus 2 has been translated as “sober-minded” (KJV; NKJV) and “sensible” (NASB).

It is understandable that some translations render both words in Galatians 5 and Titus 2 as “self-control,” but it is worth noting the nuances of both. Given the differences in the words, we can conclude that, when the New Testament talks about self-control, it is addressing our whole selves: minds and passions alike.

What, then, is self-control? We can define it as a Spirit-empowered ability to govern our passions and actions and pursue soundness of heart and mind to the glory of God.

### ***Self-Control in the Life of Jesus***

Examples are always helpful when we want to define something, and — as with every virtue — we have a perfect model in the Lord Jesus. And while he came primarily to be our substitute and to supply the righteousness we could never achieve on our own, we should also look to him as our example. It is, after all, into his likeness that the Spirit is transforming us. So it is right and good for us to look to him as our pattern.

Let us consider a few scenes where Jesus puts self-control on display.

#### *1. Before the Tempter*

After Jesus is baptized, he is led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he goes without food for forty days and forty nights. Seeing an opportunity, the devil shows up and takes aim at Jesus’ appetites. The ancient serpent is crafty, and his plan is shrewd. Matthew even tells us that by the time the devil arrives, Jesus “was hungry” (Matt. 4:2). So the tempter takes his shot: “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread” (Matt. 4:3). Jesus responds by staring temptation full in the face and quoting Deuteronomy 8:3: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4).

How is Jesus able to respond this way? His appetite was certainly raging, and the offer of bread must have been genuinely tempting. Jesus is able

## SELF-CONTROL: THE PATH TO TRUE FREEDOM

to respond this way because the truth of Scripture was more controlling for him than his physical appetite. His “no” to the temptation allowed him to say “yes” to the promises of God. In other words, he allowed his real, legitimate appetite to be subservient to the Word of God. This is self-control.

### *2. Before His Accusers*

The scene of Jesus’ arrest, interrogation, flogging, and death is one long series of injustices. The accusations were false, and every moment of punishment undeserved. And yet Jesus never wavered.

When he was before Caiaphas and the rest of the council, Jesus was in the midst of an unhinged religious mob. There were false witnesses and wicked foes who spit on and struck Jesus. And yet “Jesus remained silent” (Matt. 26:63).

When he is questioned by Pontius Pilate, Jesus was willing to converse, but never sought to avoid the cross. And Mark notes that when Jesus decided that such exchanges were no longer necessary, “Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed” (Mark 15:5).

How is it that Jesus was able to endure such hostility, even physical assault, and yet not retaliate verbally or physically? The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus was able to face such mistreatment “for the joy that was set before him” (Heb. 12:2). And Peter says that, “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Pet. 2:23). Jesus knew there was greater pleasure to be had in obedience than in retaliation — and he could have brought all his accusers to nothing with a mere word. But his trust in the Father did not falter. The reality of God and eternal rewards enabled him to control his tongue and stay the course.

### *3. Before the Crowds*

Jesus dealt with a lot of people in his brief ministry on earth. Look at these handful of verses from the Gospel of Matthew:

- “...great crowds followed him” (Matt. 4:25).
- “Jesus...withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all” (Matt. 12:15).
- “That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him” (Matt 13:1–2).
- After John the Baptist is killed, Jesus “withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him...

## FIELD GUIDE

and he had compassion on them and healed their sick” (Matt. 14:13–14).

Such examples could be multiplied. Notice that, despite the fact that Jesus had almost no opportunity for solitude and had people constantly seeking him for healing, he never once responded with irritation or anger. He never resented the neediness of the crowds or their persistence in wanting his attention. When Paul writes that love “is patient and kind...does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful...love bears all things” (1 Cor. 13:4–5, 7), one wonders if he had the example of Jesus in mind.

There is another jarring scene in John’s Gospel, where Jesus fed the five thousand and the crowd responded so enthusiastically that Jesus perceived “that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king.” He responded not by allowing himself to be crowned, but by withdrawing “again to the mountain by himself” (John 6:15).

How is it that Jesus exercised such control over his responses, never being bothered or angry? How was he able to refuse to allow the masses sway him one way or another, giving him freedom to serve his Father and love others? He knew the purpose for which he came, he sought first the kingdom, and he knew that true joy is found in the good of others. This is self-control.

Jesus put our definition of self-control on glorious display: a Spirit-empowered ability to govern passions and actions and pursue soundness of heart and mind to the glory of God. What a Savior!

### ***Discussion & Reflection:***

1. Can you define self-control? Who in your life examples self-control well?
2. Which scene from the life of Christ displays the kind of self-control you hope to cultivate in your life?
3. Have you memorized Galatians 5:22–23? Try it!

## 2

# SELF-CONTROL AND THE HEART

Before we consider practical areas of application, there are three questions related to the heart that are worth our consideration.

### ***1. Is Self-Control a Christian Virtue?***

As noted above, our age loves authenticity and self-expression. Once you discover the version of yourself that you want to pursue, anything that might inhibit its full expression should be done away with. Such restrictions would threaten to make you inauthentic. So, in some ways, self-control is opposed to the spirit of the age.<sup>3</sup>

And yet, a scroll through the bookstore will tell you there's an entire segment of the publishing world devoted to self-help resources, life hacks, and maximizing productivity — books promising to have unlocked the secret to getting things done and mastering the self. So, in some ways, self-control — or at least some form of it — remains highly sought.

While the obsession with authenticity might be a feature unique to our times, the quest for self-control over our passions is not. Nor has self-control been a concern exclusive to the people of God. Philosophers as far back as Plato and Aristotle have listed temperance — a relative of self-control — among the cardinal virtues. The entire school of Stoic philosophy depends on virtues like self-mastery.

This leads to an important question: is the temperance of Aristotle, the self-control of the Stoics, and the self-maximization of today's gurus the same thing as the fruit produced by the Spirit of God?

The short answer: no, it's not the same.

The longer answer is that the difference between the Christian virtue and its non-Christian counterparts will not always be discernible. This is the case with many elements of Christian character: kindness, joy, patience,

## FIELD GUIDE

and more. For the most part, you will not be able to observe whether what you see is the work of the Holy Spirit or simply common grace on display.

With self-control, there may be some discernibly Christian things you can observe. For example, we want to be disciplined with our time so that we can spend time in the Word and prayer. We want to be wise in our financial habits so we can give to our churches and be generous. Yet even in these examples, we could be simply observing some counterfeit to the Spirit.

This is because the truly Christian nature of Spirit-wrought self-control is something you cannot see: the heart. The difference between Christian self-control and the others is the *why* behind the behavior. What is the grand aim of living within boundaries?

Aristotle, who described temperance as the mean between indulgence and lack, viewed the virtues as a path to happiness. That was his *why*.<sup>4</sup>

The Stoics avoided excess and practiced a sort of indifference to external factors in order to achieve internal harmony and virtuous living.

Much of today's literature on self-control is aimed at becoming the most productive and optimized version of ourselves.

None of these desires are bad, of course. Happiness, harmony, and productive habits are all worthwhile aims. The question is whether they are worthwhile as *ultimate* aims.

You likely know the answer: no, they are not. The problem is that these aims can be pursued, and even achieved, with no regard for God whatsoever. Things like productivity and happiness are concerned only with us; their realm is limited to this earth and our transient lives. The Bible's very first verse — "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1) — confronts such assumptions head on. This life is not all there is, we have a Creator, and he fills both heaven and earth. So any consideration of our lives that does not begin and end with God is incomplete and sub-Christian.

God calls us to some of the same aims: self-control, happiness, productivity, internal peace. But the animating motive for these is higher and greater than anything the Greeks or gurus describe:

- Christians should seek to work hard and be productive. Why? "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving

## SELF-CONTROL: THE PATH TO TRUE FREEDOM

the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:23–24).

- Christians should seek to restrain their sinful appetites. Why? “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people...training us to...live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:11–13).
- Christians should be disciplined in their use of time. Why? “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (Eph. 5:15–17).

Look at what should motivate such careful living: an awareness that we are accountable to God Almighty and the Lord Jesus Christ. He made us, he has set the terms for how we should live, and his commands are the path of true joy.

So why should we be self-controlled? For the honor and glory of God.

Do we want to achieve happiness? Absolutely. Do we want to be productive? I hope so. But the underlying motivation for these things is not simply to be the best version of ourselves, or to boost our self-esteem, or anything with the self at the center. The foundational incentive ought to be that we want to “do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

The examples from the life of Jesus that we considered above make this point. His ability to say “no” to temptation and sin while saying “yes” to all the right things was a reflection of his devotion to the glory of God. This heart-level motive is what makes self-control a true fruit of the Spirit.

### **2. *Is Self-Control Simply about Laws or Boundaries?***

Our second question gets at the role of wisdom in the pursuit of self-control. Truly Christian self-control is not about setting up rules and then simply following them. Were that the case, we could forget about the God-centered motives we just established. We would also run the risk of potentially being enslaved to our own schemes, blinding us to providential and unexpected opportunities.

And to live by a set of our own rules could also keep us from understanding that much of our self-control happens within the realm of Christian freedom.

To help us grasp this point, we can think of two different “lanes” of self-control.

First, there is a wide lane. We might call this the Self-Control-or-Sin lane. There is freedom to move anywhere within this lane, but as soon as you

## FIELD GUIDE

cross a boundary, you've veered into sin. For example, consider internet usage. There is much you can do online that is well and good; there's freedom. But there are also areas online — e.g., pornography — that are completely outside the lane and off the road altogether. You have to sin to get there. The choices are to either exercise self-control and stay in the lane, or lack self-control and fall into sin.

Or consider our speech. There are lots of God-honoring ways to speak, but there are also ways to use our tongues that are explicitly sinful: lying, blaspheming, gossiping, and more. The choices are to either exercise self-control and not speak in these ways, or lack self-control and fall into sin.

In both of these examples, it requires self-control to stay in the lane and avoid the inherently sinful activity.

But in both internet usage and speech, we can identify a second, narrower lane within the wide one. We might call this the Self-Control-or-Imprudence lane. This narrower lane is not defined by laws, but by wisdom. Considering internet usage again, there are a lot of ways one could function online that are not inherently sinful, but are unwise. Or that may be unwise *for you* or *for a time*. Be it sites that drain your time or prove less-than-edifying — you may need to exercise self-control by drawing prudential boundaries.

The same goes for our speech. There are all kinds of ways people can use their speech that may not be inherently sinful, but are unwise. It could be a habit of talking too much, or talking too little, or any number of ways we're prone to misuse our tongues. Whatever it is, it calls for wise boundaries to be put in place.

Wise boundaries are what Paul encouraged when writing to the Corinthians. The Corinthians had a misguided view of freedom, as captured in one of their slogans: "all things are lawful for me" (1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23). They were using this line to legitimize sinful behavior, and Paul took exception. For one, it is simply not true that all things are lawful. Christians are under the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21), and though we are free from the bondage of sin and the law of Moses, we are to be slaves to righteousness (Rom. 6:17–19). And second, even within the law of Christ, there may be other considerations.

Paul countered the Corinthian slogan by offering a couple such considerations: "not all things are helpful" and "I will not be dominated by anything" (1 Cor. 6:12).

Whether something is "helpful" or not can be determined by whether it's a help or a hindrance in our walk with Christ — or in that of others, as the idea

## SELF-CONTROL: THE PATH TO TRUE FREEDOM

of “helpful” sometimes has the welfare of others in view (10:23–24; 12:7). And whether we are being “dominated by anything” can be determined by whether we have the freedom to forego it without drastic measures.

We don’t want to live in fear that we’re always on the brink of losing control. It is wonderfully true that “everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving” (1 Tim. 4:4). But if you know yourself well enough and you know the darkness of sin, it will not be difficult to think of something you enjoy that can turn into indulgence. It is possible that the enjoyment of something good, left unchecked, can become enslavement. Self-control is the difference between God-honoring enjoyment and sinful indulgence.

The only thing we want controlling us is the Spirit of God. That happens as we live within the wider lane of lawfulness and, when necessary, draw boundaries to ensure we will not be dominated by anything. This leads us to our third question.

### **3. *Who’s in Control?***

A misgiving one could have with regard to self-control is that it sounds as though we are the ones making it happen, and such expressions of effort seem contrary to the grace and sovereignty of God. This tension is not exclusive to self-control, although the word “self” may exacerbate it with this particular virtue.

So let’s seek some clarity.

The writers of the New Testament have absolutely zero problem calling us to put forth effort in the pursuit of godliness:

- “...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12).
- “Put on the whole armor of God” (Eph. 6:11).
- “Let us therefore strive to enter that rest...” (Heb. 4:11).
- “...train yourself for godliness” (1 Tim. 4:7).
- “...you also be holy in all your conduct” (1 Pet. 1:15).
- “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: ... that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor” (1 Thess. 4:3–4).

This is not to mention the calls of Christ to pick up our cross and follow him, or his word about the way to life being narrow.

Are we, then, responsible to produce holiness — and self-control in particular — in our lives? Yes, we are. Either we are responsible or those verses above are devoid of any meaning.



## FIELD GUIDE

But this is not the full picture. Hemming in these imperatives and propelling our efforts are the promises of God:

- “...for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).
- “...he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6).
- “He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thess. 5:24).
- “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom. 8:29).
- “[you] have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Col. 3:10).

This is not to mention the promises of Christ that none can pluck us from the Father’s hand and that whoever comes to him will not be cast out.

Is God, then, ultimately sovereign over even our efforts to grow in godliness and self-control? Yes, he is.

Until the day our earthly sojourn ends, we are to be putting off sin and laying aside whatever entangles us, and putting on love, self-control, and all godliness. This will take, as Kent Hughes puts it, some “holy sweat.”<sup>5</sup>

The growth may be slow, but God promises that it will happen. He himself will see to it. Just as parents cannot observe their children growing taller day-by-day, but a picture makes it plain, so it is with spiritual growth. When we look back and see evidence of growth, whether we look back now, at the end of our lives, or somewhere in between, there will be no doubt that real change and maturity occurred. And it will be equally clear that it was the Spirit of God who made it happen. And he will get the glory.

### ***Discussion & Reflection:***

1. Why should Jesus’ work on the cross motivate your self-control?
2. What are areas of “imprudence” in your life?
3. Ask yourself *why* you desire to live in self-control. What is motivating you?

# 3

## APPLYING SELF-CONTROL

God wants you to live a self-controlled life. He “gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control” (2 Tim. 1:7). And he has supplied his own Spirit to ensure that it happens. So in this section of the field guide, I want to challenge you to put on self-control. Not in order to earn what Jesus has already accomplished for you, but to bring glory to God and magnify all that Jesus accomplished for you.

To do this, let’s look at a few areas where people can struggle, let’s consider what the Scriptures say, and let’s commit to getting after it for the glory of God in our lives.

### **Time**

*“So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” – Psalm 90:12*

Stewardship of time is an area of battle for many of us. This is no surprise, for Paul when exhorts us to make “the best use of the time,” he also tells us that “the days are evil” (Eph. 5:15–16). The age in which we live — and this has been and will be true of every age until the kingdom of Christ comes in full — does not encourage Christian faithfulness. So if we are not careful, we will end up using our time in ways that dishonor Christ: laziness and sloth, worldly pursuits, sinful deeds, or a refusal to rest. None of these are faithful ways to steward our minutes, hours, days, and years.

Time is our most precious resource, and working toward faithfulness is vitally important. In a sermon on stewardship of time, Jonathan Edwards said,

It is but as a moment to eternity. Time is so short, and the work which we have to do in it is so great, that we have none of it to spare. The work which we have to do to prepare for eternity, must be done in time, or it never can be done.<sup>6</sup>

## FIELD GUIDE

If Edwards is right that the work we have to do is “so great” (and he is), then how should we think about our time?

King Solomon employs a vivid illustration to instruct his son on the matter, and we can do no better than to consider his words:

Go to the ant, O sluggard;  
    consider her ways, and be wise.  
Without having any chief,  
    officer, or ruler,  
she prepares her bread in summer  
    and gathers her food in harvest.  
How long will you lie there, O sluggard?  
    When will you arise from your sleep?  
A little sleep, a little slumber,  
    a little folding of the hands to rest,  
and poverty will come upon you like a robber,  
    and want like an armed man. (Prov. 6:6–11)

In this look at the ants, Solomon observes that they do what needs to be done without supervision. The ants do not need someone cracking the whip in order to stay on task. Can the same be said of us? Or is our stewardship so poor that we can hardly be trusted with an open hour?

In verse 8, Solomon notes that the ant “prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest.” There are different activities for the different seasons: preparing in summer, gathering in harvest. In other words, the ant knows the right time to do the right thing.

This is a view of productivity that we would do well to adopt. It does not honor God to live by a commitment to get as much done as possible all the time. This is not what God did in the week of creation, and it was not what Jesus did in spending only three years of his life active in public ministry. And the maximum-productivity approach is a sure way to burn out. As Solomon says elsewhere, “Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind” (Ecc. 4:6).

This approach also makes it very hard to be relationally available. Who has time for an unscheduled phone call with a loved one, or an urgent visit to a friend in the hospital, if our approach to life is one of maximum productivity?

Self-control in our use of time looks like doing the right thing at the right time in the right way. When we are at work, we should work. And it is

## SELF-CONTROL: THE PATH TO TRUE FREEDOM

wise to set boundaries around what encroaches on our work. When we are home, we should be at home, with boundaries in place to protect that time. When we should be sleeping, we should sleep. The principle can be applied across our responsibilities: do the right thing at the right time in the right way. Prepare in summer, gather in harvest.

When Solomon finishes his observation of the ant, he turns his attention to the sluggard: when will you get up and do something? He's talking about sleep, but we could just as easily fit it to our own struggles: "How long will you binge your streaming service?" "How long will you scroll on that phone before you actually get up?"

There is a time for appropriate, God-honoring rest. But sleep and leisure are appetites, and if you indulge a little bit here and a little bit there, those appetites will grow. And one day you'll wake up and realize you have not been living your life in the fear of God.

One painful reality is that someone will always pay for our poor stewardship of time. If we are lazy at work, our employer and coworkers feel the effects. But so will our loved ones, if we end up having to make up for our laziness with time that should be protected for our families, churches, and friends.

Evaluate how you steward your time, and see what needs to change. If you're not sure, ask those closest to you to share their observations. Then act: confess to those you've sinned against, if that's the situation. Put boundaries in place, and honor God with this most precious of commodities.

### **Thinking**

*"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." – Romans 12:2*

Exercising self-control in your thought life may not seem like a possibility, but it is worth the effort. We are to love God with our heart, soul, and *minds* (Matt. 22:37). The Scriptures assume that we are not simply passengers along for the ride in our thinking, but that we have agency over what happens within our minds.

The Apostle Paul writes,

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable,

## FIELD GUIDE

if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Phil. 4:8)

Did you catch that last part? That's an imperative: think about these things.

Paul would not tell us to do this if it were an impossibility. We see the same biblical assumption of agency in Psalm 1, where the blessed man is said to meditate on the law of God day and night. Such meditation involves decisions about what to think about and what to put out of our minds. That is to say, the Bible calls us to self-control in our minds.

Such mental discipline is a challenge, and there are some for whom certain kinds of thoughts prove “sticky,”<sup>7</sup> but we are all exhorted to “be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom. 12:2).

There are many areas of our thinking where self-control would help, but let's consider two: lustful thoughts and immature thinking.

### *Lust*

If you concede agency and allow your thoughts to happen to you, lust will prove a losing battle. You must be ready for the struggle and be prepared to counter. For people who struggle consistently with lust, one way to help is to get real practical: start with a notecard. On that notecard, write a Bible verse or two that can help you battle lustful thinking, like 1 Thessalonians 4:3, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality.” Or make it something you want to move your mind toward, so that you're putting off lust and putting on something edifying, like “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom. 12:10).

Keep that card in your pocket, or tape it to your dashboard or computer, and when a lustful thought enters your mind, take that card out and read it, and pray until you believe it. If you're still struggling, do it again. Do that until you can experience what Jesus experienced in his temptation: the reality of the truth outweighing the raging appetite. This is one way to take your thoughts captive and exercise some self-control.

### *Immaturity*

In 1 Corinthians 14:20, Paul says, “Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.”

What does mature thinking look like?

## SELF-CONTROL: THE PATH TO TRUE FREEDOM

As an example, Proverbs 18:17 says, “The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.” The immature, childish way of thinking hears one side of a story and then forms a passionate opinion in response. The mature, self-controlled way of thinking waits, doesn’t settle for surface-level thinking, and is patient in forming an opinion until more information can be gathered.

Given that we live in a culture of clickbait, hot takes, and emotionalism, this form of self-control will put you squarely at odds with the spirit of our age. To get practical: next time you hear of a controversy, or see some viral video on the news, resist the temptation to believe the initial narrative. The mature way to think is to hear one side of the story and think, “that may very well be right, but we’ll have to see.”

Let everyone else rage in their opinions and express them loudly on social media. Be mature, sober-minded, and self-controlled in your thinking.

### **Emotions**

*“Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.” – Proverbs 16:32*

*“A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back.” – Proverbs 29:11*

What does self-control look like in our emotional lives? It looks like the capacity to rule our spirit, and not giving full vent to it. It looks like allowing our emotions to *serve* our thinking rather than letting them *guide* our thinking.

This is one area where the concern for authenticity can undermine maturity. In our culture, passion has nearly reached the status of an emotional trump card, so that if I simply say something with enough passion, it must be true or at least taken seriously. But some passion is nothing more than giving “full vent” to our spirits. The wiser course is to exercise self-control and be one who “quietly holds it back” (Prov. 29:11).

The same authority has been granted to emotional responses. If you say or do something and my feelings get hurt, then it does not matter whether what you did or said was wrong or intended to wound, the fact that my feelings got hurt is what matters. This is childish, and the opposite of what Solomon commends: “Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense” (Prov. 19:11).

## FIELD GUIDE

Emotions can be good things. The Lord Jesus expressed sorrow at Lazarus's tomb (John 11:35), anger as he cleansed the temple (John 2:13–22), concern in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:38–39), and he “rejoiced in the Holy Spirit” when he prayed (Luke 10:21). And as Christians, we’re commanded to rejoice and to weep (Rom. 12:15).

Emotional maturity, then, cannot be the absence of emotions. Rather, it’s in the ability to rule our emotions and not be ruled by them.

Immature emotions tend to be fleeting, surface-level, and may not be in keeping with our mind and will. They rise within us and exercise an out-sized influence.

An example of such immaturity is when children (or adults, for that matter) throw tantrums. They lose control and allow their emotions to run the show, often in ways of which they will later be ashamed. When my son was younger and would throw a temper tantrum, we would remind him that “big boys have self-control.” He has outgrown tantrums, but this is a message he still hears.

Mature, self-controlled emotions — which may more properly be called affections — tend to involve the whole person, aligning with our beliefs and wills, and prove enduring. They rise within us and propel us in ways that are good and fitting to the circumstances. They express sadness, joy, and all the rest at the right time and in the right measure.

If we would shine as lights in a twisted generation, exercising self-control in our emotional life will go a long way.

### **Tongues**

*“If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man.” – James 3:2*

Taming the tongue is a universal battle, but it takes place on different fronts for different people. Some people are too quick to speak while others don’t speak up when they should. Some are too long-winded once they start speaking, while others struggle with being harsh, vulgar, and unedifying. Others can’t avoid lying, while others fail to keep their word.

What does self-control look like with our speech? It looks like making Ephesians 4:29 our standard: “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.”

## SELF-CONTROL: THE PATH TO TRUE FREEDOM

If you make edification your aim when you speak, you will use your words to encourage, affirm, speak the truth, and bear witness. This is all pleasing to God and gives grace to those around you.

People with a self-controlled tongue often possess the skill of good listening, too. You likely know someone who is such a poor listener that you wonder what the use is of trying to converse with them, or who is clearly waiting for you to stop talking so they can say what they want. Such qualities display not merely bad listening, but a selfish, self-absorbed heart. If someone won't listen, their speech will often be self-serving.

The commitment to edifying and serving those around us should mark our verbal communication, our listening, and our written communication. Whether it's our texts, our social media posts, or something else, we should all tremble at the truth that "on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak" (Matt. 12:36).

As James observes, if anyone can restrain his tongue, "he is a perfect man" (James 3:2). None of us does this as we ought, which is why the Scriptures speak so much about it.

Consider a mere sampling of the ways the Word of God instructs our speech, and note which verses have particular relevance for you:

- "When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent" (Prov. 10:19)
- "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil" (Matt. 5:37).
- "But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth" (Col. 3:8).
- "From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so" (James 3:10).
- "Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few" (Ecc. 5:2).

The ways to stumble with our speech are so numerous as to make total silence tempting. And yet speak we must!

Fear God, love others, and control your tongue by seeking to build up and give grace. You will bless those around you and spare yourself much strife.



## FIELD GUIDE

### **Bodies**

*“You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” – 1 Corinthians 6:19–20*

We do not own our bodies, we are merely stewards of them while we have them. And in this life we only get one of them.<sup>8</sup>

A lack of self-control in physical stewardship could entail gluttony, drunkenness, laziness, sexual immorality, and more. Putting on self-control begins with the firm belief that God owns our bodies, and that we are responsible to take care of our earthly tents as we serve the Lord.

This should inform our relationship with food. We ought to enjoy it as a good gift from God, but as Paul says, we should not be dominated by anything in the form of overdependence or addiction.

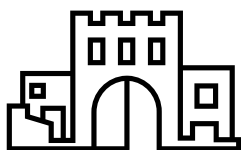
This should inform our relationship with exercise. Bodily training may not hold eternal value, but it is of some value (1 Tim. 4:8). There is such a thing as *undervaluing* the value of bodily training, which would be poor stewardship. And there is such a thing as *overvaluing* physical training, which could be a sign of misaligned priorities. In the same way that a craftsman tends to his tools to ensure they can fulfill their purpose, so we should pay some heed to our bodies, lest they become a hindrance to faithfulness.

And this reality that we are stewards of our bodies should lead us to hate sexual immorality and to flee from it. Our bodies belong to God, and to dishonor our body by using it for the purpose of immorality is to dishonor our Creator. The wise person sets up boundaries to ensure we stay far from sin.

These are five areas where self-control will serve us, but you could take any area of your life and map out what self-control looks like. Such efforts are difficult, and will require confession and repentance along the way, but this is what God wants for us, and by his Spirit he can bring it about.

### **Discussion & Reflection:**

1. Which of these areas need the most attention in your life?
2. What are some boundaries you can put up to make progress in self-control?
3. Who in your life can you invite to hold you accountable?



## CONCLUSION

“For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” – 2 Peter 1:5–8

Self-control is the path to freedom. It enables us to live the kinds of lives we *want* to live. It allows us to enjoy God’s good gifts without being enslaved, and it displays to all the world that we are mastered by nothing other than Jesus Christ.

So where do you go from here?

My hope is that your primary response to what you’ve read is *not* despair. It is always the right time to submit an area of your life to Christ. You may think you’re too far gone in some area, but this is a lie that you must reject. And know that, in the fight for boundaries and self-control, you are going to fail at times. You will never outgrow your need for the grace of God and the forgiveness of sins. But, praise be to God, our passions and weaknesses are no match for the Spirit of God. Do not give in to despair.

Another response that would not be fruitful is a vague commitment to be better. Biblical counselor Ed Welch says that “the desire for self-control must be accompanied by a plan...given that our enemy is subtle and crafty, a strategy is essential.”<sup>9</sup>

Solomon warns that a “man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls” (Prov. 25:28). A city that lacks walls is hopeless against an enemy. And a city that vaguely hopes to be ready to fight is a

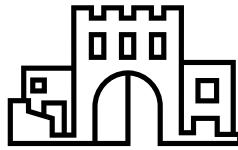
## FIELD GUIDE

city doomed to fall. The same goes for the Christian looking to set up wise boundaries. You either have a plan, or you are merely giving lip-service to the idea you want to change.

My counsel would be this:

1. Identify an area of your life that you want to bring further under the lordship of Christ. It could be an area we explored in this guide or something else like entertainment, finances, etc. We all have areas of weakness, the question is whether we intend to do anything about it.
2. Once you've identified your targeted area, make a plan for how you want to grow and what boundaries you want to put in place. Remember, self-control is not only about setting up rules and then following them. But it may be the case that drawing tighter boundaries in the short-term will allow us to walk in greater freedom in the long-term.
3. Invite accountability. It could be a mentor, a pastor, a friend. Let that person know your plan, and give them permission to keep you accountable. Set up a regular time when you can give an update and they can ask some invasive questions. Or you could have a set of questions you answer in writing each week. There are a host of ways to do this, but inviting a brother or sister in Christ into the fray could be a serious aid.
4. Set your eyes above. Do not let your struggle for self-control become indistinguishable from a pagan pursuit of self-mastery. Pray often, pleading with God to grant you the fruits of his Spirit. Read, memorize, and meditate on Scripture. Consider Jesus and your new life in him. The psalmist hid God's Word in his heart, "that I might not sin against you" (Ps. 119:11). And do whatever it takes to cultivate a fear of God, the recognition that you live before him and are accountable to him.

The Christian life is the best life there is. The narrow way is the path of Christ, where true life and lasting joy is found. And when we put on self-control, we are setting ourselves up to taste the goodness of the gospel: "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1). This is the fruit of self-control.



## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 350.
- <sup>2</sup> William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary (Thomas Nelson, 2000), 407.
- <sup>3</sup> To grasp some of our cultural realities, see Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Crossway, 2020).
- <sup>4</sup> Charles Young, "Aristotle on Temperance," *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter* (1985), 125.
- <sup>5</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man* (Crossway, 2019).
- <sup>6</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "The Preciousness of Time and the Importance of Redeeming It," (December, 1734). Accessed at <https://redeemingproductivity.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Jonathan-Edwards-The-Preciousness-of-Time.pdf>.
- <sup>7</sup> For more on these kinds of struggles, see Michael R. Emlet, *Freedom for the Obsessive-Compulsive* (P&R Books, 2004).
- <sup>8</sup> For a longer treatment of this topic, see the field guide *Stewarding Your Body* by Matt Damico.
- <sup>9</sup> Ed Welch, "Self-Control: The Battle Against 'One More.'" *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Volume 19, Number 2, Winter 2001, pp. 24–31.



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**MATT DAMICO** is the pastor for worship and operations at Kenwood Baptist Church in Louisville. He's the co-author of *Reading the Psalms as Scripture* and has written and edited for a number of Christian publications and organizations. He and his wife, Anna, have three incredible kids.

