



Respectable Sins: Lack of Self-Control

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July 13, 2008 – Trinity 8

In Proverbs 25:28 we read, “A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.” Remember that in biblical times, the wall of a city was its primary means of defence against outsiders. It was hard to tunnel under the walls. It was hard to climb over them, but if you could break down the gate or knock down part of the wall, an invading army could pour into the city and destroy it from the inside out. Think of the story of the fall of Jericho. God told the people to march around the city for seven days blowing their trumpets. And at the end of the seventh day, after marching in silence all day, when they blew the trumpets, God caused the falls to collapse and the Israelites swarmed over the city and destroyed everyone in it.

And so Solomon tells us that just as a city without a wall is easy prey for an invading army, so a man or woman who lacks self-control is easy prey for any and all kinds of temptation. It’s too bad that Solomon didn’t heed his own device. He’s a perfect example – on a large scale – of what happens when you lack self-control. The Bible tells us that he had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, and many – maybe even most – of them came from pagan nations – the very people God had told the Israelites NOT to take wives from. But Solomon gave free reign to his desires and passions. You see it started harmlessly enough. He married the Pharaoh’s daughter to cement a political alliance – that’s what kings did in those days. But God called his people to be different. While the other nations trusted in horses and chariots (and worldly negotiations and treaties), God called on his people to trust in him and consistently obey his Law. Sin snowballs. It starts with small things, but it turns into big things. Instead of trusting God, Solomon negotiated with Pharaoh and took his daughter as his wife. Pretty soon he was doing the same thing other kings and princes – marrying their pagan daughters and bringing them into his household.

And once it started, it awoke in him other sinful desires and before long he was building a harem, bringing in every pretty girl he came across. Instead of exercising self-control, he disregarded his own words of wisdom and allowed himself to be ruled by his out-of-control passions. He paid a heavy price. Those pagan women brought their pagan religions into Israel and turned not only the heart of Solomon, but the hearts of the people, away from God. And God’s punishment was to split the kingdom upon Solomon’s death. Never again would Israel have the prominence, peace, and prosperity that God had given under David and Solomon.

Holy Scripture makes it pretty clear just how important self-control is. Proverbs addresses it and so do the Epistles. St. Paul tells us in Galatians 5:22-23:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

And it’s a lack of self-control that he tells St. Timothy will characterise the “last days” – in the same passage we read last week that begins saying that men will be lovers of themselves. The church in Crete apparently had a big problem with self-control, because St. Paul exhorts St. Titus on three occasions to teach about it. Paul also wrote to Titus, saying “For the grace of God has appeared, *bringing salvation* for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and *to live self-controlled*, upright, and godly lives in the present age” (Titus 2:11-12). God hasn’t just given his grace to save us, he’s given us his grace to sanctify us – to help us live lives that are pleasing to him – and one part of pleasing him is having self-control. St. Paul also, when he lists the qualifications for bishops, lists self-control. St. Peter tells us several times in his epistles, that we should be sober-minded and self-controlled.

The virtue of self-control is all over the pages of Scripture, but it’s a virtue that I don’t think gets much *conscious* attention from most Christians. I think that when we do practice self-control, it’s not so much because we’re wanting to please God, but because our church culture – and often even our secular culture – tend to restrain us from obvious sins. I don’t think many Christian men would every walk into a brothel, but depending on what survey you look at, four to six out of ten

Christian men regularly surf porn on the Internet. I don’t think any of us would walk into the store, stuff our pockets full, and walk out with out paying. But how many of us would have no problem showing up to work late, going home early, taking a long lunch, or taking care of our personal business on company time? I doubt that any of us would go down to Staples and steal a box of pens, or a box of paperclips, or a ream of paper, but we have no problem taking those things home from work. When I worked for Hewlett-Packard we had our own office supply division on site. A site with 4000 employees needs to stock its own supplies. They had pens, paper, binders, erasers, tape, glue, paperclips, printer cartridges, floppy disks and CD’s. You name it, and if it could somehow be used there, they had it. You just took what you needed, wrote it in the log, and listed your name and department. But every September they’d have to bring in extra stock, because of all the employees who’d drop by after hours to get what was on their kids’ school supply lists – and a lot of those people were Christians. What kind of witness is that?

You see, we avoid sin when there’s a risk of getting caught and when we know that it would damage our reputation, but if we can get away with it in secret we show very little self-control. There are obvious boundaries around us, but for the most part, within the boundaries we pretty much live as we please. We seldom say “no” to our desires and emotions. A lack of self-control is one of our more “acceptable” sins. And because we tolerate it, like Solomon, we become vulnerable to other sins. A lack of control of our tongue, often opens the door to all manner of defiling speech, like sarcasm, gossip, slander, or ridicule.

What is self-control? I like Jerry Bridges’ definition:

“It is governance or prudent control of one’s desires, cravings, impulses, emotions, and passions. It is saying no when we should say no. It is moderation in legitimate desires and activities, and absolute restraint in areas that are clearly sinful. It would, for example, involve moderation in watching television and absolute restraint in viewing Internet pornography.”

Now, it’s important to understand that self-control and willpower aren’t the same

thing – at least not natural human willpower. Anybody, believer or unbeliever, can practice self-control in specific areas of life if they're trying to meet a certain goal, but in other parts of their lives, they may live with little or no self-control at all. An athlete might be strict and have a lot of self-control when it comes to his diet or his daily workout, but then be totally lacking in self-control when it comes to his temper. Sometimes our self-control may be situational. Think of the guy with a temper problem. He controls his anger and his temper when he's at work and around his customers, because his livelihood depends on it, but when he gets home he gives up that control, loses his temper, and takes it out on his wife and kids.

That's a human-powered kind of self-control. Biblical self-control, in contrast, covers every part of our lives and requires an unceasing conflict with the passions of the flesh that, as St. Peter puts it, "wage war against our souls." No one can do that on his own. This is why God fills us with his Holy Spirit when we come to saving faith in him. His goal isn't just to redeem us – it's also to make us like Jesus. Real, godly, biblical self-control depends on the work of the Holy Spirit to give us not only a desire for self-control, but the power to do it. You could say that real, full-time, biblical self-control is not control *by* yourself through your own willpower, but instead it's control *of* yourself through the power of the Holy Spirit. I think it helps to remember that self-control is one of the fruit of the Spirit. We don't expect to put on love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, or gentleness all on our own power – we know that this is the work of the Spirit in us. The same goes for self-control.

I think that we often tend to think of self-control in relation to certain activities and not as a general way of life. As I said, we have no trouble controlling ourselves when it comes to certain things, but then we go nuts when it comes to others. Case in point: what and how we eat and drink. You guys all know what this is. [Hold up empty "Pringles" can.] Potato chips. Mmmm. Potato chips. Did you know that I ate the *whole* thing all by myself? Okay, so that's not a big deal. In fact, that's what I planned when I bought them. But here's the problem. After they made it to

my desk drawer the plan changed. They were supposed to be part of my lunch – for two or three days. But when I got them here they looked really good, so I opened the can and figured I eat one or two before putting them away. And you know, they managed to stay in the drawer for about an hour. And then, I'm ashamed to admit, they came out of the drawer...and I ate the whole thing...by 9:30 in the morning...while I was writing this sermon. [Hang head in shame.]

That's 163g of potato chips. According to the label that's supposed to be six servings. 60g of fat. Yikes! And all while I was writing a sermon on self-control. Now there was a time when I used to do that several times a week. I'd take a break in the mid-afternoon to walk down the street to the grocery store and buy a can just like this. I'd take it back to work and it would all be gone in about thirty minutes. But you see, I learned a long time ago that when I open one of these cans I seem to lose the ability to stop until the thing's empty. I don't seem to have that problem with any other food. God used something as stupid as a can of Pringles to show me my lack of self-control. He showed me that a lack of self-control with something silly and relatively unimportant weakened my self-control in more important areas of life. God taught me that self-control is a lifestyle – it's not something you apply here or there – you apply it to everything.

So how do I exercise self-control with Pringles now? I already know that an open can is too big of a temptation. I learned that sometimes self-control is simply removing the source of the temptation. I don't have to worry about Veronica buying the things for me – she'd never do that. I just don't buy them myself on any kind of regular basis. If I'm in a snack mood in the afternoon, I've learned not to go to the grocery store – because every time I do, even if I have the best of intentions, guess what I buy? Right. So I've learned how to avoid getting into the situation that challenges my self-control.

My point isn't to send anyone on a guilt trip for enjoying junk food, desert, or Starbucks. What I want you to understand is that we need to make sure that we control our desires rather than letting them control us.

Maybe your problem isn't with food. Maybe it's your temper. I can attest from personal experience and from counselling that this is a big problem for lots of Christians. We all know people like this – or maybe we *are* people like this. You've got a short fuse and when it burns down you explode. Anger is the subject for another sermon, but a temper has to do with self-control. Anger can often be sinful, but if you struggle with being short-tempered, you compounding things by adding the sin of lack of self-control.

We can blow up at anyone that does something to upset us. It might be another driver who cut us off on the highway, an umpire who makes a bad call, a wife who burned dinner, or a kid who didn't clean up his room like he was asked. The worst thing is that it's our family members that usually take the brunt. Natural, fleshly, and selfish self-control might keep us from blowing up at the boss, but it doesn't stop us from coming home and kicking the dog or getting angry with our family.

Scripture, especially the book of Proverbs, warns us against a quick temper: "A man of quick temper acts foolishly" (14:17) and "Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city" (16:32). St. James warns us in his epistle to be "slow to anger" (James 1:19). If this is your problem area, store up God's word in your heart that you might not sin against him (cf. Psalm 119:11). Read Proverbs and make note of all the verses that talk about anger and tempers, and make note of the five or six that really speak to you – then memorise them. Let God's words replace the words that you're prone to speak in anger! Put off the old man and put on the new man by the power of the Holy Spirit!

The final area I want to cover and that I think Christians tend to lack self-control is personal finances. I know it's a problem because a lot of people have asked me how God can help them get a hold on this area of life. I know because one of my former parishioners wrote a book on the subject for Christians – and it's one of his best sellers. I know because of men like Richard Barnard, who used to be the rector of one of our churches in Dallas. He's seen that this problem so plagues the Church that he has a ministry in which he

travels the country, going from church to church, leading a seminar that teaches Christians how to get out of debt and make Christ Lord of their finances. I don't know what the numbers are in Canada, but the average household in the U.S. carries about \$7,000 of credit card debt. I wouldn't image that Canadians are that drastically different. That's not low interest debt like you'd pay on a house or maybe a car – that's high interest debt that keeps growing as long as you don't pay it off. We spend beyond our means – way beyond. As a people we aren't exercising financial control; instead, we're indulging our desires for what we want: new clothes, a new car, expensive holidays, new computers, new televisions and stereos and all sorts of other things.

It's not just people who are in debt, though, who fail to exercise self-control in this area. There are a lot of affluent and wealthy people, including a lot of Christians, who can afford to indulge themselves in whatever they want. They're like the writer of Ecclesiastes who said, "Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them" (2:10). Indulging ourselves in whatever we desire, even if we *can* afford it, is not a way to exercise self-control. Remember, again, that self-control is a fruit of the Spirit.

We could probably stay here all night listing other ways we lack self-control. How often do you sit down in front of the T.V. to watch one programme and end up staying there all evening? How often do you sit down at the computer to look at just one website or to look-up one piece of information and end up sitting for hours following one interesting link to another until the day is gone? How often do you throw yourself into sports while ignoring your family or your other duties? What about impulse buying – going out to "hit" the sales – or the garage sales – with no real goal in mind other than to get some good deals – and you come home spending more money than you should have on stuff you didn't need before you saw it on sale? For us men a big need for self-control is over our eyes and thought lives in an age when many women dress less modestly every season.

I've hit on some of what I've seen to be the more common areas of life over which we tend to lack self-control, but we're all different. I urge you to examine your own

life. Are there desires, cravings, or emotions that may be out of control to some degree? Remember that we're talking about "respectable" sins – sins that are often so subtle that we fail to notice them. So look hard. Because this sin is so subtle, we all suffer from it somehow. As you work to stamp out this sin in your life, remember that self-control is a fruit *of the Spirit*. Don't try to do it on your own. It's God's enabling power that give us the victory!

Please pray with me: Father, we confess that in many areas of our lives we lack self-control – while you should be the Lord of our lives, we often hold back parts of ourselves. We confess to you that we do not have the power in ourselves to control the flesh, and so we ask you to put your Holy Spirit to work in our lives, showing us the places we've held back from you, and helping us to give them over that he might control us and use us in your service. We ask this through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.