

Self-Discipline in the Ministry

Introduction

Self-discipline or self-control is a grace that is seldom properly developed among most modern-day professing Christians. I say that this is a grace because it is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5: 23-“temperance”). While even the unregenerate can exercise some form of self-discipline it is impossible for one to exercise godly self-control until he has spiritual life.

It is true that some who are not indwelt by the Holy Spirit can achieve some remarkable degrees of some form of self-control. Through the centuries, for example, there have been many from various religious orders who have practiced self-denial to the point of asceticism, but that is not what we are considering here. We are speaking of self-control that is practiced under the power of the Holy Spirit to the glory of God.

After the reception of spiritual life each child of God, being empowered by the Holy Spirit, must then work out his salvation with “fear and trembling.” (Phi. 2: 13). Even after he has been born again he retains his sinful nature with its corrupt desires. This nature with its lusts must be kept under constant, strict control or it will get out of hand and lead to grievous sin. Failure to exercise self-discipline led David to commit adultery. This kind of failure and other kinds have brought grief and sadness to many of God’s children. Many a servant of God has wrecked his ministry and brought disgrace to himself, his family, and the cause of Jesus Christ by the failure to exercise self-discipline. Brethren, the stakes are high!

Definitions

It will be instructive for us to look at several New Testament Greek words which have to do with our subject:

In 1 Cor. 9: 25, the word which is translated “temperate” is the verb *enkrateuomai*. This is translated, “to be self-controlled, continent; to exhibit self-government, conduct one’s self temperately; in a figure drawn from athletes, who in preparing themselves for the games abstained from unwholesome food, wine, and sexual indulgence.”^[1] This verb is used once more in the New Testament, in 1 Cor. 7: 9, “if they *cannot contain* let them marry,” where the obvious reference is to sexual self-control.

A related or cognate word is the noun *enkrateia*. This word is used four times in the New Testament (Acts 24: 25; Gal. 5: 23; 2 Pet. 1: 6, twice). In each of these places it is translated “temperance.” The full meaning is “self-control (the virtue of one who masters his desires and passions, esp. his sensual appetites).”^[2]

A related adjective is *enkrates*. This word is used only once in the New Testament, Titus 1: 8, where it is translated “temperate.” The basic meaning of this word is, “strong, stout; possessed of mastery; master of self.”^[3]

Referring to this group of words, Vine writes, “The various powers bestowed by God upon man are capable of abuse; the right use demands the controlling power of the will under the operation of the Spirit of God.”^[4]

There are some other words that would be relevant to our discussion, but this word group captures the basic meaning of the self-discipline that we are considering.

Looking at some of the passages where words from this group are used, we learn some basic lessons. One is that a man cannot be a God-approved elder in a church unless he exercises strict self-control. That is obvious from Titus 1: 8, where the elder or bishop must be “temperate.” This temperance or self-discipline is so necessary in our lives that Felix trembled when Paul told him how God demanded

it (Acts 24: 25). Temperance is one of those characteristics that must be added to our faith if we are to make our calling and election sure (2 Pet. 1: 6).

Determination

If we intend to exercise self-control, we must be very determined about it. We must emulate Paul's determination set forth in 1 Corinthians 6:12, "All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any."

However, even as we act with the very strongest determination, we must realize that we are completely dependent upon God for enabling grace. Our constant prayer must be that found in Psalms 119:133, "Order my steps in thy word: and let not any iniquity have dominion over me." A similar prayer is found in Psalms 19:13, "Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression."

One of the areas in which we absolutely must exercise self-discipline is in the use of our tongues. A very pertinent prayer concerning this is found in Psalms 141:3 "Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips." The Scriptures are filled with similar prayers. It is a very good spiritual exercise to note prayers like these as we read God's word and take them to Him in prayer. This is what the prophet exhorted us to do in Hosea 14:2, "Take with you words, and turn to the LORD..." What better words can we take to the Lord in prayer, than the words of the inspired Scriptures?

The Absolute Necessity

Let us reflect on the extreme necessity of exercising self-discipline in our lives. We have been commanded by our Lord to, "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof." (Rom. 6: 12). We **must** heed this if we want to honor the Lord and to be used in His service. We **cannot** be a follower of the Lord apart from the self-control of daily self-denial. The Lord Jesus has said in Luke 9:23, "And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me."

It is impossible for a child of God to lose his salvation. However there is a real danger that a saint, and particularly a minister of the gospel, may lose his usefulness. We may not be able to wreck our salvation, but we certainly can destroy our effectiveness in the work of the gospel. Paul placed the very highest value on the privilege he had of preaching the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. He went to great lengths to protect that privilege. Notice his determination and intensity in the following passage: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway."

Motivation

Why should we exercise self-control? Some men do so as a matter of pride. Some do it because they feel better about themselves or want others to admire them. However, the ultimate reason any child of God should strenuously exercise self-discipline is because he wants to be obedient to God and to bring glory to Him.

My fellow brethren, how do you measure up? Are you complacent or are you deadly serious about this matter of self-control? Do you have mastery over your desires and passions, or do they master you? Do you constantly curb, control, and restrain yourself? Consider the following areas of your life and see how much control you have over them:

Sleeping

Do you sleep either too much or too little? The Lord intends for us to take care of the temples of our bodies. Sometimes we need to get a good night's rest even more than we need to study or to pray. This seems to be the case with Elijah. See 1 Kings 19: 1-6. In fact, we should get adequate sleep and rest. Sometimes worry or the pressures of life and of the ministry might rob us of sleep. The great prayer-warrior, George Mueller, wrote that when he had lost a lot of sleep he was especially susceptible to the assaults of Satan. The psalmist wrote in Psalms 4:8, "I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety." The wise man wrote in Proverbs 3:24, "When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet. David wrote in Psalm 127 of the Lord that "He giveth His beloved sleep."

However, it is not always easy to get out of bed when we should. Satan no doubt tempts us to sleep too much when we are depressed or are facing an unpleasant challenge. Solomon warned us against the danger of sleeping too much because we are slothful or lazy. Consider the following passages:

Proverbs 6:9-11, "How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? when wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man."

Proverbs 20:13, "Love not sleep, lest thou come to poverty; open thine eyes, and thou shalt be satisfied with bread."

Our dear Lord set the example of rising early to pray. He had been extremely busy the day before, but we find recorded in Mark 1:35, "And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed."

Diet and Exercise

Sometimes we make jokes about over-eating and not exercising, but these are really serious matters. I don't want to make anyone feel bad if he is overweight and can't help it. Sometimes people have genetic problems or difficulties with metabolism. If, however, we are in terrible physical shape because of laziness or bad habits, we should do something about it. At this writing I am 66 years old. I can testify that when a man begins to age, he will deteriorate in many ways if he does not put forth intelligent, informed and consistent effort to do something about it.

There are many ways a man can get in good physical shape and maintain that condition. I have been interested in this kind of thing most of my life and will be glad to share what I know with anyone who desires it.

The Scriptures have much to say about overeating or gluttony. Let us examine a few of them:

Proverbs 23:1-2, "When thou sittest to eat with a ruler, consider diligently what is before thee: And put a knife to thy throat, if thou be a man given to appetite."

Proverbs 23:21, "For the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty: and drowsiness shall clothe a man with rags."

Philippians 3:19, "Whose end is destruction, **whose God is their belly**, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things"

It is necessary to be reminded here that we are not trying to maintain health and strength primarily so that we will feel good. We are above all concerned about our health so that we can use it in the service of the Lord. I read about a young minister who had been very zealous for God, but had broken his health by not getting enough rest. As he was on his death bed he said, "God gave me a glorious message

to deliver and a good horse (his body) with which to deliver it. I have now killed the horse and cannot deliver the message!"

The Handling of Money

The mishandling of money has been injurious to many ministers of the gospel. We should all strive to live within our means. I am so glad that in my lifetime many of the Primitive Baptists have returned to the Biblical pattern of freeing their ministers' hands to spend most of their time in the ministry of the Word whenever possible. Many of our people are very generous. It is our sacred obligation to use the money given to us wisely. We should set a good example to the people we serve in the use of our money. We should be neither tightwads nor spendthrifts. There may be times in our lives that we will be better off financially than others. We may have to adjust our lifestyles accordingly. Paul referred to this in Philippians 4:11-13, "Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."

There is a very interesting passage in the New Testament that speaks of the importance of handling money properly: Luke 16:10-11, "He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much. If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?"

One of the best assets a minister can have in the use of money is a good wife. I am amazed at how far my dear little wife can stretch a dollar. We are constantly entertaining God's children in our home, usually including a meal. How she feeds all those people considering the budget she is on is a source of wonder to me.

One thing a minister of the gospel should never do is to gamble in any form. Gambling is a sin and a very poor example. Many of our states now have lotteries. At almost any convenience store or gas station lottery tickets can be purchased. A minister of the gospel should completely avoid such things as these.

The Tongue

The tongue is one of the most useful members of our bodies. What a great blessing it is to be able to communicate. We could not preach the gospel nor counsel people if we didn't have a tongue. However, it is also true that the improper use of the tongue has probably caused more trouble in our churches than all other things combined. James compares the tongue to a fire. Now we all know that fire is very useful, but only if it is very carefully controlled! We ministers and our families **absolutely must** set the example in the use of our tongues.

Our speech must be above reproach. We must not gossip. We must not violate people's confidences when they confide in us. This is such a vital matter that there is very much about it in the Scriptures. Let us look at a few of them:

Proverbs 17:27-28, "He that hath knowledge spareth his words: and a man of understanding is of an excellent spirit. Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is counted wise: and he that shutteth his lips is esteemed a man of understanding." This is a rebuke to those of us who talk too much.

Proverbs 29:20, "Seest thou a man that is hasty in his words? there is more hope of a fool than of him."

Proverbs 16:28, "A froward man soweth strife: and a whisperer separateth chief friends." This verse should put the death knell to gossip.

Matthew 12:36-37, "But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." This is a very sobering verse.

Matthew 12:34, "O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh." I hope that we are not a generation of vipers, but we should be aware that what we speak reveals what is in our hearts.

Ephesians 4:29, "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers." This verse teaches us that we should refuse to say anything that will not be beneficial to those to whom we speak.

The Use of Time

We each have only a very limited amount of time. The older we get the more we are aware of just how little time we have. We should heed the words of our Saviour in John 9:4, "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work." Another very important passage to consider is Psalms 90:12, "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom."

It is so easy to waste time or to "kill time" as we sometimes say. We must learn to use "bits and pieces" of time. I do this in my memorizing. Over the years I have memorized several entire books of the Bible and many individual passages. I have done this for the most part by consciously spending a minute or two here and a minute or two there. I am trying to "redeem the time," as instructed by Paul in Eph. 5: 16 and in Col. 4: 5.

Every man will have to develop his own method of redeeming time. I always have a watch with a stopwatch feature. I have a pretty elaborate memorization program. I implement it with the help of the stopwatch. For example, when I stand in line at the bank, I memorize. By the time I have reached the teller, I may have memorized for ten or fifteen minutes. When I am driving I am usually either memorizing or praying. It is an incentive to me to keep up with the minutes I spend in memorizing in a day. There are many days that I spend an hour or more in memorization, just consciously using minutes that would have otherwise been wasted. I have even had several books of the Bible laminated on cards so that they are waterproof. I often spend my time in the shower using these waterproof cards to help me memorize. If you really want to use your time right, you will find ways to do it.

Robert Dick Wilson was an outstanding scholar in the Old Testament. He knew many languages. The way he learned these was to constantly carry a language textbook with him wherever he went. When he had a spare moment he would read a few pages.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn has written many books. He wrote many of them in very difficult circumstances while behind the Iron Curtain. He almost never had a large block of time in which to write. He just wrote a little bit every time he had an opportunity.

Not all of our dear brethren have the opportunity to spend all their time in the ministry. Many of them have to work full-time secular jobs. Don't be frustrated, dear brethren. Our Lord knows your situation. He will not require you to do what you cannot do; only do the best you can in your circumstances. There were times Paul could spend all his time in the ministry. Other times he had to make tents. He did not become frustrated at these times. He just did the best he could.

Sexual Morality

This is one of the most important points for us to consider. Many men have made shipwreck and have ruined their usefulness by falling into one form or another of sexual sin. One of the best and most

promising young preachers I have ever met and heard preach was one of our Filipino brethren. I heard him preach one of the most moving sermons I have ever heard on Jesus being our Shepherd. He had a beautiful and dedicated wife and some children. Now he is gone from the church and his family has dissolved. Likewise, one of our very promising young ministers from India is no longer in the church and has destroyed his usefulness because of sexual sin.

I know other brethren who have damaged their souls and in some cases their relationships with their wives by being engaged in pornography. As anyone with any awareness knows, various forms of pornography are very easily available in our society. In fact, this evil is so prevalent, that we have to make a determined and constant effort to avoid it.

Internet pornography is available at the touch of a keyboard or the movement of a mouse. I advise all the brethren to combat this by several means. Have a good filter on your computer. Do not be alone with your computer at night. If you have any problem at all with this evil, immediately become accountable to a trusted brother. You **must** find a way to avoid this terrible, soul-damaging temptation.

Sex is a wonderful gift that the Lord has given to married couples, but only to them. We must guard our hearts, our eyes, our tongues, and our actions.

Not only must we avoid adultery, we must even avoid what Dennis Rainey, the president of Family Life Today calls "Emotional Adultery." While we must be warm-hearted pastors to all the members of our flocks, we must not become friendly in an intimate way with any woman besides our wives. This includes conversation. We are not to meet the emotional needs of any women besides our wives. With all our dealings with women, even with sisters in Christ, we must do what Paul instructed Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:1-2, "Rebuke not an elder, but intreat him as a father; and the younger men as brethren; The elder women as mothers; the younger as sisters, **with all purity.**"

We must be **very careful** when counseling women. We must not be alone with a woman behind closed doors. We must not be in a car alone with a woman other than our wives, daughters, or other close kin. To protect our usefulness we must follow the injunction of 1 Thessalonians 5:22, "Abstain from all appearance of evil."

There are many, many Scriptures which deal with this vital subject. Let us look at just a few of them. We will not consider the many Scriptures from the book of Proverbs on this subject. Every preacher should often read this book of wisdom.

Joseph resisted a very fiery sexual temptation, because he was aware of how much God hated it. He told the wicked temptress in Genesis 39:9, "There is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou art his wife: how then can I do this **great wickedness**, and sin against God?"

Job may not have been bothered with the internet, but he knew how to avoid pornography. He made this plain in Job 31:1, "I made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I think upon a maid?"

We should respect no one more than we do our Lord Jesus Christ. Consider His sobering words, recorded in Matthew 5:28-29, "But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell."

Men sometimes think that maybe a little looking at pornography is not all that dangerous. That is a deadly delusion. We have no idea how such activity robs us of spiritual power. We are not merely warring against human beings; we are involved in spiritual warfare with demonic beings we cannot see

with our physical eyes, but we know they are there because we are Bible believers. This terrible damage to our souls, when we engage in the lusts of the flesh is addressed by the apostle in 1 Peter 2:11, "Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which **war against the soul...**"

The Emotions

It is imperative that pastors of churches be in control of our emotions. We must be dependable, steady, and trustworthy. Our world is filled with turmoil and crisis after crisis. We believe that we serve an immutable God. We must show that we really believe this and be examples of stability. We must not give way to unbelieving fear. There is such a danger of this that Paul had to warn Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:7, "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind."

Another emotion that we must not give in to is anger. We must not be prone to "fly off the handle," even when provoked. Remember that one of the greatest men who ever lived, Moses, only gave way to anger once, and for that lapse God did not permit him to enter the land of Canaan!

The wise man warns of this destructive emotion in Proverbs 16:32, "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city."

Family Relations

Brethren, one area in which we must exercise self-control is in our families. This can make or break our ministries. Paul made plain that one of the most essential qualifications for a bishop is that he has his family under control. He wrote in 1 Timothy 3:4-5, "One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God)"

We must spend time cultivating a loving relationship with our dear wives and our children. We must discipline our use of time to make sure that our wives and children are not lost in the shuffle of our busy pastoral lives. There is no substitute for time spent with those we love and are responsible for. We must set the example to the other men in our churches in being loving leaders to our wives and in having our children under loving but firm control. Many a man has severely damaged his ministry by having unruly children.

What Is It All About?

We have set some lofty goals. It will require much prayerful effort. What is the final goal of living a disciplined life? I believe Peter said it well when he was speaking of the ordination of deacons in the church at Jerusalem. The deacons were given to be helpers to the ministers of the gospel. They were to free the ministers' hands as much as possible. What were their hands to be freed to do? Peter tells us in Acts 6:4, "But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word." Anything that hinders from this should be laid aside as much as possible. Satan will do everything he can to distract us from the vital work to which we have been called.

Never Let Up

There is a great temptation when a man has been in the ministry for a number of years to slack from our efforts and to "coast" during the last part of our ministries. When a man is young and begins to learn the glorious truths of the Bible for the first time, he is very excited. Study is a joy as he digs golden theological "nuggets" from the Word of God. He absolutely has to study hard for each sermon. However, when he gets older and knows more, there is a great temptation to depend on past study and spend less and less time in the Word of God. There is even a temptation to spend less time in real, fervent prayer.

Brethren, don't make this mistake. Instead of getting less zealous, discipline yourselves to be even more zealous. It has been my privilege to witness some men of God do some of their very best preaching and writing in their 70s and 80s! Anyone who has ever read 2 Timothy knows that Paul lost none of his zeal for the work of the Lord at the end of his life. He was filled with holy zeal and exhorted Timothy to be filled with the same.

In the Old Testament, Caleb was a zealous warrior for the Lord at eighty-five years of age. He thundered to Joshua. "Give me this mountain!"

A song writer wrote an inspirational song depicting Joshua's attitude:

The challenge how is here. What cause is there to fear? I will follow to the place where God has called. And though the task ahead is great, there is no need to wait; God's command is "conquer cities fenced and walled."

This mountain I shall own, But not for me alone. For my children I shall claim this Promised Land. Because the word of God is sure, the future is secure; All the power we need is in God's mighty hand.

Take courage and be strong. We'll sing the victor's song. All the blessings God has promised we may claim. So let us hasten to obey. Our Savior leads the way; He will help us win the battle for His name.

Give me this mountain, give me this mountain; to the land where giants grow. That's the place I want to go. Give me this mountain, this very mountain; I shall conquer in the power of the Lord.^[5]

Brethren, I have set forth a series of tasks that is impossible to accomplish unless we walk in close fellowship with our Lord!

[1] Online Bible Greek Lexicon.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Bagster's Analytical Greek Lexicon, p.113.

[4] Vine's *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Vol. 4, p. 114.

[5] Frank Garlock, *Praises I*, Majesty Music, 1978.