

Self Control

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Date: 14 July 2019

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[0 : 00] This morning we're in the last of our series looking at the fruit of the Spirit. Let me read to you from Galatians chapter 5.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

And it's self-control that we're thinking about this morning. There's a saying that you can't control the actions of others, but you can control your own actions.

That's challenging and it's true. We need to ask ourselves the question, how easy is it, really, to control our own actions?

Quick experiment. Remember, remain seated, but lift your right foot just a few inches above the ground and make circles in a clockwise direction.

[1 : 07] That's important. Clockwise direction. Now, I know a number of people are listening to this on the podcast and if that's you, you can do this at home. Please don't do it if you're driving right now.

Okay, so you've got a clockwise direction with your right foot. Now, raise your right hand in the air and with it, I want you to draw a great big number six.

What happens to your right foot? Now, I think if you practice that long enough, you probably could train your brain to coordinate that one.

But, you know, it's that automatic response, isn't it? It changes direction. We think we have control. We'd love to have control. We live in an age where we feel that we can control just about anything. We can order anything we want anytime, wherever we are in the world and have it delivered to us as quickly as we can. We get very upset when we feel that we no longer have that kind of control that we feel that we have a legitimate claim to.

[2 : 17] Now, controlling the self is not that straightforward. And in order for us to think about that properly, we have to think more widely about the Christian understanding, the biblical understanding of the human condition.

In other words, what it is to be a human being. A very, very old-fashioned word and a word that we probably don't use much in everyday language because it sounds unfashionable and out of date, but it's the word sin.

And that word is so important if we are to understand properly what the Bible teaches us about what it is to be a human being.

Forget notions of lists of things that we think are wrong. That's not really ultimately what that word sin refers to.

Rather, it refers to that thing within us that continually moves us in the directions that lead to destruction and leads us in a direction that is not good.

[3 : 36] That's what it is. It's a power. It's a bias within the human heart. Every single one of us, every human being alive has some sense of right and wrong.

No matter how we live that out, we all have some sort of sense of what's right and what's wrong. Sure, there are grey areas that we can discuss. We have disagreements among ourselves as Christians, but the point is, as human, it's fundamental to what it is to be a living human being, to have a kind of a moral compass.

We might not always do what is right, but we have a sense of what is right. It's part of what defines us. And yet, no one's perfect.

Now, that may sound like an obvious cliché, but why? Why are we not perfect? It's puzzling, isn't it? Why we should all have this instinct as to there being something called right and something that's wrong and all the difference between those two things. And yet, we would really probably want to

do what's right, but we don't.

[4 : 41] And no matter how hard we try and set out genuinely to do the right thing, we don't. It's a pattern that recurs in every time and place throughout human history.

It unites all of us. We're not perfect. That, to me, is one of the most compelling things, one of the most compelling things, about the whole Christian faith, because of the way in which it understands the reality of what it is to be a human being.

There's no pretending anything. There's no sweeping anything under the carpet. You know, we have this mysterious bias, this gravitation to do the wrong thing, even though we know what is right and even though we want to do what is right.

Sometimes we can find even the harder that we try to do the right thing, we seem to get it wrong and trip up over and over again. An illustration that I've heard and have used many times is, imagine if you're going into the shopping, to do shopping in a supermarket, and you get one of those really big trolleys.

Sometimes you put your pound or your little token in or whatever, you pull it away and then you walk through, and you soon notice that one of the wheels is stuck or bent or warped, and it starts a judder, and it's a strain to push it straight forward.

[6 : 03] So you're walking forward like this, and it keeps veering off to one direction. You want to go straight ahead, it wants to go right. So you have to push it. It takes effort. You really, really want to go to the fruit and veg, and yet it insists on heading for the real ale and the pastries.

Yeah? So you've got to work at it. It's that bias that even though you've got in your mind the direction you wanted to take it in, it insists on veering off.

That is a kind of an image as to what the power, the gravitational pull, the bias that we refer to when we use that word sin, is. And throughout the scriptures, we find this idea develops, that we live not in a spiritual vacuum, but everything has a spiritual dimension to it.

And so the language that is deployed, particularly in the New Testament, is that of a battle, that we are fighting a spiritual battle. A lot of the time we forget that, we're not aware of it, we're not tuned into it, but that's the reality.

So every choice, every decision comes loaded with that spirituality. Self-control then matters, because if we don't get a handle on ourselves, it's too easy just to veer off in the wrong direction.

[7 : 20] Even though we, inside ourselves, know what's right and wrong, and we want to do the right thing, we find that so hard. The other thing that we need to know about self-control, is that when we think about it, we probably naturally think that it's all about avoiding doing bad stuff.

That self-control is about, you know, don't do this and don't do that. But self-control applies as much to positive things that we should do, as much as it does to negative things that we want to avoid.

For example, praying. How often do we find in our experience that we just don't feel like praying, or we struggle to get started? I think of loads of times when I find that it's a real effort to actually motivate myself to get down to doing some serious praying, or reading the Bible.

I can find all sorts of reasons not to, and I find it's a real struggle to get there. So that, again, is a positive thing, but it requires self-control.

Once it's got started, I often find, actually, it's great. Where do we go? But sometimes overcoming that initial hurdle, again, is a challenge for self-control.

[8 : 36] So, self-control applies not only to what we're trying to avoid doing, but also to the positive things that we're trying to embrace and to do. So, let's get down to the story, then. Let's be frank about this.

It's a corker of a story. It's a juicy one. It's extreme. King David, the God's chosen one, hero of the people of Israel, is in his palace, and late one afternoon, he gets up, he looks out the window, and he clocks a beautiful-looking woman.

He obviously watches her for a while, thinks about it, gives instruction for her to be brought to him. He's told that she's married to somebody. That doesn't stop him having sex with her and getting her pregnant.

When he finds that she is pregnant, he tries to cover it up. So he hatches this plan. He says, bring her husband back from battle, and I'll give him all the royal treatment and then send him off with his wife, and hopefully, in a few months' time, everyone will think that it's his child.

Except that when the soldier, the husband, comes home, he's too much integrity to do that. He says, I'm not going to go home and live in luxury like that when all our soldiers are out there risking

their life.

[10:01] No, I'm going to sleep with the rest of the servants this evening. So he does. Two nights, David tries this and it doesn't work. So off he goes back to battle and he gives instruction instead to put him on the front line of the battle where all the action is so that he'll get killed off and that's what happens.

Now, when we listen to this story, it's very easy for us to think, well, of course, that's really extreme. You know, and it seems such a huge gap between David's actions and the place where we are that it can be almost hard to relate to and think, yeah, that's one thing but if we're trying to get a gauge of what self-control means by learning from such extreme actions, well, it's too hard.

We need to start with something that's closer to our own experience. let's not think that. It's a dangerous thing if we begin to think this actually isn't anywhere close to being on our radar because if we do so, we misunderstand the reality that what we have here is a universal principle.

things start small and become big and they can do so without us actually being conscious that that is what is taking place.

You see, this is how bad things can escalate into terrible things if we're not mindful of self-control.

Remember, David was God's anointed.

[11:42] He had had some exceptionally profound spiritual experience of God. If you'd have asked him back then at an earlier point if he would ever end up doing what eventually he did end up doing, he would have not believed you.

You see, sin escalates. Bad stuff escalates. It started with a thought when he clocked Bathsheba in the shower.

But it didn't stay as a thought. Another illustration, and it's one that I have used before, but it's the best one I know for, I think, helping us to understand and engage what I'm trying to talk about here. There is a way in which Eskimos go about the business of catching wolves. they take a dagger and they get another animal that they've killed and they dip the dagger in the blood of that dead animal and freeze it.

And then they do it again, freezing another layer of animal's blood around that dagger. They repeat this process over and over and over again until they freeze layer upon layer upon layer to eventually they've got a block of ice, red ice, frozen animal blood, in the middle of which is a dagger.

[13:00] They put that thing in the middle of the snow and they walk away and they leave it overnight. Wolf comes along and catches a sniff of the blood. It likes the smell.

So it begins to lick at the frozen blood. The more it gets, the more it craves. The more it craves, the more it gets, the more it gets, the more it craves.

It cannot satisfy its craving until it licks away and away and away, licking layer upon layer away from this knife until eventually the ice has gone, the wolf has consumed all of that frozen animal blood yet it still cannot get enough of it and so it licks away, this time its tongue is lashing away on the edge of that bare knife.

Eventually it drowns in its own blood. You're looking forward to your next strawberry split ice cream now, aren't you? That's the subtlety in which these things work.

They get a hold of us at a very small level. Then, without us knowing, they escalate. This is why this story, as extreme as it may be, teaches us some universal human principles, spiritual realities from which none of us are immune.

[14:26] you see, the human mind is something of a mental greenhouse. In verse 2, we see David walking around on his palace and he sees Bathsheba.

A thought process is then set in motion. Somewhere between his observation and his actions things lie a decision.

And it may not be easy to pinpoint exactly where that took place, but it took place. Somewhere between our thoughts and our actions, there lies that point of decision.

And self-control is about learning to discern where those points are. St. Paul in the New Testament talks about the dynamic of taking every thought captive, being aware of the thought processes that are going on inside us and growing on inside us.

But notice actually where all of this starts. It doesn't start at the point where Bathsheba is brought before David.

[15 : 47] It doesn't even start at the point where he tells his officials to bring her to him. It doesn't even start at the moment he sees her.

It starts much earlier in verse one. In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him.

They ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem. It was the time of the year when kings would normally be expected to go out to battle.

But David for some reason, and we're not told why, doesn't. He stays. He's in the wrong place. And had it actually been in the right place, then none of this could have even begun to emerge.

And a question, and I want to suggest that this is the most universal question that we can put to ourselves when we read this passage, is what is our wrong place for whatever it is that we may struggle with when it comes to self-control?

[17 : 00] what's the wrong place? What places do we find ourselves most vulnerable when we're trying to control those things that will pull us in the wrong direction?

Now for each of us that will be a different thing. I'm going to just describe just a few which give a hint of the sort of things that 20 years as a minister now I've listened to people's stories, things where things have gone wrong in people's lives and brokenness and the sort of picture I get as I think back over many conversations over the years that I've heard, and again if you're listening to this on the podcast, wherever you are right now, ask yourself the question, are you in the wrong place as you're listening?

If a struggle area for us is gossiping. If it's something that actually, yeah, we do but perhaps we only recognise it after we've done it and we've been talking with a group, make that an area of prayer and next time you're with others and the conversation begins to pick up on the subject of people who aren't with that group at that point in time, walk away, just get out of that place.

If your wrong place is that you're just spending too much time on the internet, and this is so much harder now because there was a time not so long ago when to be on the internet then sat in front of a computer, it doesn't now because we have handheld devices, it's not quite as easy, it's more challenging.

But if you find that you're spending too much time, that that's your wrong place, whether you're spending too much time or whether you're on the wrong kind of sites and engaged in the wrong kind of activities, then impose some kind of barrier on yourself.

[19 : 05] Switch off your device, put it away in the drawer, turn off your modem, whatever it may be, but get out of that wrong place before destruction begins. If you find that you're drinking too much of the wrong stuff too much, or eating too much of the wrong stuff too much, too frequently, the wrong place is not necessarily wherever that may be during the week, it might be far earlier than that.

Maybe you need to keep less of it indoors, so that it's harder to access, so that you're not put in the wrong place. Maybe if you're spending too much and you're finding yourself in crippling debt, then perhaps being in the wrong place means being somewhere with a credit card on you, leave it at home and use cash instead.

Get out of that wrong place. Maybe if you're getting into a relationship that actually is not a healthy one, it's an inappropriate one, then you need to ask yourself, at what point are you in the place where you're getting closer to that other person?

Maybe if it's a situation where you work away from home lots, where you're staying away from home lots, only you will be able to answer that question. What is the wrong place?

Name it and get out of it. Run without dignity. But also, just to go back to where we started, we're saying that self-control is not only about avoiding things that are destructive, about staying away from some things.

[20 : 39] Self-control is as much about embracing things positively. So if you're struggling to pray, if you're struggling to read scripture, if you're struggling to discipline yourself in that, look for a good place and a good time.

Perhaps there's a particular place where you can go and walk and pray. Perhaps there's a particular time in the day, perhaps there's a particular room in the house, a place where you can sit that will enable you to still yourself and to spend that time in focused prayer.

But finally, as we come to pray now, I want to say that if anything I've said this morning is about, suggests any kind of guilt trip, it's not.

Well, it kind of is in that there is such a thing as creative guilt. There's destructive guilt as well and there's all the difference between the two. This is not about destructive guilt, it is about creative guilt.

Creative guilt is guilt that actually motivates us to change in a helpful way. And if we're in that place where we really do want that to happen, then that's great.

[21 : 50] Because we need to remember from this story, and I think this is perhaps the most powerful thing about this story of David and Bathsheba, that it teaches us, is that even not if, but when we mess up, when we get it wrong, when we've got ourselves into the wrong place and then some, we can always come back.

Because God meets you in that place, and he doesn't leave you in that place, he brings you back to a fresh start and a new beginning. Because as horrendous, as horrific, as assorted as David's actions were, not only did he commit adultery, but he then tried to cover it up and then eventually got someone killed.

Even he found redemption and forgiveness. And if he in that story can find redemption and forgiveness and a new beginning, then so can we. Because out of this experience, David came to write one of the most famous psalms, Psalm 51.

And I'm going to read that psalm now, because it so powerfully expresses words of confession, words which express that, yes, we get it wrong, we're broken beings, but we depend on the grace of God.

David did. David knew that he was forgiven and so can we. So I'm going to read to you from Psalm 51 and it was written as a prayer, so I'm going to read it as a prayer.

[23 : 21] Let's take some time now just to bring ourselves before God. As we come to the end of this series, thinking about self-control, let's just bring ourselves before God as we are because we can come no other way and ask for him to help us where we struggle, wherever that may be and whatever that may mean.

Psalm 51 says, have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions, wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone have I sinned and have done what is evil in your sight.

Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me, even. You desire truth in the inward being, therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

Purge me and I shall be clean, wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness, let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.

[24 : 42] Please, create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence and do not take your Holy Spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will return to you.

Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation. And my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance. Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise.

For you have no delight in sacrifice. If I were to give you a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit.

A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. Father...