

Monday

After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, "Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you."

Acts 24:24-25

After Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, he was brought to Caesarea and placed under the authority of the governor Felix. Felix had already heard the message of the Gospel when Paul came before Felix and Drusilla to talk about faith in Christ (Acts 24:22). When Paul spoke about faith, he spoke about righteousness, self-control, and coming judgment. In sharing the Gospel, we understand the significance of the points about righteousness and coming judgment. But why did Paul emphasize self-control (a word that often referred to moral self-control)? Why was Felix so terrified when he heard Paul's message?

Felix and Drusilla were known for a lack of moral self-control. Felix had already been married once when he married Drusilla. Drusilla was the daughter of Herod Agrippa I (the Herod spoken about in Acts 12). She was married to the king of a small region in Syria when she was young. But when she was 16, Felix seduced her away from her husband and convinced her to marry him. Paul's preaching on self-control confronted the sin of Felix and Drusilla, much like John the Baptist's preaching confronted the sin of Herod Antipas and Herodias (Matthew 14:1-12). Although he was very afraid when he heard Paul's message, he refused to repent, and he told Paul he would call him again when it was convenient. But two years later, Felix left Paul in prison when he was recalled to Rome for his own corruption. Drusilla was killed in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, and Felix likely died of tuberculosis. History never records either one repenting and turning to Christ. Writing of his own life, Augustine said, "But I wretched, most wretched, in the very commencement of my early youth, had begged chastity of Thee, and said, 'Give me chastity and continency, only not yet.' For I feared lest Thou shouldest hear me soon, and soon cure me of the disease of concupiscence, which I wished to have satisfied, rather than extinguished." Like Felix and Augustine, we can face moral temptation in our lives, and we can be tempted to push off repentance until a convenient time, desiring to enjoy indulgence in sin before repenting. But the Fruit of the Spirit is self-control, and this self-control applies in the area of moral purity. Let us not put off repentance, but let us seek God's help in living out the Fruit of self-control in this area of life.

1. Our culture is saturated with moral impurity, and it treats many forms of immorality (both secret and public) as normal and celebrated. But like every area of life, we must follow the Bible's teaching on morality. What moral temptations do I struggle with? Am I willing to submit to God's Spirit and the Fruit of self-control in this area of life, or do I want to hold on to sin?

2. We must submit to God's Word, and God can help us as we face temptation. But God also uses other faithful believers in our lives to help disciple us and keep us accountable. Who can challenge me and help keep me accountable regarding the moral temptations that I face?

Tuesday

For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

James 3:7-8

In 1871, a large fire destroyed more than three square miles of Chicago and killed about 300 people. The exact cause of the fire was never definitively determined, although the most popular idea was that a cow kicked over a lantern. But no matter the exact start of the fire, much destruction began from a small flame. James 3:5 uses the illustration of a great forest being destroyed by a small fire to show the great destruction that an untamed tongue can cause. In our current day, we can see the great problems throughout the world caused by a microscopic virus.

But uncontrolled speech can cause far more destruction than any fire or virus. Our tongues can boast in pride, tear down other people, and destroy relationships. Speaking of our tongues, James 3:9-10 says, “With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.” Even as Christians, we may bless and speak well of God, but then speak poorly of others. James’ condemnation of this kind of blessing and cursing applies to how we speak of *all* people, whether believer or unbeliever. He does not simply condemn speaking poorly of fellow Christians, although that is certainly included. He condemns speaking poorly of people who are made in the image of God, which is everyone, believer and unbeliever alike. As he simply says, “these things ought not to be so.” Yet we struggle with self-control regarding our speech. As James says, people have learned to tame many creatures for their use, but no human can tame his tongue. But as God works the Fruit of self-control in our lives, He can help us with control of our tongues. Let us plead with God to help us with the self-control we need regarding our speech.

1. Our culture often criticizes and tears down the character of people with whom they disagree, but this is exactly what James says should not be done by Christians. How often do I speak poorly and tear down others, even if I genuinely believe that they have done wrong or have wrong motives in what they do? Do I acknowledge that God says this is wrong, or do I seek to justify myself in talking in these ways?

2. Looking back in my life, what relationships have been harmed by the way that I speak? How can I repent and seek to restore those relationships?

3. James 3:5 reminds us that our tongues often boast of great things. In what areas of life do I struggle with boasting of myself? How can a proper view of God’s character and my own standing before God help me with this pride and boasting?

Wednesday

Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat, for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe them with rags.

Proverbs 23:20-21

God has blessed us with prosperity, and few Americans wonder where each meal will come from. We have far more food available to us than we actually need. Research estimates that American households throw away approximately 150,000 tons of food every day, equaling over \$150 billion of wasted food in a year. When we think of self-control, often one of the first areas of life that we think of is the need for self-control in eating. In New Testament culture, the word for self-control was most often used in the areas of morality and gluttony. But we often find it far easier to talk and joke about the need for self-control in eating than to actually exercise self-control in eating. But self-control in eating is about more than choosing good health in our lives; it is something the Bible teaches about several times. When the Bible speaks of gluttony, it often connects gluttony with drunkenness (Deuteronomy 21:20; Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34; drunkenness is also condemned several times where gluttony is not mentioned). Most would readily agree that the Bible condemns drunkenness, but are not so quick to speak about gluttony. As Duane Garrett said, “Christians should note that both drunkenness and gluttony are condemned. We often eschew the former and practice the latter.” It can be easy for us to overeat, and yet God warns us against gluttony, and He warns us against the consequences that gluttony can bring. God has blessed us by providing for our needs, and as Ecclesiastes teaches, we can enjoy the physical provision that God has given to us. But we should also take His warnings about gluttony seriously.

Gluttony can reveal a lack of self-discipline, but it can also reveal a lack of concern for others and a lack of good stewardship with what God has given to us. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul pointed out that when the Corinthian church ate together, some of the Corinthians were overindulging in food and drink while others were going hungry. Overindulgence in our own desires can lead us to ignore the needs of others. It can also lead us to waste resources that could be better used for serving others. As Christians, we can easily struggle in this area of life, but it is a place where God has called us to self-control.

1. Do I struggle with self-control in eating? How can I find contentment in what God has provided while applying the need for self-control?

2. Sometimes it is easy for us to condemn the sins of others while ignoring our own struggles. We might be quick to condemn a lack of self-control in someone else while ignoring our own struggles with self-control. How does this attitude reflect pride in my life? How can I humbly look at my own struggles?

3. As I learn to be careful in what I eat, how can I better use those resources in service to God? As I learn to watch out for overindulgence, how can I focus better on the needs of others?

Thursday

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.

Ephesians 5:15-16

Paul exhorted the Ephesians to carefully look at how they walk (live their lives). Instead of drifting through life without pausing to think about how they were doing, they should examine their lives to see where they are living in an unwise way instead of being wise. One of the primary things that they can examine is the use of their time, because the days are evil. Paul wrote to the Ephesians from his imprisonment in Rome, and he faced much evil persecution and opposition because of his faith. But when he had the opportunity to give his defense before Felix and Agrippa, Paul took both opportunities to share the Gospel with them. Despite being imprisoned for his faith, Paul wisely used his time by continuing to speak of Christ. Like the Ephesians, we must live our lives wisely and make the best use of our time. We have a limited amount of time in every day, and we have a limited number of days in our lives. But God always give us enough time to complete the things that He wants us to do each day. It is easy for us to waste time on distractions or things of little value, but the fruit of self-control includes control of the time that we use.

During a great plague in London in 1665, Isaac Newton was a student at Cambridge. He went home to his family's estate to avoid the plague for more than a year. During this time (called "the year of wonders"), he studied math problems and wrote some papers that were the foundation of calculus. He also studied the idea of gravity by applying the principle of an apple falling from a tree to the moon revolving around the earth (without the apple actually landing on his head).

1. We are living in a unique and difficult time, and there is much evil in the world. Looking back over the last couple months, have I wisely used the time that God has given me, or have I wasted a lot of time? We may not invent calculus or discover gravity, but how can I use this time wisely to honor and glorify God?

2. Over the next three days, record how you use your time, including how much time you spend on things like social media, phones, and other entertainment. At the end of that time, evaluate what things you wasted the most time on and how the Fruit of self-control can be applied in these areas.

Friday

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

Matthew 23:25-26

In Matthew 23, Christ used several illustrations to point out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. They portrayed themselves as good and righteous before others, but they were not genuinely righteous. Normally when we think of dishes, we think of them as only clean or only unclean. But if they are only partly clean, then we want the part that touches the food to be the clean part. The most important part of the dish to be clean is the inside where the food goes. If the outside of a dish looks perfectly clean, but the inside is still gross and disgusting, then we would never want to eat out of it. But the Pharisees were hypocritical. They cleaned the outside so it would look good to others, but the inside, the most important part, was still dirty. As Christ said in Matthew 15:8, the Pharisees honored God with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him.

In this particular illustration, Christ condemned them for the sins of greed and self-indulgence. Self-indulgence is the opposite of self-control. Self-indulgence is giving in to the desires of the flesh, while self-control is the Spirit-empowered control of the desires of the flesh. We often think of self-control in terms of outward sins such as adultery, drunkenness, gluttony, outbursts of anger, etc. But like the Pharisees, we can lack self-control inwardly as well. We may try to look good on the outside while we still indulge in secret internal sins of bitterness, lust, greed, jealousy, etc. But the fruit of self-control works in both the inward and the outward things of our lives.

1. Although internal desires and sins can manifest themselves outwardly over time, we can often do a pretty good job of covering our sin and trying to look good on the outside and impressing other people. In what internal temptations do I struggle with self-control?

2. Sometimes we try to look good on the outside so that other people won't think poorly of us (which often is rooted in the sin of pride). But God knows our hearts and our secret sins, and His view of our lives is most important. How should this reality affect the way I view the internal temptations and sins that I face?

3. In pointing out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees in Matthew 15, Christ said that they professed to honor God while their hearts were far from God. Where is my heart before God? Am I genuinely committed to trusting and following God, or is my heart far from God and pursuing its own desires (perhaps even while I profess to follow Him as the Pharisees did)?

Saturday

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

In comparing the Christian life to a race, Paul pointed out that athletes practice great self-control in every area of life in order to compete. The greatest athletes typically follow strict guidelines of exercise, nutrition, and sleep. They don't just give up things that can directly hurt their performance. They also give up good things in the pursuit of something great. They often place athletic success as their primary goal, and then they rearrange all of their other priorities to best reach their primary goal.

The same is true in our Christian lives, although we pursue a far greater goal. The crown (often made of celery leaves) given to early Olympic champions would soon fade away, but God promises eternal reward to those who follow Him faithfully. We can spend a lot of time, energy, and money pursuing things that are not inherently wrong in themselves, but distract us from the most important things. In our lives, our greatest goal should be to bring God honor and glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). One of the best ways that goal can be accomplished is to fulfill the Great Commission and make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20). Every choice and every goal that we make in life should be placed in their proper position below those highest priorities. We certainly need the fruit of self-control when faced with temptation to sin. But we also need self-control when faced with the decision between what is good and what is best. We need God's help to rearrange the priorities of our lives in order to pursue the things that He says are most important.

1. God calls on us to give Him honor and glory, and one of the best ways that we can do this is by making disciples. Is that my greatest priority in life, or do I prioritize other things over what God says is most important?

2. If honoring God and making disciples are my highest priorities, then what does this look like in my life? How should the other priorities and goals of life be arranged under these primary goals?

3. Jesus called Peter away from fishing in order to make him a "fisher of men." Although there is nothing inherently wrong with fishing, God had a much higher priority for Peter's life. What good things in my life can get in the way of God's priorities for my life? If needed, am I willing to give up these good things in order to follow God in the greater things that He has for my life?
