

Discipleship Groups — Level 7
WEEK 2
Life Check: My Self-Control

In this week's self-examination, we are going to be looking at our self-control. This is part of the fruitfulness of our lives that the Holy Spirit produces in us.

There are lots of things to say regarding self-control. However, I am not going to sit here and simply say, "Get more self-control and don't do things you shouldn't." I'm not going to do that because, 1) it isn't something you don't already know, 2) it is something you likely already feel guilty about, and 3) me—just telling you a bunch of stuff about not yelling, not cursing, not looking at porn, not drinking, and a whole long list of other "nots"—isn't really going to help. It only feeds into the cycle of the already growing sense of anger, frustration, and failure most of us have at not "being better." However, that said, with time and growth in God's Word and through the help of the Holy Spirit, we will—little by little—see these things become more and more of a reality in our lives.

So, I am not undermining the real need for growth in controlling our emotions, actions, and responses, because we do, but in this lesson, let's approach self-control from another angle—the angle of what is going on in our innermost being, because there are reasons why we do what we do, and many of those reasons are imperceptible at this moment.

Colossians 3:1-2, "Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth."

I am an intense guy. I always have been. Often times, I have felt that the emotions I feel and the things I do as a result, are amplified by my intense nature. Over time, the Lord has helped me to control this, but much of it was through confronting deep-seated things in my life.

I spent too many years of my life being angry.

I was angry that my father died.

I was angry that my grandfathers didn't step up to help me after my dad's death like I needed them to.

I was angry at other pastors who didn't help me either.

I was angry my dad never got to meet my children.

I was angry that, in certain respects, I was still a child myself.

I was angry at my dad.

I was angry that I couldn't go back and make things right with him.

I was angry that I wasn't being heard or listened to.

I was angry that I wasn't honored, not in a self-serving way, but honored for who I was and what I knew I brought to the table.

I was angry for being held back from running at full speed.
I was angry for not getting my way.
I was angry that everyone else was too slow or too loud.
I was angry that things weren't up to the standard I knew they could and should be.
I was angry at people I felt were inferior to me.
I was angry at myself for not being able to overcome my own weakness, temptation, selfishness, and pride.
I was angry that, in the fearlessness of my own personality, I was so afraid of failure.
I was angry that I couldn't win to the extent I wanted to.
I was angry at my children for feeling like they were holding me back.
I was angry that my wife took so long to get ready to leave the house.
I was angry at my wife for challenging me.
I was angry that people in general aren't better.
I was angry that, for all that I've known of Jesus, I wasn't better than I was.

That sounds like I am a total ogre...I wasn't...But I wasn't totally nice, either. In all that anger, I tried, by sheer force of will, to bend every aspect of my life to my expectations.

Aren't you glad you have me as your pastor?

The thing is, I always wanted to do the right thing. I always wanted to please God. I always strove to love people and be a man of character and wisdom—a man God could be proud of. A man of respect and honor. A man my wife and kids could be proud of. While I had many genuinely good moments, either in my own mind or in the sight of those closest to me, there seemed a dichotomy—a genuinely godly side and a dark side that always loomed over me and inside me.

There were certain things that would always set me off, and in my self-righteous anger, my wife would shrink away from me and gradually disconnect. My kids would be afraid of me—to the point where one of my sons at one point said to my wife, “Dad isn't my hero anymore.”

That stoked the terrible dichotomy inside of me—there was real and genuine repentance toward the people I love so much but had hurt, and then there was more anger at myself for not being the man I knew I could be and should be. My emotions were out of control, and subsequently, so were my actions—not in physical or verbal violence, but in explosiveness and intensity that was way more than what was called for.

Anger, however, is not the primary issue. Anger is not a root, it is a fruit. Anger is only the result of a deficiency we live with in our hearts. The things that “set us off” usually aren't really about the issue right in front of us. Sometimes they are due to simply a lack of patience, but many times they are things that touch our own sense of pain, failure, inadequacy, or lack. These things touch the very core of our identity and our sense of personal worth—and most times we don't even realize it. When our sense of worth is threatened, we lash out:

“Shut up and do as I say!”
“You’re cheating on me!”
“Hurry up! You’re so slow!”
“Get out of my way!”
“Go to hell!”
“Why are you so stupid!”
“Why did I ever marry you?”

By the way, we say those things as if we had no responsibility in the issues at hand. And then after we say them, we feel worse than ever.

Then, when we are asked why we are angry, our responses will often be, “Because of such and such” a reason. But when we are alone, we think to ourselves, “Why am I so angry? I don’t know! What is wrong with me!”

Then we spin into a cycle of self-hatred and condemnation saying things like, “I’m a bad person...I’m stupid...why try anymore? How could God continue to love or use someone like me?” We say to ourselves the same things we say to our wife and kids. We then start to believe things about ourselves that are untrue, but these lies only feed the cycle of our own sense of failure and worthlessness, and then the outbursts become even greater, and the addictions and distractions become more frequent, and everyone else around us pays a heavy price for the brokenness inside of us.

You see, self-control is not simply a matter of will and of trying harder; it is a supernatural change that the Holy Spirit has to work in us to help us do what we cannot do on our own. It is not to say that some people who do not have Christ can’t change or force their will for more self-control. They can. But that is fruit of the flesh that submits something of the mind or body to whatever the desired change is. What human force of will cannot do is to make you into a new creation, redeemed from sin, and transformed from someone unclean to clean. The fruit of human will cannot produce the righteousness of God, nor can it produce a new birth through Jesus Christ. As Jesus said in John 3:6, *“Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.”*

We need something far beyond what the strength of our flesh can give us. We need something supernatural and spiritual: We need the peace of Christ. The Mind of Christ. The joy of Christ. The new life of Christ—all of these surpass our human force of will and human comprehension.

We need Jesus to touch our hearts and we need to realize that the fullness of our identity does not rest on our performance. The things we get so worked up about usually are not worth getting worked up about. It is OK to be imperfect. It is OK to struggle with your growth process in becoming like Christ. It is OK for life to be a bit messy—because it is. This is by no means a justification for any sinful habits or attitudes, but our imperfection as human men has no bearing on our identity as men of God.

It was about five years ago that a switch was flipped in my soul. I don't know exactly when or exactly what happened, but it was a noticeable release inside of me—I was no longer angry like I was before. God had been dealing with my identity for years, and something changed inside of me. I am still very far from perfect, but I am MUCH better! My self-control, my anger, my patience, and all the things we should be controlling started to come under much more control. All I can say is that God touched me and helped my struggling heart, but His help came from dealing with my identity and a touch of the supernatural.

In your groups, pray for each other, because the force of our human will is not enough; we need the intervention of the Holy Spirit who, as His name suggests, helps us to live lives of holiness before God. Remember, Psalm 136:23, *“He remembers us in our weakness,”* and Romans 8:26, *“the Spirit helps us in our weakness.”*