

# SELF-CONTROLLED

Before the pandemic,  
I was working out at Villa 4 to 6 days per week.  
One of the guys there is well into middle age  
and he's a stud.  
When he was younger,  
he won all kinds of weight-lifting and fitness competitions.

Today,  
he still lifts heavy.  
But what impressed me most was watching him do other exercises  
that were more about the motion,  
rather than the weight.  
The way he carried himself,  
his posture,  
the precision of his movements –  
there was no one else at the gym like him.

From time to time he offers to help someone  
and he offered to help me.  
Either he saw great promise in me  
or he was so embarrassed for me  
that he couldn't stand it anymore.  
Either way, he said he'd help me with dead lifts and squats.

I was excited.  
Here's our first conversation.

Him: Now before we get started,  
I need to know your goals.  
Me: I've always been skinny,  
so I want to build some muscle and put on some weight.  
And especially my glutes.  
I'm getting older and  
I know it's important that I have enough back there  
to get in and out of chairs,  
up and down stairs,

in and out of cars.  
Basically, I want a little help for my skinny butt.

Him: Hmmmm.

Me: Why? What's your goal?

Him: I want to be in the place that my body never tells me what to do.  
I want to always be able to tell my body what to do.  
I don't want it to control me.  
I want to control it.

Me: That's a better answer, right?  
That's what I should have said, isn't it?

He taught me a huge lesson that day.  
It's the lesson I want to share with you this evening/morning.

Real strength is about self-control.  
Real strength is not about  
    how much you can lift, or  
    who you can intimidate, or  
    how big you are.  
Real strength is about  
    your posture – how you carry yourself.  
It's about being able to control  
    your actions and your emotions and your words.

**Proverbs 16.32:** Better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one  
    who takes a city.

Taking a city – not easy.  
Being a man with self-control – even harder.  
    Even better.

In our present series, we are looking at the traits  
    God desires to see in men.  
And the characteristic we're looking at today is self-control.

Paul mentions it in both Timothy and Titus  
as a trait required for men  
who are put into places of respect and authority.

**1 Timothy 3.2:** So, a leader must be a man whose life is above reproach. He must be faithful to his wife. **He must exercise self-control**, live wisely, and have a good reputation.

And in Titus we read

**Titus 1.8:** Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, **who is self-controlled**, upright, holy and disciplined.

The Greek word for self-controlled in these verses is swphronos.  
Its literal translation is “of sound mind.”

It describes a man who thinks rightly and makes sound judgments –  
and whose actions are controlled by his right thinking and his principles,  
rather than being determined by his emotions and his impulses.

Those of us who have accepted Jesus as our Savior  
and have the Holy Spirit living within us,  
there is a struggle going on within us.

There is a part of us that wants to be  
totally devoted to God,  
more like Jesus in every way, and  
holy in thought and deed.

And there’s another part of us that is tempted to give into  
pride and lust and greed and anger and  
all that appeals to our lower nature.

And the godly man is the one who is getting better and better  
at turning from his lower impulses and  
living faithfully for God’s high calling on his life.

In Galatians 5 Paul tells us how to know if we are growing spiritually.

**Galatians 5.22-23:** But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

If you're truly growing in your relationship with God,  
you will more and more be characterized by traits that Paul refers to as  
the fruit of the Spirit.

And one of them,  
you caught it didn't you?  
One of them is self-control.

In Titus, Paul continues to write about self-control and how important it is  
for men wanting to be faithful followers of Jesus.  
He tells Titus:

**Titus 2.6-7:** Encourage the young men to be **self-controlled**. In everything set them an  
example by doing what is good.

All right, Titus,  
you got some young guns in that church there in Crete  
that you're overseeing.  
And you know how young guys are.  
They're still  
full of themselves,  
full of testosterone,  
still learning,  
still tempted to act before they think,  
still driven by their emotions.

With your words and with your example,  
I want you to show them how to be self-controlled,  
not giving into their impulses and their passions.

Young guys, Titus,  
brother, you know how they are,  
bless their hearts.

Does Paul give Titus a word for old guys?  
Yes, he does.

**Titus 2.2:** Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, **self-controlled**,  
and sound in faith, in love and in endurance.

Whaaat?  
Teach the old men to be ... self-controlled.

Dang.  
Evidently becoming self-controlled is not like becoming taller.  
It doesn't automatically come with age.

Just maybe, growing older is not the same as growing up.

One is automatic;  
the other is optional and  
happens only if we work at it.

I've quoted this to you a hundred times  
but I still love it.  
The difference between boys and government bonds  
is that over time bonds mature.

Maturity is not a given.  
It requires work.  
And part of that work is becoming self-controlled.

We guys,  
we often joke about women being emotional.  
Of course, not in their presence,  
and certainly not at particular times of the month.

(Dad – ministerial period)

We guys often joke about women being emotional,  
being controlled by their emotions.  
But not us.

We're men.  
We're strong.  
We're the rock.  
We're steady.  
We keep it together  
and stay under control.

That's why men are more likely than women to be  
alcoholics, and  
drug addicts, and  
porn addicts.

That's why more of us require anger management  
and end up in prison.

That's why more of us commit suicide than women.

Because we handle our emotions so well.  
Because we have things, including ourselves,  
so well under control.

I wish.

Self-control –  
it doesn't come with age.  
It's not easier for men  
because we aren't emotional by nature.  
And it's not optional  
for those of us who want to please God  
and be worthy of respect.

So, let's talk about how we can do better when it comes to being self-controlled.

## **TO BECOME MORE SELF-CONTROLLED**

### **1. We Need to Admit We have a Problem.**

Everybody gets angry at times.  
Most of us become impatient when it's not helpful.  
Some guys struggle with lust.  
By some guys, I mean all the guys in this room with a pulse.

But for some of us it's not just a slip-up every now and then.  
It's a real problem.

When it comes to anger,  
it's not occasionally.  
It's often.  
And/or it's intense.

When it comes to impatience,  
we end up saying or doing things that hurt relationships.

When it comes to lust,  
it's not situational.  
By that I mean it's not just when an attractive woman  
crosses our path.  
We look for it  
on websites,  
on TV, or  
by putting ourselves in a place where we know women  
will be dressed suggestively or  
not at all.

Some of us, our problem is  
wanting the praise of others, or  
needing to be the hero who makes everything ok for everyone, or  
being driven to succeed so that we never rest or enjoy the good work  
we've done.

And of course,  
there are the typical addictions – alcohol, drugs, spending, food and  
consuming.

I've told you before that for several years,  
probably 10 – 12,  
I drank too much.

We didn't have alcohol in our house growing up.  
I remember seeing beer and wine in some of my friends' houses  
and being amazed that it was right out there in the open,  
where everybody could see it.

They drank and  
they weren't ashamed if people knew it.  
I figured, "I guess that's just how bad people are."

As an adult,  
I began to drink wine and found the taste ok  
but the effect of calming my nerves  
and taking away my anxiety  
and helping me turn off –  
that I really liked!

That's one of the reasons we don't address  
the area in our life that's out of control.  
Giving into it makes us feel better.  
Whether it's anger or alcohol or lust or buying stuff we don't need.  
It changes how we feel  
and temporarily give us some relief.

It takes away our anxiety.  
Or it makes us feel in control.  
Or it makes us feel superior to others.  
Or it gives us an excuse for failing  
or for not even trying.

The area that's out of control in our lives,  
when we give into it,  
it changes how we feel for the moment.  
And we like that,  
even if it creates problems later for us.

Think about the area in our life where you have a problem.  
Ask yourself:  
What am I receiving by allowing this part of my life be out of control?  
What's the psychological/emotional benefit to having this in my life.

Back to me and my problem.  
Drinking became almost a nightly ritual.  
Like I said, I enjoyed what it did for me.

What wasn't so good is that  
over time I had to drink more and more to get the same effect,  
it became a regular part of my life, and  
it began to create problems at home.

I won't go into all the details as to how I stopped drinking  
but I remember the day I said to myself,  
I can't do this anymore.

I can't do this and be the man I want to be.

I can't do this and be the husband I want to be.

I can't do this and be the father I want to be.

I can't do this and pretend that I'm a person of real faith  
who trusts in Jesus to get me through life.

And I certainly can't stand up and tell people that Jesus is all they need  
without being a hypocrite.

The day that I admitted to myself that I had a problem  
was 24 years ago.

Since that time I've had one drink.

And only because I was bullied into it by a couple of 80 year old  
Italian Fascists.

Tell the story.

Why do I tell you about my problem with alcohol –  
well, one so I could tell you the story about Emma and Primo, and  
two, so you might find it easier to admit that you have a problem.

You can be a good person,  
you can be someone who loves and trusts in Jesus,  
and still have a part of your life that's out of control.

You don't have to be ashamed of that.

As a matter of fact,  
shame will just make it harder for you to get better.

But you do need to admit that you have a problem  
and that you need to address it.

So, let's say you admit you have a problem.  
What do you do next?

I would say

## **2. Pray about It.**

I'm going to give you more than this  
because prayer can be a cop out.

But the place to start always  
is to pray about it.  
To get honest with God about what's going on within you.

And the prayer begins with  
confessing this is a problem in my life,  
acknowledging that  
I am responsible for it,  
no matter how it became a part of my life,  
I am responsible for it being here now and for moving forward,  
and asking for God's help.

In the Sermon on the Mount,  
Jesus describes to us the blessed life.  
How we live a life that pleases God and  
that brings good to ourselves and to others.

And here's the first thing he tells us.  
It's the gateway that we must pass through  
if our lives are to be good and full and blessed.

**Matthew 5.3:** Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of God.

Getting our lives right begins  
with admitting that we can't get our lives right –  
not by ourselves,  
not in our own strength, or  
not in our own wisdom.

Spiritual transformation begins when we acknowledge  
we are so poor spiritually  
that we need God to be at work in our lives.

So, talk to God about it.  
Get real with God about it.  
Get down on your knees  
and ask for his help.  
And tell him you'll do whatever he tells you to do –  
ask for forgiveness,  
seek out counsel from someone else,  
whatever it takes.

### **3. Work to Understand the Cause Behind Your Behavior.**

When we have a problem with self-control,  
it means that something else is controlling us.

#### **A. It could be something in our past.**

Some of us live with anger,  
some of us live with shame,  
some of us live with a compulsive need for affection,  
some of us live with a need to be the hero  
or to succeed at work  
because of something that was said or done to us  
when we were young.

If you were abused as a child,  
verbally, emotionally or sexually  
(and more men experience sexual abuse growing up than you would  
guess),  
that doesn't go away just because you moved away.

That sense of being violated  
often creates a deep anger that resides within us  
and that comes out at others who had nothing to do with it.

We react too often,  
too violently and  
we hold onto it too long.

We don't understand why we do what we do.  
Why we're out of control.  
That's because the reason is something long ago  
that we tell ourselves we're over.

Some guys grow up with fathers and mothers  
who tell them that  
they're nothing,  
they're worthless,  
they'll never accomplish anything.

And they're at the office at 9 pm,  
wondering why they can't go home and be with their families,  
wondering why they so are driven to succeed,  
wondering who they're trying to impress, and  
wondering why it's never enough.

If you grew up with a parent that was absent –  
physically gone because of work or divorce,  
emotionally gone because he or she  
was alcoholic or clinically depressed or narcissistic –  
that feeling of being unwanted,  
of being worthless,  
of being a problem,  
that will come out somehow until you deal with it.  
It will manifest in some part of your life being out of control,  
trying to get someone's attention,  
someone's approval,  
someone's love.

I have known several men  
who have struggled with being sexually faithful and pure  
because when they were a teenager  
an older woman seduced them  
and screwed with their heads  
until she was done with them.

Others have had a father who introduced them  
to prostitutes or to older women  
and told them this is how you become a man.  
And some of these guys,  
this was the only attention they ever received from their dads.

You think you get married  
and all that just goes away?  
All those lies,  
all those wrong ways of understanding what it means to be a man,  
that need to be attractive to and wanted by one more woman –  
that way of feeling good about yourself?

No – it will come out in some way,  
some uncontrolled way until you understand it  
and deal with it.

In his poem “My Heart Leaps Up,”  
William Wordsworth wrote

**William Wordsworth:** The child is the father of the man.

In his poem the sentence has a positive meaning.  
And it can be that way in our lives.

But it’s also true negatively.  
The hurts, the lies, the shame, the identities  
that were placed on us as boys  
create the man we are today  
and lead to all kinds of negative behaviors,  
parts of our lives that are out of control  
until we understand and deal with them.

If something in your past is causing some part of your life  
to be out of control,  
your solution is probably not your willpower.

It's not deciding you'll try harder and not give in this time.  
If that was going to work,  
it would have worked by now.

What we need is to figure out why we are the way we are  
and deal with the root cause.

## **B. It could be something in our present.**

There are times when the pressures of the present  
become too much.

It could be a schedule that's overwhelming  
and that leaves us tired and frustrated and feeling like a failure  
all the time.

It could be a job where we feel denigrated and disrespected.  
No one appreciates all we've done  
or all we're doing.

It could be a marriage where we feel unappreciated.  
We're doing the best we can.  
We're giving all we know to give.  
And it's not enough.

All we hear is that  
we don't get it,  
we're not doing it right,  
we won't ever get it right.

And all that pressure builds up  
like the air expanding in a balloon  
until it explodes.

We all have a breaking point.  
We get to a place where we can't take it anymore.  
And if we're not careful  
we lose control of our emotions.

We give into anger or depression.  
We begin to drink or drug.  
We turn to porn or an affair.

We want to feel better.  
So, we give in to something that promises  
to take away our pain.  
And some part of our life gets out of control.

**C. It could be something in the future.**

Some worry.  
Some fear.  
Some situation we can imagine  
we are unprepared for.  
Some possible eventuality that will make us vulnerable  
and expose us as weak and incapable of doing what a man should do.

As a boy for me that was playing Little League baseball  
and realizing someone might hit a ball in my direction.

As a man, it's something more serious,  
like having other people in the car with me,  
and there's no way around it.

I'm going to have to parallel park.  
I'm getting nervous right now,  
just thinking about it.

Most of y'all have no idea what it's like  
being as big an idiot as I am  
when it comes to anything that is practical  
or associated with what men are expected to be able to do.

I'm guessing some of you have worries about the future  
that are even more serious  
than mine about parallel parking.

Again, when we're filled with anxiety,  
we'll do something to get rid of that feeling.  
There's planning and there's prayer and there's talking to others  
and there's gutting it up and bearing the pain.

But often what we do is give into some compulsive behavior  
that changes how we feel in the moment  
but does nothing to prepare us for the future  
our deepens our reliance on God.

And that behavior comes to get a grip on us.  
It comes to control us  
to the point that we're no longer controlling our lives.

Understanding why your life is out of control will not fix your problem,  
not by itself.  
But if you don't understand it,  
you'll never overcome it.

You may have heard me say:  
You cannot give to God what you don't have.

Until you have your problem,  
it will have you.  
And until you have your problem –  
and by that I mean until you understand it and what it's doing to you –  
until you have your problem,  
you cannot give it to God.

So, when there's a part of our life that's out of control,  
it's important that we do the work we need to do  
to understand it,  
to get our hands on it  
so we can give it to God.

#### **4. Know Your Triggers and Work to Prevent Them.**

**Ephesians 5.15:** Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise.  
If you struggle with self-control,  
what does it mean to live wisely.  
One thing it means is that you identify what is likely to trigger  
your out-of-control behavior.  
And you try to avoid those situations.

In the recovery movement,  
people with addiction issues are told to be careful  
when they are hungry, angry, lonely or tired.  
The first letter of those four states spell the word Halt.

And addicts and alcoholics are told that when you're in any of those four  
conditions, you become more vulnerable to a relapse.  
So, take care not to get into those situations;  
and if you do, halt – stop, and address the state you're in.

It's the same when we have a problem with  
anger, impatience, lust, self-pity, depression.  
Whatever it is,  
that area where we tend to be out of control  
can be triggered by being in those states.

Others of us have different triggers.

If you've had a problem with pornography,  
just sitting down at the computer where you've looked at porn before  
can be a trigger.  
Even if you sat down for no purpose other than to send an email  
or shop on Amazon.  
Being in that same place  
will likely be a time of temptation for you.

A trigger for me is feeling disrespected.  
I get angry.  
I'm likely to become sarcastic,  
not in the wonderfully clever and affable manner that so many people enjoy,  
but in a way that's mean and hurtful,  
and maybe even directed at someone who has shown me nothing but  
kindness.

I know this about myself,  
so, when I'm feeling disrespected,  
I go on high alert in how I deal with people.  
And try to talk myself down off the ledge.

For some people it's when they're depressed.  
For others it's when they're exuberant and on top of the world.

But we need to know our triggers.  
It's called self-awareness.  
It's being wise.

If I had time, I'd look at these passages closely with you.

David is a strategist and a warrior.  
He and his men come home and find  
    their village has been burned to the ground and  
    their families have been taken captive.

David and his men weep and then

**1 Samuel 30.6:** David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters. But David found strength in the Lord his God.

David is in a dangerous place.  
He could have been easily triggered  
    and made a bad situation worse.  
But he realizes what's going on,  
    he turns to God,  
    calms down, and  
    makes good decisions.  
And they get their wives and children back.

Years later, David, now king,  
    has grown weary.  
He doesn't go out with his troops to fight his own battles.  
Instead, he sends someone else to lead his men.

**2 Samuel 11.2-4:** One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite." Then David sent messengers to get her.

You probably know the rest of the story.  
Bathsheba is brought to him.  
He has sex with her.  
Really, this is rape.  
And then later he has her husband killed.  
It's an awful story.

How does it begin?  
David is depressed.  
It doesn't say that,  
    but that's what's going on.

He's not up to going out and fighting his own battles.  
He's up at night.  
He can't sleep.

And this man who was able to keep his composure and his self-control  
    when his village was burned and his family was taken –  
he now makes the biggest mistakes of his life.

And what triggers it is his depression.  
His depression and his loneliness  
    lead him into grievous sin.

Know your triggers.  
As far as you can prevent them from coming into your life.  
And when you see them showing up,  
    have the self-awareness to know that you're in danger.  
And protect yourself.

Get out of that place emotionally or physically.  
Phone a friend.  
Don't overestimate your strength.  
Know that you are vulnerable.  
And do what it takes  
    to change your situation.

Finally,

### **5. Humble yourself, get some help and do the work.**

I don't know why sometimes God will speak to us directly  
and why other times he speaks to us through other people.  
I don't know why he sometimes comforts us and strengthens us and delivers us  
through his Spirit with no one else involve,  
and why other times he does that work through others.

But there are times when we are not going to get the help we need  
unless we  
go to someone,  
tell him what's going on, and  
do the work that's needed to overcome our problem.

Asking for help is humbling.  
And sometimes we'd rather  
stay in denial, or  
keep praying  
and not tell anyone else about our problems or our failures or  
our weaknesses.

But there are times when we are going to get the help we need  
only if we get out of our prayer closets,  
stop hiding our problems, and  
ask for help.

If you are struggling with an area of your life that is out of control and  
you have prayed for a while and you're no better,  
go see a counselor,  
open up to a trusted friend,  
tell your small group.

Sure, it's embarrassing to tell someone.  
It's humbling to ask for help.  
It feels like weakness to admit  
I've got a problem that I can't lick.

That's the voice of pride controlling your life  
and pride will always screw you up.

Here's what I think.  
We want God to be our problem fixer.

I don't live within my means.  
I've messed up my marriage.  
I'm anxious all the time.  
I'm addicted.  
I'm angry too often.

Please, God, answer my prayer,  
wave your magic wand, and  
fix my problem.

And if God does that –  
you don't learn,  
you don't grow,  
you don't get better, and  
you'll end up in the same place again.

God wants to be your life changer,  
not just your problem fixer.

He wants you to learn a new way of thinking, acting and being.  
He wants you to become a person of character and strength.  
And for that to happen,  
usually you have to look at your life and your problems,  
understand why you do what you do, and  
develop new ways of relating to people and handling your problems.  
And that is almost always done best  
with other people –  
with people who love you and will walk with you.

Stop praying for God to fix your problems.  
Start praying that God will change your life.

You don't have to live the way you've been living.

Your life, some part of it,  
does not have to be out of control.

You can change.

You can get better.

You can stop hurting others  
and you can start pleasing God.

Often that means,  
humble yourself,  
ask for help,  
and with someone else who is trained and wise,  
do the work.

And you'll be glad you did.