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Chapter 1

Why Self-Control?

Because It Leads to Freedom and Flourishing

“He who reigns within himself and rules passions, desires, and fears is more than a king.”

—JOHN MILTON

Whenever you lose control, someone else always finds it.”

These were the words of my high school English teacher Mr. Sologar on our first day of class. They didn’t have anything to do with literature or grammar, but I guess he wanted to kick off the class with a life lesson.

It was a good one.

If we acted up at home, he explained, control of our lives would swiftly transfer to our parents in the form of lost privileges or being grounded. The same was true at school. If we abused our freedom in the classroom or in the hallways—and we did!—we’d find ourselves in the principal’s office or confined to detention. If we got really crazy and decided to break the law, the legal system would step in to curtail our freedom.

“No, control is never truly lost,” he repeated in his thick Indian accent. “If you fail to control yourself, others will control you.”

I didn’t care for Mr. Sologar. He covered our papers in red

The biggest threat to our freedom isn't any external enemy. It's our inability to control ourselves.

ink, hectored us about poor diction (he would have liked the word *hectored*), and insisted we read *The Lord of the Flies* even though there was a perfectly good movie based on the novel. Yet somehow his self-control lesson lodged itself in my lazy, teenage brain. There it sat, dormant and almost forgotten until I started researching for this book. Only now am I starting to truly appreciate the wisdom of his words. As he looked out across a class of adolescents, he knew the biggest threat to our freedom isn't any external enemy. It's our inability to control ourselves.

Mr. Sologar, you were onto something.

CONQUERING CITIES

The Bible has a lot to say about self-control. In that great repository of wisdom called Proverbs, we're told that it's "better to have self-control than to conquer a city" (Prov. 16:32 NLT). I'll admit that the city-conquering language feels a little weird to me (I'm more of a Cappuccino-conqueror), but I get the point. In the ancient world, people built massive walls around cities and patrolled them with armed guards. Conquering a city was the hardest military feat imaginable. But here's Solomon, the wisest guy in antiquity, saying that controlling yourself is more impressive than pulling off this nearly impossible exploit. The image also provides a telling contrast between two kinds of enemies. Defeating the enemy beyond your walls is hard; subduing the enemy within is harder.

Proverbs revisits the city-smashing motif elsewhere to hammer home the point. "Like a city whose walls are broken

through is a person who lacks self-control” (Prov. 25:28). In other words, an absence of self-control is dangerous. Soldiers-breaking-through-your-walls dangerous.

It’s not all wall breaking and city smashing. In one of the most beautiful passages in all of Scripture, the apostle Paul lists self-control alongside core virtues like love, joy, and peace as among the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22). We tend to think of self-control as a strictly human enterprise, but Scripture describes self-control as a product of being connected to God. It’s something that grows when your life is rooted in divine reality. In fact, if it’s missing, your faith may be a ruse. No fruit, no root.

These are just a few mentions of the virtue. Scripture is also crammed with examples of self-control in action, people who demonstrated this vital virtue as they served God and their fellow man.

Unfortunately, self-control has a bad reputation these days. When I told people I was writing a book on the topic, I heard a lot of sighs and groans. “Oh yeah, I should be better about that,” they would say, their voices tinged with defeat. Most of us view self-control like that overdue dentist appointment—necessary but dreaded. Others don’t even see the necessity. The self doesn’t need to be controlled; it needs to be liberated. For them, *self-expression* is the real virtue. Self-control is boring, confining, the cop that shows up and shuts down the party.

Others worry emphasizing self-control will lead to legalism, an approach to spiritual life that reduces faith to a list of dos and

The Bible portrays self-control not as restrictive but rather as the path to freedom. It enables us to do what’s right—and ultimately what’s best for us.

don'ts. Yet it's a mistake to relegate self-control to this category. Biblical self-control isn't about proud self-reliance or earning your way to heaven. It's not somehow nullified by grace. You will find no asterisks beside the biblical exhortations to exercise self-control. What you will find is a truckload of commands to resist evil, flee lust, avoid temptation, abstain from sin, control your tongue, guard your heart, and, most graphically, kill the flesh.

Yet these drastic measures aren't meant to confine us; they are edicts from a loving God designed to bring liberty. The Bible portrays self-control not as restrictive but rather as the path to freedom. It enables us to do what's right—and ultimately what's best for us.

From the biblical view, there are only two modes of life available to us: enslavement to sin and life in the Spirit. The former speaks of confinement in the extreme. Today “sin” is a playful word, associated with decadent desserts and lingerie ads. We see the word *sin* and imagine someone sampling a menu of forbidden delights. Don't be thrown by that connotation. Instead, think of being pistol-whipped by increasingly destructive patterns of behavior, ones that ultimately lead to your demise. That's what the Bible means by sin: enslavement. The early theologian Augustine (who knew a thing or two about sin) described it this way: “vanquished by the sin into which it fell by the bent of its will, nature has lost its liberty.”¹

Life in the Spirit, on the other hand, is a life of liberty. In this scenario a loving God guides and empowers you to live a life of righteousness that leads to flourishing and joy. But without self-control, you're doomed to the enslavement side of the equation.

RESISTING MARSHMALLOWS

For the past year, I've been reading everything about self-control I can get my hands on. Primarily that meant surveying the relevant Bible passages and diving into the vast corpus of Christian thought on the topic. I've also scoured academic journals and pored over dozens of studies. I've read bestselling books about grit and willpower and resilience and habits. I've interviewed experts in a variety of disciplines. Along the way, I've acquired a new vocabulary to talk about the subject. *Self-regulation*. *Ego depletion*. *Delayed gratification*. *Active volition*. *Inhibitory control*. All fancy ways of referring to our ability—or inability—to control our behavior.

It's been a fascinating journey, even if the material at times has been a little dry. Let's just say that studies with titles like "Cognitive, affective, and behavioral correlates of internalization of regulations for religious activities" aren't exactly beach reading. No matter. There have been enough revelations along the way to keep me going. More than once I've had my assumptions about self-control challenged—or flipped upside-down. Which is to be expected. Even those who study the subject for a living have been stunned by the discoveries of recent years.

One of the biggest surprises is just how powerful self-control is. Researchers first caught wind of the importance of self-control thanks to a 1960s experiment. In the now famous "marshmallow experiment," Stanford researcher Walter Mischel put a group of preschoolers through a wrenching test.² Each child was offered a marshmallow, cookie, or pretzel to eat. Or they could make a deal. The tikes were told that if they could hold off eating the sweet or salty treat for just fifteen minutes they would receive *two* treats.

Almost none of them could.

A few jammed the yummy snack into their mouths immediately. Most at least tried to resist. The children who held out employed a range of behaviors to cope with the temptation. Some would put their hands over their eyes or turn away from the tray bearing the delicious temptation. Out of sight, out of mind, they hoped. Others started kicking the desk or tugging on their hair. Some even played with the marshmallow, stroking it “as if it were a tiny stuffed animal.”

The researchers analyzed the results, charting the children on a four-point scale on their ability to delay gratification. But the big findings wouldn't come until decades later and completely by chance. As fate would have it, Mischel's own daughters attended school with several children who had participated in the experiment. Over the years, he heard secondhand reports from his daughters about how their classmates were doing. Mischel noticed a pattern in the gossip. The children who seemed to get in the most trouble were the same ones who had trouble waiting for a second marshmallow.

His curiosity was piqued. Mischel and his colleagues tracked down hundreds of participants from the original study, now teenagers. Sure enough, the ones who had demonstrated the higher levels of willpower as preschoolers were outpacing their peers. Not only did they have better grades and test scores, they were more popular at school and less likely to abuse drugs. The benefits continued to mount as the test subjects grew older. The children who had held out for the full fifteen minutes scored 210 points higher on their SATS than their weakest willed counterparts. They went on to achieve higher levels of education and report higher levels of happiness in their relationships. They even had

lower body mass indexes.

Part of what made the follow-up findings so remarkable is that very few childhood traits are helpful in predicting outcomes later in life. Yet this simple test had shown a strong correlation between the ability to delay gratification in childhood with numerous benefits in adulthood.

The findings rippled through multiple fields. Psychologists had long assumed intelligence was the key to a successful life. For educators, high self-esteem was the ticket. Self-control had never entered the discussion. But Mischel's marshmallow test changed everything. It showed that self-control was paramount and affected virtually every area of life. Since Mischel's famous experiment, study after study has linked self-control to a surplus of "favorable life outcomes," including better relationships, higher incomes, and higher levels of happiness. People with greater self-control are more sociable, honest, and sacrificial. They have lower rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and aggression. They even live longer. If you could bottle self-control, it would be one of the most valuable substances on earth.

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I'LL BE GOOD . . . LATER

Some researchers define self-control as the ability to delay gratification. This is what the marshmallow experiment sought to test. Can you resist the smaller immediate reward for a bigger one later? On paper, it looks like a no-brainer. The smart move is to hold out for the better reward. But desire has a way of changing the game, and not just for preschoolers. You know that passing on

that donut now will make you feel healthier and more energetic tomorrow . . . but wait, is that a maple glaze?

Our inability to delay gratification lands us in all kinds of trouble. Perhaps the most famous example in the Bible involves a birthright and a bowl of soup. You might recall the story. The patriarch Isaac has twin sons, Jacob and Esau. Esau is born mere minutes before his brother, which means he's recognized as the firstborn. That might not seem like a big deal to us, but back then it was everything. The son with the birthright would eventually inherit all of the father's wealth and possessions.

The boys grow up, and they're complete opposites. Esau is a man's man. He excels at hunting and growing body hair (seriously . . . see Gen. 27:11). Jacob is a committed indoorsman who knows his way around the kitchen. One day Esau comes back from a hunt and he's starving. "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished," he says to his brother. Jacob agrees to serve him the stew—on one condition. Esau has to give up his birthright. On the face of it, it's the most ludicrous offer of all time: one meal in exchange for a fortune. But Esau is hungry. And that makes all the difference. "Look, I am about to die," Esau says. "What good is the birthright to me?"

Esau was crazy, right? He was, but we all have a little Esau in us. We have a hard time holding out for future rewards, even when it's clearly in our best interest to do so. We tend to opt for the smaller, short-term payoff.

We whip out the credit card to buy things we don't need, knowing we'll have to pay it back later, plus interest.

We eat too much, knowing it will cause health problems down the road.

We indulge in sinful behaviors fully aware that doing so will damage our relationship with God and with others.

Somehow we lose sight of the bigger picture and grasp for the immediate pleasure. We eat the marshmallow. We trade for the soup. We take the easy way out. Self-control sounds like a lovely idea, but it's something we'll get to tomorrow. Augustine's prayer could be our own: "Grant me chastity and self-control, but please not yet."³

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

As I'm writing this chapter, the news is crammed with instances of high-profile moral failings. It seems every day brings new revelations of a Hollywood executive or politician accused of sexual assault or harassment. If the allegations are true—and most of them sure seem to be—it's hard to imagine what these people were thinking. Not only did their actions degrade and traumatize other people, they boomeranged back on them and destroyed their reputations and careers.

It's easy to dismiss these issues as secular problems. Many Christians experienced an acute sense of *schadenfreude* as we watched "godless" Hollywood consumed by the scandals. But sadly, the church has been home to similar behavior. For years, I edited a prominent ministry magazine, which brought me into close contact with many of the top church leaders in the country. I remember one up-and-coming leader I got to know. Charismatic and talented, he led a megachurch, headlined conferences around the country, and wrote bestselling books—and then lost it all when he was caught having extramarital affairs. I wish I could say his story was anomalous, but I lost count of how many leaders

and friends torpedoed their ministries by succumbing to lust or greed.

In the midst of the scandals unfolding in 2017, theologian Owen Strachan took to social media to share this leadership lesson with his followers:

Now more than ever, one moment can destroy—in one day—your life’s work. The essential virtue: self-control. You can have all the talent in the world, and draw a ton of attention for it, but if your ability is not matched by strong character, you are in a precarious place.⁴

As Strachan observed, a lack of self-control has dire consequences. And it’s not just politicians and pastors who need to heed his warning. For all of us, even a momentary break in willpower

A lack of self-control has dire consequences. And it’s not just politicians and pastors who need to heed his warning. For all of us, even a momentary break in willpower can cause irreversible damage.

can cause irreversible damage. Yet preventing these kinds of dramatic failings is just one function of self-control. It also plays a central role in the thousands of small decisions we face every day.

Social scientists define self-control as the ability to resist negative impulses. But when the Bible mentions self-control, it usually has something bigger in mind. Yes, it involves the ability to resist doing something you shouldn’t. But it also

has a proactive element. It refers to the ability to do something you should. In theological terms, it’s about guarding against sins

of commission (bad things you do) and sins of omission (good things you fail to do). It also involves resisting the entire range of unwelcome impulses: from the instinct to eat that second piece of chocolate cake to the temptation to look at pornography.

When you think of self-control in these terms, you see how it impacts every facet of life. Just think of an average day. It starts before you even open your eyes. Your alarm goes off and you're faced with a decision. Grab some extra sleep or use the extra minutes doing something useful. Sometimes it's fine to grab the extra Zs (you probably need them). But usually you're better off using those precious before-the-craziness-of-the-day moments to spend some time with God or get some exercise. So do you linger in bed or do something productive? Depends on self-control.

Next comes breakfast. Do you grab a donut and coffee on the way out the door? Or opt for a healthier option, which, in addition to not tasting as good, likely takes more time to prepare? Again, self-control.

On the way to work, you get cut off. Then you hit gridlock traffic. Another decision: lose your cool and cuss, or take a deep breath and let the incident roll off your back? More self-control.

At work you face a jungle of dilemmas. Do you spend the first hour at your desk surfing the web? Or dive straight in and make some progress on that important report? When people start gossiping about that annoying coworker, do you join in or defend him? When you notice that someone seems discouraged, do you risk a little awkwardness by walking into their office and showing concern? Or do you just ignore it and stick to your routine? Do you gripe about the boss? Do you look a little too long at that attractive coworker?

It's all self-control.

When you return home, the challenges continue. And now you're tired, making self-control even harder. Do you just melt into the couch and let the cable TV wash over you? Or do you spend some quality time with your kids? Do you eat too much at dinner? Or drink too much after it? Do you spend the meal staring at your phone or conversing with your family? After the kids go to bed, do you watch Netflix or take the opportunity to spend some meaningful time with your spouse and deepen your marriage?

It's not just 9–5 workers who face such choices. They come at every stage of life. If you're a stay-at-home parent, do you park the kids in front of the TV? Or do you lead them in constructive activities that demand more of your attention? Do you routinely feed your children sugary snacks or push nutritional meals (even when they act like you're torturing them)? If you're a retiree, do you live for your personal hobbies or pour into members of the next generation? If you're a college student, do you start on that essay early in the semester or cram the day before it's due? Do you Snapchat with friends during class or listen to the lectures?

While we may be tested in dramatic moments, the fabric of life is stitched slowly, through a thousand tiny choices that end up defining your life.

There are times where it's perfectly okay to just veg out. We need down time. But too often we choose the easier, and sometimes sinful, option rather than doing things that would ultimately enrich our lives, help others, and foster growth. And typically, the difference doesn't amount to ignorance of what choice is better; it's usually a matter of self-control.

It's easy to imagine your life's

outcome as the product of a few big decisions. We envision a lone hero showing extraordinary courage at a climactic moment. Or a tragic figure losing control at a critical juncture. That might be how things work in the movies.

In reality, our destinies are determined in a more mundane manner. As the writer Annie Dillard reminds us, “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.”⁵ While we may be tested in dramatic moments, the fabric of life is stitched slowly, through a thousand tiny choices that end up defining our lives. The difference of those accumulated decisions is dramatic. They can add up to a life crippled by sloth and sin or to one characterized by freedom and flourishing.

THE GYMNAST CONFRONTS HER ABUSER

Among all the public sex scandals in recent years, none was more disturbing than the case involving Larry Nasser, the former Team USA gymnastics doctor who was accused of molesting 250 young women. The first to draw attention to Nasser’s sexual abuse was Rachael Denhollander, a former gymnast the doctor abused. At Nasser’s sentencing, Denhollander addressed him for forty minutes. Drawing from her Christian faith, she spoke of God’s judgment and mercy.

“The Bible you speak carries a final judgment where all of God’s wrath and eternal terror is poured out on men like you. Should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you have done, the guilt will be crushing. And that is what makes the gospel of Christ so sweet. Because it extends grace and

hope and mercy where none should be found. And it will be there for you.”⁶

In her address, Denhollander also confronted Nasser about his selfishness and lack of self-control.

“You have become a man ruled by selfish and perverted desires, a man defined by his daily choices repeatedly to feed that selfishness and perversion. You chose to pursue your wickedness no matter what it cost others and the opposite of what you have done is for me to choose to love sacrificially, no matter what it costs me.”⁷

TERMS OF SURRENDER

Okay, so self-control is important. But what exactly is it?

As we’ve seen, the ability to delay gratification is crucial. But there’s more to self-control than postponing pleasure. In some situations we’re not sure if doing the right thing will result in a bigger reward down the road. Yet exercising self-control demands doing the right thing anyway. For a more comprehensive understanding of this essential character trait we must look to Scripture.

The New Testament uses four words that we translate as self-control. Each highlights a different aspect of the virtue. If you’ll indulge me, I’m going to dust off my seminary Greek and take a brief look at each one. (I promise to keep it short and sweet.)

Néphō literally means “to be sober, to abstain from wine.” It is also used figuratively, to speak of being free from the intoxicating effects of sin. *Néphō* is used in passages that warn against being duped by false teachers (2 Tim. 4:5) and becoming prey for the devil’s attacks (1 Peter 5:8). It stresses the need for clear-eyed

vigilance. *Nēphō* describes a crucial precondition to resisting temptation. We need clear vision to spot sin and avoid it.

Chalinagógeó (don't you love these Greek words?!) means “to bridle or restrain.” The word invokes the image of a horse controlled and directed by a mouth bit. James uses the word to describe the formidable task of taming the tongue (James 1:26) and controlling the body (3:2). Like a large animal, our sinful desires are powerful. Self-control demands we direct and restrain them.

Sōphrōn describes someone with a “sound mind” who is “balanced.” According to Scripture, it is especially important for elderly men and church leaders to possess this key attribute (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 2:2). Though *sōphrōn* denotes moderation, it doesn't speak of a safe, middle-of-the-road mentality. Rather it portrays a mindset that is righteous and therefore temperate. The person who has this quality is not prone to erratic, impulsive behavior.

Egkráteia translates as “self-mastery” or literally “dominion within.” The most familiar usage of this word comes in Galatians 5, where Paul lists *egkráteia* alongside the other fruit of the Spirit. People who exhibit this quality are not mastered by their passions. They have internal control.

You can probably see how these Greek words relate to our understanding of self-control—and how they expand on it. The biblical concept of self-control goes far beyond the mere ability to hold out for future rewards. These concepts describe mentalities and habits and character traits. Someone who embodies these virtues is sober and restrained, balanced and mastered.

When I look at that list, I'm both impressed and intimidated. I don't know about you, but I wouldn't use those words to describe myself. Not all the time, anyway. Don't get me wrong. I want to cultivate those attributes (that's why I've tackled this project after

all), but doing so is a daunting prospect. It requires more than curbing a bad habit or two; it demands growth in multiple core areas. And growth is painful.

But here's the good news. When it comes to developing self-control, we're not expected to go at it alone. Thank God for that!

What self-control requires, ultimately, isn't control but surrender.

As we walk closely with Him, He promises to guide and empower us. We tend to think of self-control as an independent virtue. After all, we're talking about *self*-control. Isn't it primarily about us? I would argue, no.

As we'll discuss later, there is certainly a role for human effort. But there's a giant paradox at the heart of this issue. What self-control requires, ultimately, isn't control but surrender.

Above I defined *egkráteia* as “self-mastery.” If any virtue would be dependent on me, it seems like this would be it. “Self-mastery” makes me think of someone with ninja-level discipline, completely self-sufficient. Yet Scripture is clear that this self-mastery isn't an attribute that can be developed apart from God. Remember, Paul calls it a “fruit of the Spirit.” He's invoking a metaphor. Just like a tree must be nourished by the soil to produce fruit, so we must be connected to God in order to see this virtue flourish in our lives. As a result, *egkráteia*, as one commentator states, “can only be accomplished *by the power of the Lord*.”⁸ There's a similar dynamic with *sôphrôn*. As another commentator puts it, the word describes someone “who does not command himself, but rather is commanded by God.”⁹ Ultimately, mastering yourself is only accomplished by being mastered by God.

Self-control implies a struggle. We're conflicted creatures,

beset by sinful desires and selfish impulses. Part of us wants to do the right thing. Another part wants to do what's easy or most pleasurable. Stanford psychologist Kelly McGonigal provides a definition of self-control that gets to the heart of this reality. She defines self-control as "the ability to do what you need to do, even if part of you doesn't want to."¹⁰ My definition is even shorter. *Self-control is the ability to do the right thing, even when you don't feel like it.*

Sounds simple enough. But for Christians, there's a catch. We believe that "the right thing" to do has been determined by God. He knows what's best for us. He's shown us what's right and wrong through His Word, and He speaks to us through the quiet witness of our conscience. Self-control, then, is about listening and obeying. It's not self-determined. It means submitting every decision we make to God. It's about surrendering. When we do this consistently, it's called self-control.

I realize this sounds hard. Delaying gratification, doing what's right, surrendering your will. It might seem like teeth-gritting, white-knuckling stuff. But it isn't. As we'll discover, though building self-control requires effort, it gets easier as you go. Eventually, it can feel like gliding. In a beautiful twist of biblical irony, submission leads to victory. Surrender produces freedom. As you are liberated from the tyranny of self, you're able to experience God's best for your life.

Next we're going to consider the role that purpose plays in developing self-control. Then we're going to look at the obstacles we face in developing this key virtue. It's going to get a little dark, but stick with me. There's a lot at stake. Your future self will thank you.

Self-Control Training: Entry #1—The Mission

I WARNED YOU IN THE INTRODUCTION that this book was more than a theoretical exploration of the topic. In addition to investigating the spirituality and science of self-control, I said I was going to test out the ideas I encountered in my own life. And that's precisely what I plan to do.

But before I can jump into discussing specific strategies for improving my self-control, I need to understand what I'm up against. That will mean reckoning with my fallen nature and understanding how willpower works, which I'll do in the subsequent chapters. And before I can apply the wisdom of Scripture and the findings from social science, I feel like I need to identify the areas in my life where I need to grow.

How can I identify those areas of weakness? I suppose I could try to take a hard look at my life and be brutally honest with myself. The problem is that self-assessment is notoriously unreliable. Have you ever lamented a personal shortcoming only to have someone look at you with confusion and say, "Actually, I think you're really strong in that area"? Try as we might, we don't always see ourselves clearly. An outsider perspective does wonders for alerting us to our faults.

So I decided I needed some outside help. But from whom? It would have to be someone who knew me well and cared about me, who was kind. I also needed someone tough. This job required a person who would be honest enough to cut through my nonsense and talk to me straight about my battle with self-control. Hmm . . .

"Honey, can you help me out with something?"