

# Christian Self-Control in an Age of Dissipation

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## Introduction

Our subject is self-control in an age of dissipation. The Word dissipation is defined as: a wasteful use of time or energy; a wasting or squandering of something; or a dissolute, irregular course of life, an excessive indulgence in pleasure. In certain contexts the Word has the meaning of scattering, falling apart or moving from organization to disorganization.

This subject is very important because as Christians we are called to a life of self-control, discipline, godliness or sanctification in a very ungodly, dissolute, hedonistic culture. If we do not maintain holiness, self-control or discipline as defined by Scripture alone, then in our private, family, business and church lives we will go backward and not forward. We will not preserve and transform culture but rather be transformed by it (i.e., syncretism). We will not be instruments of godly dominion but instruments of decay, ethical scattering, moral chaos or dissolution.

As we examine this topic keep in mind that we are not discussing self-control in general, but rather Christian self-control or self-control as defined by Scripture. There are unbelievers who exhibit a certain kind of self-control but such self-control is not biblical for it is not guided by the Holy Spirit speaking in the Bible. It does not flow from a regenerated heart that loves Jesus and it is not directed to the glory of God. For example, Napoleon at the peak of his career worked 18 hours a day, seven days a week. However, Napoleon lived for one thing only—the glorification of himself. There are gurus, monks and cultists who lead quite disciplined lives. However, their self-control is directed to the service of false gods, of demons and the kingdom of Satan. When Christians speak of self-control we mean thinking, speaking and acting from a regenerated heart, in accordance with Scripture in order to glorify God, grow in grace and expand Jesus' kingdom. Christian self-control is an important aspect of our sanctification. It is necessary for a life of diligent, constant and consistent obedience to Christ.

## The Foundation of Christian Self-Control

Before discussing biblical principles for self-discipline it is important to consider the foundation of self-control. If one were to survey modern evangelical books and essays on this topic, one would at best find some biblical advice on how to be holy and at worst find pop-psychology self-help books which are worthless. Unfortunately, there is little if any discussion of the person and work of Christ as the foundation for a disciplined, holy life. Before we look at the biblical imperatives relating to godly discipline we must first understand that *Christ is the source of sanctification*. Jesus says, “For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth” (Jn. 17:19). Paul writes, “Our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin....Likewise you also reckon yourselves to be dead to

sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:6, 11). The apostle says, “But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—that, as it is written, ‘He who glories, let him glory in the Lord’” (1 Cor. 1:30-31). Peter also bases Christian living upon our mystical union with Christ. He writes, “Therefore, since Christ has suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God” (1 Pet. 4:1-2; read Rom. 6:1-7:6; Tit. 2:13-14; 1 Cor. 1:2; 6:11; Eph. 5:25-27; Heb. 13:12; Col. 3:1-5; 1 Pet. 1:2-4, etc).

The New Testament emphasizes that the decisive events that determine the Christian life all occurred in the past in redemptive history. There is a covenantal and vital union between Christ and His people. This vital union determines our death to sin and our life of holiness. The ethical imperatives in the epistles arise out of and are rooted in the gracious indicatives of the gospel. Christ’s past is our past. His death is our death. His resurrection is our resurrection. Note how Paul bases his exhortations to the Colossians on the accomplished fact of union with Christ in His death and resurrection. “If then you were raised with Christ seek those things which are above where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God....Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:1-3, 5).

How does this doctrine relate to Christian self-discipline? To live a life of Christian self-control we must continually look to the person and work of Christ. We must by faith look to His victory and draw upon His strength. Jesus’ overcoming of temptation, His sacrificial death and His glorious resurrection provides us with the spiritual power to overcome. The resurrected and enthroned King sends forth His Spirit to raise our dead hearts; to open our deaf ears and blind eyes; enabling us to believe, causing us to love God and repent of our sins. His work is the foundation. He is the “captain,” “author,” or “pioneer” of salvation in the most comprehensive sense of the term (cf. Heb. 2:10; 12:2).

## The Root of Self-Discipline

The starting point of self-discipline in the life of a Christian is regeneration or the new birth. It is at the moment that the Holy Spirit raises, renovates, renews and purifies the elect sinner’s heart that sanctification begins. “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God who is rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:1-7). The new birth is the experimental beginning of the Christian life.

The apostle John points believers to regeneration and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit as proof of a decisive breach with a past of enslavement to sin and the devil. “Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God” (1 Jn. 3:9). The person who has been regenerated by God and has the Holy Spirit in him cannot continue in the life that characterized his unregenerate state. “The believer is the one who has secured the victory over the world, is immune to the dominion of the evil one, and is no longer characterized by that which is of the evil one, and is no longer characterized by that which is of the world, ‘the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life’ (1 Jn. 2:16).”<sup>1</sup> In his first epistle John teaches that the person who is born again no longer loves the world and no longer habitually practices sin but instead loves Jesus Christ (1 Jn. 2:3-5), loves the brethren (1 Jn. 1:9-10) and keeps the commandments of God (1 Jn. 2:3-6, 17, 29; 3:10).

The work of Christ is the foundation of godliness and regeneration is the starting point of the application of Jesus’ redemption in the life of a Christian. All Christian discipline is founded upon the objective work of the Savior. All Christian self-control is rooted in the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and the abiding presence of the Spirit in the life of the believer.

## Biblical Motivations for Self-Control

There are two things in the Bible that are frequently connected with sanctification and self-discipline: the fear of God and love for Christ.

After pointing out God’s promise of a special loving presence and covenantal relationship among His people Paul writes, “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1). Believers are to be motivated by a fear of God to be holy, to purify themselves. God says something similar when He reminds Israel of His fatherly interest in them. Deuteronomy 5:29 reads, “Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!” When Jehovah comforts Israel with Words of the New Covenant era, He promises, “I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me” (Jer. 32:40).

When the Bible speaks of fearing Jehovah it refers to a complex combination of thoughts, attitudes and feelings toward God. It is a reverence, love, joy and awe of God as a covenant father. It comes from a regenerate heart that understands who God is, what He has done in Christ and His infinite love for us. Poole says that it refers to the “inward worship of God, reverence, and love, and trust, and a devotedness of heart to serve and please God, and a loathness to offend him, and an aptness to tremble at his Word and judgments.”<sup>2</sup> The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Pr. 1:7) because true knowledge, love and obedience can only come from a right understanding of and relationship with God. “It is a love for God which is so great that we would be ashamed to do anything which would displease or grieve him, and makes us happiest when we are doing what pleases him.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1977), 2:283.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1962 [1700]), 2:307.

<sup>3</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, *Grow in Grace* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1989), 29.

Closely related to the fear of Jehovah is our love and devotion toward God. Jesus says, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (Jn. 14:15). The apostle John tells Christians that “He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His Word, truly the love of God is perfected in him” (1 Jn. 2:4-5). We need to continually meditate upon what Jesus has done for us. This mindset will stimulate our love and devotion toward Him. When Peter failed miserably by denying Jesus three times publicly with curses he looked, saw Christ staring at him and he remembered what the Lord had said. Peter then went out and wept bitterly (Lk. 22:61-62), not because he was afraid of the consequences of his sin but because he knew how much Jesus loved him. He knew that the Savior was about to die for him and that even in his disobedience the Lord was praying and interceding for him as well as actively loving him. He knew that Jesus deserved better. Our love and devotion to Christ should be the motivation, the driving force behind our self-discipline. Thus, Paul could write, “For the love of Christ compels us...He died for all that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again” (2 Cor. 5:14-15).

## **The Standard for Self-Control**

Thus far we have noted that all the holiness in the life of a believer is founded upon the person and work of Christ. Because of our union with Him the ethical and spiritual efficacy of His death and resurrection is applied to us by the Holy Spirit. As a result of what Jesus has done for us, the Holy Spirit raises our dead hearts, breaks the power of sin over us and causes us to be more holy over time. Before our regeneration we walked according to the flesh (Rom. 7:5); but after our regeneration and conversion to Christ we walk according to the Spirit. That is, we are led or controlled by the Holy Spirit. Paul writes,

For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not *use* liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one Word, *even* in this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another! I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. (Gal. 5:13-18)

Ultimately then, self-control (biblically defined) is being controlled by the Spirit of God.

How does the Spirit of God work in this process? The Holy Spirit works *immediately* upon the human soul implanting a new spiritual nature. Regeneration results in a love for Christ, a conviction of sin, repentance and saving faith. The *immediate* work of the Holy Spirit is mysterious and beyond our comprehension. However, the Holy Spirit also works *mediately*. That is, He uses means to work on the conscious life of man. The Spirit works upon the conscious life of man by means of the Word of God.

This teaching is important because it is at this point where many views of self-discipline or sanctification go astray. Note the following examples. (1) The unbelieving Jews of Paul’s day believed in salvation and sanctification by obedience to the law apart

from Jesus Christ and an interior work of the Spirit. Such legalism led to pride and the persecution of God's true Israel. (2) Another view is that "mother church" has an intrinsic authority outside of its boundary set by the Word of God and that it dispenses grace mystically through the sacraments even apart from their connection to the Word of God read, taught and preached and to faith. Because the proponents of sacramentalism reject *sola Scriptura* or Scripture alone as the standard for faith and life, the sacerdotal concept of Church has resulted in a multitude of heresies: heathen asceticism, flagellation, penance, mysticism, indulgences and a mountain of man-made human traditions.

(3) A common error among Evangelicals today is that in sanctification the Holy Spirit works mystically apart from God's Word. Frequently Charismatic believers say things like "God told me to do such and such. Evangelicals, especially Pentecostals, often view sanctification as a second blessing subsequent to salvation where a person gets "zapped" or baptized with the Holy Spirit. Such views come from Wesleyan perfectionism, the higher life movement and holiness revivalism of the nineteenth century. The idea is to "let go and let God." People are told to come to the front of the church week after week and get zapped by God for victory over sin and problems in life. Coupled with such erroneous views is the dispensational idea that all of God's law including the Old Testament moral law has been done away by Christ and is no longer binding on believers. Without the biblical emphasis of God's Word as the means used by God's Spirit to sanctify, evangelicals more and more are resorting to pop-psychology, secular self-help gimmicks and pragmatism for help with self-discipline. The most popular author today on this and other related topics is T. D. Jakes, a Pentecostal Unitarian.

When professing Christians do not base their daily living on a careful study of God's Word, but instead follow some form of inward guidance, mystical intuition or inner promptings they fall into some form of relativism and/or pragmatism. Paul condemns such behavior in Colossians when he says that man-made rules or regulations are of no value in subduing the sinful flesh (Col. 2:23). Therefore, it is important to recognize that in sanctification the Holy Spirit always uses the Word of God whether directly or indirectly.<sup>4</sup> Jesus said, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your Word is truth" (Jn. 17:17). Peter told the believers under his care, "You have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit" (1 Pet. 1:22). "As newborn babes desire the pure milk of the Word, that you may grow thereby..." (1 Pet. 2:2). The Psalmist said, "How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your Word...Your Word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You...I will meditate on Your precepts, and contemplate Your ways. I will delight myself in Your statutes; I will not forget your Word...Teach me, O Lord, the way of Your statutes, and I shall keep it to the end. Give me understanding, and I shall keep Your law, indeed I will observe it with my whole heart" (Ps. 119:9, 11, 15, 16, 33, 34). If we are to be sanctified or disciplined by God's Spirit then we must study the Bible, learn and understand what it says and obey its precepts and examples.

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<sup>4</sup> We say indirectly only in the sense that the various other things associated with sanctification such as the sacraments, Christian fellowship, divine providence and so on all receive definition and meaning from the Word of God. Thus, the Reformed churches never administered the Lord's supper apart from the preached Word. All of the means of grace are dependent upon Scripture. Even regeneration in the more broad sense or the term is dependent upon the Word of God (1 Pet. 1:23; Jas. 1:18).

While it is important to recognize that we are sanctified by Christ and that because of His perfect work we can never fall away for we are victorious in Him, we must also keep in mind that sanctification is a grace that is also a duty. We must look to Christ with the eyes of faith, depend upon the Holy Spirit for spiritual ability and use all the biblical means for a life of Christian discipline. Everything we need for life, godliness and self-discipline must be obtained from the Word of God. Paul writes, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

While it is very important to recognize that union with Christ is the foundation of spiritual life, that all holiness in the world comes from the Savior; that to be godlier over time we must continually look to Christ and draw upon Him, we must never separate our Lord from His Word. We learn to know and love the personal Word—Jesus—only because the Holy Spirit causes us to believe in the written Word—the Bible. All the light that we receive from God concerning the trinity, Christ, salvation and our spiritual and ethical duties comes from Scripture. There is no knowledge of Jesus, sanctification or Christian self-discipline apart from His Word and Spirit. Therefore, we must diligently and prayerfully study the Bible every day of our lives.

The anti-intellectualism and negative view toward theology or the knowledge of God that is so common in charismatic and evangelical circles is contrary to godliness. All the emotion and sincerity in the entire world will not increase true holiness if they are based upon ignorance or the imagination of sinful men. Ignorance breeds legalism, anti-nomianism, heresy and sin.

A few notable passages of scripture which emphasize the necessity of biblical knowledge are found in Paul’s epistles to the Colossians and the Philippians. In Colossians 1:9-10 Paul prays: “that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” Paul connects a knowledge of God’s will (that is, to know rightly according to Scripture with a spiritual understanding and a wise or proper application to life) directly to an upright life that pleases God. Calvin writes, “The knowledge of *the divine will*, by which expression he sets aside all inventions of men, and all speculations that are at variance with the Word of God...Further, he admonishes us, that if we would *walk worthy of God*, we must above all things take heed that we regulate our whole course of life according to the will of God, renouncing our understanding, and bidding farewell to all the inclinations of our flesh.”<sup>5</sup>

A similar passage is Philippians 1:9-11, “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” For the apostle true biblical knowledge directs Christian love which in turn causes the mind to approve in the right things. This increase results in fruits of righteousness, which flow from a sincere heart, which are directed to the glory of Jesus Christ. For Paul love, biblical sincerity, righteousness and discernment cannot be separated from knowledge of the truth. Thus, he addresses the throne of grace on their

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<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 142-143.

behalf regarding growth in knowledge and frequently commands them to study to show themselves approved unto God ready for every good work (2 Tim. 2:15).

We must bring God's Word to bear upon our own lives to expose our sins and sinful habits, to convict us of those areas that need change, to correct what is wrong, and to establish new ways of living that please God and glorify Christ. "Walk in the Spirit and you will not fulfill the lust of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16)

## Some Preliminary Considerations and Review

Before we turn our attention to the methodology of Christian discipline or self-control let us briefly review some of the previous considerations and mention a few important points that may have been missed. Note the following: (1) Christian self-control is a crucial aspect of sanctification. It must never be considered apart from its theological context. (2) A believer's self-control is rooted in, a result of and dependent upon the person and work of Jesus the Messiah. Sanctification is a grace that flows from union with Christ in His life death and resurrection. The Savior is the source, the foundation of all holiness in the world. All the imperatives of Scripture which deal with obedience, holiness and self-control are based on the indicatives of Jesus' redemptive work; that is, the accomplished historical reality of the gospel. (3) The efficacy of the Messiah's work is applied to us by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God quickens us, dwells in us and enables us to love Jesus, mortify the flesh and perform our duties with sincerity and joy. (4) All Christian self-control begins with regeneration when the Spirit implants a new spiritual nature in the elect sinner; translates him from death to life; circumcises his heart; and definitively breaks the power and slavery to sin over his life. (5) The primary motivation for self-control is the fear of God and the love of Christ. We must focus our love and affection upon Jesus because of who He is and what He has done for us. He loved us and suffered and died in our place when we were His enemies who deserved the punishment of death and hell. Every day let us (figuratively) wipe His pierced feet with good works that are mingled with tears of love, joy and gratitude. Let us show our love with prompt, sincere and habitual obedience. (6) Christian self-control or good works are non-meritorious. Even the best of our good deeds are tainted with sin and contribute absolutely nothing to our salvation. All concepts of self-discipline that are neonomian, that make a life of holiness and perseverance a co-instrument of justification (or even "final justification"), are Romanizing and heretical. (7) Although our progressive sanctification is a grace, it also is a duty. We are responsible to diligently attend the means of grace and apply them to our own lives. The means used by the Holy Spirit to sanctify sinners is the Word of God. (8) The goal of Christian self-discipline or self-control is a progressive transforming of the total person to be more and more conformed to the image of Christ. We want to be more holy and obedient over time. We want to progressively put off that which is contrary to God's Word and replace it with thinking and behavior that glorify God, extend the mediatorial kingdom and produce a godly heritage.

A study of Scripture demonstrates that Christian self-control consists of two aspects, the one negative and the other positive. A passage which sets forth these two facets clearly is Ephesians 4:21-24. Paul writes, "...you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct,

the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lust, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.”

Christian sanctification, discipline or self-control always consists of these two elements. For the sake of organization in our study we will consider these topics separately. However, keep in mind they always must be taken together. In sanctification there is a simultaneous destruction of the old man and a renovation of the new. While old sinful habits and tendencies are being dealt with, they are being replaced by new godly habits and activities.

In the New Testament these aspects are spoken of in a number of ways. Regarding the putting off of sin Paul says that we need to “put to death the deeds of the body” (Rom. 8:13) or “put to death your members which are on the earth” (Col. 3:5). There is to be a continuous mortification of sin. The phrase “put to death” means to render inoperative, to completely eliminate sinful deeds. In Galatians Paul says that “those who are Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (5:24). Our rejection of sin and our former manner of life must be a ruthless, uncompromising rejection of sin. Similarly, Jesus taught the necessity of self-denial saying, “let a man deny himself and take up His cross and follow Me” (Mk. 8:34). The putting off of sin involves pain and personal sacrifice. How often does our Lord require a decisive putting off of sin? Jesus says that every Christian must take up his cross daily” (Luke 9:13).

In 2 Timothy Paul refers to the need to cleanse oneself (2:21). In 2 Corinthians he exhorts believers saying “let us *cleanse* ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit” (7:1). In both passages the emphasis is on a thorough cleansing. Believers are to avoid contamination and must strive to become pure. Peter begs Christians to “*abstain* from fleshly lusts which war against the soul.” Paul says, “[T]hat you should abstain from sexual immorality” (1 Thess. 5:22). The apostle says, “I discipline my body and bring it into subjection” (1 Cor. 9:27). The context indicates that the strenuous self-denial of an athlete in training ought to be a pattern for how seriously we take the subduing of sin in order to serve Christ.

The first step in Christian self-control is really quite simple: put off sinning, put it to death, abstain, don’t do it, stop it, decisively eliminate it, say no to the flesh, the devil and the world. We will have more to say about this aspect of discipline later as we deal with specific ways to mortify the flesh.

Christian sanctification does not simply consist of negatives, of putting off the former attitudes, thoughts and behaviors. It also has a positive side. The putting off of sin must be replaced with a corresponding putting on of righteousness. The old habitual sin patterns must be replaced with new habits of righteousness. The old heathen lifestyle must be replaced by a new Christian lifestyle. The Christian must not just abhor what is evil but also cling to what is good (Rom. 12:9). We must “overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21), and not only “not be conformed to the world” but also “be transformed by the renewing of our mind” (Rom. 12:2). While the outward man is perishing the inward man is being renewed day by day (2 Cor. 4:10). Paul says that we must put on the new man (Eph. 4:24) created in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:24). This new man exhibits the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5:22). This new man lives and walks in the Spirit (Gal. 5:25).

God expects us to change because He has changed our hearts. He commands us to live consistently with who we are in Christ. We are a new creation, created in Christ Jesus for good works.” (Eph. 2:10). We are dead to sin and alive to God. For us “all things have become new.” The old man—the unregenerate scoundrel that we once were—is dead. Therefore, everything we were by nature--fallen, corrupt, depraved, polluted with a hatred of God and a bias toward evil--and by a life spent developing sinful desires and habits must be put off. Kill it. Put it to death. Have nothing to do with it! We must be what we are: new men who love, obey and serve the King.

Although the biblical “put off—put on” dynamic is beautifully simple, the hard part of this process lies within ourselves because: (1) the old sinful nature that we inherited from Adam is not completely eradicated when we are regenerated; and (2) old sinful habits and practices still cling to us to a certain degree even though positionally and definitively the old man died with Christ. In Romans 7 Paul depicts the struggle we find ourselves in. Commenting on this scriptural truth Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes,

When I become a Christian I find myself a man who is driving a pair of horses. I myself am the driver, with the reins in my hands; there is the horse on the right; there is the horse on the left; I am driving both these horses. The old man, the new man, and I myself! And we operate together and are conscious of doing so. I am conscious of the new man that I have become, and yet I myself, as it were, am able to consider these two. There it is. It may help to carry that picture in your mind. And so the Apostle says to *me*, put off that old man! Put off all that belongs to him, he is not really you any longer, so put off all that appertained to him; and put on the new man.<sup>6</sup>

As we move to the practical application of Christian self-control we need to keep in mind regarding putting off sin and the old man and putting on righteousness that: (1) The terms Paul uses (put to death, flee, abstain, crucify, etc) indicate that we are to go about this task *diligently and radically*. (2) The tense that Paul uses (e.g., Rom. 8:13) indicates that this process is to be *continuous*. Our sinful inclinations and habits do not go on vacation. They are always with us. Therefore, our efforts at the eradication of sinful desires and habits must never be neglected. (3) We can only be successful at this process of sanctification *by or through the Spirit*. It is He who works in us causing us to will and to do (Phil. 2:13). The letter kills, the Spirit gives life (2 Cor. 3:6). (4) It is progressive but never completed in this life. The imperatives to put off and put on are written to believers who had already put off the old man. It is obvious that progress in holiness is a life-long journey. (5) Once again, the putting off and putting on are things we are commanded to do. We must take up the cross and follow Jesus diligently every day. God requires biblical change; He commands progress in godliness over time.

## The Biblical Methodology of Self-Control

As we turn our attention to the method of self-control we should note that everything that follows will relate to defeating sin in our lives in three ways. First, we want to prevent sin from occurring. This point will involve understanding ourselves and

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<sup>6</sup> D. Matryn Lloyd-Jones, *Darkness and Light: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:17-5:17* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 123-124.

learning how to deal with temptations. Second, once a person sins or has a particular sin problem he must learn how to deal with it biblically and stop it or as Paul frequently says “put it off.” Third, we must learn how to replace sin with a godly counterpart. The biblical way to avoid sinful habits is to replace them with godly habits. Our goal is a cheerful, prompt, sincere and habitual obedience to Jesus Christ for His crown and covenant. There are a number of important things to consider in our pursuit of holiness or Christian self-control.

(1) Christian discipline or self-control involves a continuous, careful and close examination of our own hearts. If we are to have self-control then we need to hold our hearts up to God’s law and identify our weaknesses, sinful tendencies and every area where there is a prior pattern of failure or unfaithfulness. Why is it so important that we honestly assess ourselves in the light of Scripture? Because temptations that come upon us receive their power from our inner lusts. “But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death” (Jas. 1:14-15).

This point is important for the following reasons. First, we have an enemy within, the remaining corruption of our natures; that will be with us until we die; that is contrary to self-discipline and holiness. Paul warns believers in Romans 7 that there is “the sin that dwells in us” (v. 17), “the flesh” (v. 18) or “lusts” (vs. 7-8), “the law of sin in our members” (v. 23). Our corrupt nature and sinful inclinations draw us toward what is evil and “wars against the law of our minds” (vs. 23). The apostle warned believers of this inner war: “For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the thing you wish” (Gal. 5:17). It is important for us to understand that in the battle for Christian self-control there are two levels—one outward, the other inward. The war within is fought invisibly in the depths of your soul where no one is watching except you and God. It is a war that you cannot escape and that you must diligently fight if you are to grow in holiness.<sup>7</sup> Spurgeon writes, “A man who carries gunpowder about with him, may well ask that he may not be led where the sparks are flying. If I have a heart like a bombshell, ready to explode at every moment, I may well pray God that I may be kept from the fire, lest my heart destroy me.”<sup>8</sup>

Second, we need to understand that nothing outside of us can force us to sin. While it is true that we can be buffeted by strong external temptations, the giving in to temptation always begins in the mind. Christian self-discipline must first begin with a discipline of the heart and mind. Satan and the fruit did not force Eve to commit sin. She first lusted after it; made excuses for it and then consented to it in her mind. The gold and beautiful clothing did not force Achan to commit sin. He dwelt upon it, lusted after it, made reasoning for it and then made a commitment to take it in his mind. Even the beautiful Bathsheba did not force David to sin. She was minding her own business, taking a bath. But, David stood there and stared and committed himself to an evil act. A bottle of liquor never flew off the shelf and poured itself down a man’s throat.

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<sup>7</sup> See Jay Adams, *The War Within: A Biblical Strategy for Spiritual Warfare* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “Lead Us Not into Temptation” in *Spurgeon’s Expository Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996 [1863]), 14:396.

Sin occurs when men and women make peace with sinful desires, contemplate them, rationalize them and then consent to them in the heart. Sinful acts always begin in the mind with an inner rationalization and consent. Therefore, Christian self-discipline must first involve warfare against fleshly lusts. “Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul” (1 Pet. 2:11). Peter says that true mortification of sin involves not merely abstaining from outward acts but also fighting against and weakening the root and power of sin within.

Third, given the previous two points, we must note, strengthen and guard our weakest areas. Why? Because, for most Christians, that is where failure occurs; that is where we are most vulnerable and where our adversary is most likely to attack. A smart military tactician studies his opposition and attacks at the weakest point where the enemy is most likely to be beaten back. Spurgeon writes, “There is a weakest point in every one of us; and remember, the strength of a rope is to be measured, not according to its strength in its strongest but in its weakest part. Every engineer will tell you that the strength of a ship should always be estimated, not according to her strongest but her weakest part, for if the strain shall come upon her weakest part, and that be broken, no matter how strong the rest may be, the whole ship goeth down.”<sup>9</sup>

There are a number of things that we need to do regarding our weak areas. We must carefully and honestly identify our own specific problem areas. Some people have a problem controlling their anger. Others may be tempted to drink an excess of alcoholic beverages. Many men have a particular problem with the lust of the eyes and temptations relating to sexual matters. Some professing Christians are drawn to the pride of life and an obsession with wealth and material things. Others have a tendency to be lazy and irresponsible. It is very important that we honestly evaluate ourselves in light of the Scriptures because self-induced ignorance and self-deception is a result of pride. And pride goes before a fall (Pr. 16:18). We must be humble, admit our deficiencies and fight against them biblically.

Fourth, we must deal with the first motions and movement of temptation and sin within us the moment they appear. The longer a believer waits to deal with temptation or lust the more likely that believer will fall into sin. That is one reason we must stand guard over our own hearts. If we do not deal with inner lusts immediately they will consume and conquer us. “If you fail to deal with it at that stage, it will overcome you. Nip it in the bud, deal with it at once, never let it get even a moment’s foothold. Do not accept it at all. Perhaps you feel inclined to say, ‘Ah well, I am not going to do the thing.’ Ah, but if you accept it in your mind, and begin to fondle it there, and entertain it in your imagination, you are already defeated. According to our Lord you have sinned already. You need not actually commit the deed; to entertain it in your mind is enough, to allow it in your heart is sin in the sight of God, who knows all about us and reads even what happens in the heart and the imagination.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, deal with temptations and sinful thoughts at once. The hardest thing to control is our own minds. They tend to wander to forbidden areas very easily. Therefore, we must learn to put off vain thoughts, evil imaginations and perverse images and replace them with good thoughts. “Whatever things are true...noble...just...pure...lovely...of good report...meditate on these things” (Phil. 4:8).

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 394.

<sup>10</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: Exposition of Chapter 8:5-17* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 146.

(2) Once we have a biblically-based assessment of our weakest areas and an understanding of the enemy within we must take steps to ensure the avoidance of sin and our growth in holiness. This is what Christian self-control is all about. There are a number of things that we all need to do.

First, we must, to the best of our ability, control our environment. Anything in our life that may stimulate sin or be an occasion for sinning must be avoided and be replaced with situations, persons or things that facilitate righteousness. We need to carefully avoid all situations of temptation. What is temptation?<sup>11</sup> Temptation refers to anything--whether a person, a thing, a place, state, way or condition--that upon any account whatsoever, has a force of efficacy to seduce, to draw the mind and heart of a Christian from the obedience God requires of him, into any degree of sin.<sup>12</sup> What can we do to control or rearrange our environment? One thing we must do is be alert against every circumstance that may provoke or stimulate sinful thoughts, Words or acts. For example, if a man was a drunkard before his conversion and sometimes is tempted to drink in excess, then obviously he should avoid bars, taverns or pubs. He also should not keep company with people who drink in excess or tempt him (even close relatives) and he should not keep alcoholic beverages in his home.

If a Christian sometimes struggles with sexual lust, then he should not watch any TV programs, commercials, movies, videos, DVD's or Internet images that will pour gasoline on his corrupt embers. In our sex-saturated culture this task will take continued diligence. We must, as the Puritans would say, guard the eye gate and the ear gate against all ungodly images that stimulate lusts and have an unbiblical influence upon us.

We must be as godly Job who was so serious about holiness that he made a covenant with his eyes not to gaze at young women. Job was scrupulous in avoiding even the occasion of possible temptation. Job understood that the eyes are often the first

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<sup>11</sup> Temptation as a power of seduction toward sin is a very broad term. It can refer to all the various external temptations: the allurements of the world, the subtle solicitations of Satan, the arguments and enticements of the unregenerate; as well as all inner temptations arising from the sinful desires that arise within us (envy, unlawful lusts, impure imaginations, covetousness, thoughts of unlawful revenge, etc). All of these forces can work upon us in virtually an infinite variety of ways.

What does it mean to enter into temptation? To enter into temptation is a biblical phrase that refers to times when believers enter into intense situations of temptation, to situations of seduction from outside forces that are beyond our average everyday existence. These are periods of particular spiritual danger. In 1 Timothy Paul compares falling into temptation to becoming ensnared or entangled in a trap; or falling into a pit; "Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare" (6:9). In 1 Corinthians the apostle speaks of temptation as something that overtakes a man: "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man" (10:9). Eve entered temptation during her dialogue with the devil (Gen. 3:2ff.) Joseph entered temptation when he was propositioned by Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39:7ff.). David entered temptation when he beheld Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:1ff.). Job entered temptation when he suffered a number of serious calamities in his life (Job 1:16ff). Peter entered temptation when he warmed himself by the fire at Jesus' trial (Mt. 26:69-75).

Why is the purposeful avoidance of temptation so important? Because all sin begins with an entering into temptation. If we fear sin then we must also fear sin's entry point: temptation is the gate where the enemy of godliness gains entry. This is where the battle for holiness must first be fought. Is it not wise to stop our enemy before he enters our walls of defensive perimeter? Is it not prudent to deal with an issue before it blossoms into sin. Although temptation itself is not a sin (Heb. 4:15) and God promises to deliver the godly out of temptations (2 Pet. 2:9; 1 Cor. 10:9); nevertheless, it is much better to take steps to avoid a dreaded disease in the first place rather than be careless and end up treating a mess we could have avoided to begin with.

<sup>12</sup> See John Owen, "What is it to Enter Temptation?" in *Works* (Carlisle, Pa: Banner of Truth, 1974), 6:96.

instrument of sin. Therefore, he made a covenant with himself. That is, he made strict rules to avoid temptation and sin. Job was obsessed with obedience to the law that extended to even his thought life. He took steps to avoid not just the outward act of adultery but also the impure imaginations and desires that are the root of uncleanness. When Peter described the false, antinomian teachers in his day he said that they “indulge the flesh in corrupt desires...having eyes full of adultery” (1 Pet. 2:10, 14) If King David had followed the example of Job he would not have been on the roof of his house watching Bathsheba take a bath. In our perverse post-Christian culture where illicit sexual images permeate the visual media, where many women dress like prostitutes, where sex is used to sell everything from cars to beer to shampoo, we must be like Job and make strict non-negotiable rules that help us avoid anything that will lead us into sin. As Paul says in Romans 13:14, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof.” Believers must put on Christ in the concrete circumstances of everyday life and do everything they can to deprive sin of an opportunity.

Obviously then, young Christian men and women should never go out on dates where they are alone and could easily be tempted and fall into the sin of fornication. Christian women need to dress in modest attire so that they do not tempt their brothers in Christ. Pastors, elders and men of authority must never be alone when counseling women. Parents must set an example and teach their children to mortify the flesh, to guard against temptation, to understand the vanity and foolishness of the ways of the world. We must remove all impediments to our new life in Christ and we must replace these impediments with God-glorifying alternatives.

Another thing that we must do is avoid bad company and keep good Christian companions. The Bible repeatedly warns us that evil company is a corrupting force on covenant people. Paul says, “Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company corrupts good morals’” (1 Cor. 15:33). Keeping company with evil companions has a corrupting influence on our attitudes and behavior. Interestingly, the apostle’s injunction comes in the middle of an argument against professing Christians who are denying the resurrection of the dead. Even fellowshiping with people who have heretical doctrine can have dire consequences.

In Second Corinthians Paul argues that separating ourselves from evil involves separating ourselves from the heathen and their influences. “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness” (6:14; cf. Lev. 19:19; 22:10)? The apostle is not saying that we should enter a monastery or avoid all interaction with the heathen, but that we should not make them yokefellows, companions or close friends. “Do not be envious of evil men, nor desire to be with them; for their heart devises violence, and their lips talk of trouble-making” (Pr. 24:1-2). “He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets; therefore, do not associate with one who flatters with his lips” (Pr. 20:19).

Psalms 1 tells us how companionship with the wicked can lead to three degrees of departure from God. “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night” (vs. 1-2). Note that first the person is corrupted by accepting the advice of unbelievers. The pagan way of seeing things displaces the Christian worldview and ethic. Then second, the rebellious person

leads a lifestyle in accord with the heathen. Then third, they are among the most obstinate and scandalous of sinners—they are scoffers. They end up mocking the Lord Jesus Christ and the way of righteousness. They trample the cross under foot as apostates. Tragically, this type of progression to apostasy occurs for many professing Christian when they attend a state school or secular university. If you think about it objectively, our universities, generally speaking, contain the most anti-Christian, perverse, God-hating, left-wing, “red diaper dooper babies”<sup>13</sup> in America. Parents, send your children to a consistently Reformed Presbyterian College (not so-called Christian colleges that place mammon and respectability among the heathen before Christ [e.g., Geneva College, Covenant College, Calvin College]).

If you want to be wise and godly then make dedicated Christians your companions. “He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed” (Pr. 13:20). This is God’s voice. He speaks in mercy. Cling to those who are meek and lowly, who follow the Lamb wherever He goes; who are fellow-travelers toward Zion; who will help you if you stumble to make progress in the path of life.

Second, use the spiritual weaponry that God has placed in our hands. The Word of God is all you need to fight against temptation and sin. You must master it and use it both defensively as a shield and offensively as a sword. We need to depend on God’s Word and use it in a number of ways.

(a) We need to read the Bible everyday so that we have a clear understanding of our Christian duties. The Bible is an infallible, fully sufficient standard (2 Tim. 3:16-17) that identifies what is right and what is wrong. It alone authoritatively contains all the divine imperatives that we need to obey as well as the historical examples that we should follow. If we want to succeed in the battle against sin and temptation we need to master it. We need to learn it and apply it to ourselves. There is a direct correlation between the great amount of heresy and sin among professing Christians today and the widespread ignorance of the contents of the Bible and the system of doctrine found therein. To counter this widespread problem every Christian should read the Bible everyday. In order to read the bible once a year three to five chapters ought to be sufficient. Read a good literal translation (e.g., KJV; NKJV) and not from paraphrases and sloppy translations (e.g., NIV). By reading the Bible over and over we saturate our minds with Scripture and provide the passages and teachings that the Holy Spirit can bring to our minds and apply to our hearts when temptations arise. “Your Word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against you” (Ps. 119:11). If we do fall into sin, the Holy Spirit will apply the Word to our hearts and convict us of sin so that we confess our sins and learn from our failings.

(b) We must study the Word to transform our whole way of thinking. It is very important that our worldview, ethics, attitudes, opinions and reasoning all be reshaped by Scripture. Paul says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). Sanctification is a process of revolutionary change that begins in the center of our consciousness and then radiates out to external behavior. If a professing Christian’s plans, ambitions and activities are based on what is popular in our heathen culture or even on false doctrine then his discipline will be directed toward vanity, foolishness and sin. We must renounce all autonomous thinking and all *independent* pragmatic reasoning and submit explicitly, as obedient children, to the

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Savage (radio talk show host).

teaching of Christ. “But for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self control, to self control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love” (2 Pet. 1:5-7). “Knowledge is a weapon that smites errors, it wields the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.”<sup>14</sup> We need to bring all of our thinking into captivity to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). The author of Proverbs says that our thinking determines our character. “For as he thinks in his heart, so is he....” (Pr. 23:7)

(c) We must study the Word in order to be aware of the common allurements of the world and the common reasons that covenant members sin and apostatize. The Bible speaks of professing Christians who have the Word choked out and made unfruitful because of the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things (Mk. 4:19). John speaks of the things that dominate the unbelieving world: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (1 Jn. 2:16) and warns us not to love the world or things in the world (v. 15). Many professing Christians do not have Christian self-control because they are too busy for God. There are people who are filled with pride, who are overly concerned with money, status and keeping up with the Jones’. Such people allow themselves to be drawn away from spiritual matters to lives of vanity and self-worship. For this reason God repeatedly warned Israel not to forget His commandments when they become prosperous economically (cf. Deut. 8:11-14). In America such declension has left many people with the idea that the church is just another service and entertainment center that exists to fulfill their personal wants and desires. In ancient Israel, times of great prosperity were often times of the most serious declension.

There are temptations that accompany money problems and poverty. Some people in such situations are tempted to neglect their family, work on the Sabbath and/or take on jobs that are shady and unscriptural. Such situations can tempt people to worry, become irritable and even fight with a spouse. Thus the writer of Proverbs prayed, “Give me neither poverty nor riches—feed me with the food allotted to me: lest I be full and deny You, and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or, lest I be poor and steal, and profane the name of my God” (Pr. 30:8-9).

(d) We must study and memorize Scripture so that appropriate passages can be utilized when temptations arise.<sup>15</sup> If a person has a problem with uncontrolled anger, then the passages that deal specifically with how to handle anger lawfully need to be committed to memory. If someone is tempted by drunkenness, or fornication or dishonest business practices then specific passages should be written out, memorized and meditated upon so that he can be convicted and strengthened by the Holy Spirit at the appropriate

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<sup>14</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of I and II Epistles of Peter...* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1966), 268.

<sup>15</sup> “A disciplined intake of the Word of God not only involves a planned *time*; it also involves a planned *method*. Usually we think of methods of intake as falling into four categories—*hearing* the Word taught by our pastors and teachers (Jeremiah 3:15), *reading* the Bible ourselves (Deuteronomy 17:19), *studying* the Scriptures intently (Proverbs 2:1-5), and *memorizing* key passages (Psalm 119:11). All of these methods are needed for a balanced intake of the Word. Pastors are gifted by God and trained to teach the ‘whole counsel of God.’ Reading the Scripture gives us the overall perspective of divine truth, while study of a passage or topic enables us to dig more deeply into a particular truth. Memorization helps us retain important truths so we can apply them in our lives.” (Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness* [Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1978], 102)

time. Our problem areas must be met head on with Scripture. We need to not only quote Scripture and apply it to our own hearts, we also must quote it offensively against any persons who would tempt us.

What did Jesus do every time He was tempted by Satan? He quoted Scripture: “It is written...” (Mt. 4:4). “It is written...” (Mt. 4:7). “Away with you, Satan! For it is written...” (Mt. 4:10). Not only did our Lord quote Scripture, He quoted verses that specifically applied to each temptation. He resisted the Words of the tempter by appealing to God’s Word. He used the Bible to light his path and to resist an enemy. There is great power in God’s Word for both directing the righteous and confounding the wicked.

The Savior’s example is very relevant to our modern times. Note the following hypothetical example of a good use of Scripture. Bob is a young Christian man who is attending the local secular university. One day a beautiful unbeliever invites Bob to her abode in order to drink excessively, smoke pot and fornicate. What does Bob do in this situation? The Canaanite girl is very attractive and he definitely is tempted. Bob responds biblically by going immediately to Scripture to both remind himself of his ethical duty as a Christian and to fend off the temptress with the Word of the Spirit. Bob says: “I cannot come over, Sally, because I am a strict Christian. The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 6:9 that ‘fornicators and drunkards will not inherit the kingdom of God.’ I need to live in a manner that pleases Christ.” This biblical response not only strengthens Bob’s resolve to be obedient to Christ, it also immediately and firmly tells this young heathen that she is wasting her time and must look elsewhere for a sin partner. Such a direct, biblical response usually sends a heathen tempter back on his or her heels.

(e) We must study Scripture and apply biblical principles to our problem areas and the most common areas of temptation in our life. In other Words, we develop a premeditated plan of attack so that we know how to respond to a situation biblically before it even occurs. This plan can be developed using the Bible to analyze our weak areas; areas where there has been a pattern of past failures; and even hypothetical situations that are likely to occur. We need to ask ourselves probing questions regarding how to handle various situations.<sup>16</sup> For example, “What Scripture passage will I meditate on and quote if this particular temptation arises?” “What exactly will I do if this particular temptation comes before me?” “What will I say when this or that occurs at work?” “How can I arrange my affairs at home, school or work to lessen the possibilities of temptation and avoid sin?” An army never goes into battle without a premeditated plan of attack. Similarly, we must always study Scripture with personal application and growth in holiness in mind.

A Christian can avoid many problems at work or school by making rules based on biblical principles that are non-negotiable. For example, a married Christian man can in a non-offensive manner make it very clear to everyone at work that he is a strict Christian; that he is dedicated to his wife and will have nothing to do with other women; that he will

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<sup>16</sup> If we are not sure about certain activities we should ask ourselves some questions based on Scripture: Is what I am about to do a violation of the moral law of God? Is it consistent with the godly historical examples in Scripture? Will it lead to my edification and/or the edification of others or will it do the opposite? Is it something Jesus would do? Is it something that I would not be ashamed to do in front of godly believers or have godly believers learn of? Is it an activity that can bring me under its enslaving power? Is it something that glorifies God and pleases Him?

not partake of filthy talk or coarse jesting; that he will not go to a bar and hang out with unbelievers after work. By establishing a good and consistent witness at the beginning of a job or school year with acquaintances, believers not only honor Christ but also teach the heathen that tempting such a person is a waste of time. A single Christian in college must in each and every case make it crystal clear that dating or being alone with the opposite sex is off limits; that courting Roman Catholics, unbelievers or Arminians is unscriptural and unacceptable.

When believers carefully structure their lives and set up rules and policies that are formulated by a careful study of Scripture and then habitually follow those rules, they will find themselves automatically following the *Spirit-directed mind*. (Remember, being lead by the Spirit does not mean a Christian follows impressions, inner voices or mystical leadings. It means that he is lead by the Scriptures.) In other Words a biblical response to temptation becomes second nature. It becomes a godly habit. Such a procedure is much wiser and more successful than being unprepared, fumbling around and trying to come up with a biblical response to a situation of temptation.

Remember, we are not to trust our own hearts. We must never be careless or unprepared and place ourselves in a situation of having a debate between our sinful lusts and our Spirit-directed mind in the heat of battle. Once again, our goal in learning biblical principles, in learning their specific application to our lives and practicing these principles repeatedly is to develop habitual patterns of godliness. This sanctification process from knowledge to application, to repeated obedience is what biblical wisdom and self-discipline is all about.

Note how Solomon describes the prudent man. “Every prudent man acts with knowledge, but a fool lays open his folly” (Pr. 13:16). “The simple believes every Word, but the prudent considers well his steps” (Pr. 14:15). “A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself, but the simple pass on and are punished” (Pr. 22:3). “He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, but whoever walks wisely will be delivered” (Pr. 28:26). God clearly expects us to study His Word and make personal application to our own lives.

(f) It is very important that temptations, lusts and sinful problem areas or habits not merely be negated or repressed. They must also be replaced with godly, lawful counterparts. The biblical pattern of change (discussed earlier) is to put off sinful thoughts, Words or deeds and replace them by putting on righteous activities. Biblical change has two aspects—one negative, the other positive. “Change is a *two-factored process*. These two factors always must be present in order to effect genuine change. Putting off will not be permanent without putting on. Putting on is hypocritical as well as temporary, unless it is accompanied by putting off.”<sup>17</sup> One of the central arguments for sanctification in the New Testament is that you are no longer what you were “the old man,” you are now something new, a “new man.” Therefore, we must no longer walk or live as we once did (i.e., in accordance with previous ungodly habits) we must live or walk according to the Spirit. “Walk in the Spirit and you will not fulfill the lusts of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16). Note how the apostle Paul repeatedly refers to this two factored process.

When the apostle addresses the problem of sexual lust in 1 Corinthians 7 what does he say? Does he urge believers to eat more vegetables, wear a hair shirt or join a

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<sup>17</sup> Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 177.

monastery? No. He says the biblical method of dealing with lust and fornication is for a man to take a Christian wife (1 Cor. 7:2ff.), and a woman to have a godly husband. In verse 9 Paul says it is better to marry (aorist tense—a single definitive act) than “to burn” with the strong fire of sexual desire (present tense—indicating a habitual or recurring condition). If a Christian man is having a problem with illicit lust then he needs to find satisfaction in his wife. Both husband and wife must understand this very important duty in our sex-crazed culture.

When the apostle discusses lying in the context of our putting on the new man in Ephesians he says: “Therefore, putting away lying, ‘let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor’, for we are members of one another” (4:25). Those persons who had a habit of lying must replace it with a habit of truth-telling. For men accustomed to corrupt, putrid or offensive speech Paul says, “Let no corrupt Word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers” (4:29). We are not simply to avoid all irreligious, malicious and impure language. We must replace it with Words that help, benefit and edify others. For men who come from a background of thievery Paul says, “Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give to him who has need” (4:28). It is not enough to stop stealing. One must become habituated to working hard in order to provide for oneself and help others.

If we are serious about our sanctification and self-control then we must apply this two-factored process to our own lifestyle. We should make a list of areas that need biblical change, of actions, thoughts or Words that we want to turn from and the righteous activities that will replace them. This process will force us to study the Word and apply God’s holy law to everyday life. As fervent believers we want to be consumed with serving Christ that we do not have the time or energy to waste on the service of the flesh. We want to be so accustomed to active obedience as a replacement for old ungodly habits that our obedience is sincere, immediate and automatic. It is second nature to us.

The practice of godliness leads to a life of godliness.<sup>18</sup> Repeated obedience leads to greater obedience. Repeated disobedience leads to slavery to particular sins and greater disobedience. If you *practice* what God tells you to do, the obedient life will become a part of you.<sup>19</sup> Godliness will be “natural.” There is no simple, quick, easy way to instant godliness.<sup>20</sup> It requires discipline, planning, and a diligent effort to put biblical strategies into action.

(g) Sanctification and Christian self-control also involve dealing with our sin biblically when we do fall. This side of heaven no Christian is perfect; we are all guilty of committing sins. Therefore, it is very important that we learn from such failures and endeavor to go and sin no more. “For a righteous man may fall seven times and rise again, but the wicked shall fall by calamity” (Pr. 24:16).

When we do fall into a sin it is not only important that we admit it, confess it to God through Christ (1 Jn. 1:9; 2:1) and repent of it, we also must denounce it, hate it and analyze how and why we failed. If there is something that we are doing that is contributing to failure such as going to a certain place, meeting with a certain person or

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 181.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

watching a particular show then we must make sure we do not make the same mistake twice.

When professing Christians are unwilling to admit their failings and analyze them biblically, they not only do not learn from their mistakes they actually get worse. For example, the sins (and the problems that attend them) that are common in marriage relationships such as poor communication, unbiblical and unloving speech, selfishness and so on can spiral into severe, scandalous situations if they are ignored.

(3) As we go about the task of self-discipline and sanctification there are some things that should permeate everything we do. First, we must have a constant faith in Christ and what he has done. We must trust in Jesus' redemptive work as the reason that the old man is dead, that all things are new. We must trust in the eternal, electing love of God. If God is for us, who can be against us (Rom. 8:31)? We must trust in the Savior's continuing work of intercession. His intercession is effective; it cannot fail. We are preserved unto the final day because of His blood, through His mighty power to save. "His righteousness is greater than your unrighteousness. His Saviourhood is greater than your sinnership. Do not despair: you are strong in him, alive in him, victorious in him. Satan may win many skirmishes, but the war is yours, the victory is yours."<sup>21</sup> We also must trust in His Words.

There is a clear relationship in Scripture between faith and obedience or faith and good works. Although we are justified by faith in Christ apart from the works of the law (Rom. 3:20ff.) even before we do any good works, nevertheless, there would never be any good works without faith in Christ. "[F]or it is impossible that those who are implanted into Christ by a true faith should not bring forth the fruits of faithfulness."<sup>22</sup>

Second, we should meditate on our love for Christ. There is no greater motivation to live a holy life than our adoration and devotion toward God. When we are tempted to sin we should think about what Jesus has done for us undeserving sinners. We must express our love by faithfulness, by concrete acts of loyalty. We find an excellent example of this love in Joseph. When he was confronted (with absolutely no warning) with a strong temptation he immediately replied, "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God" (Gen. 39:9)? Joseph's motivation for obedience was his love, dedication, loyalty and dedication to Jehovah. We who have been forgiven so much ought to love much.

Third, we must meditate on the promises and teachings of Scripture related to the blessings of obedience and the disastrous consequences of disobedience. Jesus told His disciples that believers who obey God in secret will be rewarded by the Father (Mt. 6:4, 6, 18); that our main concern in life is not to attain earthly treasure but "laying up...treasures in heaven" (Mt. 6:20); that we must seek first his kingdom and His righteousness and God will provide the material sustenance we need (Mt. 6:33); that Christians who suffer for the faith should leap for joy for their reward in heaven is great (Lk. 6:23). Paul told believers to do the best works, works of biblical quality (compared to gold, silver and precious stones) in order to receive a reward (1 Cor. 3:10-15). He exhorted Christians to buffet their bodies and live in a manner so as to obtain the prize, and imperishable crown (1 Cor. 9:24-25). The apostle John urged believers to be diligent in their obedience to Christ saying, "Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things

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<sup>21</sup> Joel R. Beeke, *Holiness: God's Call to Sanctification* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1994), 19.

<sup>22</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Question 64.

we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward” (2 Jn. 8). The author of Hebrews sets forth the example of godly Moses. He writes, “Moses...esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he looked to the reward” (Heb. 11:26). We must discipline ourselves, work hard and make many sacrifices while we by faith look forward to the day when face to face our precious Savior will say to us, “Well done good and faithful servant...Enter into the joy of your Lord” (Mt 25:21,23).

Obedience also brings sweet blessings in the here and now. There is the comfort of a full assurance of salvation (1 Jn. 2:3). There is the joy of an unimpeded, sweet fellowship and communion with God. There is the happiness of peaceful churches, harmonious families, blissful marriages, and faithful covenant children. Although ultimately we obey God because of who He is and what He has done for us, He has put many promises or rewards and blessings in Scripture to help us obey.

We must also contemplate the disastrous consequences of giving into temptation. A fool acts without any consideration for the future. For a moment of pleasure years of misery are brought upon many people. A wise man does the exact opposite. He understands that true peace and joy come from obedience to Christ; that sin for a moment may be sweet like honey, but in the stomach it is bitter and painful. Sin is a very destructive thing. It can bring calamity and misery upon a person or even a whole household for many years. While it is certainly true that there are many believers who have fallen into serious sin, backslidden and then have been restored, the consequences of sin can last for many years. If a Christian man commits adultery and then repents, God will forgive him and his wife may even forgive him. But think of the pain and suffering that poor woman must endure. Sin causes emotional anguish and can scar people for life. Even King David was damaged by his transgression with Uriah’s wife. “You will never find David dancing after his sin with Bathsheba. Not he; there was no dance in him after that! He limped to the day of his death.”<sup>23</sup>

Giving in to sin (especially scandalous sin) is particularly grievous because it brings reproach upon the name of Christ and His church. When hundreds of believers lead holy lives, go about helping the poor and do good works the world hardly takes notice. But when a notable Christian falls into sin the whole world will speak of it and delight in the scandal. This was true in the days of David and it is true in our own day (e.g., the Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart fiascos). Anything that we do that causes the heathen to blaspheme the name of Christ ought to bring anguish to our hearts.

Sin can also bring a loss of sweet communion with God. The comfort, peace and fellowship that we have with Jehovah are disrupted when we sin against Him and backslide. Look at King David lying in bed, covered with sweat, tossing and turning and groaning in agony. David brought months of pain, torment and anguish upon himself. “Pray that penitential psalm over, and you will soon discover that sin is the father of sorrow, and that a saint cannot slip without much damage to himself.”<sup>24</sup> Sin is clearly not worth it. If we do not live a life of Christian self-control, then we will wear a garment of sorrow and sleep on a bed of thorns.

Fourth, we must pray often for God to sanctify us, for Christ to keep us from stumbling (Jude 24), and lead us not into temptation (Mt. 6:13). We are told to pray throughout the New Testament (e.g., Mt. 6:9-13; Rom. 12:12; 2 Cor. 1:11; Eph. 6:18;

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<sup>23</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *Expository Encyclopedia*, 14:395.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2; 1 Pet. 4:7; etc). God expects us to ask for His special assistance in resisting sin and temptation.

Biblical prayer is based on a humble acknowledgement that we are saved and sanctified by Christ alone; that we are totally dependent on the efficacy of Jesus' work for progress in holiness. Prayer is crucial because keeping and preserving ourselves from sin is not within our own power. We are dependent on our union with the Savior, the intercession of Christ and the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Peter says that Christians "are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet. 1:5; cf. 2 Tim. 4:18). Thus we must pray diligently, saying "Create in me a clean heart, O God" (Ps. 51:11); and, look to Him, "the author and finisher of our faith" (Heb. 12:2). "To call upon God is the chief exercise of faith and hope; and it is in this way that we obtain from God every blessing."<sup>25</sup>

Fifth, we must imitate Christ. He is the perfect example of self-control. Thus Paul exhorted believers to: "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). As the captain or leader of our redemption Jesus not only merits our salvation by His perfect obedience and death, but also sets before us the proper path of Christian living as the second Adam, the firstborn of a redeemed humanity. A careful examination of our Lord's perfect obedience to the law and ministry is very important, for the Savior personalizes the law. That is, He exhibits the perfect biblical attitude, love, speech and emotions as He rendered a perfect obedience. There are a number of areas where we need to observe and imitate Christ.

(a) We need to imitate the boldness of Jesus. Our Lord displayed boldness in His submission to God and advancement of the kingdom. Christ constantly demonstrated courage as He ministered among His enemies. He fearlessly spoke the gospel to all and never watered down the truth because He was afraid to offend His audience. We need to boldly obey God and not fear what the heathen think of us. When the Sanhedrin saw the boldness of Peter and John in the proclamation of the gospel, they realized these men had been with Jesus (Ac. 4:13).

(b) We need to imitate the love of Christ. Our Lord lived for others, not for Himself. He came to serve, not to be served. He went about His whole life doing good while expecting nothing in return. Therefore, love and benevolence ought to permeate everything we do. Our speech must be seasoned with salt and tempered by love. Our witnessing to hateful pagans must be mixed with kindness, concern and compassion. Our treatment of erring brothers must be merciful and forbearing. We must cheerfully visit orphans and widows and place others above ourselves. We must cast aside our sinful tendency to be self-centered. We must live for the good of the church not ourselves. Our love and Christian benevolence must beam out to all men.

(c) We need to imitate the humility of Christ. There is no greater example of humility than Jesus of Nazareth. He came from the throne room of heaven to the filth of a manger; from the continual worship of angels and saints to the rejection of His own covenant people; from the bosom of the Father to the separation and agony of the cross. Our Lord was a friend to tax collectors and sinners. He even ministered to the outcasts of society, to prostitutes, to lepers, to the blind and deaf. He reached out to the unclean and made them clean. He washed the disciples' feet and became poor that we might become

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<sup>25</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 340.

rich in Him. We must set aside all concepts of class, racial superiority and snobbery, roll up our sleeves and minister to disgusting sinners. We must point the sick to the Great Physician.

(d) We need to imitate the holiness of Jesus. Our Lord's obsession was in doing His Father's will, in obeying God's law. He had a passion for holiness. When He was tempted, He refused to sin and rebuked Satan. When He was mistreated and spit upon He turned the other cheek. He was devout and continually communed with God in prayer. He was forgiving, even to those who mocked Him while on the cross. He is a perfect example of Christian obedience. We must strive to be like Him, a man of holiness, service, humility, love, boldness and cross-bearing for the cause of God and truth. Therefore, we must continually ask ourselves: "What would Jesus do?"

(4) There are some general principles of discipline that we must not fail to consider. First, anyone who is serious about sanctification or Christian self-control must learn to live in the present tense. We must take one day at a time and resolve not to commit any known sins that day. The person who says, "I will repent tomorrow," or, "Let me relish in my secret sin just one more day or a few more weeks," is in grave danger of total apostasy. Why? (a) Because we do not live in the future, we live in the present. Such a person in essence is saying "I will not submit to the lordship of Christ now, maybe I'll get to it down the road." We know from Scripture that a person who refuses to submit to Jesus as Lord, who does not repent of their sins (Lk. 13:3), who lives or practices habitual sin (1 Jn. 1:6; 2:4; 3:8) has no reason to believe their faith is genuine. (b) We know from experience that most people who say they will repent tomorrow, tomorrow never comes. Days, weeks, months, years and decades go by without repentance, without serving Christ. This tragic fact should not surprise us, for the thought "I will repent tomorrow" is nothing but a lame excuse for rebellion against God. It is a deceitful excuse for sin designed to calm or soothe a guilty conscience. When a person plans to deliberately sin, the last thing he needs is something to appease his conscience. He needs to tremble with fear, repent, confess and pray for assistance to overcome a besetting sin, a sin of habit.

(c) The person who puts off repentance to "sow the wild oats" or to feed sinful lusts strengthens sin's power. Many people who always place repentance of their favorite sins in a hypothetical future do so with the notion that once lusts are satisfied, repentance will be much easier. Is such a common idea really true? No. It is height of unbiblical absurdity. Who in their right mind would think that we can become holy by committing sin; that we can extinguish a fire with gasoline? When a person repeatedly sins he strengthens its power by making it a habit. People who relish certain sins and commit them over and over again become slaves of that particular sin. Whenever a person does something long enough it becomes a part of him. By repeated practice a person becomes used to sinning; he becomes trained or habituated toward evil. That is why we can only repent when Holy Spirit works in us and this repentance must be two-sided. One must turn from their sinful habit to an appropriate, corresponding biblical practice (e.g., the man who is enslaved to pornography on the Internet replaces that activity with intimacy with his wife).

We must have a total commitment to Christ each and every day. "Do not fall prey to the 'one more-time' syndrome. Tomorrow's obedience is disobedience *now*. Tomorrow's holiness is impurity *now*. Tomorrow's faith is unbelief *now*. Aim not to sin

at all (1 Jn. 2:1), asking for divine strength to bring even your very thoughts into captivity to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).”<sup>26</sup>

Second, we need to become a member of and active in a solidly Reformed local church. A Christian is not an island. Christ set up the church for our benefit. He ordained that the means of grace such as preaching and the sacraments would be found only in the institutional church (Mt. 28:19-20; Eph. 4:11ff.). As we serve Christ in the context of the local church we are not only sanctified by the preaching and the Lord’s supper, we are spiritual sharpened by being in a community of serious Christians where we have godly companions, biblical counsel, sanctified advice and opportunity for ministry. Further, if we do fall, we have brothers who will lift us up and pray for us. If we have serious sin problems we have the discipline of the church to help us repent and serve Christ as we ought. It is for all these reasons and even more that the author of Hebrews says, “Obey those who rule over you and be submissive, for they watch over your souls, as those who must give account” (Heb. 13:17); and “let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling or ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:25).

As members of a local church we should become active in some area of kingdom service (e.g., witnessing, helping with a Christian cable access program, assisting the elderly and widows, passing out tracts, organizing fellowship meals, etc). If we are very active in the edification of our families and in doing good works, then we will be too busy doing good to engage in sinful activities. This point is one reason why the Westminster Larger Catechism (139) says that idleness is a violation of the seventh commandment. If King David had been fighting the enemy with his troops as he should have been, instead of relaxing in his palace, the incident with Bathsheba may never have occurred.

Third, we should use part of our private devotional time to assess our daily progress or the lack thereof. (This was a very common practice among the Puritans.) During this time we analyze the day’s thoughts, Words and deeds in light of Scripture and note the areas in which we fell short. Then, after we critique our behavior biblically we think of what we will do next time we are in a similar situation. Some believers who do this take notes and chart the progress made in problem areas. We must hold ourselves accountable for violations of Scripture that even occur in private. “Never let a day pass without trying to do something for Jesus. Every night reflect on what Jesus has done for you, and then ask yourself. What am I doing for Him?”<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

God calls every Christian to a life of holiness. The only way that believers can make progress in godliness is through Christian discipline. We must, therefore, use all the means that God has given us to train or discipline ourselves to be godly. We must learn the Holy Scriptures and apply them to our daily lives. We must continually look to Christ “the author and finisher of our faith” and have faith in the efficacy of His life, death and resurrection. We must regard ourselves as dead to sin and alive unto God. We must live

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<sup>26</sup> Joel Beeke, *Holiness: God’s Call to Sanctification*, 20-21.

<sup>27</sup> Brownlow North, “Six Short Rules for Christians” as quoted in Joel Beeke, *Holiness*, 25.

in dependence on the Holy Spirit's enabling, sustaining and preserving power. While the Christian life is a continual battle and our responsibilities are many, we can take comfort in the person and work of Christ. His yoke is easy and His burden is light (Mt. 11:30). His intercession for us continues and it cannot fail (Heb. 7:25). "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to preserve you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Savior, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen." (Jude 24-25).

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