

## Self-Control Must Begin in the Heart

We usually *work on* “self-control,” as the old-timers would say, “on the hind leg” of the problem. Anyone who has ever dealt with cows or horses knows that to gain control of the animal, grabbing the *hind leg* won’t work- and will probably get you hurt. And yet, such is usually the approach we typically take regarding “self-control.” We grab the *hind leg* of the problem: the activity/behavior...

We’re going to stop being late, procrastinating, over-eating, smoking, drinking, cursing, using drugs, watching pornography, whatever. So, we employ various means and mechanisms in an effort to control *the behavior*. But herein lies what should be an obvious problem: “Self” is constituted of more than just our *behavior*. Thus, “self-control” must involve more than just behavioral modification. Don’t get me wrong- behavior is *part* of who we are, and it definitely needs controlling. Notice 1John 3:7-8a, “*Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil...*” However, merely modifying or stopping a behavior, though tremendously important, is not all there is to “self-control.”

Behavior is but the outward manifestation of who we are inwardly. Jesus put it this way, “*The good man out of the treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart,*” Luke 6:45. We often erroneously believe that we have “good hearts” despite living sin-filled lives. But this just isn’t so. Our behavior **is** the *outward manifestation* of the *inward content* of our hearts. So, if we want to change our behavior, we must first change our hearts.

The “heart,” as the Bible speaks of it, is made up of three parts: **intellect/thought** (Matthew 9:4; Mark 2:6,8), **emotion/feelings** (2Corinthians 2:4; 1Peter 1:22), and **will/desire/purpose** (Romans 10:1; 2Corinthians 9:7). If we genuinely desire to gain control of ourselves, we must start here- on the inside and at the core of who we are, and then our behavior will follow. So, to have “self-control,” we must first learn to **control our**:

**Minds.** Our decisions of *right* and *wrong* and *good* and *evil* must be controlled and brought into subjection to God’s Word. The proverbial writer penned of man, “*As he thinks within himself, so he is,*” Proverbs 23:7a. If we are to *behave* in good and godly ways, we must first allow God to determine what is *good* and *godly*! Then, we must focus and fill our minds on those things God says are *true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, excellent, and praise-worthy*, Philippians 4:8. We can’t expect to behave in good and godly ways while allowing Satan, those who are his, or even ourselves (cf. Jeremiah 10:23) to determine and dictate our thoughts. We must, instead, “*be transformed by the renewing our mind(s)*” so that we both learn and practice what is “*good and acceptable and perfect*” to God, cf. Romans 12:1-2.

**Emotions.** “I can’t help the way I feel” is often a lie we tell ourselves to feel better about the *ungodly* emotions we’re experiencing. Jonah was angry when he had no right to be, Jonah 4:1-11. Likewise, God told Cain that his anger was misplaced, and that he should “*do well*” (by being obedient, PCS) and his “*countenance*” (facial expression as a manifestation of emotion) would be “*lifted up,*” Genesis 4:6-7. Think about it this way: If we can’t control our emotions, why is the New Testament replete with admonitions to *love another* and other ways we are commanded to *feel* about each other, cf. Colossians 3:12. We must first *think* (Philippians 2:3-4) and then *feel* (Colossians 3:12) properly about each other in order to then *treat* one another properly, Colossians 3:13.

**Will/Desire/Purpose.** In James 4, we learn that **wrong purposes** (“*wishes,*” v.4), **wrong “motives”** (to satisfy *your* desires rather than God’s, v.3), and **wrong desires** (“*lust*” and “*envy,*” v.2a), lead to **wrong actions** (*quarrels, conflicts, murder,* v.2b), with the result of winding up the “**enemy of God,**” v.4. Please understand that it was the wrong *purposes, motives, and desires* of the heart led to the wrong *actions* of the body!

If we are to learn “self-control,” we must control all parts of “self.” This must begin with our *hearts* (made up of *thought, emotions, and will*), and then the activities of the body will follow. God doesn’t want just your *activities* to be right- He wants your *heart* to be right, cf. Matthew 9:10-13! (Philip C. Strong; Southport Church of Christ; 7202 Madison Ave, Indianapolis, IN 46227; online at [southportcofc.org](http://southportcofc.org); email to [mrpcstrong@hotmail.com](mailto:mrpcstrong@hotmail.com))