

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, **Rom13:13-14**. However, behavior modification, though tremendously important, is not all there is to “self-control.” And it may be the wrong “end” on which to start...the “hind leg” if you will.

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, 1John 3:7-8a**. 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 our fleshly selves (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**. To “control self,” **we must control our mind/thoughts**.

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. To "control self," **we must control our heart/emotion.**

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! Consider that when Jesus needed every ounce of self-control He could muster to control and submit Himself to go to the cross, He prayed, "...yet not My **will**, but *Thine be done*," Luke 22:42. To "control self," **we must control** (through submission) **our will/purpose.**

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 15:10-20!