

The Fierce Fruit of Self-Control

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"As the Hebrews were promised the land, but had to take it by force, one town at a time, so we are promised the gift of self-control, yet we also must take it by force."*

The very concept of "self-control" implies a battle between a divided self. It implies that our "self" produces desires we should not satisfy but instead "control." We should "deny ourselves" and "take up our cross daily," Jesus says, and follow him (Luke 9:23). Daily our "self" produces desires that should be "denied" or "controlled."

That path that leads to heaven is narrow and strewn with suicidal temptations to abandon the way. Therefore Jesus says, "Strive to enter through the narrow door" (Luke 13:24). The Greek word for "strive" is *agonizesthe*, in which you correctly hear the English word "agonize."

We get a taste of what is involved from Matthew 5:29, "If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you." This is the fierceness of self-control. This is what is behind the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:12, "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force." Are you laying hold on the kingdom fiercely?

Paul says that Christians exercise self-control like the Greek athletes, only our goal is eternal, not temporal. "Everyone who competes in the games (*agonizomenos*) exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable" (1 Corinthians 9:25). So he says, "I pommel my body and subdue it" (1 Corinthians 9:27). Self-control is saying no to sinful desires, even when it hurts.

But the Christian way of self-control is NOT "Just say no!" The problem is with the word "just." You don't just say no. You say no in a certain way: You say no by faith in the superior power and pleasure of Christ. It is just as ruthless. And may be just as painful. But the difference between worldly self-control and godly self-control is crucial. Who will get the glory for victory? That's the issue. Will we get the glory? Or will Christ get the glory? If we exercise self-control by faith in Christ's superior power and pleasure, Christ will get the glory.

Fundamental to the Christian view of self-control is that it is a gift. It is the fruit of the Holy Spirit: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace . . . self-control" (Galatians 5:22). How do we "strive" against our fatal desires? Paul answers: "I labor, striving (*agonizomenos*) according to His power, which mightily works within me" (Colossians 1:29). He "agonizes" by the power of Christ not his own. Similarly he tells us, "If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live" (Romans 8:13). "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the LORD of hosts" (Zechariah 4:6). We must be fierce! Yes. But not by our might. "The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the LORD" (Proverbs 21:31).

And how does the Spirit produce this fruit of self-control in us? By instructing us in the superior preciousness of grace, and enabling us to see and savor (that is, "trust") all that God is for us in Jesus. "The grace of God has appeared . . . instructing us to deny . . . worldly desires . . . in the present age" (Titus 2:11). When we really see and believe what God is for us by grace through Jesus Christ, the power of wrong desires is broken. Therefore the fight for self-control is a fight of faith. "Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called" (1 Timothy 6:12).

Your comrade in the fierce fight for self-control,

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