

## The Secret of Self-discipline

There's something which renders many a Christian useless to God. There's a sin that destroys their fruitfulness, effectiveness and power. If I were to ask what this sin is, you might assume it's the sin of immorality, unforgiveness or bitterness. For something to have such an impact on your Christian life – it must be a sin of that kind of nature, a grievous act of rebellion against God's Word. In fact, the sin I mean is something 21st century Christians hardly talk about – it is a lack of self-discipline.

Sadly, many today think of self-discipline as the kind of virtue you can add to your life optionally – one of those window-dressing elements of the Christian life that would be nice to have, but it is not great loss if you lack it. Some may speak of its virtues, but hardly any will speak of it as a sin if you lack it.

But Scripture is very clear that a lack of self-discipline is not a weakness, but a sin. It is in fact, the sin of laziness and the sin of self-indulgence combined. Why would these sins render us so powerless? Why would they have such an impact on our Christian lives? The answer is that without self-discipline, none of the other graces in the Christian life can take root.

How many people can study their Bible consistently if they lack discipline? How many Christians can grow without consistent Bible study? How can you pray regularly if you lack self-discipline? How can you grow into the image of Christ if you do not pray regularly? How can we be effective servants of Christ if our lives are chaotic, without any order, schedule or balance? How can we become more like Christ, if we are not serving Him?

Solomon said the following about a lack of self-discipline: *"He that hath no rule over his own spirit, is like a city broken down, and without walls"* (**Proverbs 25:28**). In ancient times, a city without walls was vulnerable to any attack. It was a sitting duck for those who sought to plunder it. So the person without self-discipline is defenceless against temptation. In fact, it's simply a matter of time before waves of attacks enter in and cause ruin.

See, this self-discipline is absolutely essential to growing as a Christian. Without it, it will be like trying to grow a crop by planting seeds occasionally and not ploughing the land. Your harvest will match your methods – sporadic, random, and pretty limited. Your spiritual life will resemble your sowing methods – no fruit that lasts, or is consistent. Paul understood this when he wrote to the Corinthians:

*And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we, an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.*

**1 Corinthians 9:24-27**

Paul says that athletes seeking victory are self-disciplined, and rigorously so, as we all know from modern sportsmen. Likewise, Paul says, he is not haphazard and random in his approach

to his walk with God. He rules his body, treating it severely, making it his slave and not vice-versa.

Why? So he does not arrive at the Judgement Seat of Christ and find his rewards have been disqualified due to the excess and lack of self-discipline in his life. There's clearly a lot at stake here. It is your very spiritual growth that is on the line.

Now as we look into Scripture we find some interesting things regarding self-discipline. We find it is not something that some people just have, by birthright, like blue eyes or wavy hair. Scripture treats self-discipline as an obedience issue, not as a weakness. While self-discipline can be improved and strengthened, God does not regard you as weak when you are undisciplined, but, in fact, as disobedient.

This is both encouraging and convicting. It means that I do not have to be despondent or discouraged about my failures in this area, since God says it is an obedience issue. Whatever He commands me to obey, He will give me the power to perform. It's not a genetic weakness that I can do nothing about. That's encouraging. But it's also convicting because it means my excuses about how tired or weak I am just don't hold up to the scrutiny of the Bible. I am responsible to be self-disciplined.

### **What does the Bible say about self-discipline?**

Firstly, we see self-discipline as part of Christlike character. **Galatians 5:22-23** says, *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law."* Temperance – or self-control – is part of the fruit of the Spirit. It's one fruit – the fruit of the character of Christ.

As we submit to God by obeying the Word, the Spirit produces the fruit of self-control. The ability to bring your body, desires, attitudes under control, instead of them ruling you – God gives us this ability. *"For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind"* (**2 Timothy 1:8**). A sound-mind here carries the idea of moderation – self-control.

Self-discipline is not something we must try to create in ourselves. Instead, like love, it is something we obey, and allow the Holy Spirit to shed it abroad in us as we obey. Nevertheless, that does not mean we can be passive about it. **2 Peter** gives us the building blocks of the Christian life:

*And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness...*

**2 Peter 1:5-7**

So, we see self-discipline as something which God gives us, yet something which we are to pursue. That's typical for truth in the Christian life – it's 100% God's power, but requires 100% obedience from us. So how are we to pursue self-discipline? Well, Paul's simple way of describing sanctification in **Ephesians 4** applies here:

*...that ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.*

**Ephesians 4:22-24**

We need to put off something; we need to be renewed in our minds about the issue of self-discipline; and we need to put on something.

## **Stage 1 – Putting off**

Well, what do we need to put off? Obviously, a lack of self-discipline. Let's go to Scripture and see how it describes this lack. If we see how it looks in the Bible, we can identify it in our own lives. Primarily, the Bible calls it slothfulness and self-indulgence. Here are some characteristics of the sin of sloth, according to Scripture:

### **1. The slothful always procrastinates**

They will postpone a task for as long as possible, even until the postponement has brought problems. They hope that if they keep putting stuff off, it will go away altogether. **Proverbs 20:4** says: *"The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold."* This is like saying, 'It's not a good time to do it. I can't get to it now. I will later – when it warms up, when I can, when it's convenient for me...'

### **2. The slothful enjoys disorganisation**

A sluggard in fact uses their disorganised lifestyle as an excuse to stay that way. **Proverbs 15:19** says: *"The way of the slothful man is as an hedge of thorns: but the way of the righteous is made plain."* They say, 'Oh, my desk is such a mess, I can't study. I have so many appointments that I can't go to any of them. Look how messy the house is, it'll take a month to clean. I'll tackle it when I have to, some day.'

### **3. Similarly, the slothful makes excuses not to work**

They always have a reason why they can't just get on with good hard work and self-disciplined living. **Proverbs 22:13** says: *"The slothful man saith, 'There is a lion without, I shall be slain in the streets.'" They say, 'I can't go to work, I might be killed. I can't get up, I just need more sleep. I can't say no to this food – I have a high metabolism. I can't do those chores now, I have other things to do.' There's always an excuse. **Proverbs 26:16** tells us: *"The sluggard is wiser in his own conceit than seven men that can render a reason."**

### **4. The slothful often starts something but struggles to finish it**

**Proverbs 12:27** says, *"The slothful man roasteth not that which he took in hunting."* He hunts, but he's too lazy to cook it. In fact, it gets even worse. **Proverbs 19:24** says, *"A slothful man hideth his hand in his bosom, and will not so much as bring it to his mouth again."* This man is so pathetic

that even if he gets so far as to have cooked the food – he is too lazy to feed himself and take the spoon to the dish and up to his mouth. That sounds a lot like the undisciplined, doesn't it?

The self-indulgent in Scripture is simply a glutton. They are greedy for pleasure. They have more than their fill. They pursue pleasure at their own cost. They live for the moment, and can see no reason not to indulge now. **Proverbs 25:16** warns: *"Hast thou found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith, and vomit it."*

There is something called having enough – and the self-indulgent do not believe that. Whether it is food, sleep, laughter, recreation, relaxation, entertainment – anything pleasurable – the self-indulgent cannot say 'enough.' They indulge to where they are being gluttonous for sleep, greedy for ease, covetous of pleasure. They want more than their portion.

Samson is the best illustration of the self-indulgent. He could not say no to a woman, to honey, to anything his flesh felt like. Esau is another example. He could not see the point of a birthright when he was hungry. His lust for pleasure now overwhelmed his sense of things beyond the now. He sacrificed the eternal on the altar of the immediate. That's the self-indulgent. They reject the principle of sowing and reaping – all they can see is how they feel now.

Now, consider your own life and see if those things are present. How do these things look in your life? Is there the procrastination of the sluggard? Perhaps your home, office, or room is perpetually disorganised, and it fuels your procrastination. How about excuses not to work, not to get up, not to clean, not to pray, not to read, not to begin something you said you would do?

Is your life filled with unfinished projects? Would this appear in your journal: "Dear Diary, today I plan to finish what I start and not get distracted by..." Maybe there's a pattern of self-indulgence in your life. Sleeping when you ought to rise. Watching TV or browsing online beyond what you said you would. Eating an extra helping when you can feel that your body is satisfied. If the pleasure is within your grasp, you do not say no.

Only you know how this sin of slothfulness and self-indulgence looks in your life. Obviously, this is what we have to put off. We have to say 'no' to slothfulness and to self-indulgence, depending on the Holy Spirit. **Romans 6** is a chapter on how strong the Christians' 'no' is. A Christian can say no to sin with the power that Calvary had over sin.

## **Stage 2 – Renewing your mind**

However, you may say, 'I have tried to say no. But I just can't root this out!' Well, that's where the second stage comes in – renewing your mind. The real power behind conquering this sin in our lives and putting on self-discipline is to search our hearts to see what is going on. What is the ruling lust we are pursuing, that is causing us to act this way?

In other words, what is the thing that we want so badly that it controls us, over and above submitting to God? When we identify this thing, we can clearly see what needs to be repented of, and how we need to replace it with a God-pleasing desire. This is what we mean by

renewing our minds. It's the process of seeing the sin for what God calls it, and then seeing Christ in His glory as the precious alternative.

So what is going on inside me when I am undisciplined, when I am slothful and self-indulgent? In your heart, you may find three types of pride, which need to be repented of.

### **The undisciplined person needs to turn from:**

#### ***1. The arrogance of ownership***

A sluggard or a self-indulgent person shows by their behaviour that they believe they are the owners of themselves. They show that they consider their body to be their own, their time to be their own, their money, their resources – indeed, everything. A sluggard says by their behaviour – this is my body, and I will use it any way I want. This time is mine, and if I want to sleep all day, I will.

Such people reject the idea of being a steward – a manager of someone else's property – they see everything as their own. Consequently, they do not see what they are doing as irresponsible – since pride has said, 'I am my own.' This heart is lusting for control over its own life.

#### ***2. The arrogance of greed***

The self-indulgent says, 'No one can tell me I can't have more. I will have as much as I want. I will have as much leisure as I want, as much relaxation as I want, as much ease as I want.' Greediness is the pride that says, 'I ought to be like God – having all things belonging to me when I want them.' It thinks 'I want' is a command that creation must obey. This heart is lusting for more – always more.

#### ***3. The arrogance of scorning God's order***

This person says, 'Who cares if God says I will reap what I sow. I care nothing for what is not in front of my eyes, and within the grasp of my hands. God's methods and commands do not matter if they do not make sense to me right now. I can live for my own pleasure now, and no harm will come to me. I can live above God's laws. Laziness will not bring poverty to me. Self-indulgence will not weaken and ruin me.' This heart lusts for ease and pleasure to the point of idolatry.

So you can see what is in the heart of the sluggard. It's clear that this is not a weakness. This is rebellion. The sluggard now has something to repent of: the pride that thinks they own their time and body. The self-indulgent can repent of gluttony and greed. And both can repent of despising God's order.

### **Instead, the undisciplined should turn to:**

#### ***1. Submission to God's possession***

As we turn *from* something, we turn *to* something. In place of the arrogance of ownership, we submit to God's possession.

*Know ye not that your body is the Temple of the Holy Ghost which ye have of God, which is in you, and ye are not your own. For ye are bought with a price.*

**1 Corinthians 6:19-20**

Humility embraces reality – I do not belong to myself. My time, my body, my possessions – they are to be managed for their true Owner – the Lord Jesus. I must manage them responsibly, and in a way that pleases Him.

## **2. Submission to God's portion**

In place of the arrogance of greed, we submit to God's portion for us. God has given us a certain portion of sleep, food, relaxation, leisure. Humility says, 'I have been allotted a certain amount, and no more. To take more than that would be stealing.' The sluggard says, "*Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep*" (**Proverbs 6:10**). They fool themselves into thinking that because it seems so harmless, so small, they are not in rebellion.

However, we need to see we may be proudly taking more than our portion, again and again. Humility will say, 'Enough. My body is full of sleep. God granted me my share. I'm not my own, and it's time to get up.' We realise God has placed limits on pleasure, ease, food, and there is a point to say 'no.' Moderation is the opposite of excess, of greed. Moderation submits to God's portions.

## **3. Submission to God's procedure**

In place of the arrogance of scorning God's order, we should submit to God's plans and procedures. God cursed the ground, and promised a life of frustratingly hard toil. Humility submits to that. It does not try to find a shortcut to avoid God's curse. It embraces the hardship of life in a fallen world, with the discomfort and hardship that is necessary for the ground to bring forth fruit.

This applies to all areas of your life – you will have to embrace self-denial to see the fruit of real life. God's procedure is that we bring our bodies under subjection, and make sure we are ruling our bodies, and not vice versa. God's plan is that we must often be harsh with ourselves to train ourselves to bear life's responsibilities.

We will always gravitate towards what is easiest, to the path of least resistance. Embracing God's plan and procedure means submitting to His order of hard work, of battling back the thorns and thistles, and diligently planting good seed. That can be anything from a work situation to family relationships, from physical health to your prayer life, from financial discipline to your studies.

So we know we must put off the procrastination, disorganisation and excuses of the sluggard. We know we must put off self-indulgence with its greed, excess and lack of moderation. But now we see the root of those sins.

There is the arrogance of ownership – thinking I own my life. There is the arrogance of greed – thinking that ‘I want’ legitimises my actions. Then there is the arrogance that despises God’s order of sowing, embracing difficulty, and buckling down to the toil of life. This we need to repent of.

We must turn then in faith to God. We embrace His possession of our very lives and submit to it. We embrace His portion for our lives, and submit to it with contentment. We submit to His procedure of self-denial as a means to an end in this life. That’s renewing your mind.

### **Stage 3 – Putting on**

Now, we are in a position to do the third state: put on, by the power of the Spirit, the fruit of a self-disciplined life. God produces this fruit in us, as we saw, but we must seek to cultivate it. A life filled with moderation and self-control will bring forth great fruit unto God. Self-discipline is not godliness itself, but it is the environment in which godliness thrives.

What are some practical tips for cultivating this life of self-discipline? Here are some I’ve heard and picked up from others:

#### ***1. Do the hardest thing first***

Postponing the difficult tasks only feeds that sluggard in you. Grab the bull by the horns and teach yourself to tackle what is hardest first. The easier tasks will then fall into place. If you always do what you love most first, you will seldom, if ever, tackle the tasks you dislike. This is not self-denial.

#### ***2. Clean your environment and work to keep it that way***

Cleaning your environment, whether it be at work, at home or anywhere else, has a number of benefits. Firstly, a messy, cluttered environment tends to be that hedge of thorns for the sluggard. It gives you more excuses to postpone the cleaning operation. A messy environment also tends to feed slothful tendencies – it desensitises you to the need to clean and be organised.

If you get used to a mess, then the sluggard in you is at home in that mess. Also, the maintenance of that cleanliness is a good exercise in the frequent, consistent nature of self-discipline. Self-discipline is really a series of good decisions. The habit of keeping a place clean enforces this attitude.

#### ***3. Try to keep a daily schedule***

Don't just let life happen to you. Organise and plan. Your body and mind crave routine. The person who never sleeps at the same hour, and gets up at odd times, will endlessly struggle with self-discipline in other areas. Learn to work around some kind of routine. You will accomplish far more if you plan your time, rather than letting others and circumstances plan your life for you. In the same vein, work on punctuality. Being on time for places and events teaches you to manage your time and to stick to a routine.

#### **4. *Practice self-denial of even the harmless***

Sometimes, you need to say no to an extra helping of dessert simply to teach your body that you *can* say no. It's pointless to indulge all the time when it comes to dessert, and expect self-discipline to take root in your life. There is nothing wrong with a dessert, but there is something wrong in the inability to say no.

Now and then, you need to treat your body severely, by denying it a legitimate pleasure. Sounds too harsh? Paul says he was in essence beating his body black and blue till it became his slave. One less ice cream or chocolate is still a far cry from that!

#### **5. *Welcome additional responsibility***

When we refuse responsibility, it is often because we know how chaotic our life is already, and do not want anything more. Certainly, we are often too busy and need to simplify our lives. But when you are approached with a new responsibility, especially in the spiritual realm, do not be quick to say no. God's plan is that we bear much fruit, not stay where we are. Additional responsibility is often what we need to stretch ourselves to a new height.

These are just five practical ways of creating an environment in which self-discipline is produced by the power of the Spirit. But ultimately, we have no choice. The sluggard will reap a life of wasted time and talents, of unfinished tasks, and of poverty. He will find he lives with continual restlessness and self-disgust, and he will be a very barren branch of the Vine of Christ.

May we put off self-indulgence and laziness, renew our minds with submission to God's possession, portion and procedure, and put on the beautiful fruit of self-discipline and moderation.