

## Ruin or Reward Proverbs 4:23

To make some extra cash a stunt pilot was selling rides in his single engine airplane. One day he got into an argument with a pastor who insisted on taking his wife along at no extra charge. Not wanting to miss out on a chance to make some cash, the pilot said, "I'll take you both up for the price of one if you promise not to utter a sound during the entire flight. If you make any noise, the price is doubled." The deal was made and they climbed aboard the plane.

The pilot quickly proceeded to put the plane through all sorts of stunts and maneuvers designed to make the bravest person tremble. But the passengers didn't make a sound. Exhausted, the pilot finally landed. As the pastor climbed out, the pilot said, "I made moves up there that frightened even me and yet you never said a word. You must have incredible self-control." The pastor thanked the pilot and then said, "I must admit that there was one time when you almost had me." "When was that?" asked the pilot. To which the man replied, "When my wife fell out of the plane!"

So there's a word to you wives to be wary if your husband asks you to go up in an airplane any time soon. And Joann, that goes for hot air balloon rides.

Turn with me in your Bibles to **Proverbs 4:23**. We'll be using this passage as a spring board to other Scriptures that deal with a very difficult topic. Whether we want to admit it or not we all have something for which we need self-control.

**"Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life."**

Solomon begins by noting the importance of the command he is about to discuss with his son – **"above all else."** Son, this is of utmost importance.

We're not sure when he wrote this. It's probably before those very depressing words in Scripture that speak about how his foreign wives turned his heart away from the Lord. Otherwise, these words would have had a more lasting impact on his young son. Even so, Solomon understands that passions and motivations and actions all come from within a person. Guard it well because your life depends on it. Don't ever let your guard down. At all costs, protect your heart. Keep a vigilant and wary eye out for things that will come and rob you of it.

We need to protect our heart from doing evil. David's words in **Psalms 119:9-11** are very helpful here. Listen to it from the Message: **"How can a young person live a clean life? By carefully reading the map of your Word. I'm single-minded in pursuit of you; don't let me miss the road signs you've posted. I've banked your promises in the vault of my heart so I won't sin myself bankrupt."**

If I give up my heart, I've lost everything. When we keep God's commands in our heart, then our heart remains guarded against evil intentions that may come our way. When His Word is in our heart, it sounds an alarm to warn us of some danger that is approaching. **Every first Saturday of the month at 1:00p.m. our community warning siren is tested. In an emergency the siren warns us to seek shelter. Whether or not we heed the warning is up to us.** God's Word is a siren that warns us that danger is approaching and that we should seek cover.

Similarly we read in **Psalms 1:2**: **"But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night."**

**Psalms 119:105** says that God's Word lights our path and guides our steps so we won't stumble along the way. When God's Word is applied it will help keep our heart so we won't involve ourselves in the plans or activities of the wicked. It is from the heart that our actions take place – good or bad.

It is in the heart that we shape our values. It is the heart that we are to keep or guard with all diligence. What is in the heart determines our affections. Jesus said where the heart is that is where your treasure is also.

### What place does God's Word have in your heart?

In just a few weeks we will be tuned in to the Olympic Games. If you google names of Olympians often times there is a segment on their training and diet. What they eat is important to keep them fit and sharp for competition. They need the right food to do well.

The prophet said he found God's Word and ate them. Feed on His Word to keep your heart.

If we are going to do well in this life as a Christian, we need to feed on God's Word regularly.

Evangelist R.A. Torrey said this about the importance of the Word of God. "You may talk about power; but, if you neglect the one Book that God has given you as the one instrument through which He imparts and exercises His power, you will not have it. You May read many books and go to many conventions and you may have your all-night prayer meetings to pray for the power of the Holy Ghost; but unless you keep in constant and close association with the one Book, the Bible, you will not maintain it except by the daily, earnest, intense study of that Book." It will help keep your heart.

Scholar Delitzsch states that the heart provides the direction our life takes, its very conduct and course, its morality and spirituality, speaking about the heart being the "wellspring of life."

John Phillips writes that "the heart must be right if the life is to be right." He concludes that even though the heart may be right because it has been cleansed by the blood of Christ, it must still be guarded with all diligence. The admonition is to guard our heart.

Our passage intuitively emphasizes the importance of having self-control. But self-control without the Word of God is like having a car without the engine. There is an assumption in this verse that where the heart is guarded there will be self-control. And the heart is guarded by obedience to the Word of God. With that let's consider these three points:

Self-control defined

Self-control destroyed

Self-control developed

## I. SELF-CONTROL DEFINED

### A. A Philosophical Glance at Self-control

Philosophy gives us a cultural glance into the word itself that I think is important for us to understand. Self-control was a virtue that was highly prized by the Greeks. Generally speaking the Greek mind viewed self-control as an ideal of the free and independent man, of the man who was under no control, but who freely controlled all things and who in self-restraint maintained his freedom in the face of his desires.

The Greek philosopher Philo said that self-control was the "superiority to every desire."

When the Greeks wanted to illustrate the virtue of self-control, they built a statue of a man or a woman in perfect proportion. If you ever studied art history you may remember seeing the statue of the discus thrower captured in motion as he is getting ready to let the discus fly. Everything about the sculpture was symmetrical. All around Athens you could find statues of men in perfect athletic proportion – their arms were strong but not grossly muscular, their legs were powerful but graceful, they were well toned with the absence of fat. There is a fluidity of the body in motion. Everything about the sculpture is in harmony and balance. It was this kind of balance that the Greeks thought of as self-control. They considered this to be the proper ordering and balance in one's life.

Aristotle said that the self-controlled man was neither cowardly nor foolhardy, but courageous. He was neither gluttonous nor fasting, but healthy in diet. He was neither ignorant nor a bookworm, but learned. He was neither a drunkard nor sober, but social. This is what self-control looked like to the Greek mind.

Plato, not the dog on Mickey Mouse – Pluto, but the philosopher said that self-control was the rational ordering of the soul that kept it free. Our animal urges, what we might call our natural vitalities, must be governed, he said, or else they will produce a “feverish state in the soul, a city of pigs” which knows no limits. The ungoverned soul, he said is like the state being ruled by cooks, bakers, tap dancers and flute girls.” Flute girls were prostitutes by trade, employed in Greek cities.

Both Aristotle and Plato put a lot of stock in the importance of forming good habits for the development of self-control. They thought that self-control was largely imprinted upon us before we were old enough to know better. The neighboring city of Sparta made childhood development a rigorous formation of character and paid attention to minute details. It’s clear that where there is a lack of self-control in the family, that child is headed for trouble.

Benjamin Franklin said that if children were taught the habit of self-control they would be kept from a lot of misery later in life and society would have less crime.

Journalist Daniel Akst wrote an article in 2011 titled *We Have Met the Enemy: Self-Control in an Age of Excess*. In the article he said that because of a lack of self-control in allowing instant gratification due to some uncontrolled passion, we will bear the consequences of that action for a long time.

Aristotle used to say that the goal for the development of self-control was to feel the right

amount of pleasure at the right things to the right degree. But as we will see self-control is more than just the ability to curb desires with moderation, whatever those desires may be. Scripture gives us another perspective on the issue of self-control. We have taken a philosophical glance; now let’s take a Biblical glimpse at self-control.

## **B. A Biblical Glimpse at Self-control**

The word in the Greek is “egkratos” and is the combination of two words “eg” which means in or with and “kratos” which means power or strength. Kratos as used in the Septuagint denotes natural strength or might such as the strength that is in man’s hand or the strength of a horse. Overwhelmingly though, its use in the Old Testament is in reference to the power of God. It is used in the sense of man seeking God’s power or God’s power that is working in man.

Taken together it means with strength or in strength. It is the ability to have strength over one’s emotions, behaviors or desires. For the Christian it came to mean possessing power or mastery over some passion. For example In **I Corinthians 7:19** Paul used it to speak of mastery over sexual desire.

For the Greek culture, moderation in all things was acceptable. You could do whatever you wanted, but not in excess. The definition for the Christian took on an entirely different meaning because it wasn’t just moderation in all things such as a restraint on gluttony or drunkenness and the like, but rather in some cases as we will see, it also meant we don’t do certain behaviors at all because they are characteristics of the old nature.

From Scripture and fundamental to our faith as Christians we need to see the clear *evidence of the source of self-control*. **Galatians 5:22-23** Vine’s Expository Dictionary of the New Testament defines it as “the controlling power of the will under the operation of the Spirit of God.”

We have considered a definition of self-control from both a philosophical and Biblical perspective. Now let's look at self-control destroyed.

## II. SELF-CONTROL DESTROYED

### A. It Brings Ruin - Proverbs 25:28

In those days the walls of a city were very important. It provided security for the citizens as a defense against attack. A number of years ago a study was done on a school playground in which a fence was erected around the playground. Children freely ran all around even playing games near the fence. The researchers then had the fence taken down and found that even though they still had the entire playground in which to run around, they chose to play in the center of the yard. They felt threatened without the security of the fence.

Without walls the city was vulnerable to an attack. Broken down walls were considered a disgrace. When word reached Nehemiah of the condition of Jerusalem with its walls shattered, he lamented its disgrace on the city and the people of Jerusalem.

Solomon compared the condition of a city without walls to that of a person who has no self-control.

At the beginning of WWII Hitler called for a meeting with Dr. Kurt von Schuschnigg, the Austrian chancellor. Schuschnigg was an intellectual genius but had an addiction for which he had no control. He was a chain smoker. During their meeting, Hitler rudely cut off some remarks made by the chancellor and broke into a tirade that lasted all afternoon. Hitler's brutal psychological attack along with his refusal to allow the chancellor to smoke resulted in the chancellor's readiness to sign a new agreement with Hitler that in effect handed over Austria on a platter all for a lack of control. It is true that a man who cannot control his own spirit is like a city that has broken down walls.

Without self-control a person is defenseless against the attacks of the enemy. Satan can come in and easily conquer a person by having them engage in activity that overtakes them, consumes them, for lack of control. It doesn't even have to be anything bad.

It could be a lack of control over how much TV you watch.

It could be a lack of control over eating too much in general or eating certain things.

It could be a lack of control over how much you are on the phone texting or on the internet or shopping.

*When you lack self-control in any one thing defeat is inevitable, disgrace is evident.* Things consume you to the point of giving up things that matter.

You spend less time with your family.

You spend less time at work.

You spend less time with the Lord.

There was a story in 2007 about a couple who lost control of playing video games and neglected their two children. Both received 12 year sentences. A lack of control has catastrophic effects and brings ruin.

It can be a lack of control in other things as well.

When a discussion becomes heated, you lack self-control in what you say or how you say things – swearing, critical or condescending remarks, anger, yelling.

Something doesn't go your way in a meeting and so you slam doors or hit the desk on impulse.

A lack of self-control brings ruin and disgrace.

Trouble will always follow that person who bears the consequences for rash decisions for a long time. Perhaps one of the greatest examples in Scripture of a person with a lack of self-control brought to ruin is found in the book of Judges.

### Judges 13-16

Samson is born at a time when Israel was under the suppression of the Philistine. He was raised as a Nazarite by his parents – devoted to serving the

Lord. Somewhere along the way in life, we're not sure when, he developed a lust for women. Keep in mind **I John 2:15-16 "Love not the world neither the things that are in the world. If any man loves the world the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world."**

Remember that the law given by God forbade Israelites from intermarrying with the other nations.

**Judges 14:1-3**

He saw. He desired. Lust of eyes and lust of flesh.

**Judges 16:1**

He saw. He desired. Lust of eyes and lust of flesh.

**Judges 16:4**

He saw. He desired. Lust of eyes and lust of flesh.

You know the story. Maybe he thought he was favored by God, because of his great strength and he could do what he wanted. He was filled with pride. He did things a Nazarite wasn't supposed to do. He touched a dead animal. He married someone who wasn't a Jew. He lied. He finally spilled the beans and told Delilah the truth about the source of his power, he was captured, his sight was taken from him and he was forced to grind in the mill and the Philistines made sport of him. He was ruined because he lacked of self-control. What he wanted he could no longer see. What he desired he could no longer get.

We might rationalize our decisions that just this once won't hurt. In our pride we think we can handle it. It's not a big deal. What can one time hurt?

I've been on weight watchers before to shed some pound. Things were going well for the first few weeks and weight was coming off. I felt pretty good about myself, so I thought one cookie or donut won't hurt. After all I was running quite a bit and felt that I deserved a little reward. The next thing I knew I was back to old habits. I wasn't controlling

what or how much I was eating. The next thing I knew, my weight was back up. (And don't even tell me it's not been a struggle for some of you too.)

You're meeting with your boss about a project that isn't going so well. He's challenging some of the decisions that have been made which you are responsible for. You become defensive and before you know it your anger causes you to lose control and you say some things and storm out of the meeting. The next day you're excused from work.

A lack of self-control leads to ruin. We tear down the walls with a lack of self-control and our heart becomes defenseless. A lack of self-control has a devastating effect on you, your family, your friends, your job, even the church.

When we don't or won't let the Holy Spirit develop self-control in us it is difficult to say no, it's easy to give in to the lusts of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life.

**Galatians 5:13, 16 "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love...So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want."**

The sinful nature is pulling and pulling you down. It wants you to let go of self-control and indulge yourself. You deserve it. You need it. Feed your passions whatever they are. You'll feel better.

Paul is urging us not to gratify our passions. He's telling us to have some restraint, practice self-control, don't think that it's okay to indulge the sinful nature just because God is forgiving. Keep your heart. Guard your heart. Your heart will determine your character and your conduct. He



continues in vs. **24-25** “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”

A lack of self-control will bring destruction. Jesus said in **Matthew 6:24** that we cannot serve two masters. You will always only love one and hate the other; you can never strike a compromise between the two. **So which master are you serving?**

When we allow the old nature to control us, it will lead to ruin.

### III. SELF-CONTROL DEMONSTRATED

#### A. Surrender Your Will to God

##### Romans 12:1-2

We are no longer our own, we were bought with a price Paul tells the Corinthians. He says that in everything we do we are to glorify God. **Can we then claim that any lack of control on our part is glorifying to God?**

If we have surrendered our will to the Lord that means we have died to self and our desires and are living our lives for His desires. We give up the desire to only think about and please ourselves, we now have a new master to please.

#### Have you surrendered your will to the Lord?

On a dusty road outside a city, Saul had an encounter with the living Christ and surrendered his will that day. After that he was always on guard to make certain his will was surrendered to the Lord. I like what John Piper said on this matter. “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.

Surrender your will so God gets the glory.

#### B. Submit Your Ways to the Holy Spirit

We come back to **Galatians 5:23** “**But the fruit of the Spirit is...self-control.**”

Self-control is the anchor for the other graces.

Without self-control instead of love there will be hate.

Instead of joy, sadness

Instead of peace, anxiety

Instead of patience, impatience

Instead of kindness, cruelty

Instead of goodness, badness

Instead of faithfulness, unfaithfulness

Instead of gentleness, harshness

Instead of self-control, no control

According to this passage self-control is not something we have in us early on in life as Aristotle and Plato believed but something that God’s Spirit is producing in us as we yield to His authority over us. We don’t need to pray for more self-control.

Hey, I’m guilty of that. It’s already there. The Holy Spirit doesn’t dole it out in portions or to the proportion of what we need in the moment when we’re dealing with something where self-control is needed. It’s already there in full measure; we need to apply what’s already available in full to us.

When my back/leg pain was really bad, Robyn would tell me I needed to take ibuprofen to help with the pain. I refused to take it even though it was available to me. Then I yielded to her nursing expertise, but I didn't take just one tablet, she gave me what I needed at the right time to help the pain.

The Holy Spirit in us has a full measure of self-control to give us for whatever it is.

It may be self-control over anger.

It may be self-control over lying.

It may be self-control over the tongue like gossip.

You hear some news about someone and you immediately have to tell someone.

It may be self-control over shopping/buying.

It may be self-control over (you fill in the blank.)

Only you know what it is that in your own power you can't overcome but realize you can with the Holy Spirit's help.

The Holy Spirit wants to develop it in us but we in turn must allow Him to do His work. Self-control is a gift that God has given to us through His Holy Spirit. It is the indwelling Spirit who helps us overcome those desires or what John refers to as the **"lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye and the pride of life."**

Someone said we don't need more will power, we need won't power. I disagree. What we need is to allow the Holy Spirit's power to build in us self-control. That God's Spirit produces this in us and not something we can muster up ourselves must be a fundamental truth for us. Apart from the Holy Spirit self-control is foreign to us. Self-control is just one element of the Christian life that is to be displayed as we submit to the powerful working of the Holy Spirit who, through these nine graces, are transforming us into the character of God. We are able to overcome our desires only by the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit that is at work in us. Only you know what needs to be mastered by submitting to the Spirit.

**How then do we struggle against these desires?**

John Piper writes that "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."

Paul's answer is found in **Colossians 1:29** where he says he agonizes according to the power of Christ at work in him. This power is not his own, it is Christ's. In **Romans 8:13** he says that it is by the Spirit that we put to death the actions of the flesh. And in the Old Testament the words of **Zechariah 4:6** remind us that it is **"not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit says the Lord."** He instructs us to deny the worldly desires of this age. (**Titus 2:11**)

Piper concludes that the fight for self-control is really a fight for faith. So fight the good fight of faith. When we surrender our will to God and submit to the work of His Spirit in us we will see a spiritual transformation take place where we deny self to follow Christ. Here's Paul's advice from **Galatians 5:16** **"Live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit. Then you won't feed the compulsions of selfishness."**

Self-control – without there is ruin, with it there is reward. **Is there an area in which you lack control?** If you're not sure ask someone you trust what it might be.

Max Lucado writes **"I am a spiritual being. After this body is dead, my spirit will soar. I refuse to let what will rot, rule the eternal. I refuse to let what will rot rule even today! I choose self-control. I will be drunk only by joy. I will be fattened only by love. I will be impassioned only by faith. I will be influenced only by God. I will be taught only by Christ. I choose self-control!"**

**What will you choose today?**