

Self Control

The ability of the individual to have mastery over his bodily passions as not to be ruled by his desires or lusts is known as self-control. In the Christian context, it is the abstinence from excess, and from satisfying every creature comfort or bodily appetite in the fear of God.

Today, there are glaring evidences of lack of self-control among many people. They indulge in alcoholism, drug abuse, over-eating, compulsive sex, gambling, smoking, wrathfulness, etc. This has led to broken marriages, indebtedness, high rate of accidents and many cases of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs, including the rampaging HIV/AIDS pandemic), etc.

Self-control, sometimes known in the Bible as temperance, is deeply ingrained in the Christian character, hence the Bible lists it as one of the fruits of the spirit, (Galatians 5:22, 23) and as one of the virtues that we should add to our faith. – 2 Peter 1:5-10.

In his letter to the Christians at Corinth, St. Paul compared the striving for life in God's Kingdom to a race in which the athletes must observe a strict and most laborious discipline in order to win the prize. He added: "...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..." (1 Corinthians 9:24-27) In his letter to Timothy his spiritual son, St. Paul spoke in the same vein, stating, "And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully." (2 Timothy 2:5) It is common knowledge that the athlete must observe all the conditions necessary for the contest in regard to diet, regular exercise, self-restraint, chastity, decorum, etc. He must abstain from excessive drinking and loose living which could weaken his ability to perform at his peak. The Christian is required to exercise even a higher degree of discipline or self-control to win the race of salvation by the grace of God.

Sin

Though God made man a free moral agent, yet He gave him the power of reason so that man could do things rationally or wisely by way of self-control. It was the failure to exercise this power that led to the fall of man at the garden of Eden and eventually to the vile conditions under which the world is now living. The Bible account has it that "when the woman (Eve) saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband (Adam) with her; and he did eat". (Genesis 3:6) Consequently, man lapsed from perfection into sin with the result that all mankind were conceived and born in sin. David, a prophet of God declared, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me."- Psalm 51:5.

St. Paul gave an insight into the hold which the sinful nature of man has on him when, in his epistle to the Roman believers, he stated: "For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do..." – Romans 7:14-23.

There is thus the conflict between the Christian's inclination to do right and the strong urge to sin. A person may want to do what is right but the negative drives in him, hinder intended behaviour. But a person who finds that he has the tendency to do things contrary to his judgement, prevailing inclination or established conduct should not just give in to such conduct on the ground that "we are all sinners". Rather, he should with prayer to God determine not to give in so as to be freed from those vices lest he becomes a willing tool of the devil. Indeed, any

vice that is not resisted but is nurtured or cultivated will, over time, become a habitual characteristic and the person

will become enslaved by or addicted to it. St. Paul stated: "Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?" – Romans 6:16

In this computer age of "spatial proximity and social distance" – when people are increasingly distant from one another though they live physically close to each other, a number of situations have arisen which tempt people to cultivate negative or unwholesome desires. These include boredom, which creates a hankering for novelty, excitement, change; loneliness which makes one feel unwanted, unloved, ignored, neglected and unappreciated; depression which creates emptiness, sadness, helplessness, and feeling of uselessness. Other factors which also affect the ability to control oneself include rage, hatred, spitefulness, wealth, education, beauty and power. Compare Jeremiah 9:23, 24; Psalm 147:10, 11.

Some Other Vices

To better appreciate the issue of self control, it would be useful to x-ray some other vices which pose great dangers to man's physical and most importantly, spiritual well-being. These vices include gluttony, which the Oxford Dictionary defines as "the habitual greed or excess in eating and drinking; inordinate and uncontrolled desire for food". When some people see food, even at public functions, they lose all sense of decorum or even shame in the way they rush at it. They are unable to control their appetite for eating. A newspaper report about Britain's "fattest family" described them as a "greedy family whose hobby was eating". The family of five were said to be "scoffing junk food and sugar around the clock" which left them weighing a "collective 100 stones". (635 kg) The report, carried in the London Daily Express of Wednesday October 20, 2004, at pages 6 and 7 said they "often woke up in the middle of the night and ate a full meal before going back to bed". Between meals the family would eat 48 cakes and 24 doughnuts, washed down with 36 cans of Coke. Feeding alone cost them £300 a week, "not including trips to restaurants". They only trimmed down when a nutritionist warned they were eating 50 times more sugar than the average family, "that they were eating themselves to death, and that just one more stone in weight could kill them".

It should be understood therefore why the prophet Solomon advised: "Hast thou found honey? eat so much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith, and vomit it." (Proverbs 25:16) It is not the quantity of food eaten that makes man happy, contented and healthy but knowledge of and faith in God and His blessings on the individual worshipper. Moses told the children of Israel in those days that "man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live". – Deuteronomy 8:3; see also Matthew 4:3,4.

Drunkenness is also significant in the issue of self-control. Because of drunkenness many men and women have suffered economic hardship, sustained injuries or even had their lives cut short through accidents. There was the report of an Australian, Wayne Griffin who, having drunk himself into unconsciousness was picked up by three pranksters who dumped him in an industrial bin where a compactor vehicle picked him up later. As the machine went to work grinding what it had collected, the man woke up from his stupor and started shouting and banging the sides of the vehicle but the driver could not see him or hear him. He would have been killed but for the fact that the driver had cause to come out to put something right at the back of the vehicle. It was then he saw the drunkard and took him to hospital. By then he had already suffered injuries to his arms and ribs. – The Times (of London) September 29, 2005, page 34.

The Bible warns: "Be not among winebibbers; among riotous eaters of flesh: For the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty: and drowsiness shall clothe a man with rags..." Knowing

that many are enticed by the colour and aroma of alcohol, the Bible further admonishes: "Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder..." – Proverbs 23:20, 29-32 Another important area where self-control is needed is sexual drive. It is important for men and women to be able to manage their sexual impulses. Man is made higher than the animals and so is not ruled by instinct. (Job 35:11; Psalm 49:12, 20) Truly, the inability to control this most basic of human desires, has given many a man heart-aches. But for laxity in sexual morality, there would not have been so many cases of rape, sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV/AIDS), divorces, single parenthood, etc. Faced with the AIDS pandemic which is taking millions of lives a year, an increasing number of authorities have now come to accept abstinence as the best way of preventing the disease which some have dubbed the "insurmountable scourge". This is as it should be. The thrust of the fight against AIDS should be abstinence and not the use of condoms which only promotes sexual promiscuity for which God will punish this sinful world. (Ephesians 5:3-5; 1 Corinthians 6:9,10) But some are wondering how abstinence could be possible in this age of "bizarre dressing and fashion". While we condemn erotic dressing and anything that excites to sexual lusts, it should be pointed out that both men and women have to practice self-control in order not to fall prey to the wiles of the devil.- Matthew 5:27-30.

Then there is the matter of the use of the tongue. It is vital to exercise restraint over what one says. Apostles James said: "If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body" while our Lord Jesus Christ warned: "For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned". (James 3:2; Matthew 12:37) Indeed, "death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof". (Proverbs 18:21) David, the sweet Psalmist of Israel, having this understanding prayed: "Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips." (Psalm 141:3) Many interpersonal conflicts and even wars have been caused by wrong use of words. Hence Apostle James added: "If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridled not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain." – James 1:26. See also Proverbs 13:3; Ephesians 6:11. What of Wrath? This is "intense anger or indignation; a fit or manifestation of such feeling". The Bible says that he who "hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls" and that "the discretion of a man deferreth his anger; and it is his glory to pass over a transgression". (Proverbs 25:28; 16:32; 19:11) A Christian should have control over himself even when he is angry. It is generally said that: "prove that you can control yourself and you are an educated man; without this, all other education is good for nothing." It could therefore be understood why St. Paul advised: "Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: Neither give place to the devil." (Ephesians 4:26,27) It was due to wrath that two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, much to the displeasure of their father Jacob, slew all the males of Shalem, a city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan when Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, defiled Dinah their sister. (Genesis 34:18; 34) The event served as a reference point for Jacob when he was blessing his children and His parting words to the two-some were not complimentary. – Genesis 49:5-7.

David twice showed great example of self-control when he refused to kill Saul, who had been seeking his life, when he found him and his lieutenants sleeping. (1 Samuel 26:8,9; see also 24:1-22) In all things one should "be slow to wrath" knowing that "the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God."- James 1:19,20.

Another vice afflicting many people today is the get-rich-quick-syndrome. It is not a sin to be rich, for "The blessing of the LORD, it maketh rich, and he addeth no sorrow with it". (Proverbs 10:22) Each and every one of us should therefore be contented with what God has blessed us with as it is written: "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith

content.” (1 Timothy 6:6-8. See also Matthew 6:25-34) But it is wrong to love money and to crave for wealth at all costs. The Bible says, “He that hasteth to be rich hath an evil eye, and considereth not that poverty shall come upon him”. (Proverbs 28:22) St. Paul warned that “the rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition”. (1 Timothy 6:9,10-12,17) Those materially endowed should resist vain pleasures and instead use their wealth for the service of God and humanity.

Several other vices which people indulge in due to lack of self-control are listed by St. Paul in Galatians 5:19-21 thus: “Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” See also 1 Corinthians 6:9,10.

Admonition

The Scriptures say we must examine ourselves at all times. (2 Corinthians 13:5,6) We must seriously search our hearts whether we actually have self-control and if not, we should examine the reasons for our lack of self-control by carefully questioning and critically assessing ourselves. Some of our traits may initially be seen as positive, their enthralling power may have a relatively weak initial pull for us, but once we are absorbed, it takes hold. It is by recognizing their negative, long term consequences and disapproving of the destructive aspects of the traits, we can reduce, if not eliminate these “blocks”, which St. Paul called “the sin which doth so easily beset us” in order to achieve our more important life goals.- Hebrews 12:1-3.

Those who give free rein to their bodily impulses and do not want to mend their ways do not like exhortations on self control. An instance of this happened when St. Paul was addressing Governor Felix, a man who was said to have ruled “with a mixture of cruelty, lust, and servility” who “thought himself at liberty to commit every sort of crime with impunity”. The record in Acts of Apostles chapter 24 verse 25 has it that as St. Paul’s “discourse turned to questions of morals, self-control, and the coming judgement, Felix became alarmed and exclaimed, That will do for the present; when I find it convenient I will send for you again”. (*New English Bible*) The discomfiture of Governor Felix was because the truth was at odds with his immoral life style which he did not want to amend. This should not be the case with true Christians.

To achieve mastery over one’s impulses, one must have the knowledge of God. (Job 23:12; Proverbs 6:23) This enables one to know what the will of God is concerning His worshippers. (Ephesians 5:17) Then one should exercise strong faith in what he has read. (1 Corinthians 15:1,2; Hebrews 2:1) Strong faith in God is required for one to put in the effort and time needed to tame what may seem to be the “uncontrollables” and “unchangeables” in one’s life and prove that one is rational, realistic and healthy in his thinking, emotions and actions. David prayed “Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.” (Psalm 51:2) In Isaiah 1:16-17 God Almighty declared: “Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well...” It is with the help of God one can turn his back on sin, hence the Bible says that “it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps”. (Jeremiah 10:23) One must attune himself to the laws of God by insisting on what is right and praying to God for strength to keep to it always. St. James said: “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”- James 4:7

To achieve self-control it is also helpful to talk to a supportive person. Counselling by a knowledgeable, God fearing person could go a long way in easing the burden of one’s emotional

torments, thus facilitating the process of achieving self-control. The Bible says that in the "multitude of counsellors there is safety." – Proverbs 24:6;15:22.

Also, it is important to avoid environments or persons that trigger or encourage compulsive behaviours. It would be careless and even foolish for one to say he cannot break a habit or to blame God in any way if he continues to relate with persons or places that will lure him back to sin. Apostle James declared: "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death." (James 1:13-15) Ahab did not have the heart to kill Naboth nor had Amnon the boldness to rape his sister but for the negative influence of Jezebel and Jonadab respectively. – 1 Kings 21:1-19; 2 Samuel 13:1-33;

Truly has the Bible admonished, "Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners". (1 Corinthians 15:33) Moreover the Prophet Solomon stated: "Forsake the foolish, and live; and go in the way of understanding" (Proverbs 9:6) and that "if sinners entice thee, consent thou not". (Proverbs 1:10) The Bible also states: "He that walketh with wise men shall be wise: but a companion of fools shall be destroyed". – Proverbs 13:20.

Seeking the interest of others by getting immersed in positive activities such as church work, community projects, counselling and recreational activities, helps one to replace the negative behaviour with positive ones, takes him away from the situations that trigger unwholesome behaviour and serves as antidote when temptations threaten. (See Philippians 2:1-5). One needs to constantly ask himself this question, "Am I making full use of my time right now?" Ephesians 5:16.

The realization that lack of self-control leads to vanity, vexation of spirit and death should spur one to keep working on oneself to overcome his areas of weakness. But those who scorn and refuse to change will regret in the end.- Proverbs 9:12; Ephesians 5:6.

Many people, including professed Christians, have found themselves living virtually all their adult lives under great stress because of the struggle to secure themselves against future calamity, such as poverty, disease and death. However despite all their efforts, they instead end up being captive to greater anxiety and ill-health. The Bible says: "Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus". – Philippians 4: 5-7.

Blessings

Blessings abound from the ability to control oneself. These include peace of mind, clear conscience, good health, respect of godly people, happy married life, etc. Such a one will be prosperous and wise and live a longer, more satisfying life and be saved in God's Kingdom by His grace. Elihu, one of Job's friends declared: "Then he sheweth them their work, and their transgressions that they have exceeded. He openeth also their ear to discipline, and commandeth that they return from iniquity. If they obey and serve him, they shall spend their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasures. But if they obey not, they shall perish by the sword, and they shall die without knowledge". – Job 36:9-12.

We should learn to exercise self-control and look to God always. He has promised He will always be with us and not fail us. St. Paul exhorted: "Stay away from the love of money; be satisfied with what you have. For God has said, I will never, never fail you nor forsake you. That is why we can say without any doubt or fear, 'The Lord is my Helper and I am not afraid of anything that mere man can do to me' "- Hebrews 13:5, 6 (*Living Bible*)