

Things to Add to Faith: SELF-CONTROL

Around 52 A.D., there was a Roman governor in Judea by the name of Antonius Felix. His friends just called him “Felix” for short. It was a Latin name meaning “happy”, but Felix was anything but a happy guy. In fact, historians of the time describe Felix as a very cruel, brutal and corrupt politician who did not hesitate to use murderous assassins to achieve his desired goals, including the murder of a high priest named Jonathan.¹ And then one day, the Apostle Paul was brought to trial before him on trumped up charges. Felix heard Paul out on his defense but deferred making any decision in the case because he actually wanted to solicit a bribe from Paul to force him to purchase his freedom. Paul, of course, wasn’t interested adding to Felix’s corruption by paying any bribe, but he did take the opportunity to witness to Felix. We get an important bit of Paul’s discussions with Felix in Acts Chapter 24 which tells us: ²⁵ “As he [Paul] reasoned with them [referring to Felix and his wife] about righteousness and **SELF-CONTROL** and the coming day of judgment, Felix became frightened. ‘Go away for now,’ he replied. ‘When it is more convenient, I’ll call for you again.’” Acts 24:25 (NLT2)

Now you have to ask yourself what was it that Paul said that frightened Felix so? Well, we can certainly assume that if Paul told Felix anything at all about righteousness—i.e. about being right with God—he must have informed Felix that he needed to repent and have faith in Jesus Christ. And it appears that Paul must have ended the discussion by letting Felix know that without faith in Jesus, Felix would go to the final judgment and stand condemned to Hell. Those were the bookends of Paul’s discussion—righteousness on one end, and judgment on the other. And those two things must have frightened Felix because he knew that his life was totally devoid of any faith, so he was afraid that Paul was right and that a judgment of damnation awaited him. But as frightening as those thoughts were, what really terrified Felix was that middle part of Paul’s discussion—that part of Paul’s presentation dealing with what connected faith to salvation—something that Paul referred to as “**self-control**.” Apparently this part of the discussion scared Felix to death. Now why was that?

Well, since Paul talked about “**self-control**”, he likely expressed to Felix the same concept that the Apostle Peter would one day write about. It’s that verse from 2nd Peter that we’ve been thinking about the past two Sundays—the one that reads, in part: ⁵ “[M]ake every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶ and to knowledge, **SELF-CONTROL** . . .” 2 Peter 1:5-6 (NIV) And what Paul and Peter were pointing to was a real problem for Felix. You see, what concerned Felix was that if salvation depended on faith, and faith depended on self-control, then he was up the Jordan River

without a paddle because self-control was something that he was sorely lacking—particularly the kind of self-control that both Peter and Paul are talking about.

The only kind of “*self-control*” that Felix practiced was the kind that the world around him promoted. Greco-Roman philosophers loved to teach a worldly brand of self-control that prized the human ability to act entirely upon one’s own free will—in other words, do what you think is best and don’t be constrained by any morality but your own.² This corrupted form of self-control has been touted in various ways both before and after Felix came along. For instance, long before Felix or the Roman Empire existed, the Book of Judges, describes the *out-of-control* state of the people of Israel who failed to acknowledge God as king, and as a result, “everyone did as he saw fit” in their own eyes.³ And this morally depraved view has continued right on after Felix ever since. For example, William Shakespeare came up with a line that the world has since twisted over time, far from its original meaning, to promote this degraded form of self-control. In Shakespeare’s famous play, Hamlet, we find this line: “*To thine own self be true.*”⁴ Boy does our society love that one! But people today give this line a new spin and put it in a less flowery way. And, who better to do that than the flower children of yesteryear—those hippy generations who proclaimed, “*Do you your own thing, baby!*” Their children and grand-children have made that their life’s motto ever since. For people like Felix, whether living during the Roman Empire or in 21st century America, “*self-control*” means nothing more than living their lives totally out of control.

But, Peter and Paul were speaking of a radically different kind of “*self-control*”—one that is the polar opposite of the kind practiced by the world. The Greek word that they used for *self-control* was ἐγκράτεια (eng-krat'-i-ah). It is word describing the virtue of anyone who masters their passionate desires—taming those desires that tend to put them upon wicked and self-destructive paths.⁵ And once those worldly passions are held in check, your faith is given a chance to grow. But, this *faith-connected self-control* is not something that you can develop all by yourself. You can’t go into Barnes and Nobles and go to the self-help section and pull out a book that tells you how you can develop this biblical kind of self-control. The only Book that will do you any good is this one [*holding up the Bible*]. And yet the Bible doesn’t tell how you can develop self-control. It is not a question of “how YOU can do anything.” Rather, it is a question of “from WHOM” you can gain self-control. And the sole, exclusive source of *Christian self-control* is the *Holy Spirit*—you can’t get it anywhere else. In Paul’s letter to the Church in Galatia, he lists many things that *come from the Holy Spirit* as a gift that cannot be earned—one of those things that is so essential to the healthiness of our faith is *self-control*. Paul starts out talking about all those “out-of-control” desires that emerge from the sinful natures of those who have no *faith-*

based self-control. Paul writes: ¹⁹ “When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God. ²² But the **HOLY SPIRIT PRODUCES** this kind of fruit in our lives: [and listen to what’s among that fruit] love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and [last but not least] **SELF-CONTROL.**” Then Paul continues by explaining: ²⁴ “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature [their worldly “out-of-control nature] to His Cross and crucified them there. ²⁵ Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit’s leading in every part of our lives.” Galatians 5:19-25 (NLT2)

When a Christian allows the Holy Spirit access to his or her heart, the Spirit brings with it the **gift of self-control** which enables a believer to avoid falling prey to the temptations of this life.⁶ Now while you can’t obtain **self-control** except through the Holy Spirit, **you can do something** that allows the Holy Spirit to plant that gift in your heart. You can **position yourself** to better receive that gift. And when you position yourself to receive the gift of **self-control**, the whole **center of gravity** of your life will shift as **self-control** becomes part and parcel of your total make-up. Let me explain by using Felix’s life as an example. There were many things in the life of Felix that pulled him away from accepting Paul’s message of the grace that offers salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. But, greed, anger and a murderous heart defined Felix’s character. Yet, it does not appear that he ever tried to position himself away from those things that reinforced these character flaws. A greedy person doesn’t have any encouragement to abandon greed if they house themselves away in their wealth and luxury, never venturing out to see the needs of the poor and less fortunate all around them. And that is where Felix positioned himself—there within the walls of his palace with a blind eye to the needs of others. And you don’t get rid of anger by hanging around angry people. Yet, Felix surrounded himself with assassins and brutal people, and their harsh and wicked attitudes toward life only encouraged his own wicked ways to continue to flourish. And I am sure that Felix thought that he was a very intelligent and enlightened government official. Yet, he apparently was never intelligent enough to appreciate the need for the **self-control** that Paul tried to explain to him. And that shows us that self-control is so much more important than raw intelligence.

Richard Nisbett is a social psychology professor at the University of Michigan and deemed by many to be the foremost authority on **“intelligence”** in the world. According to Nisbett, self-control is the key to a well-functioning life. In one of his forum discussions, he indicated that the human brain is

easily susceptible to all sorts of influences. Watching a violent movie or TV show, playing video games filled with profanity and bloodshed, reading a novel that promotes illicit sex or is totally insensitive to the sanctity of life—all these things influence our brains in an adverse manner that predisposes us to act immorally as well. Nisbett indicated that simply listening to violent and angry discussions of others can make us more inclined to behave violently. Professor Nisbett really put things into perspective when he concluded by saying that **“he'd rather have his son be high in self-control than intelligence.”**⁷ Too bad that it's taken so long for our educational elites to realize a simple message that Paul and Peter taught 2,000 years ago. Position yourselves away from these negative things that only reinforce anger, violence and immorality. That's why the very first verse of the book of Psalms begins with that crucial advice: “Blessed is the man who does not WALK IN the counsel of the wicked or STAND IN the way of sinners or SIT IN the seat of mockers.” Psalm 1:1 (NIV) If you find that the people and things that you are exposing yourself to exhibit characteristics that are opposed to the things that God wants for you, then it's time to **re-position yourself** away from them in order that you can begin to gain that **self-control** that the Holy Spirit yearns to give to you.

Now if you have the courage to do that, then you will begin to experience that **shift in gravity** within your life. You will start to completely **re-prioritize** the things in your life—putting them in a whole different order. Specifically, **Christian self-control** means putting yourself last and putting Jesus first. It also means putting others ahead of yourself. When you put Jesus first, your fellow-man second and yourself last, there is a radical shift in your **life's center of gravity**. Before that shift comes about, people are essentially **self-centered**. They have the tendency to feed upon all their desires—even to the expense of those around them. Their lives are marked by greed as they continually take much more than they ever give. They continually allow their emotions to go unbridled—anger, contempt, conceit and jealousy dominate the way that they react to circumstances and to other people. The problem is that when your life is **self-centered**, you tend to deny yourself nothing—the satisfaction of physical pleasures becomes your drive in life. You will readily feed your addictions to satisfy you **self-centered cravings**: Smoking—both cigarettes and pot—alcohol, drugs from prescription opioids to coke to meth to heroine, whatever, over-eating, pornography, sexual indulgences of every kind—your life will be dedicated to the pursuit of these worldly things. You will deny yourself nothing, until in the end you will be nothing at all—as your soul shrinks while these demons grow until finality there is nothing left of you but the ashes of a self-centered and self-destructive fool.

But, it does not have to be that way. Rather than adopting a self-centered lifestyle, you are offered a **Christ-centered alternative** that is truly amazing. So how do you turn from a destructive

lifestyle that leads to eternal death and come to this **Christ-centered** one that leads to eternal life? Well, it's all about what we've been talking about these past few Sundays—you have to come to faith. And the self-centered person's faith will never grow until they shift their base of gravity from themselves to Jesus Christ. The only way to begin doing that is to accept that **gift of self-control** that Peter wrote about in his letter and what Paul tried to tell Felix about. But to accept that gift, you not only need to reposition yourself away from wickedness, you need to also surrender something. So what is that? Well, this may sound counterintuitive, but **you can only start taking on self-control by surrendering control.** Now you might think that if you surrender control of your life, things might go out of control. Yes—that's true if you allow Satan to take control—then you'll be like a ship without a rudder in a hurricane or a plane in a 700 m.p.h. nose-dive headed straight for a crash. But, if you surrender control of your life to Jesus, wonderful things will begin to happen.

Take for example the life of Louis Zamperini who became a war hero for surviving 47 days in a life raft after his B-24 bomber was shot down in the Pacific. He was captured by the Japanese and endured horrible conditions and torture while being held as a POW. Recently, his story has been recounted in Laura Hillenbrand's book entitled, *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* followed up by two hit movies. But it was only the second of these movies that dealt with the very difficult struggles that Zamperini experienced after he came back to his civilian life as a hero here in the United States. The Book of Proverbs described Zamperini's life to a tee stating: "A person without self-control is like a city with broken-down walls." Proverbs 25:28 (NLT2) And Louis Zamperini's walls were thoroughly broken as he struggled with frequent flash-backs and nightmares involving his horrible experiences as a P.O.W. in those Japanese prison camps, coupled with his battle against alcoholism.

Now bear in mind that prior to WWII, Louis actually competed in the 1938 Olympics—and it's fairly safe to say that Olympic athletes typically have a great deal of discipline and self-control. And yet the kind of self-control that Louis had as an athlete wasn't enough to help him out of the darkness that he found himself in. The problem was that he still didn't have that self-control that the Holy Spirit provides. He didn't have it, that is, until his wife finally convinced him to attend a Billy Graham Crusade in Los Angeles. Now, after the first night, Louis was so upset by what Billy Graham preached about sin, the need for repentance and forgiveness that he refused to return the next night. But, after his wife continued to plead with him, he finally relented and went to the second Crusade meeting. And after again hearing Billy Graham preach the Gospel of repentance and forgiveness, Louis Zamperini finally surrendered his self-control to the control of Jesus Christ. And the control that his WWII related

nightmares had over him dissipated. And he re-positioned himself *vis á vis* his alcoholism. How did he do that? Well, that very same night that he was saved, he poured all his bottles of alcohol right down the drain. Louis Zamperini came to faith and let that faith grow by accepting that **life-saving self-control that only God can give**. Eventually, he even came to forgive all the Japanese prison guards and the camp commandant who had tortured him without mercy. That is what the **self-control** of the Holy Spirit allows to happen in someone's life when Jesus is in control.

And so who will you choose to be like—someone like Felix, or someone like Louis Zamperini? Will you choose man's self-control, which is out of control? Or, will you opt for that **self-control of the Holy Spirit** which opens your faith up to the maturity that God wants for you? Which do you have now? Which one do you want? One keeps you trapped and wedded to the things of the world, and separates you from God. But, the other changes you into something pleasing to God. Paul compares the sinful nature of one versus the holy nature of the other when he tells us: ⁵ "Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things [i.e., they are "controlled" by them], but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. ⁶ So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace. ⁷ For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God's laws, and it never will." Romans 8:5-7 (NLT2) And the same goes for you as well. Will you give control to the One who controls your eternal destiny? Whatever you do, don't put that decision off like Felix did when he told Paul, in effect, **"I'll get back to you at a more convenient time?"** For so many, the problem is that convenient time never seems to come. Don't allow that to happen to you.

Let us pray.

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¹ Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England, ed., *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), s.v. "FELIX," WORDsearch CROSS e-book. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *Volume Two: E-J*, (Chicago, IL: Howard-Severance Company, 1915; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "FELIX".

² Douglas Moo, *2 Peter and Jude: From biblical text...to contemporary life*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 45.

³ Judges 21:25 (NIV) In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit. Or, Judges 21:25 (ESV) In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

⁴ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene III, lines 78-82, the words of the character, Polonius.

⁵ James Strong, *Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary*, (Austin, TX: WORDsearch Corp., 2007), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "1466". See also: Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon.

⁶ Id., Douglas Moo, 45.

⁷ Larry Greenemeier, "What Causes Someone to Act on Violent Impulses and Commit Murder?" www.scientificamerican.com, (1-12-11); submitted by Jerry De Luca, Montreal West. PreachingToday.com.