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“I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Self-Discipline

Central Truth: The Christian controls himself for Christ’s sake.

L240. Date: December 1990. **Text:** I Corinthians 9:19-27; Galatians 2:20.
Topic: Discipline: Of Oneself; Self-Control; Temperance.

“Giving all diligence, add . . . temperance” (II Peter 1:5, 6).

A little girl was crying. Suddenly she stopped. Her mother, surprised at how suddenly the cries stopped, asked, “How did you stop so quickly?” The child replied, “I told myself to stop and I can make me obey me.

That is an excellent illustration of the grace of self-discipline. It involves telling yourself to do something and making yourself do it.

Peter uses an interesting word in the Greek text when he writes, *“Giving all diligence, add . . . temperance.”* That word temperance (Greek, *egkrateia*) is a form of the Greek word for strength (*kratos*). Do you see the stem *krat* in each of those words? To exercise temperance means to have strength, particularly the strength of self-control.

To recognize God as our Father requires us to submit to Him as children. To recognize Jesus as our Lord requires us to submit to Him as servants. To recognize the Holy Spirit as our Guide requires us to submit to Him as followers. Every relationship that we have with God requires the exercise of self-control.

Self-control is not easy. It is humbling and demanding, but it is also rewarding. You are not alone in your personal discipline. God enables you to live as the victor over self.

I. THE GRACE OF SELF-DISCIPLINE

“Though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more” (I Corinthians 9:19).

There is a beautiful expression of grace in the Christian. By position he is *“free from all men”* and so not bound by obligation to anyone. Yet by choice he has made himself *“servant unto all”* and willing to do anything to meet their needs. His goal is to *“gain”* (lead to Christ) as many as possible. To a people who have no claim on him the Christian makes himself a willing servant that he might lead them to faith in Jesus. There is the element of grace in self-discipline.

It takes grace on your part to visit someone in need when you are tired or would prefer to do other things. It takes grace for you to risk possible embarrassment to witness for Christ to one who is an unbeliever or in rebellion against Him. It takes grace for you to refuse to engage in the sinful activities of your peers because you wish to maintain your Christian witness before them.

Look for ways to exercise the grace of self-discipline in your life so that your work and witness for your Lord will be enhanced.

II. THE DESIGN OF SELF-DISCIPLINE

Be sure you understand I Corinthians 9:20-22, lest you misunderstand it! Upon casual reading it sounds as if Paul recommends that we let down all barriers and *“when in Rome do as the Romans do.”* Not so! The point of emphasis is not on compromising the truth. It is rather on how to reach people where they are.

Romans 14:1 teaches us to receive the weak person but not to argue with him over doubtful issues. Romans 15:1 says that we who are strong should bear the infirmities of those who are weak. We must be willing to minister to any person. .

Paul would witness to the Jews. He would witness to the Gentiles who were proselytes of Judaism and were considered to be under the law of Moses (verse 20). He would witness to the heathen who did not recognize the law of the true God who has spoken in Holy Scripture, always living under God's law as he did so (verse 21). To those who had overscrupulous standards, he ministered in consideration of their opinions. Whatever a person was like, Paul sought to find a common ground with him in order to present the gospel to him.

Jesus did the same. He talked with the woman of Sychar about the water from Jacob's well before He spoke to her about the Water of Life

(John 4). That is a good pattern for us to follow today.

There is a warning in the text for us. We must reject no person because his race, culture, religious background, or personal lifestyle is different from ours. We must become "*all things to all men*" if we would take the gospel to every person in the whole world as Jesus commanded (verse 22). Are we willing to discipline our preferences and prejudices in order to be witnesses for our Lord? We must, if we would be obedient.

Paul does not seek mere social integration. That can be done through political means even without the gospel messenger. The self-discipline required of Christians is always "*for the gospel's sake*" that we might share it with other people (verse 23).

III. THE DEMONSTRATION OF SELF-DISCIPLINE

The apostle Paul must have loved sports. He has many athletic metaphors in his writings, one of which is in I Corinthians 9:24-27. He refers to running a race (verse 24) and boxing in the ring (verse 26). The athletic metaphor is an excellent demonstration of and a challenge to Christian self-discipline. The professional athletes put most Christians to shame in their devotion to their game. "*They do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible*" (verse 25).

Three principles are stated in this passage. They are as applicable to Christians as to athletes.

First, aim for victory (verse 24). Many may run in a race, but only one receives first prize. Be content with nothing less than first place. The Christian does not do it for personal honor, but for his Lord who deserves the best. How tragic it is for one to be content that he is saved and to coast from conversion to his translation to heaven. Be the best you can become for the Lord.

Second, practice strict discipline (verse 25). That is what the athlete does. His strict training requires rigid self-control. He watches his diet, his sleeping habits, his practice time, and studies diligently the rules of the game. How can a Christian do any less for his blessed Lord? The curse of our churches today is the carelessness in the lives of many members. Discipline is demanded of the disciple.

Third, have a clear goal. The runners have a track to follow. The boxer has a ring in which to face his opponent. Otherwise, the racers would be running in different directions and the boxer would be swinging at the air as if he were shadowboxing. Who would win such a contest?

Fight to win. Have a goal in mind. Move continually toward that goal

— the glory of God in your daily life as a Christian. Be content with nothing less.

IV. THE DYNAMICS OF SELF-DISCIPLINE

Is the demand too great? Do you find yourself doubting your capacity to discipline yourself as God requires? Do not despair. There is an answer to your problem in Galatians 2:20.

Two great issues must become real to each Christian. (1) I have been put to death in the crucifixion of Christ and have been raised up again in the resurrection of Christ. I may not understand how that is true, but the Bible says it and I must accept it by faith and live by it in practice.

(2) The life I now live in my fleshly body is not truly my life at all, but the life of Christ who lives in me. So when I think of discipline and dedication of life, I am thinking of the Christ-life which I live now that I am a Christian.

Jesus disciplined himself in the will of God. His cry in Gethsemane for the cup to pass from Him, nevertheless for God's will and not His own to be done, indicates that He would have preferred not to drink that cup of suffering. Yet, He denied (disciplined) himself and went to the cross on our behalf.

His disciplined life is now being lived in you. You can yield to God as He did. And you can know the victory now as He experienced it then. He requires nothing of you which He does not enable you to do.

Our generation is insisting on its rights. The Christian remembers that he has no right but to do right. The right thing for him to do is to discipline himself to live in the will of God. “*Giving all diligence, add . . . temperance*” (II Peter 1:5, 6).

Questions for discussion

1. How would you define temperance as used in this study?
2. What is the significance of “self” in “self-control”?
3. What does I Corinthians 9:20-22 teach about Christian witnessing?
4. Why is that necessary in view of our worldwide commission?
5. In what areas must the Christian discipline himself?
6. How did Jesus show us an example of self-discipline?
7. In what practical ways can you become a more disciplined person?
8. How will God help you to become more self-disciplined?