

“³ Indeed, we live as humans^[a] but do not wage war according to human standards,^[b] ⁴ for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human,^[c] but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments ⁵ and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ.

Self Control

Today we are looking at self – control. And there is a cosmic joke going on somewhere that I am speaking on this fruit. Mary made a reference to it – nobody wants to talk about self control. My momma in heaven is giggling because she knew the girl who knew what all the Christmas presents were before they were opened. I would have never passed the marshmallow test. Have you heard about that one? In 1970, Stanford researchers did a study on delayed gratification. Children were put in a room with a marshmallow. They were told they could eat the marshmallow whenever they wanted to, but if they waited the entire 15 minutes, they could get two marshmallows or two pretzel sticks. They followed that group of children into adulthood and found those who had delayed gratification were more likely to achieve life goals that the study deemed were necessary for a successful life, such as college degrees, marriage, etc. Follow up studies have since shown flaws in that original study, such as not taking into account economic status or individual life goals – not everyone wants to go to college and get married. In any case, delayed gratification has never been a strong characteristic of mine, got that first social

security check at 62. So, at first, immersing myself in the subject of self control made it glaringly evident all the areas in which struggle with impulse control. The focus on that lack of control began to make me feel guilty, and those thoughts spiraled into not feeling good enough, we talked about that – we are created in the image of God and we are more than good enough. And I found that when I was in the Word, and when I gave my insecurities over to Jesus, I found His middle ground. I was reminded of all the ways I am disciplined, reliable and my strengths in the area of self control through my entire life. For 25 years, I was a successful telecommuter, working most of the time from home and on the road. That took a lot of self control.

So today, I am going to share my insights along the journey and share one thought pattern that the apostle Paul gave us to help develop Biblical self control so that we can stop the toxic stinkin' thinkin' patterns from robbing us of the joy and peace found in abiding in Jesus, when we give our thoughts to Him.

See, the misconception I often struggle with is the fact that I view the fruit of spiritual self-control as being all about me. Seems like it would be – “self” control and all. It's all about how much I can control myself, right?

But the Biblical self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. It's not the fruit of the flesh, spoken about in verse Ephesians 5, vs. 20. “Worshiping false gods, taking part in witchcraft, hating people, causing trouble, being jealous, angry or selfish, causing people to argue and divide into separate groups”. These do not come

from the Holy Spirit, but from our flesh. But self control is listed as fruit of the Holy Spirit. So it doesn't come from us.

And Biblical self control is not willpower. Willpower is what we think of as earthly self control, and it comes from myself. It is the power of my own will. *Self control as a fruit of the Spirit is the evidence of the Holy Spirit of God at work inside an individual.* Self control comes from the Holy Spirit's transformation. It's doesn't come out of our own ability or from our own works. We cannot take credit for self control when it is produced by the Holy Spirit. We must know that God produced it and not us, or we will be unable to give God praise for it. If self control is from our own works, then we will take credit and be praising ourselves.

When we first admit that we cannot do it on our own, we are inadequate, and we pray to Jesus and trust in God promises to supply the power for every good work, we begin to see that being controlled by Christ is true self control. And then God and Jesus get the glory, which as a Christians, is where we find true satisfaction.

There are some personality types with stronger will, and some people who are weaker willed. For me, it is incredibly freeing to realize that Spiritual self control isn't about a human willpower. This is about God's will. My part is to turn to the Spirit and obey it's leading. That is what abiding looks like. Turning to the Spirit for guidance. When I am led by the Spirit, I am not under the law. When I am under the Spirit, I am not doing things in my own power. The Spirit is not going to lead me into selfish

behavior. Never. According to Galatians 5:16-21, if I live under **grace**, under the control of the Spirit of God, I will not be able to live a life habitually controlled by the flesh, producing the works of the flesh – I won't be able to do it.

Biblical Self control is really ego control and by ego, I mean our thoughts, the mind. The real battle is a battle between loving ourselves and our selfish desire, more than loving God and the desire of the Spirit. For example, we look at a typical, outwardly productive person and we conclude that they must have a lot of self-control. Like the person who gets up at 4:30 every morning and goes to the gym for two hours, and then reads the Bible and has prayer time for an hour. Always has a strict diet. Never has a cheat day. They are productive at work. They are not in any debt. You'd say, "This person must have a lot of self-control." But if this person is unable to mess up their strict routine to follow a leading of the Spirit, that's not self-control. It's just a thriving self-life. They are serving only themselves and are a slave to their routine. And their routine is their control. They are living in fear that if they break their routine even once, they will lose complete control. If they cannot give up their own control, then they cannot serve the Spirit. They don't have the freedom to serve the Spirit. And it works the other way around. If you look at a healthy capable adult, who's sitting around and cruising social media, playing video games all day, watching television, not being productive or helping anyone else in any way, again, it's the same thing. It's just a thriving self-life. So, in either case, both individuals have the same root issues. They look very different from the outside, one a couch potato, the

other fit and productive, but is a control freak - the issues are the same. Whether we look outwardly productive in our selfishness or appear lazy, we still need to deal with the selfishness that is dominating our way of life.

Christ is our example in self control - He was without sin Hebrews 4:15, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin." 1 Peter 2:22-23, tells us He committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth, when he was abused he did not return abuse, when he suffered, he did not threaten, but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. This is what abiding in the Spirit looks like. We entrust ourselves to the one who judges justly.

So how do we grow in the character of Christ when it comes to self-control? We manage our emotions by surrendering them to Christ. We release them in healthy, appropriate ways and we abide by using all of the spiritual practices we have discussed this summer - meditation, mindfulness, prayer, and lament. We get help, support, and comfort through Holy Spirit (our Comforter). And we embrace God, who loves us.

Ask God how to walk through what you're facing. Some of us are ready to always stand up and fight, but what if God is saying to exercise self-control by not fighting and to rest in God instead? That's displaying self-control. Others who don't especially like conflict would rather not fight, but what if God is

saying to show self-control by overcoming your vulnerability to help someone else? To be kind in your vulnerability. That's displaying self-control too. Both are listening to the Spirit's guidance. Abiding in the Spirit looks different for everyone because we are all different.

Surrender and self control go hand in hand because we cannot do it in our own power. But we must actively receive the gift of self control from the Spirit. We are not the source, but the gift is not passive. We must surrender and live under control of the Spirit, and we must also act on what the Spirit is telling us.

And that is where our choice comes in – in acting on what the Spirit is telling us.

“We live in this world, but we don't fight our battles in the same way the world does. The weapons we use are not human ones. Our weapons have power from God and can destroy the enemy's strong places. We destroy people's arguments, and we tear down every proud idea that raises itself against the knowledge of God. We also capture every thought and make it give up and obey Christ.”

Self control is allowing our thoughts and actions to be controlled by the Holy Spirit, to be captured and surrendered to Christ. It was a topic we often discussed at our bible studies with incarcerated women. Going on, I am using references to a book we studied called “Get Out of Your Head” by a Biblical teacher named Jennie Allen. Ms. Allen writes

Every Thought Captive-Really?

Take every thought captive? Is this even possible? Because honestly, my thoughts run wild a lot of the time. But my deep dive into the inner workings of the brain confirmed what the Bible says: we can take every thought captive. Not only can our thoughts be changed, but we can be the ones to change them by capturing them. But to capture something requires the effort on our part.

Capturing all our thoughts may seem an impossible task, especially when we consider our potential number of thoughts per minute. Researchers tell us that we have over 30,000 thoughts a day. That means we might think about thirty-one thoughts per waking minute. But what if one thought held the power to interrupt our spirals, our stinkin' thinkin' and bring peace to our mental chaos?

The apostle Paul's own life was a picture of interruption. After the scales fell from his eyes, his mind centered on an entirely new reality. There was no other hope, no other narrative, no other track playing in the background. He stopped the things that had distracted him and let himself focus on one simple thing: "To me to live is Christ," Paul wrote in Philippians 1:21, "and to die is gain" (ESV). It's all—always—about Christ.

Paul experienced a massive shift, and now he was a totally different man. No longer was he a slave to his circumstances or his emotions. Paul now chose to live aware of the power of Christ in him, through him, and for him. Paul now had the

power of the Spirit—the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, and he chose to live aware of and under that power. God built a way for us to escape the downward spiral of our toxic thoughts. But we rarely take it. We have bought the lie that we are victims of our thoughts rather than warriors equipped to fight on the front lines of the battle for our minds.

Learning to capture our thoughts matters. Because how we think shapes how we live.

Lies such as I'm helpless, I'm worthless, I'm unlovable, shape our thinking, our emotions, and the way we respond to the world around us. They trap us in their cycle of distraction, distortion and pain, preventing us from recognizing the truth we should believe. **Most detrimentally, they change how we view God.** Every lie we buy into about ourselves is rooted in what we believe about God.

Let's say I tend to feel worthless and invisible. And let's say I read Ephesians 1 and learn that God because God deeply loves me, chooses me and adopts me. Even if I don't overtly deny the validity of that premise, I still doubt it is true for me. I nod at the truth, but I never fully absorb it and let it shape my identity. Until I stop playing God, deciding who gets and doesn't get forgiveness, including myself, until I throw off the lie that God's love isn't for me, my emotions, decisions, behaviors, and relationships will remain twisted up in the mistaken belief that I'm worthless. Until I stop basing my worth on my own works, I will never be enough because I can't do enough works. I will constantly looking for the 'How', instead of looking at the Way, the Truth and the Life.

When we begin to think about our thoughts, we can stop the downward spiral. We can reset and redirect them. That's our hope. Not that we would wrestle with every fear, but that we would allow God to take up so much space in our thinking that our fears will shrink in comparison. We can ask ourselves – is this thought true? Do I know for sure if it is true?

If our toddler is throwing a fit in the grocery store, we correct him, redirect them—we might take them out of the store. Yet we have allowed our minds to have outright meltdowns with zero correction. We walk around acting as if we have no power over what we think about. And we call them our opinions. We have a right to our opinions.

In Romans 8:5, Paul said that “those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh” and that “those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit” (ESV).

I have read and reread this passage in the past few months, mulling over how life would be if I could truly have a mind that dwells on the Spirit. A mind that is full of life and peace. A mind that consistently thinks about God—who God is and what God wants for me. I so desperately want the “perfect peace” God promises when my mind is fixed on God.

As I've been practicing taking every thought captive, shifting my thoughts has become more disciplined. This is a daily battle! I may not be doing it perfectly, but I have seen significant improvement. When I remember that Jesus is right next to me,

from the moment that I wake up until I lay my head, my thoughts do not race out of control.

Based on Paul's writings long ago to the church in Rome, you and I can learn to mind our minds, to the point that controlling our thoughts becomes reflexive—an automatic, intuitive response.

I want to be so well versed in the patterns of thinking in line with the Spirit that my default is to rely on the Spirit in everything. This is the goal of our deliberate interruptions of our thoughts: we abruptly stop the crazy spirals of our minds. As we practice the art of interruption, we're shifting to a whole new mindset, and with each shift we will find ourselves growing more and more into the mind of Christ.

How we think directly affects how we live. This may sound terrifying, but, in fact, it's exciting. Because while we may not be able to take every thought captive in every situation we face every day, we can learn to ***take one thought captive and, in doing so, affect every other thought to come.*** So, what is the one thought that can successfully interrupt every negative thought pattern? It's this: I have a choice.

When we're spiraling in noise or distractedness, we have a choice to shift our minds back to God through stillness.

When we're isolated, we have a choice to shift our minds back to God through community.

When we're anxious, we have a choice to shift our minds back to God through trust in God's good and sovereign purposes.

When we're cynical, we have a choice to shift our minds back to God through worship.

When we're self-important, we have a choice to shift our minds back to God through humility. No one is indispensable.

When we feel that we are a victim, we have a choice to shift our minds back to God through gratitude for what we have.

When we are complacent, we have a choice to shift our minds back to God through serving God and others.

If you have trusted in Jesus as your Savior, you have a God-given, God-empowered, God-redeemed ability to choose what you think about. You have a choice regarding where you focus your energy. You have a choice regarding what you live for. You are not subject to your behaviors, genes, or circumstances. You are not subject to your passions, lusts, or emotions. You are not subject to your thoughts. You have the ability to ask "Is this thought true? Is it good?"

No fixation exists outside God's long-armed reach. Because we are a "new creation," we have a choice.

When we think new thoughts, we physically alter our brains.

When we think new thoughts, we make healthier neural connections.

When we think new thoughts, we blaze new trails.

When we think new thoughts, everything changes.

God, help us break the cycle of out-of-control thoughts. We want Your truths to invade every decision, every emotion, every thought that we have. God, I choose today to take every thought captive because I know You are more powerful than my

thoughts, my circumstances, and my fears. And we know that the fruit of self control is found when we surrender and give You control of our thoughts. Thank You for making us all new creation so that we can choose You! God, You equip us for this battle against the lies we believe. Help us to never to feel a victim to our thoughts, because You are already victorious! God, set our minds on the things of the Spirit. We set our minds on Your peace. We pray to grow more and more into the mind of Christ!