

Self-Control: Written on the Heart
Bill Miller
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Lectionary: Jeremiah 31:31-34 Luke 18:1-8 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

What do these three lectionary texts have in common? Jeremiah announces a new relationship with God that is not focused on laws, crime and punishment, but rather on internalized principles that are “written on our hearts.” In Luke’s gospel Jesus advises us to persist in prayer and not lose heart, and the letter to Timothy likewise counsels us to be persistent in what God calls us to do.

Taken together, these texts seem to center on self-control, which is described in scripture as an important spiritual virtue. In Proverbs,¹ a person without self-control is said to be “like a city broken into and left without walls,” and Paul² lists self-control as a “fruit of the spirit” alongside love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and gentleness.

So what is this thing called self-control? Some think of it as a personality trait that we either have or lack, but it’s much more complex than that. It is a skill: something that we *do* (or don’t do). The ability to practice self-control develops in the first six years of life, and it happens in four steps.³ First, babies learn to *pay attention* to the external world, discovering that what they do can make a difference in what happens around them. They develop relationships with others. Second, as language emerges children learn to obey verbal commands from their caregivers. When a child reaches toward a hot stove, the parent says in alarm, “Hot! Don’t touch!” and the child pulls away. Third, somewhere around the age of three children begin to internalize these rules and obey them without immediate control from outside. Approaching a hot stove, *the child* says “Hot! Don’t touch,” and draws back. A parent can now say, “Show me how you can do it yourself!” Even in the absence of caregivers, the child is able to follow rules given by others. 1: Pay attention. 2: Obey commands. 3: Internalize rules from others. Then normally around age four to six something really remarkable happens. Children start to take over the directing role themselves. They can formulate a new goal *of their own*, develop a plan, and direct their behavior in order to carry it out. Self-direction has begun, and one’s life and character start to unfold through countless choices. The blissful simple obedience of the Garden of Eden is over, and we begin the lifelong God-given journey of self-control.

Our daily choices in many ways parallel this developmental process. In order to practice self-control we first must *pay attention*, to know that a certain part of what we are doing is relevant and deserves our consideration. There are external statutes from scripture to guide us, that over time and practice we internalize as our own values and standards. But the real challenge is to be proactive and not just reactive. Integrity involves making our values conscious and consistently making choices in accord with these values. Pay attention, draw on external wisdom, internalize values, and make a consciously planned effort to live them with integrity.

That’s quite a tall order. In the Christian tradition we realize that we do not and cannot do this alone. For a Christian, self-control happens not just within oneself, but in relationship to God. The spiritual 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous begins with recognizing our limitations and asking for God’s help. We also hold each other accountable in Christian community. It takes a village to live a life well.

There is fascinating psychological research on self-control.⁴ Most of the time we operate on autopilot unless and until something tells us that there is a need for change, for self-control. When we use it, self-control seems to work like a muscle. The more we exercise it, the stronger it gets. But like a muscle it can also fatigue. When we have to exert effortful self-control over a period of time the muscle gets tired and we are temporarily more susceptible to temptation. It

¹ Proverbs 25:28

² Galatians 5:22-23

³ Kopp, C. B. (1991). Young children's progression to self-regulation. In M. Bullock (Ed.), *Contributions to human development* (Vol. 22: The development of intentional action: Cognitive, motivational, and interactive processes, pp. 38-54).

⁴ For example, Baumeister, Heatherton & Tice, *Losing control: How and why people fail at self-regulation* and A. W. Logue, *Self-control: Waiting until tomorrow for what you want today*.

is no coincidence that the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness came after a long period of fasting, when he might be expected to be most vulnerable.

So far this is more abstract theory than practical. A colleague has quipped that “In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice, but in practice, there is.” How do we actually apply self-control in practice? I will consider briefly three practical examples, three areas in which the Gospel plainly implores us to be diligent: prayer, *agape*, and radical inclusion.

So what about prayer? First, we must *pay attention*. Along with money, prayer was one of the most common subjects of Jesus’s teaching. He taught his disciples how to pray, and practiced what he preached. In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus advises us to pray with urgency and persistence. There is also the puzzling biblical instruction to “pray without ceasing.”⁵ Prayer is one of the most important components of a Christian life, and practicing it is definitely a matter of self-discipline. We may do it at first not because we want to, but because we are told on the highest authority that prayer matters. If we wait until life settles down or we run out of excuses or feel a hunger to pray, it may never happen. In fact the desire to pray comes from doing it. As we pray faithfully, God writes it on our hearts. The people in this congregation whom I think of as “prayer warriors” – the ones I really want praying for me when I’m in trouble – are not somehow more holy with a special “in” to God. Their access to God is simply *because* they do it, they pray faithfully. Praying involves making it a priority, often a planned one, until it becomes second nature.

What about loving? What clearer charge do we have from Jesus and the Gospel than that we must love one another, not just in thought and word, but in truth and action.⁶ Our sentimental affection and compassion do no good for others unless we act on them. Again we need to pay attention! Selfless *agape* loving is one of the most important things we can do in our short lives. It should take priority, but if we wait until we get around to it or feel like acting, we are wasting time. Deacons are not people who just feel love and compassion; they actually do what Christ told us to do. In my own unexpected experience as a deacon, I at last had a practical reason to do the right thing: to visit those who were sick or in prison, to care in practical ways for those who were suffering, to focus away from myself and on the needs and concerns of others. It was my job, and in the process I found that I did not resent spending the time but actually enjoyed it. Practical loving lifted me up. Because I know that I tend to fill up whatever time I have with other “stuff,” I try to be intentional about making commitments to practice *agape*. We have constant choices about how to use the time we have.

A third and final theme that is clear in the teachings and example of Jesus is *radical inclusion*. He went out of his way to spend time with the most marginalized, disempowered, despised and rejected people of his day. He welcomed, spoke to and touched women, children, lepers, fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes and beggars in ways that shocked and scandalized religious authorities. Our society makes it easy never to see our outcasts, never to look them in the eye, to speak to them or learn their names. A neighbor who lives just down the street from us said to me, “There aren’t any really hungry people in Albuquerque.” We are so easily isolated and deceived in our gated neighborhoods, our workplaces, and our churches, speaking only to people from our own socioeconomic class. Martin Luther King observed that the most segregated time of week is on Sunday morning. So first *pay attention*. Go where there are people in need. See them, talk to them, learn their names. Fear is a first obstacle here: that we won’t know what to expect or what to say around people unlike ourselves. But if we are to follow in the footsteps of Jesus we must go out of our way to escape our isolation and form relationships across society’s fences and walls. We do it first perhaps because we are told to on the highest authority, although it is uncomfortable and unaccustomed and even frightening. It is in the doing that we discover our common humanity as children of God, and are further moved to act until doing the right thing is written on our hearts.

In praying, in loving, and in including, our task is to get off of autopilot, to begin actually doing what we know to be the right thing even though we may have a long list of reasons to hold back. It’s not complicated. Just do it! In the doing it becomes easier, comfortable, fulfilling, and second nature, written on our hearts. As children of God we have the constant ability to *choose* whether or not to follow the example and teaching of Jesus. Most of the time it does not happen through great epiphanies, but rather by taking small steps in the right direction. That requires first being awake and paying attention to where we’re going, then obeying the teachings that we trust bit by bit with God’s help until it becomes our nature, a new birth, the blossoming of a Christ nature within us. That is the lifelong journey of self-control.

⁵ 1 Thessalonians 5:17

⁶ 1 John 3:11,18