Self-Control: 
The Battle Against “One More”

by Edward Welch

Solomon must have been an American: “I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure” (Eccl. 2:10). He tried what many Americans would try if they had the means. If there is a continuum that goes from legalistic, restrained, and ascetic, to licentious, reckless and hedonistic, we live in a society that favors the self-indulgent end of the spectrum. When our desires speak, we listen. As such, we live in particular need of learning the skill of self-control.

Think of alcohol and drugs, sex and food, laziness and procrastination. You target a range of struggles that have been common since biblical times. It would seem that each of these calls for self-control. Yet, even though it appears to be the perfect antidote, self-control is not a significant part of our national or even ecclesiastical dialogue. Addicts may feel like they have tried self-control maybe hundreds of times: “Just say No.” In fact, they may have tried it so many times that many of them are persuaded that their vain attempts at self-control are the problem, not the solution. The consensus? “I have to give up control to a higher power.”

Among evangelical Christians, self-control is equally suspect. “Let go and let God” is still a motto by which we live. Our sense is that if change feels like self-effort and hard work, then it is probably legalistic and not animated by the Holy Spirit. Self-control, of course, can feel like hard work. But, given the prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse, Internet pornography, bulimia, and a host of other out-of-control experiences, we would be wise to revisit the biblical teaching on self-control.

What’s the Problem?

Whatever you call it, many people are owned by their desires and reckless indulgence. AA calls it “self-will run riot,” which is a very apt description. Of the Seven Deadly Sins, three—avarice, gluttony, and lust—are devoted to excesses. In fact, sin itself can be summarized as “I WANT” and “I WANT MORE.” Sin is a reckless consumer.

Study any country in the world, and you will find greed embedded in its basic institutions. For example, first-world countries fuel capitalistic economies. One reason capitalism works is that it understands the greediness of the human heart. Societies that use other economic systems encounter the same greediness; it becomes most clearly expressed in the corruption and graft of those who have the power to get more.
Such greed is partner to idolatry. Idolatry expresses a heart that wants more. It says that God is not enough, so it looks for satisfaction in other places. As such, at the heart of idolatry is recklessness, and it is not surprising that runaway desires play a part consistently in false worship. For example, when the Hebrews chose idols, the result was “the people were running wild and...Aaron had let them out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies” (Ex. 32:25).

Idolatry is especially prominent in the Old Testament, but less so in the New Testament. This does not mean that idolatry became less of a problem in more modern times; instead, the Old Testament theme of idolatry passed the baton to the New Testament themes of lust and sinful desire. This is in keeping with the New Testament’s emphasis on the hidden commitments of the heart rather than the external objects of our affection. In this sense, the New Testament is committed to developing the Tenth Commandment, which is the prohibition against coveting.

Notice the sins that are listed in the New Testament: murder, debauchery, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, envy, drunkenness, orgies (Gal. 5:19-21). These are sins of unchecked desires. They say, “I want everything, and I want it now.” Or, more simply, they say, “That was good, let’s do it again.”

Sin Is Pleasurable

A basic though neglected feature of sin is that, to the undisciplined heart, it is enjoyable, at least initially. We sin because we are inclined to sin; we sin because we like to sin. This, of course, is self-evident. Why else would we compulsively do things that can be so destructive to ourselves and others? But you do not hear many people making the simple admission, “The problem is that I enjoy it.” For example, have you ever heard a personal story where someone said, “I sinned because I liked it”? Rarely. In sexual sin, men often try to persuade their spouses that they didn’t like their sin at all. The truth, however, is that, no matter how tragic the consequences of the sin, there is some pleasure in it.

A wise first step would be simply to acknowledge that you said, “That was good, I think I will do it again.” Sin was, and perhaps still is, enjoyable. You liked it. You loved it. Of course, like any relationship, things can be rocky at times, so there is a down side to the relationship. And there may have been times when you said you weren’t going back to it. But it is too easy to forget the bad and remember the good.

What would be the benefit of admitting to the pleasure that accompanies lust? First, it would be honest. To suggest that we hated our addiction, like all lies, has a kernel of truth, but it is a way to avoid shame. For example, who wants to admit that they loved drugs more than they loved their spouse or children? There are limits to what most people are willing to acknowledge. If our affections are not made public, to both ourselves and others, we can deceive ourselves into thinking that it was all just a mistake rather than a passionate relationship.

A second purpose for acknowledging our pleasure in sin is that it stirs us to do battle with out-of-control desires. If we think that we no longer like a certain addiction, there is no reason to be vigilant about it. After all, why would anyone ever go back to something that caused him or her so much pain? It is true that many addicts, when their private addictions are exposed, experience pain, but the pain is more often the result of being caught than a distaste for the actual addictive substances. When personal shame is misinterpreted in this way, addicts have a false sense that they loathe their addictive substance and could never return to it. As a result, walls between addicts and their favorite substances are only imaginary.

Sin’s Pleasures Are Temporary

Reckless indulgence never reveals that its pleasures are, at best, transient. A few wise people willingly make hard choices because they know the pleasure of sin is only for a short season (Heb. 11:25). Others have given themselves to pleasure, but have realized eventually that such pursuits are vain (Eccl. 2). Too many of us, however, have accepted the lie, “Just one more, then I will be satisfied.” The reality is, “one more” may satisfy temporarily, but it also feeds the desire for yet another “one more.”

This phenomenon is captured in one of Scripture’s most frightening passages: “They have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more” (Eph. 4:19). With each indulgence, we paradoxically feel less and less satisfied, while we are persuaded that the object of our desire is the only thing that can fill us.
discussion about cravings, physical dependence, and addictions. It has always been assumed in addictions research that cravings are straightforward chemical events. That is, drugs and alcohol are chemically constituted in such a way that, when habitually used, they create a profound physical dependence that defies resistance. Yet there has always been contrary evidence. For example, many people who stop cold turkey do not experience serious withdrawal and physical cravings. The most frequently cited illustration is the returning veterans from Vietnam, who became addicted in Vietnam but immediately stopped their heroin use when they boarded the plane home. If drugs or alcohol produce a straightforward physical dependence, then no one could be spared. To this observation, we now can add that cravings and dependence are not unique to allegedly addictive substances. Instead, anything that we enjoy, especially if the pleasure is experienced physically, is something we desire to repeat. For example, gambling and pornography do not introduce certain chemicals to the body, but their allure can be experienced just as powerfully as crack cocaine. What happens is that people experience the siren call of sin’s “one more.”

Consider the following proposition: cravings are best understood as spiritual problems. They are not unique to certain types of drugs. This is not to deny that cravings may involve physical features, because the “one more” of sin is often experienced as a strong physical desire. Yet the primary problem is that addicts have given themselves over to sensuality, and such self-indulgence is always associated with cravings for more, whether the drug of choice is cocaine or a soap opera. Sin itself is a craving that, when fed, leads to further craving and tolerance. It cries, “Give! Give!” but it never says, “Enough!” (Prov. 30:15, 16).

**Satan knows sin and he has well-tested strategies to persuade us that sin is really not that bad and God is really not that good.**

Satan Appeals to Our Desires

As if our own insatiable desires were not enough, Satan comes alongside these ungodly passions and intensifies them. Notice how he waited for Jesus in the desert until Jesus was weak, tired, and hungry (Matt. 4:1-11). Of course, Satan underestimated Jesus, not knowing that He was sinless and had mastered the skill of seeking the glory of the Father over self-indulgence, but Satan’s strategies of attacking perceived areas of weakness were all too apparent. Indeed, Satan waits for times when he thinks we are more vulnerable. He is the tempter. He appeals to our sinful desires, as he did even in the garden, and suggests that they are good rather than evil. He might even suggest that we need the thing desired, and how could it be right for us to be kept from something that we need?

The especially frightening thing about Satan is that he is an expert in sin. He knows its every move. He knows what it craves and what it abhors. As a result, Satan can tempt us with things that seem uniquely attractive. For example, if, on Saturday afternoon, you were doing some important preparation for a Sunday School class and a good friend came along and asked you to go window shopping at a run-down thrift store, you might easily say that, although you appreciate the invitation, you are very busy with something more important. However, if that same friend came by and tempted you with something you actually enjoyed—really enjoyed—then it would be easy to postpone the preparation.

Satan knows sin and he has well-tested strategies to persuade us that sin is really not that bad and God is really not that good. Ever the opportunist, he comes rushing in when the imaginations of our minds set themselves on the created thing rather than the Creator.

**What is Self-Control?**

In this context, self-control begins to stand out as a great blessing rather than a legalistic burden. It stands against the lies of our own hearts as well as those of Satan and keeps us on the level path that leads to life. It can be described, defined, and qualified in a number of ways.

**Self-Control Means Living within Boundaries**

Human beings resist boundaries. Ever since sin entered the world, we have considered boundaries to be violations of our personal freedoms—curses rather than blessings. Scripture, however, reveals that it is our lack of personal boundaries that enslaves us. “Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control.” (Prov. 25:28).

In biblical times, a city without walls was unthinkable. It would be the height of foolishness because it invited destruction. Any band of robbers or a neighboring country could take the city at will, guaranteeing suffering for the entire community. Only strong walls could bring a peaceful night’s sleep. Similarly, undisc-
plined addicts are like defenseless cities with marauders going in and out. The only wise alternative is, with all haste and diligence, to rebuild the walls that protect us from our favorite idols.

This might mean eating in public if you struggle with food, having passwords for internet accounts that must be opened by someone else, throwing out old reminders of the past idolatrous relationship, and never walking by a bar alone. Yet these walls are only the first line of defense. The most important walls are not those that keep someone from the local bar, however strong these walls may become. Rather, the most important walls are those that guard our own souls.

“Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the well-spring of life” (Prov. 4:23).

Bars can be dangerous, and our own physical constitution may make us more vulnerable, but the sinful desires “which war against your soul” (1 Pet. 2:11) are the real enemy. The enemy is within. Self-control is a gift of the Spirit that helps us to fight against sinful lusts.

**Self-Control Means Thinking before Acting**

Another description of self-control is simply this: THINK. Sin is like static that makes it hard to hear. Of course, some messages get through, such as questions about the goodness of God, or thoughts such as “God will forgive me, He knows how much of a struggle this is.” What doesn’t get through is wisdom.

When you consider Proverbs and James, the two books especially devoted to teaching wisdom, thoughtfulness is a key theme. In fact, biblical thoughtfulness is not so much an aspect of wisdom as it is a synonym for wisdom. Wisdom is living a biblically-informed life. It is remembering God’s instruction before we proceed (Prov. 4). It is thinking before we act. The wise person considers the consequences of his actions, while the foolish person “gives no thought to the way of life” (Prov. 5:6). Wisdom is remembering what the Lord hates and choosing to hate those things as well (Prov. 6:16-19, 8:13). It is learning from the lessons of the past. It is meditating on the good instruction we have received (Prov. 16:20). If we are wise, we will be suspicious of our own ability to justify our plans and desires.

Arrogance and pride cause us to act rashly because they persuade us that whatever they instinctively want or do is the best thing. The thoughtfulness of wisdom, however, realizes that our foolishness and ability to deceive ourselves runs deep, so it seeks out counsel and submits to it. The wise, thoughtful person loves to have wise people tell him or her what to do, and the wise, thoughtful person loves to have God tell him or her what to do as well.

**Self-Control is Not Emotional Flatness or Indifference**

At first glance, self-control might sound like the proverbial though less than biblical motto, “moderation in all things,” but it is much more than that. Moderation can be perceived as a kind of stoicism in which we rise above our passions. Scripture, however, is about passion. It commands passion. Our relationship to God in Christ should be characterized by emotional intensity; our response to our own sin should be hatred and tears; our love for others should be such that we are moved by both their pleasure and pain. Scripture does not oppose strong desire; instead, it both approves of it and commands it. The problem is in the purpose of our passions. Do our passions express a heart that seeks the glory of Christ and intensely desires the things which Jesus desires? Or do they express our own desires to serve ourselves and our own glory? It is likely that part of the repentance of addictions should include repentance for not being passionate about—lusting enough after—Christ and the things that He loves.

**Self-Control is Not Self-Dependence**

Another characteristic of genuine self-control is that it is not the same as relying on yourself and working up the willpower to control yourself. Instead, self-control is a gift of the Holy Spirit, through faith in Jesus Christ. It is a side effect of the fear of the Lord.

When moral reformation itself becomes the goal, the purpose actually might be to avoid Jesus. In the same way that the ungodly indulgence was ultimately self-serving, self-reformation might continue the same theme. Self-effort, apart from dependence on Christ, remains a self-focused pursuit. We could argue that a self-centered person who is sober is better than a self-centered person who is drunk, and, in a certain sense, that would be true. Given that, some addictions have dreadful social consequences, abstinence and sobriety at least keep a person’s reckless indulgence from hurting too many others. However, there is a sense in which the person is no better or even worse off.

When people seek to bring more disorder into their already disordered internal lives, and they do this apart from faith in Christ, Scripture suggests that any evil that might have been chased out will be followed by...
even more evil to take its place (Matt. 12:43-45). In other words, Scripture indicates that we are not ultimately our own masters. If we try to drive out one master, other masters will rush in to take its place: exercise instead of food, a slavish devotion to work instead of adultery. The AA observation of the dry drunk is an illustration of people who have reformed themselves in the sense that they are sober, but the demons that drove them to drink continue to be their masters. The only master that is not harsh and enslaving is Christ Himself. In fact, even though we are His servants, the actual experience of this servitude is so joyful and blessed that it is called liberation.

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How Do I Get Self-Control?

Against this background, self-control is a strategic countermeasure to the insatiable I WANTs of sin, and it is a great blessing to those who find it. Because the problem is so extensive, almost descriptive of humanness, it is not surprising to find plenty of biblical references to both the problem and the alternative.

A wise man keeps himself under control. (Prov. 29:11)

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal. 5:23)

Each of you should learn to control his body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen. (1 Thess. 4:4)

Prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. (1 Pet. 1:13)

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. (1 Pet. 5:8)

Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control. (2 Pet. 1:6)

On a cursory reading, perhaps these passages don’t sound very sophisticated or penetrating. Maybe they don’t sound much different than a parent saying, “Stop it!” Notice, for example, how Paul tells Titus that we should say “no” to ungodly lusts (Titus 2:12). But “just say no” is a campaign that was declared ineffective years ago. So how exactly do we get self-control?

Consider more closely Paul’s direction to Titus. Paul wrote to Titus when Titus was strengthening the Christian church in Crete. Crete bears many similarities to our own culture, because it was an addictive society. In fact, its citizenry was notorious in the Roman world for its self-indulgence. Unlike the abstemious, ascetic tendencies of some cultures, Crete specialized in Western-style lust.

What do you teach when recklessness is in the air? Paul mapped out a pastoral strategy that targeted four different groups: older men, older women, younger men, and younger women. His central teaching was self-control.

Concerning the older men, Paul said, “Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance” (2:2). Unlike the extensive discipleship packages that are available today, Paul told Titus to fix the older men’s attention on just a few things. In his list, two of the words—temperate and self-controlled—refer to a mind that isn’t dulled by indulgence, whether the indulgence is in laziness or alcohol.

Concerning the older women, he said, “Teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good” (2:3). Again, self-control, this time with alcohol mentioned explicitly, is a centerpiece. The good teaching that these older women were to provide was directed especially toward the younger women. Not surprisingly, the substance of it included self-control. The older women were to teach the younger women “to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands” (2:5).

Younger men were given the most succinct direction. “Encourage the young men to be self-controlled” (2:6). Period. Apparently, this would be more than enough. If the young men could learn self-control over the coming decades, then they might be ready for more teaching.

So, regardless of age, self-control is an essential task. Its importance to skillful living is so obvious that Plato and Aristotle list it among their four virtues, along with justice, wisdom, and courage.1 It is emphasized throughout the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, and it is a critical teaching in Titus’s pastoral ministry.

1 Plato developed these four virtues in The Republic, Aristotle in Nichomachean Ethics.
The basic idea is that we must cultivate the skill of living a thoughtful, careful life in which we do what is right despite our desires. It is tested when we are alone or we feel unsatisfied. What do we do when no one is looking, and what do we do when cravings feel so strong that they hurt? Who or what will rule us then? Our desires or our God? Self-control is the skill of saying “no” to sinful desires, even when it hurts.

Do You Want Self-Control?

Scripture couldn’t be any more clear. An essential feature of sin is that it loathes boundaries, preferring instead to follow its own desires. The consequence of pursuing these desires is that we are unsatisfied, deluded, and enslaved by our ungodly passions. In this context, self-control emerges as a blessing from the benevolent, triune God. Now the question is, Do you want self-control?

Consider the question wisely. That is, think about it. The easy answer is, “Yes, of course, look at what addiction has done to me,” but the real answer is usually much more complex.

• You actually want self-control, but you want it only in its pill form, without personal effort.
• You want it because you are supposed to want it.
• You want it, but not at the cost of saying “no” forever to something that you love.
• You want it – sometimes.
• You want it – tomorrow.
• You want it, but you are waiting for God first to remove your cravings.
• You want it simply because it will make life a little easier or save you some money. In other words, you want the misery of addiction to be gone, but you don’t want the grace of God and the will of God to replace it.

If you find that the answer is less clear to you than you first thought, then go back to basics. Do you remember that sin makes us stupid and we cannot trust our own thinking? Do you know that God is good, and that His gifts are intended to bless us? Do you realize that, especially considering how often Scripture speaks of self-control, it is possible to get it? That God actually wants to give it to us? Do you remember the tragedy that has been associated with sin?

Now envision the crown (1 Cor. 9:25). Just as a child who cannot always appreciate the blessings of obedience to Christ receives pieces of candy as inducements, so we are told of lasting crowns that are given to those who pursue obedience to Christ. Yet a crown, of course, is not the real prize. It is only a poor approximation of something much better. The real prize is Christ Himself. So, with Jesus in view, we do those things that are important, true, and good, rather than those things that feel urgent but are ungodly.

Self-control can be waylaid in a number of places. Not wanting it is one of those places.

Remember the Grace of God

In the Titus passage, after Paul explained how the teaching on self-control should be offered to every age group, he moved on to exhort us to “say ‘No’ to ungodly and worldly passions” (Titus 2:12). But this simple exhortation must be embedded in the larger context of Paul’s teaching for it to be understood accurately.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (Titus 2:11-14)

This passage changes everything. It takes a simple command—saying “No”—and surrounds it with Jesus Christ.

Scripture never expects us to hear God’s commands to us in isolation from the serious contemplation of God’s work for us in Christ. The “grace of God” is a loaded phrase for Paul. It refers to God’s benevolence and undeserved love that characterize His dealings with us. Much more than a general disposition to act in a certain way, however, the grace of God is something very concrete. The grace of God is what God has done, what He is presently doing, and what He will do. He sent Jesus to liberate us from the harsh bondage to our own desires. By faith, He has set us free so that we can live for Him rather than ourselves (2 Cor. 5:15). Having made us alive in Christ, the
Father now gives us a spirit of self-discipline (2 Tim. 1:7) by way of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22, 23), who is given liberally to those who call to the Father in the name of the Son.

This means that we are well outfitted for the task of putting to death ungodly passions. On the one hand, we have our residual sinful cravings; on the other, we have the Spirit of the resurrection that raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Although our cravings go deep, they are no match for the Spirit of the living God. This, of course, does not mean that the battle is over and we can “let go and let God.” Rather, it means that we are now empowered to engage in the battle. As the Hebrews were promised the land, but had to take it by force, one town at a time, so we are promised the gift of self-control, yet we also must take it by force.

**Reckless self-indulgence and being owned by sinful passions simply are not intended for human beings.**

Contemplate the Coming of Jesus Christ

Only the grace of God takes self-control out of the realm of hopeless self-reformation into that of great confidence that we can be transformed people. Yet, Paul gives us even more. He precedes his exhortation “say No” with a reminder of the grace of God given to us, and he follows it by asking us to contemplate the grace that is to come.

This coupling of self-control and the coming of Jesus Christ is standard in Scripture. For example, “Prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Pet. 1:13). When Scripture calls us to vigilance in our battle with sin, it often directs our attention to the future and our coming hope.

What are the benefits of meditating on the return of Jesus Christ? First, they provide a deadline. The battle with sin is hard, but on some specific day it will be over. If no end to our battle with sin is in sight, we easily can fatigue and give up, but when we know that the deadline is approaching, we become much more vigilant. Like virgins waiting for the bridegroom or a student who must complete an assignment by a certain date, deadlines allow us to be willing to forgo sleep in order to do what has been asked of us. They bring an urgency to the present, taking away the typical self-talk, “Just one more __________, and then I will stop.”

A second benefit to meditating on future realities is that eternity exposes those things that are important. For example, sometimes our less-than-attentive consciences will permit “one more,” but when we consider our thoughts and actions in light of the return of Christ, the self-serving nature of our desires becomes more apparent. A lesser version of this occurs even when we consider the advent of some other person into our addictions. For example, someone easily might justify a trip to a crack house (lover’s house, bar, website, and so on) because it is just a short visit, just dropping in to say “Hi.” But such thinking is checked when that person considers what he or she would do if a spouse or children showed up. If the potential appearance of a person can reveal the ungodliness in our behavior, how much more the coming of Christ Himself in person?

A third benefit of meditating on the grace to come is that it reveals our true destiny. This can be a very powerful inducement. Our destiny is that we will be perfect creatures who do not know all things but are sinless. Consider that. Don’t we often excuse our addictions by thinking, “This is just humanness—we can’t help it”? True humanness, however, is that we are created to be like Jesus in every way that a creature can be like Jesus. This means that we are becoming people who are controlled solely by the Spirit of the living God and not by our private passions. True humanness is being able to say “No” to ungodly passions, even when it hurts.

Reckless self-indulgence and being owned by sinful passions simply are not intended for human beings. Such behavior has much more in common with a dog than it does with God’s design for us. When we indulge ungodly passions it is as if we were sub-human, licking our own vomit or eating our own feces. These actions are disgusting if done by humans. So it is when we are controlled by our ungodly desires. We were created for something much more noble than eating feces. We were created to have passions that are directed to the glory of God.

If you have put your faith in Christ, your destiny is to be absolutely sinless. Now is the time to start acting like the person you will soon be.

Develop a Clear, Publicized Strategy

We have just examined the theological nuts and bolts to the biblical teaching on self-control. Now we must consider the application of these points. One application, for example, is that the desire for self-control must be accompanied by a plan. If self-control demands thoughtfulness, and if it ultimately declares war on both our own flesh and Satan’s temptations,
then there must be a strategy. If our battle was against an insignificant foe, then planning would be unnecessary. However, given that our enemy is subtle and crafty, a strategy is essential.

This is just one of the ways that New Year’s resolutions get thrown onto the scrap heap. Having eaten too much over the holidays, we make a resolution to eat wisely. But our decision usually lasts no longer than dinner the next day. Or, having been caught buying drugs, we figure that the vague sense of remorse will engender abstinence, and we don’t even think that next week we will feel the same drug-desires and have access to the same drug-users and drug-dealers. In these situations, there was no thoughtful plan, no consideration of the spiritual dominion involved, no calling out for the grace of God in Christ, no real desire to take one’s soul to task, and no pleas for help and counsel from other brothers and sisters.

A good indicator of whether or not you want to grow in self-control is this: do you have a clear, public strategy? Put another way, if anyone says, “I am really going to change this time – I don’t think I need any help,” then that person has yet to understand the biblical teaching on self-control. It is one thing to make a resolution; it is something completely different to repent, diligently seek counsel, and, in concert with others, develop a plan that is concrete and Christ-centered.

The heart of any plan, of course, must be Jesus Christ. Self-control is like any other feature of wisdom in that it is learned by contemplating a person. Strategically, this is unprecedented. We would expect God to yell at us and tell us, again, to shape up, but God’s ways, being much better than our own, are rarely predictable. Rather than give us twelve steps on which to rely, he gives us a Person to know. As Jesus is known and exalted among us, you will notice that self-control becomes more obvious. The double cure for sin is the foundation for all change. That is, in the gospel, we have been released from both the condemnation and the power of sin. We have been freed “to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his son from heaven, whom he rescued from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath” (1 Thess. 1:9, 10).

To place this in the context of the book of Proverbs, the emphasis there is that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. What is the fear of the Lord? It is our response of obedient devotion to the Holy One who has pursued us, loved us, received the wrath of the Father on our behalf, and is with us by the Spirit. The fear of the Lord is knowing that we live coram deo, before the face of God. It is knowing that the Holy God sees every aspect of our lives. This “seeing” is a curse to those who try to avoid God, but, for us who have come to know Jesus Christ, it is a wall of protection, empowering us to discern and do God’s will, doing the important thing rather than that which merely feels urgent.