

PERSPECTIVE

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THE FLESH IS

WEAK

PASTORAL REFLECTIONS ON SELF CONTROL



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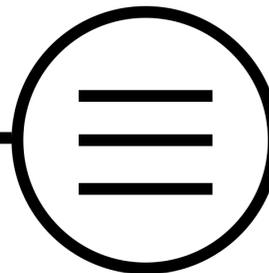
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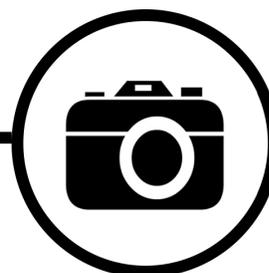
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The Flesh Is Weak: Pastoral Reflections on Self-Control

I grew up in the shadow of Nike (the shoe company, not the Greek goddess). The first church I attended sat next to the Nike World Headquarters in Beaverton, Oregon. I played high school tennis with the son of Nike's founder, Phil Knight. To top it all off, my college dorm stood across the street from Hayward Field, where Knight and his track coach, Bill Bowerman, famously tried out the first pair of Nike running shoes with its tread formed in a waffle iron. In 1988, when Nike unleashed the "Just Do It" campaign, I was all in. If you work hard enough and put in the time, you can do anything—or so I thought.

Experience soon taught me life is more than blood, sweat, and tears. All the training in the world isn't going to make my 5'9" body a starter on the college basketball team. It doesn't matter how many all-nighters I pull, God didn't design my brain to master quantitative macroeconomics. Just ask Professor Ellis, who memorably wrote on my first assignment, "If this work is evidence of your ability, I highly doubt you will be able to pass this class." Ouch.

As Christians we wrestle with this same tension. On one hand, there is work to do. We must exercise self-control. On the other hand, it is a work we cannot do. Try as we may, it doesn't matter how tall or strong, how fast or smart we are, in our flesh we simply lack the self-control required to walk in a manner worthy our calling (Eph. 4:1).

There is hope. Thankfully, even when the flesh is weak, self-control remains a potent piece of the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

WHAT IS SELF-CONTROL?

Self-control, simply put, is the ability to look at a piece of chocolate cake, and not eat it; to accidentally click on an explicit link, and immediately close the window; to hear a tidbit of juicy, salacious gossip, and end the conversation. When the seductress woos the self-controlled young man, "I have perfumed my bed with myrrh" (Prov. 7:17), he flies away like Joseph (Gen. 39:12). Self-control is the rejection of temptation and the refusal to give indwelling sin the upper hand.

We can't dismiss self-control, even if some wrongly boil down Christianity to a list of do's and don'ts. When Paul, while on trial, shared the gospel with Felix, "he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment" (Acts 24:25). Resisting temptation is not the gospel, but it is a mark of all who have come to truly embrace it. Paul later insisted that Christians will sometimes give up what they are free to enjoy if it means winning others to Christ. Such benevolence requires self-control (see 1 Cor. 9:25). Peter agreed. True believers have more than head knowledge. They are marked by self-control, which flows from the faith God gave them (2 Pet. 1:5–6).

It should be no surprise Paul ends his list of the fruit of the Spirit with self-control. After noting love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness, Paul wants us to get to work. Whatever is keeping us from loving others or being gentle must be put to death, and the desires of the flesh won't go down without a fight. Walking in love and joy won't be easy. We need self-control. Paul put it this way, "And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24). The presence of self-control proves it.

THE FIGHT FOR SELF-CONTROL

The fruit of the Spirit in your life will not come without a fight. There's a reason Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). The Christian life is hard. There is no easy path, no broad entrance. We will find ourselves at war with sin, bloodied and bruised, before the last battle is won and the tears are gone (Rev. 21:4).

When they came up with the slogan, "Just Do It," Nike's ad executives tapped into a truth viscerally known by even pagan minds: nothing worth having comes without a cost. This is true for Olympic runners, Nobel laureates, outstanding fathers, and ordinary Christians. Pastor Kevin DeYoung wisely noted how "growth in godliness requires exertion on the part of the Christian."¹ The old Puritan, Thomas Watson, used violent language to make the same point when he charged believers to "spill the heart blood of every sin."²

We are prone to give into temptation before the fight really begins. We slide into sin, without ever taking out our sword and going for sin's throat. We rationalize, "I'm just looking." We make excuses, "I didn't start the conversation." We presume upon God's grace, "I know he'll forgive me, he's God after all."

A few years ago a young man sat in my office and shared his testimony. He was unaccustomed to talking about his faith. I probed into his life and doctrine (1 Tim. 4:16). I wanted to know not only what he believed, but how these beliefs shaped the way he lived. He talked about his dating relationship and quickly admitted to going too far. He showed no remorse, and when I asked him how he made sense of his actions and the biblical call to purity, he smiled and said, “I know Jesus understands—he knows how hard it is to be single.”

It’s easy for me to roll my eyes, even as I type out that memory. This man was immature; he may not even have been a Christian! And yet, sadly, I know what it’s like to presume upon God’s grace. To let my eyes and thoughts wander into places that defile the marriage bed (Heb. 13:4). To let my mouth run off, unconcerned about the fire I’m lighting (James 3:6). To let my ears gulp down gossip, with no love for the brother or sister being dissected by critical words. In each instance, I’ve taken the path of least resistance and presumed upon God’s grace. Instead of attempting to “spill the heart blood of every sin,” I’ve drunk it down.

To have self-control is to fight temptation and put sin to death. Not just one day, every day. Not just one hour, every hour.

THE FRUIT OF SELF-CONTROL

It’s good to remember the fight for self-control. I must fight more, but the fight isn’t the whole story. Self-control is both a call to action and a gift to be received. Self-control is a piece of the fruit of the Spirit. Until this fact is understood, and understood deeply, we’ll never go to God for help and live with the confidence he’ll provide it.

At the dawn of the Reformation, Martin Luther preached a sermon about the righteousness of Christ. He called it an alien righteousness because it doesn’t naturally belong to the Christian. It is Christ’s righteousness. It belongs to him. Grace means this righteousness can be ours, through faith in Christ alone. “All that he has becomes ours,” Luther said, and not only that, “he himself becomes ours.”³ Through faith, Christ gives us himself. And with himself, the power to defeat sin in our lives.

It is through this theological lens that Luther understood the fruit of the Spirit. It is only because of Christ’s righteousness, credited to our account, that we can, “spend a life profitably in good works...slaying the flesh and crucifying the desires with respect to the self.”⁴ In

short, do you want self-control? Look to Christ. Trust in his death and resurrection. The self-control we practice—sometimes all-too painfully and poorly—is actually “the fruit and consequence” of Christ’s work on our behalf.

This is good news. Self-control is a gift and a promise to each of God’s children. God does more than command us to obey, he equips us. He does more than point us in the direction we have to walk, he carries us. God does more than give us his Word to guide us, he fills us with his Spirit and leads us.

I know my own soul, and one of the reasons I sometimes give into temptation before the fight really begins is because I fail to remember power of the Spirit in my life. Self-control seems like a mountain too tall for me to ever scale, until I remember Christ already climbed it, for me. Holiness seems like a room too sterile to enter, until I remember Christ already died, for me, to cleanse me from my sin.

THE SPIRIT IS POWERFUL

I learned long ago that “Just Do It” may be a great slogan for the world’s largest manufacturer of sportswear, but it’s a horrible motto for the Christian life. Still, it’s a lesson I need to remind myself of daily. I didn’t begin the Christian life on my own effort, and I certainly can’t walk in the Spirit by the power of my own steam. Self-control isn’t the product of true grit; it’s a piece of the fruit of the Spirit.

I can no more exercise self-control on my own, than I can repent on my own. The Prince of Preachers, Charles Spurgeon, put it well:

Have you ever tried to repent? If so, if you tried without the Spirit of God, you know that to urge a man to repent without the promise of the Spirit to help him, is to urge him to do an impossibility. A rock might as soon weep, and a desert might as soon blossom, as a sinner repent of his own accord. If God should offer heaven to man, simply upon the terms of repentance of sin, heaven would be as impossible as it is by good works; for a man can no more repent of himself, than he can perfectly keep God’s law; for repentance involves the very principle of perfect obedience to the law of God. It seems to me that in repentance there is the whole law solidified and condensed; and if a man can repent of himself then there is no need of

a Saviour. He may as well go up to heaven up the steep sides of Sinai at once.⁵

Now, re-read Spurgeon's words but replace "repent" with "be self-controlled." The point is the same. Without the Spirit of God we can't do it. Self-control is required; it's a must. But only those with the Spirit can be self-controlled.

Do you want to see the fruit of the Spirit manifest in your life? Do you want to grow in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness? I know I do! How can we grow in this way? How can we have more self-control?

- ✦ **Remember the cross.** When the sins of hatred and anxiety, harshness and impatience rear their ugly heads, we have to be willing to pull out the sword and "spill the heart blood of every sin." We can only do this if we recall that Christ purposefully spilt his own blood so we could die to sin and live to righteousness. Without a mind fixed on the cross, your self-control will be little more than self-help, and it won't last.
- ✦ **Embrace the fight.** Don't fall into the trap of thinking a life marked by self-control—or any of the other pieces of the fruit of the Spirit—will be easy. It won't be. There are just too many passages which remind us the Christian life is a painful battle (see Rom. 8:13, Col. 3:5, and 1 Cor. 9:24–25, to name just a few).
- ✦ **Bring the fiercest battle into the light.** Though it is true all our temptations are common (1 Cor. 10:13), it's also true that each of us has unique struggles. Some battle gluttony, others gossip. Some battle with pornography, others with video games. Where is the battle for self-control waged most vigorously in your life? This is what you need to share with a godly brother or sister you trust. Bring it into the light and you'll find brothers and sisters going to battle with you and for you.
- ✦ **Plead with the Spirit.** You need God's help to hate your sin, to mourn its presence in your life, to repent of its grip in your life, and to equip you to live without it. This is a prayer God is sure to answer. Pray forcefully (Luke 18:1–8). Pray confidently (Rom. 8:32). Pray daily (Luke 5:16). If self-control is lacking in your life, could it be because prayer is lacking? "Watch and pray," Jesus said, "that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:41).

Of all the pieces of the fruit of the Spirit, this is the one I want to focus on most. Not because it is most important

—each is equally important. In fact, they all go together, like a beautiful patchwork quilt. And yet, self-control is the thread tying them all together. Show me a Christian overflowing with self-control, and I'll see someone full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness, too.

~Aaron Menikoff

¹ Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole In Our Holiness: Filling the Gap Between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2012), 88.

² Thomas Watson, *The Godly Man's Picture* (Carlisle, Penn.: Banner of Truth, 1992), 153.

³ *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor Books, 1962), 87. From a sermon preached c. 1519.

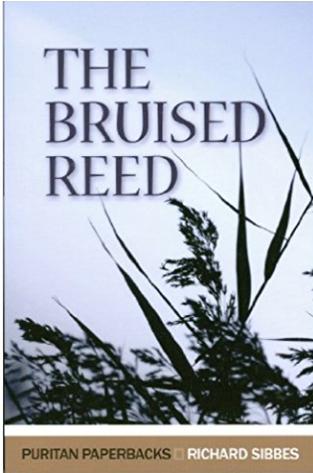
⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, "The Necessity of the Spirit's Work" in *The New Park Street Pulpit*, vol. V (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1859), 215.

The Bruised Reed

Written by Richard Sibbes

Bookstall Price \$8



As a newcomer to Richard Sibbes and *The Bruised Reed*, I found this book excellent reading. Sibbes' approach to Christianity as a Puritan is refreshing and one that seems to be lost in so much of today's writing. First published in 1630 and now almost 400 years old, this book helped me get back to the basics of the faith and rethink so much of what true devotion to God, and the grace He bestows, really is. *The Bruised Reed* (following from Isaiah 42 and Matthew 12) deals with matters of the heart and acts as a mirror into the heart to help us become freshly aware of our fallen state

while reminding at the same time that Jesus will not snuff out smoking flax.

But why read an old book like this one? Sibbes generously sprinkles his writing with verse after verse, Old Testament and New, and centers his thoughts on the Holy Scriptures. He doesn't impose his thoughts on the Bible but rather draws out thoughts from the Scripture according to the intended meaning given by the Holy Spirit.

One comes away from a read of this book as though having been cleansed—washed clean by the word of God. This is not one of today's "feel good" books but one that both exposes the ugliness of our sin and brings a comforting word of mercy and grace as relief, hope and encouragement.

– RECOMMENDED BY MIKE BLACKBURN

Excerpts From the Book

1

"The best men are severe to themselves, tender over others."

–Christ Will Not Quench the Smoking Flax, p. 23

2

"Nothing is so certain as that which is certain after doubts."

–The Spirit of Mercy Should Move Us, p. 29

3

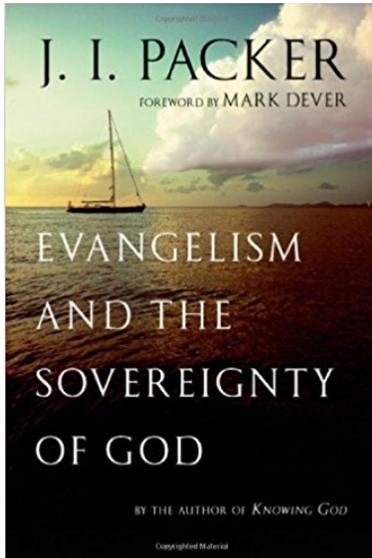
"If God brings us into the trial He will be with us in the trial, and at length bring us out, more refined."

–Duties and Discouragements, p. 54

Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God

Written by J. I. Packer

Bookstall Price \$14



The most common argument against reformed theology is that believing God sovereignly orchestrates all aspects of salvation will weaken our motivation to evangelize the lost. Who hasn't heard, "If God has already chosen who will be saved, why evangelize?" J. I. Packer dismantles this argument and others in his book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. He gives a clear explanation of divine sovereignty, evangelism, and the relationship between the two. Packer explains how many of the flaws we see in the church's evangelism today are due to an improper understanding of God's

sovereignty and wrongly defining evangelism. In *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, we see that the only way to properly evangelize is to follow the Bible's teaching, which is to heed the call to share the gospel in love and trust in the sovereignty of God for results.

Packer's book is a great resource for anyone seeking to understand God's sovereignty more. He dives into the relationship between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility in salvation, and explains they relate, not as a paradox, but as an antimony. Meaning they have the appearance of a contradiction, but both are equally reasonable and necessary. Packer diagrams how we can easily focus too much on one and forget the other. Using the Bible, he leads us to see both are true and should be seen as friends, not enemies.

The most helpful and convicting section was Packer's analysis on evangelism. He properly defines it, explains what our motivation should be, and practically describes how to evangelize. We all have different tendencies in evangelism—some of us are loquacious, while others silent—but we could all be helped by reading this section of Packer's book. I also greatly benefitted from Packer's look at evangelism and divine sovereignty together. Packer shows that belief in God's sovereignty doesn't weaken our evangelism, but strengthens it. A proper understanding of God's sovereignty in evangelism will lead us to confident, patient, and prayerful evangelism.

— RECOMMENDED BY MATT TILLMAN

Excerpts From the Book

1

"A God whom we could understand exhaustively, and whose revelation of himself confronted us with no mysteries whatsoever, would be a God in man's image and therefore an imaginary God, not the God of the Bible at all."

—Divine Sovereignty and Human
Responsibility, p. 29

2

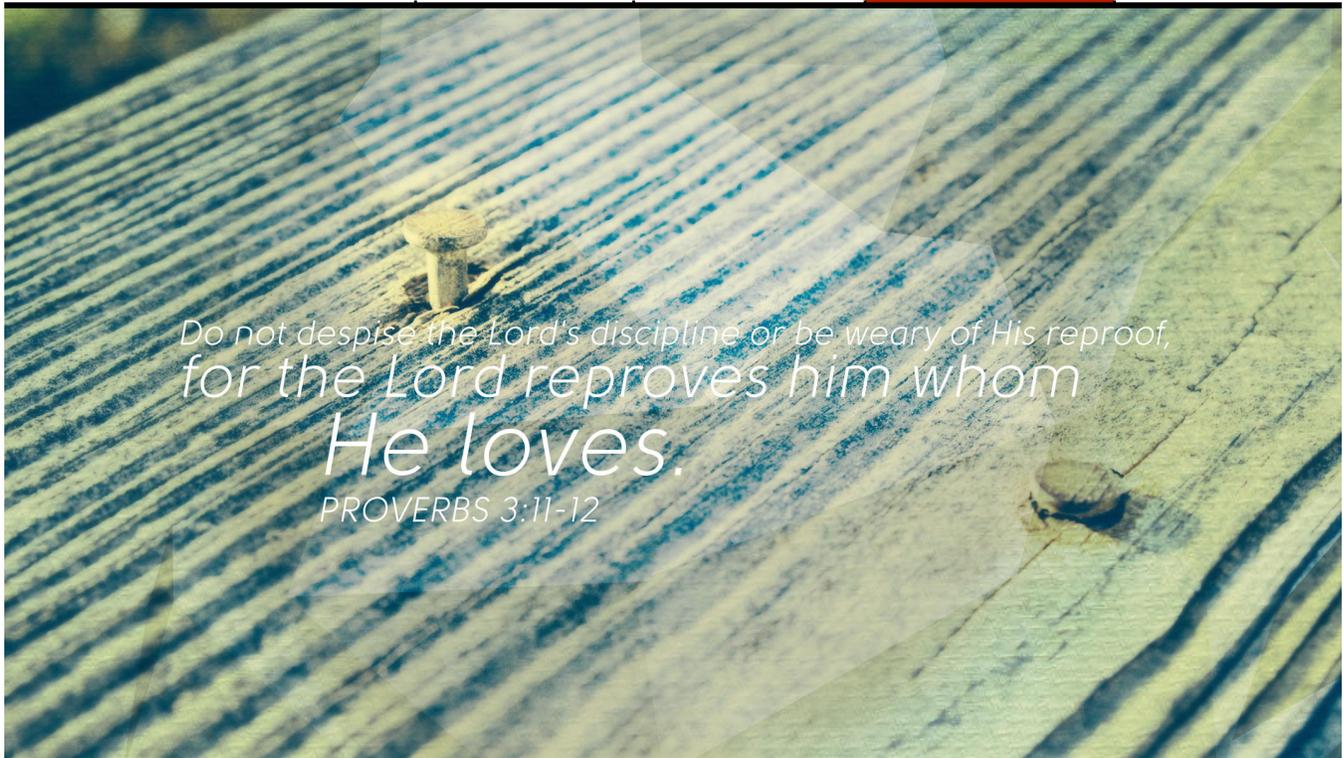
"Every Christian, therefore, has a God-given obligation to make known the gospel of Christ. And every Christian who declares the gospel message to any other person does so as Christ's ambassador and representative, according to the terms of his God-given commission. Such is the authority, and such the responsibility, of the church and of the Christian in evangelism."

—Evangelism, p. 49

3

"We may not trust in our methods of personal dealing or running evangelistic services, however excellent we may think them. There is no magic in methods, not even in theologically impeccable methods. When we evangelize, our trust must be in God who raises the dead. He is the almighty Lord who turns people's hearts, and he will give conversions in his own time. Meanwhile, our part is to be faithful in making the gospel known, sure that such labor will never be in vain. This is how the truth of the sovereignty of God's grace bears on evangelism."

—Divine Sovereignty and Evangelism, p. 115



My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline
 or be weary of his reproof,
 for the Lord reproofs him whom he loves,
 as a father the son in whom he delights.
 -Proverbs 3:11-12

Seasons of prosperity—good health, relationships, and material comfort—are a gift from the Lord. They are to be enjoyed. We should accept them with humility and gratitude. Yet, it is in life's trials that the true believer learns how suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope (Rom. 5:3-5, cf. Jam. 1:2-4). It is the moments of discipline that our faith is refined. Our gratefulness to God grows when we're blessed, and our trust in God grows when we're disciplined.

This is a lesson we learn by gaining wisdom from walking in the fear of the Lord. Solomon wanted his "son" to learn this lesson. It's easy to assume that the Lord is displeased and vindictive toward his children he disciplines them. Thus, we're easily tempted to "despise" it and grow "weary" of it. But Solomon wisely instructs us not to because God's discipline and reproof is a reminder he, our Father, "loves" and "delights" in us, his children.

The author of Hebrews used this truth to encourage a congregation who was weary and tempted to abandon the Lord because they were suffering for being Christians. He reminded them that the Lord's discipline proved his

love of them and was his means of making them holy (Heb. 12:5-11).

Admittedly, this is one of those "hard edges" of Christianity that is difficult to accept. Mentally it's easy to comprehend. However, experientially it's hard to embrace. Yet, remember that your heavenly Father wants nothing but your good. He wants to you become more like Christ. Discipline drives us to the point of realizing we are not as self-sufficient as we once assumed. We need the Lord in all things. We need Christ's righteousness at every turn and in every circumstance. So whatever hardship you may be facing today, think about William Cooper's famous line from the hymn *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*:

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
 But trust him for His grace;
 Behind a frowning providence
 He hides a smiling face.

- BRAD THAYER

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Shannon Lamm



**Jack & Jan
Lupas**



**James & Courtney
Ruley**



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