

SELF-CONTROL

1. The Definition of Self-Control.

a. Biblical terms:

- (1) ἐγκράτεια: “restraint of one’s emotions, impulses, or desires, *self-control* (for detailed discussion s. Aristot., EN 7, 1145a-1154b; esp. w. ref. to matters of sex; cp. Simplicius in Epict. p. 117, 18; 123, 14...) 2 Cl 15:1. In a list of virtues **Gal 5:23**. W. other virtues... 1 Cl 35:2; 62:2; 64; w. δικαιοσύνη **Ac 24:25**; w. γνῶσις and ὑπομονή **2 Pt 1:6**; w. μακροθυμία B 2:2; w. ἀπλότης Hv 2, 3, 2; w. πίστις and φόβος m 6, 1, 1. (W. ἀγαθὴ πράξις Iren., 1, 6, 4 [Harv. I 58, 2].) ἀγαπᾶν ἐν πάσῃ ἐ. *in all chastity* Pol 4:2; ἐ. διπλῆ Hm 8:1. Personified as a virtue v 3, 8, 4; 7; Hs 9, 15, 2. Bestowed by God 1 Cl 38:2” (BDAG, 274).
- (2) ἐγκρατεύομαι: “to keep one’s emotions, impulses, or desires under control, *control oneself, abstain, ἀπὸ παντὸς πονηροῦ πράγματος abstain fr. every evil deed*” (BDAG, 274).
- (3) νηφάλιος: “pert. to being restrained in conduct, *self-controlled, level-headed*” (BDAG, 672)
- (4) νήφω: “prim. ‘be sober’; in the NT only fig. = be free fr. every form of mental and spiritual ‘drunkenness’, fr. excess, passion, rashness, confusion, etc. *be well-balanced, self-controlled*” (BDAG, 672).
- (5) σωφρονέω: “to be prudent, with focus on self-control, be reasonable, sensible, serious, keep one’s head” (BDAG, 986).
- (6) σωφρονισμός: “exercise of prudence, moderation, self-discipline, prudence” (BDAG, 987)).
- (7) σωφρόνως: “[P]ert. to being prudent, soberly, moderately, showing self-control” (BDAG, 987).
- (8) σωφροσύνη: “gener. soundness of mind, *reasonableness, rationality* (s. σωφρονέω 1; in contrast to μανία X., Mem. 1, 1, 16; Pla., Prot. 323b; Iren. 1, 26, 1) ἀληθείας καὶ σωφροσύνης ῥήματα *true and rational words* (opp. μαίνομαι) Ac 26:25... practice of prudence, *good judgment, moderation, self-control* as exercise of care and intelligence appropriate to circumstances” (BDAG, 987).

b. Self-control: the ability to resist a sinful or unhealthy urge to do something.

c. Delayed gratification.

d. Related to self-control are:

- (1) Life habits. See *Life Habits*.
- (2) Discipline: the ability to do what ought to be done when it ought to be done.
 - (a) See *Discipline*.
- (3) Diligence. See *Diligence*.
- (4) Peace: the ability to control one’s anger.
 - (a) See *Peace*.
- (5) Temptation. See *Temptation*.

2. The Call to/Expectation of Self-Control.

- a. **1 Ti 3:2** 2 Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, *self-controlled* (σώφρων), respectable, hospitable, able to teach....

- b. **2 Ti 4:5** 5 As for you, always be *sober-minded* (νήφω), endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry.
- c. **Tit 2:2** 2 Older men are to be *sober-minded* (νηφάλιος), dignified, *self-controlled* (σώφρων), sound in faith, in love, and in endurance.
- d. **Tit 2:4-6** 4 ...And so train the young women to love their husbands and children, 5 to be *self-controlled* (σώφρων), pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled. 6 Likewise, urge the younger men to be *self-controlled* (σωφρονέω).
- e. ***Tit 2:11-12** 11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, 12 training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live *self-controlled* (σωφρόνως),¹ upright, and godly lives in the present age....
- f. **2 Pe 1:2-11** 2 May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. 3 His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, 4 by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. 5 For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, 6 and knowledge with *self-control* (ἐγκράτεια), and *self-control* (ἐγκράτεια) with endurance, and endurance with godliness, 7 and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. 8 For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Messiah. 9 For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. 10 Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. 11 For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Messiah.
- g. “For we have touched upon every subject—faith, repentance, genuine love, self-control (ἐγκράτεια), sobriety, and patience—and have reminded you that you must reverently please almighty God in righteousness and truth and steadfastness, living in harmony without bearing malice, in love and peace with constant gentleness, just as our fathers, of whom we spoke earlier, pleased him, by being humble toward the Father and God and Creator and toward all men.”²

3. The Challenge/Difficulty of Self-Control.

- a. **Ac 24:25** 25 And as [Paul] reasoned about righteousness and *self-control* (ἐγκράτεια) and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you.
- b. **1 Co 7:5-9** 5 Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer. But then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of *self-control* (ἐγκράτεια). ...9 But if

¹ “[P]ert. to being prudent, soberly, moderately, showing self-control” (BDAG, 987).

² *1 Clement* 62.2, in Michael William Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Updated ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 99.

they cannot exercise *self-control* (ἐγκράτεια), they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

- c. **1 Co 9:24-27** 24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. 25 Every athlete exercises *self-control* (ἐγκρατεύομαι, pres.) in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. 26 So I do not run aimlessly. I do not box as one beating the air. 27 But I *discipline* (ὕπωπιάζω, pres.)³ my body and *keep it under control* (δουλαγωγέω, pres.)⁴ lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.
- d. **Ga 5:16** 16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not *carry out the desires* of the flesh (καὶ ἐπιθυμίαν σαρκὸς οὐ μὴ τελέσητε (aor.)).⁵
- e. **2 Ti 3:3** 3 ...Heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, *without self-control* (ἀκρατής), brutal, not loving good....
- f. **1 Pe 5:8** 8 Be *sober-minded* (νήφω). Be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.
- g. The law of inertia.
- h. At no time in human history has self-control been more required. This is due to online anonymity, internet, free time, and our fallen human nature.
- i. “Surrender to all your desires obviously leads to impotence, disease, jealousies, lies, concealment, and everything that is the reverse of health, good humor and frankness. For any happiness, even in this world, quite a lot of *restraint* is going to be necessary.”⁶
- j. “No conflict is so severe as his who labours to subdue himself.”⁷
- k. Indulgence. Gluttony.
- l. “Far better to have self-control than to need to go into damage control.”⁸

4. The Framework of Self-Control.

- a. **1 Th 5:6-8** 6 So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be *sober* (νήφω). 7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. 8 But because we belong to the day, let us be *sober* (νήφω), having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.
- b. **1 Pe 1:13** 13 Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being *sober-minded* (νήφω), set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Messiah.
- c. **1 Pe 4:7** 7 The end of all things is at hand. Therefore be *self-controlled* (σωφρονέω) and *sober-minded* (νήφω) for the sake of your prayers.

³ “[T]o put under strict discipline, *punish, treat roughly, torment*, also fig. (cp. Aristoph., Fgm. 541 πόλεις ὑπωπιασμένα) **1 Cor 9:27** (of the apostle’s self-imposed discipline. But the expr. is obviously taken fr. the language of prize-fighting vs. 26; on the virtue of self-control cp. X., Mem. 2, 1, 1; 5)” (BDAG, 1043).

⁴ “Paul makes a slave out of his body, i.e. he directs it for useful service” (BDAG, 259).

⁵ “ἐπιθυμίαν σαρκὸς τελεῖν carry out what the flesh desires, satisfy one’s physical desires” (BDAG, 997).

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 89.

⁷ Thomas a Kempis (d. 1471).

⁸ Tom McIvor.

5. The Power of Self-Control.

- a. **Ga 5:16** 16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh (καὶ ἐπιθυμίαν σαρκὸς οὐ μὴ τελέσητε (aor.)).⁹
- b. **Ga 5:22-23** 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control (ἐγκράτεια). Against such things there is no law.
- c. **2 Ti 1:6-7** 6 For this reason I [Paul] remind you [Timothy] to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, 7 for God gave us a Spirit not of fear but of power, love, and self-control (σωφρονισμός).¹⁰
- d. We call it “self-control,” but this is somewhat unfortunate because self-control sounds like “flesh-control.”

6. The Practicalities of Self-Control.

- a. **1 Co 7:5-9** 5 Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer. But then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control (ἐγκράτεια). ...⁹ But if they cannot exercise self-control (ἐγκράτεια), they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.
- b. **1 Co 9:24-27** 24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. 25 Every athlete exercises self-control (ἐγκρατεύομαι, pres.) in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. 26 So I do not run aimlessly. I do not box as one beating the air. 27 But I discipline (ὑποπιάζω, pres.)¹¹ my body and keep it under control (δουλαγωγέω, pres.),¹² lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. (1) Like top athletes, we are to be intentional and purposeful in how we spend our time.
- c. **1 Ti 2:9** 9 ...Likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control (σωφροσύνη), not with braided hair and gold, pearls, or costly attire....
- d. **1 Ti 2:15** 15 Yet [a woman] will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control (σωφροσύνη).
- e. **2 Ti 4:5** 5 As for you, always be sober-minded (νήφω), endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry.
- f. **Tit 2:4-5** 4 ...And so train the young women to love their husbands and children, 5 to be self-controlled (σώφρων), pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.
- g. Strict training requires that you pay strict attention to what we do and to how we do what we do. It means we also have to be willing to say, “Look! I am in a strict training program right now, because I do not want to lose my prize. Here are some things I just

⁹ “ἐπιθυμίαν σαρκὸς τελεῖν carry out what the flesh desires, satisfy one’s physical desires” (BDAG, 997).

¹⁰ “[E]xercise of prudence, moderation, self-discipline, prudence” (BDAG, 987)).

¹¹ “[T]o put under strict discipline, *punish, treat roughly, torment*, also fig. (cp. Aristoph., Fgm. 541 πόλεις ὑποπιασμένοι) **1 Cor 9:27** (of the apostle’s self-imposed discipline. But the expr. is obviously taken fr. the language of prize-fighting vs. 26; on the virtue of self-control cp. X., Mem. 2, 1, 1; 5)” (BDAG, 1043).

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cannot do!” In addition, when it comes to those things that we can do, we are going to be careful how we do them. Which means, for example, that we are going to meet legitimate needs—be they financial, material, emotional, and/or social—in legitimate ways. It also means that we are going to counteract the bad that we may be tempted to do, with any good that the Lord has prompted us to do.

- h. See James Clear, *Atomic Habits*.
- i. Today, perhaps more than ever, as believers we need to guard ourselves so that we don’t over involve and over-indulge ourselves in things that may even be good in moderation, but bad in excess—whether it is eating or sleeping or working or playing.
- j. Fasting.
- k. Accountability.

7. The Blessings/Results of Self-Control.

- a. **1 Co 9:24-27** 24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. 25 Every athlete exercises self-control (ἐγκρατεύομαι, pres.) in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. 26 So I do not run aimlessly. I do not box as one beating the air. 27 But I discipline (ὕπωπιάζω, pres.)¹³ my body and keep it under control (δουλαγωγέω, pres.),¹⁴ lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.
- b. **1 Ti 2:15** 15 Yet [a woman] will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control (σωφροσύνη).
- c. **1 Ti 3:2** 2 Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded (νηφάλιος), self-controlled (σώφρων), respectable, hospitable, able to teach....
(1) Self-control is a sign of maturity.
- d. **1 Pe 4:7** 7 The end of all things is at hand. Therefore be self-controlled (σωφρονέω) and sober-minded (νήφω) for the sake of your prayers.
- e. **2 Pe 1:2-11** 2 May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. 3 His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, 4 by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. 5 For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with moral excellent, and moral excellence with knowledge, 6 and knowledge with self-control (ἐγκράτεια), and self-control (ἐγκράτεια) with endurance, and endurance with godliness, 7 and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. 8 For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Messiah. 9 For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. 10 Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more diligent to confirm your

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calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. 11 For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Messiah.