

Do You Really Have Self-Control?

“He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city” (Prov. 16:32). And on the other hand, “He who has no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down and without walls” (Prov. 25:28).

Self-control is a mighty good thing to have. And as rare as Spanish doubloons in the Sunday offering.

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23a). So, the much-desired quality of self-control is found among the nine traits making up the “fruit of the Spirit,” which is also a pretty solid description of Christlikeness.

The ability to master one’s own spirit is not as recognizable as its opposite, the failure or inability to control one’s inner self. That trait—a spirit out of control—is quickly on full display whenever its owner is offended, attacked, questioned, called to account for something he/she has done or otherwise challenged. The uncontrolled spirit has no defenses against temptation, no muscles for hard tasks and no patience with difficult people. “Love one’s enemies”? (Luke 6:27) The uncontrolled spirit has difficulty loving its own friends and thus nothing in reserve for its opponents.

The angry motorist determined to set another driver straight cannot control his own spirit. The disgruntled employee who returns with a gun to settle accounts cannot control his own spirit. The gossip who simply cannot resist the urge to pass along the juicy morsel about someone cannot control their spirit.

The list is endless. And so depressing.

So, let's take the positive approach! Here, straight out of the wonderful book of Proverbs, are 10 traits of the person in control of his/her own spirit.

1. You can take chastening from the Lord and appreciate discipline when you have it coming.

"My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be weary of His correction; for whom the Lord loves He corrects, even as a father the son in whom he delights" (Prov. 3:11-12).

Ask any employer. Having to deal with an employee who is doing wrong but cannot take criticism well is one of his/her hardest jobs. That's why Proverbs makes so much of the ability to take correction.

2. You do not take offense easily. You are hard to offend.

"The discretion of a man defers his anger, and it is his glory to pass over a transgression" (Prov. 19:11). "Love ... is not easily provoked" (1 Cor. 13:5).

"He who is slow to wrath is of great understanding, but he who is hasty of spirit ("short of spirit," literally) exalts folly" (Prov. 14:29). This is the description of a person strong in self-esteem, certain of their mission and settled in their inner spirit. It's how we want to be. (Want to see that very description of our Lord? Look at the first four verses of John 13. This is what gave Jesus the strength and humility to wash the feet of the disciples.)

3. You can receive criticism without feeling you have to defend yourself.

"Rebuke a wise man, and he will love you" (Prov. 9:8b). "A fool despises his father's instruction, but he who regards reproof is prudent" (Prov. 15:5). And, "A reproof enters deeper into a wise man than a hundred stripes into a fool"

(Prov. 17:10).

I have yet to meet the man who enjoys being criticized. And yet, it's a constant in any life. There is no position worth having in this world where criticism is not a fact of daily existence. So, anyone who intends to do something of value in his lifetime would do well to master the art of receiving criticism without feeling the need to defend. Even if you say "I was only responding to the points he made," to many, it will appear you are defending yourself. (And yet, there are times when we must explain and even defend. Pray for wisdom.)

4. You can choose your words carefully.

"A man has joy by the answers of his mouth, and a word spoke in due season, how good it is!" (Prov. 15:23). "Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (Prov. 29:20).

The person who takes the time to consider what he is about to say and then speaks wisely is in control of his own spirit. How often have we heard people bragging about their inability to do this very thing: "Well, that's who I am! If I think it, I say it!" (The rest of us roll our eyes and think, "Dear Lord, deliver me!")

Of Proverbs 31's "virtuous woman," it was said, "She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the teaching of kindness" (Prov. 31:26). May that be said of us.

5. You guard your tongue.

"Whoever guards his mouth and tongue keeps his soul from trouble" (Prov. 21:23). A prayer I've prayed almost daily for decades is Psalm 141:3 "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips."

Fully one-half of the problems I have had throughout my long life were self-inflicted, and most of those involved the

inability to keep my mouth shut. They said of Job, “Your words have raised up him who was falling, and you have fortified the feeble knees” (Job 4:4). Somewhere I found a variation of that, which says: “Your words have stood men on their feet.” I like that so much, it has been my verse and my constant prayer. (We’ve all seen the power of words to knock people off their feet. The stories we could tell! But here and there among us, you will find those golden individuals with the power to stand people back on their feet using nothing more than words. I want that to be me. And so do you, I wager.)

6. You are in command of your appetite.

The appetite is a spirit within us, and sometimes it feels demonic, demanding, out of control! We smile at Proverbs 23:1-2. “When you sit down to eat with a ruler, consider diligently what is before you; and put a knife to your throat, if you are a man given to appetite.” To be sure, the control of the appetite at all times—for food, success, glory, sex, anything—is a huge accomplishment.

7. You can do good deeds without mentioning it to anyone.

“Whoever boasts himself of a false gift is like clouds and wind without rain” (Prov. 25:14). But that’s “falsely boasting.” What about if I really gave that much money? Made that great sacrifice? Did that sacrificial act? Can’t I tell that? Answer: Only in extreme situations. Only when doing so helps others and honors God.

Our Lord said, “Do not let your left hand know what your right is doing” (Matt. 6:3). Do your good deeds in secret, Jesus said (see Matt. 6:2-18).

8. You can resist the urge to meddle in another’s business.

“He who passes by and meddles with strife not belonging to him is like one who takes a dog by the ears” (Prov. 26:17). John MacArthur notes: “The dog was not domesticated in Palestine

and thus to grab any dog was dangerous. The aggressor deserved to be bitten for his unprovoked act.” (Ask any law enforcement officer about having to walk into a domestic fight. Many an innocent person has paid the ultimate price.)

9. You are able to respond to a harsh putdown with gentleness.

“A soft answer turns away wrath, but grievous words stir up anger” (Prov. 15:1). Sometimes, when an anonymous critic leaves a devastating criticism of something I’ve written on my website, the temptation to respond ‘in kind’ is powerful. But how much stronger—and more difficult—it is to say simply, “Thank you. You may be right.” And perhaps, “Pray for me.”

10. You can make yourself do the hard tasks, rather than give in to the urge to take the easy path.

“He becomes poor who deals with a slack hand, but the hand of the diligent makes rich” (Prov. 10:4). “The hand of the diligent will rule, but the slothful will be put to forced labor” (Prov. 12:24).

One who rules his spirit can make himself get out of bed and go to work, get in the car and seek out a difficult person in order to make peace, and write a check to a great ministry when he wants so much to indulge himself with that money.

One who rules his own spirit can be gentle with others and strong with himself.

A prayer I once heard and have used ever since says: “Lord, give me a heart of fire toward Thee, a heart of flesh toward my neighbor, and a heart of iron toward myself.” Amen to that.
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