



Session 2 – What Is Self-Control?

The New Testament uses several different words for “self-control” and gives us pictures of self-control in action. In this lesson we will examine the definition of self-control by looking at these terms, see a description of self-control, and end by examining a potential danger inherent in self-control.

The Definition of Self-Control

There are three words that are primarily used for self-control. All three of these words are used to describe what a pastor should be, but all are used as necessary virtues of God’s people as well. Although their meanings overlap significantly, subtle differences can be detected that when put together give us a fuller picture of what self-control is.

Sophroneo word family

This word describes someone in their right mind

And they came to Jesus and saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had had the legion, sitting there, clothed and in his **right mind**, and they were afraid. Mark 5:15 (cf Luke 8:35)

For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our **right mind**, it is for you. 2 Corinthians 5:13

But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and **rational** words. Acts 26:25

This word should characterize all Christians

Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, **self-controlled**, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 1 Timothy 3:2 (cf Titus 1:8)

1 But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. 2 Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, **self-controlled**, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. 3 Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, 4 and so **train** the young women to love their husbands and children, 5 to be **self-controlled**, 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**. Titus 2:1-6

This word is something God's grace teaches us

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**, upright, and godly lives in the present age, Titus 2:11-12

This word is the opposite of being controlled by fear

for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and **self-control**. 2 Timothy 1:7

This word should be motivated by the reality of eternity

The end of all things is at hand; therefore be **self-controlled** and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. 1 Peter 4:7

Summary: The *sophroneo* word family communicates sound, rational thinking that leads to appropriate behavior. This is why it has been variously translated as sober-minded, self-

controlled, rational, and right mind. “It often especially refers to an individual’s ability to rise above the passions to act in the best way possible in any given situation and as a way of life.”¹ In other words, this word means someone is making right decisions based on what they know, not on how they feel. It emphasizes the intellectual side of self-control. When thinking of this word, we should imagine a teenager who’s friends encourage him to try drugs. He wants their approval, but has seen too many warning ads against drugs and responds with “Thanks, but I’m not that stupid!”

***Egkrateia* word family**

This word is used of athletes and focuses on “willpower”

Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. 1 Corinthians 9:25

This word is something that the Holy Spirit must produce

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, **self-control**; against such things there is no law. Galatians 5:22-23

Summary: The *egkrateia* word family emphasizes power over one’s feelings and emotions. It emphasizes the volitional side of self-control. When thinking of this word, we should picture a professional athlete before game day being offered a dozen Krispy Kreme donuts. He grits his teeth, clenches his fist, and says “No, I will not compromise myself; I’ve worked too hard!”

***Nepho* word family**

¹ Timothy Hughes, “Meet for the Master’s Use: The Relationship Between the Minister’s Sanctification and Effectiveness in the Pastoral Epistles” PhD diss., Bob Jones University, 2015.

This word is contrasted with drunkenness

6 So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and **be sober**. 7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. 8 But since we belong to the day, let us be **sober**, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. 1 Thessalonians 5:6-8

This word is necessary because of great danger around us

Be **sober-minded**; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. 1 Peter 5:8

The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and **sober-minded** for the sake of your prayers. 1 Peter 4:7

This word is required of all

(Deacon's wives) Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but **sober-minded**, faithful in all things. 1 Timothy 3:11

(Older Men) Older men are to be **sober-minded**, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. Titus 2:2

(Pastors) As for you, always be **sober-minded**, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. 2 Timothy 4:5 (cf 1 Timothy 3:2)

Summary: The *nepho* word family This word originally meant to be sober in the sense of “not drunk,” however it later came to be expanded to included being free from “excess, passion, rashness, confusion, etc.”² This emphasizes the emotional dimension of self-control. We could picture it as someone

² BDAG, *νήφω*

coming home from work discouraged, depressed, and wanting desperately to watch Netflix for hours when they have work they need to accomplish for the next day, and doing the work instead of letting their feelings control them.

Conclusion

Self-control is the Spirit-filled, grace empowered virtue of making choices on the basis of rational thinking even when our passions and desires disagree. It involves thinking clearly, and exercising our will in favor of what we know to be right and not being controlled by our emotions.

The Description of Self-Control

Paul compares living a disciplined life to an athlete training for a competition in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, and he draws several points of parallel between the two.

1. Both have something to gain (v 24-25).
2. Both must be self-controlled in every area (v 25).
3. Both must work hard (v 26).
4. Both have something to lose (v 27).

The Danger of Self-Control

The danger in doing a lesson like this is that the focus can become almost exclusively on the *self* of *self*-control. We could potentially forget two very important factors.

1. Self-Control must be empowered by God's grace (Titus 2:11-12).
2. Self-Control is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).