

“Muscle Memory”

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 ¹

As far as I can tell, the premier fighter jet in the U.S. arsenal is the F-35C, which costs \$123 million per jet (let that sink in if you can). When pilots are flying that jet, whether in combat or in routine operations, a great deal of what they do to fly that aircraft happens automatically, beneath conscious awareness, having been practiced over and over for years so that they become “second nature.” There’s just no time to be thinking through all those decisions in the heat of battle.

When we say something is “second nature,” we mean that it has become so habitual that it has become nearly so much a part of us as our genetic traits. Athletes do the same thing, and so do musicians. Specific sub-routines are practiced often—frequently every day—so that they can be brought into play in performance without conscious thought.

Another term we use to describe such “second nature” characteristics is “muscle memory.” We practice particular movements so many times in exactly the same way that when it’s time for the gymnastics routine, particular muscles act in a particular order and with the specific movement and energy needed without much conscious thought.

Today we’re considering the last of the nine “Fruit of the Spirit”—“self-control,” and self-control is a “second nature” sort of thing. “Self-control” has to do with the “muscle memory” that causes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and faithfulness to become “second nature” in our lives.

There’s another sense in which “second nature” applies to persons who have been born again. In being born again, born from Above, we receive a new, redeemed nature by God’s grace and through God’s Spirit, who comes to live in us forever.

Paul spoke about our first, unredeemed nature as “*the mind-set of the flesh,*” and he spoke about our “second nature” as “*the mind-set of the Spirit*” (Romans 8:6). And as crucial as it is to receive this “second nature” from God so that we *are able to have* “the mind-set of the Spirit,” I expect that you have discovered that receiving this “second nature” does not do away with the first. These two natures wrestle for ascendancy within us for the rest of our earthly lives. Paul lamented that “*I do not understand what I am doing, because I do not practice what I want to do, but I . . . practice the evil that I do not want to do*” (Romans 7:14-25).

The story goes that a retired missionary visited the area where he had served for many years and talked with a man who had become a believer “back in the day.” This believer told the missionary, “It’s like there are two dogs fighting within me. One dog is good, and one dog is evil; and it seems that the evil dog wins the fight as often as not.”

After thinking about this for a moment, the missionary asked, “So which dog are you feeding?” The question of “self-control” has to do with “feeding the good dog.”

That’s what Paul was talking about in this morning’s text: “*Don’t you know that the runners in a stadium all race, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way as to win the prize. Now everyone who competes exercises self-control in everything. They do it to receive a perishable crown [and to get on the Wheaties box], but we an imperishable crown* (1 Corinthians 9:24-25).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on September 24, 2017. “The Big Nine, #9: Self-Control.”

When we lived in Louisville, horse racing was, of course, a big deal, with the Kentucky Derby being a local event. One of many characteristics of a winning jockey is to stay as light as possible in order to increase the horse's speed. I think it was jockey Pat Day who said that, even on days when he won the Derby, the only thing he allowed himself to do to celebrate was to stick a fork in a cake and lick the fork. That's self-control.

The word Paul used for "self-control" in our text is *ἐγκρατευεται* (*enkrateuetai*); and the word he used in the "Fruit of the Spirit" is *ἐγκρατεια* (*enkrateia*). Both words come from the same root in Greek, and the concept of "self-control" had a long history in Greek philosophy. Socrates introduced the idea of self-control to Greek ethics.² Plato contrasted self-control with overindulgence in both food and sex,³ and Aristotle described "self-control" as "powerful passions under strict control," perhaps like a trained war-horse.⁴

Self-control is an attitude that masters and channels our own desires so that we are fit to be the servants of our Lord. Self-control has to do with wanting to do one thing but choosing to do another. *Self-control does what is needed, when it is needed, whether we really want to do it or not.* We sometimes use the term "will power" to describe the emotional and mental energy required to exert such self-control.

Jesus both exemplified and commanded self-control. He knew we are tempted to worry, but told us to pray instead. He knew we are inclined to curse, but told us to bless instead. He knew we frequently lean toward hate, but told us to love instead.

N. T. Wright, the famous British theologian, uses the word "virtue" for "self-control": "Virtue is what happens when someone has made a thousand small choices requiring effort and concentration to do something which is good and right, but which doesn't come naturally. And then, on the thousand and first time, when it really matters, they find that they do what's required automatically. Virtue is what happens when wise and courageous choices become second nature."⁵

This process of developing a new, God-powered, "second nature," involves a process of intentional habit formation that the New Testament calls "sanctification," or "being made holy" (2 Thessalonians 2:13). Sanctification is about becoming like Jesus, and that's what "self-control" is really all about.

There is a growing body of empirical research that suggests that self-control is rather like a muscle. Like a muscle, self-control weakens after vigorous use, but strengthens with frequent and incrementally increased use.⁶ Studies on self-control have grown in the past two decades, and research has found that people with more self-control live longer, are happier, get better grades, are less depressed, are more physically active, have lower resting heart rates, have less alcohol abuse, have more stable emotions, are more helpful to others, get better jobs, earn more money, have better marriages, are more faithful in marriage, and sleep better at night. Sounds good so far, right?

It's probably important to say at this point that while growing in self-control makes our character more Christlike, which is God's goal for our character; it is not necessary to have

² *Xenophon, Memorabilia*, 1.5.4

³ *Republic* 390B, 430E

⁴ *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.4.1145Bff.

⁵ Cited by Bradley Wright with David Carreon, "The Science of Sinning Less," *Christianity Today*, April 2017. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/may/science-of-sinning-less.html>

⁶ Much of this discussion comes from Wright and Carreon's article.

mature self-control in order to be loved by God. My friend, there is nothing you can ever do that will cause God to love you any more than God already loves you; and there is nothing you can ever do to cause God to love you any less than God already loves you. **You are loved at this very moment with all the fullness of love that God has had for you since before the moment of creation** (Ephesians 1:3-14)! Let your heart be glad!

At the same time, God really does want us to develop the Character of Jesus—which is God’s own Character—so that we can be fully effective as God’s ambassadors in the world, and so we can fully receive the Gift God has prepared for us in the Life to Come. Developing self-control helps us to experience the other eight Fruit of the Spirit with increasing success and decreasing effort—they become “second nature” to us, and that’s the point.

Time restricts what we can do right now, but let me mention four areas where we humans frequently have trouble with self-control: *anger, alcohol, sex, and food*. I’ll briefly describe the shape of the problem and then suggest directions for forward movement.

ANGER. Dr. Ben Carson has been somewhat less successful in his political efforts than he was as a pediatric neurosurgeon; but in that highly-specialized field of surgery, perhaps the most difficult of all, he was among the very best in the world.

You may not know that as a teen, Ben Carson had a terrible problem with anger, so much so that when he was fourteen, he tried to stab a friend in an argument over what station to listen to on the radio. The knife broke when it hit the other boy’s belt buckle. Realizing what he had just done, Ben ran home to confront his anger before God. Claiming Proverbs 16:32 (*He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city*), Ben began a journey of transformation that continues to this day.⁷

ALCOHOL. Equally faithful Christians understand the Bible’s teaching about drinking alcohol differently, and Sarah Bessey had never had any trouble with her drinking, until, early last year, she became convicted that God wanted her to stop drinking altogether.

Sarah began to be haunted by Hebrews 12:1-2—*Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith*—and she wondered why, if drinking wasn’t a problem for her, it was so difficult to put it down.

In her blog post, “So I Quit Drinking,” Sarah wrote that “Conviction is less about condemnation than it is about invitation. It’s an invitation into freedom. It’s an invitation into wholeness.”⁸ That’s worth saying again: **“Conviction is less about condemnation than it is about invitation. It’s an invitation into freedom. It’s an invitation into wholeness.”** That’s a good summary of what self-control is all about.

SEX. It is no longer news to observe that our world is obsessed with sex. Pornography is a global plague, and the scourge of human trafficking is one of its dark products.

We cherish our liberties in this country, as well we should, but those liberties often run amuck. Those who study such things say that as many as 90% of all the pornography websites in the world originate in this country;⁹ and in that respect, at least, other nations are right to call

⁷ Ben Carson, *Take the Risk* (Zondervan, 2008).

⁸ Sarah Bessey, “So I Quit Drinking,” *Sarah Bessey blog*, 3.11.17.

⁹ Rachael Brown, “The Nation in Numbers,” *The Atlantic* (January/February 2010), 57.

us “decadent.” At the same time, pornography is rampant pretty much everywhere, including Japan, Indonesia, China, South Korea, Ghana, Kenya, Uzbekistan, Egypt, Tunisia, Lebanon, Pakistan . . . and the list is almost literally without end.¹⁰

The American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers—divorce lawyers—recently observed that 56% of divorce cases involve “one party having obsessive interest in pornography,” while 68% of divorce cases these days involve one spouse having an affair with someone they met over the Internet.¹¹

FOOD. I doubt that we need much evidence to demonstrate our troubles with food. Our mirrors tell that tale painfully well. We can read pamphlet after pamphlet about the risks of obesity and watch ad after ad about the need to “eat healthy,” but more than 1/3 of us in America are officially obese.¹² Houston, we have a problem.

This list of troubles—anger, alcohol, sex, and food—can be pretty discouraging, but both the Bible and science give us guidance about how to move forward. Paul told us that we must “**put to death** what belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry” (Colossians 3:5), and he said that “*we take every thought captive to obey Christ*” (2 Corinthians 10:5). That sounds pretty serious. It also sounds pretty intentional.

I suspect that those pilots, musicians and athletes with which we began know something about “taking every thought captive” and about “putting to death” inclinations that distract from the goal. Just remember what I told you about Pat Day. So here are a few principles that may help us on the journey toward the sanctification of self-control:

1. **Be clear about your goal.** How much do you REALLY want to develop love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness in your life?
2. **Focus on the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that you desire to become characteristic of your life** (love, joy, peace, etc.). Develop “tiny habits” that can, over time, become “second nature” so that little by little, you are transformed. What we practice is what we become. That was the “which dog are you feeding” thing.
3. **Recognize that self-control and will power operate similarly to your physical muscles.** They become weaker after vigorous exercise and stronger with repeated use. This means that we are more vulnerable after a significant will power/self-control event than we were before it, and we need to therefore be careful about the situations we allow ourselves to encounter in that depleted state.
4. **Build on and plan for incremental and small successes.** Physical exercise begins with just a few repetitions and builds as stamina increases. Plan small success steps and celebrate small victories.
5. **Monitor your stress level.** Self-control diminishes under constant stress. Adequate rest is essential. There’s a reason why pilots, truck drivers, railroad engineers, and surgeons have enforced limits to their work hours.

¹⁰ J. D. Payne, *Pressure Points: Twelve Global Issues Shaping the Face of the Church* (Nelson, 2013), pp. 152-153.

¹¹ Nathan Black, “Family Group Releases Study on Effects of Pornography,” www.christianpost.com (12.2.2009).

¹² <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html>

6. **Eating healthy foods still matters.** Refined sugars and processed grains put blood sugar on a roller coaster, and low blood sugar is correlated with diminished self-control.
7. **Eliminate hurry from your life.** Hurry makes us less responsive to God, to others, and to ourselves, and it depletes self-control.
8. **Develop healthy interpersonal relationships.** Interpersonal conflict diminishes self-control.
9. **Avoid putting yourself in situations where behaving in non-self-controlled ways is a temptation.** As Paul told Timothy in his last letter to him, “*Flee from youthful passions, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart*” (2 Timothy 2:22). Flee! This is serious business! Run!
10. **Maintain a humble spirit.** In any given situation, your store of self-control is probably less than you think it is.¹³

As you can see, being shaped into the character of Jesus is more difficult than our initial decision to be born again. This shaping lasts as long as we live on Earth, and it’s only as effective as our cooperation with it. Continuing shaping requires our continuing cooperation.

God’s purpose is to build deep into the DNA of your spirit the Jesus-qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). But this shaping depends on your intentional and continuous focusing of your life on worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry and mission—which is why we encourage one another to do these things each and every week.

C. S. Lewis reminded us that God’s purpose is to make us into “dazzling, radiant, immortal creatures, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine.”¹⁴ Jesus’ command to “*be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect*” (Matthew 5:48) is neither idealistic foolishness nor a command to do the impossible. God intends to make us into creatures who can obey that command.¹⁵

Paul had all this in mind when he wrote, “*I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the mighty working of his strength*” (Ephesians 1:18-19).

May it be so, in my life and in yours, my friends. It’s all by grace!

¹³ Jeanna Bryner, “Temptation Harder to Resist Than You Think, Study Suggests,” *Live Science*, 8.3.09.

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan), p. 85.

¹⁵Ibid, p. 89.