

Lesson 11

How to Develop Self-Discipline (1)

Jesus said, “Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Mark 8:34). This study has been about learning to deny ourselves—learning to control or master ourselves. We have seen that God demands self-denial. We saw that we must suppress our will and put God’s will first. We learned that meekness is a part of denying ourselves and we saw how to apply it in our lives. We looked at the principle of temperance and how it applies in so many areas of life.

In this lesson and the next, let’s consider how we can develop self-discipline.

Begin with an “I Can” Attitude

The apostle Paul had an “I can” attitude. He said, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13). This is not an all-inclusive PMA statement. Rather, in context, Paul is saying that he can do what God expects of him. He can live with or live without some of the pleasures of life. He can abound or be abased. In application, I learn that I can fulfill any command, bear any trial, perform any duty, meet any temptation, and live in any circumstance with Christ.

Since God expects me to control myself, then I can do it. I can say “No.” I can refrain. I can bridle my tongue. I can quit what I know to be wrong. I can make myself do what I know I need to do (Jas. 4:17). I can do without some things that I may desire and want. I can overcome habits and practices that I have learned and developed.



One who begins with a defeatist attitude will not make the effort to discipline self. When facing a challenge, some will say things like, “I don’t know. . . . I’ll try, but I don’t think I can do it.” Or, “It is hard for me to. . . .”

If we begin with the attitude that we can control ourselves, then that leads to an “I will” attitude (cf. Heb. 6:3). That involves determination. With those attitudes we will master self.

Refuse to Dwell on What You Need to Deny

Too often we dwell on things that we don’t need, can’t afford or can’t do. We spend time thinking about how we would like to get even with someone, knowing all the while that we cannot. We may focus on the fun we are missing by living right. We may think about things we would like to say that we shouldn’t. Ungodly fantasies may camp in our minds. We must realize that it is hard to “window shop” without either buying something or making ourselves miserable.

Self-Discipline

The answer is simply to control our thinking. Outward sin comes from our thoughts (Matt. 15:19). The point is: stop your thoughts before they lead to sin. Lustful thoughts can lead to adultery (2 Sam. 11; Matt. 5:28). Bitterness and hatred can lead to murder (1 John 3:15).

This principle includes thinking on things that are sinful. We are to deny “ungodliness and worldly lusts” (Titus 2:12).

It also includes things right within themselves like: (1) material things beyond our reach (Phil. 4:11; Heb. 13:5), (2) something the doctor has forbidden, or (3) anything to the excess.

Think before You Act

Joseph is a classic example of this (Gen. 39). When tempted by Potiphar’s wife, he thought about: (1) the sin and wickedness involved and (2) the trust that Potiphar had in him. His thinking led to his control of self.

David said, “I thought about my ways, and turned my feet to Your testimonies” (Ps. 119:59).

Some questions need to be raised (especially in the midst of temptation) to help us learn to exercise self-control: (1) Is this how God wants me to respond? (2) Am I yielding to my own desires or to the desires of God? (3) Will I be controlling myself in this? (4) Should I say this? Does it serve any good purpose? (5) Is this what I need? (6) Can I afford this? (7) Can I do without this? (8) Will I be ashamed after I do

this? (9) Will I regret my actions later? (10) Would I want my children and other family members to know if I do this?

It follows that if all sin comes from the wrong thoughts, then right thoughts lead to right actions (Matt. 15:19). That is one of the reasons why Paul wrote, “Finally,

brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things” (Phil. 4:8).

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Questions

1. In view of its context, what is the point of Philippians 4:13?

NOTES

2. What is the “I can” attitude? _____

3. An “I can” attitude leads to an “_____” attitude.
4. Where does all sin begin? _____
5. List some things we should not think and dwell upon that may be right within themselves.

6. What should we think about before we act? _____

Find the Passage

1. “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.” _____
2. “Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.” _____
3. “And this we will do if God permits.” _____
4. List any practical lessons you have learned from this study.

