Self-control

Self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23). It is the capacity to control one’s own appetite, desires, emotions, fears and pain. The person who lacks self-control may be a hedonist, someone who avidly sets out to have a good time, and to enjoy life without restraint. Alternatively a person lacking self-control may be weak, the kind of person Paul portrays in Romans 7:14-24, someone who knows the good that they ought to do, but who lacks the inner strength to live that way in practice. It is sometimes helpful to use spatial imagery to envisage what Paul is saying here: the external power of sin has assumed control of the flesh, and has overpowered the inner person who delights in the law of God. However, the good news is that God in Christ has condemned sin in the flesh and has sent his Spirit into our hearts, so that as those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit, they can put to death the deeds of the body (Romans 8:1-13). The indwelling Spirit of Christ renews our inner minds and enables us to wrest back control of our bodies from the usurping power of Sin, enabling is to live in the world as God’s children. Our bodies are contested territory: under the dominion of the external power of Sin, our bodies are flesh, destined for death and destruction, but when reclaimed by the indwelling Spirit of God, our bodies are destined for life and resurrection. Paul would say that Sin is so powerful that self-control is only possible by the Spirit of Christ: our part is to set our mind on the things of the Spirit and by the Spirit to put to death the deeds of the body (Romans 8:5, 13). What does this mean in practice?

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul compares the exercising the discipline of self-control to an athlete training for a competition. Does reflecting on this image help you develop your understanding of self-control in any way?

We have seen that the four cardinal virtues of justice, courage, self-control and wisdom were first developed by the Greek philosopher Aristotle. Aristotle claimed that those who avoid pain are either soft or lacking in self-control (*Nicomachean Ethics* 7.2-3). Do you think that our comfortable lifestyle has made us soft, and does that have a knock-on effect on our levels of self-discipline? If so, is there anything we can do about this?

For Aristotle, the person who is able control their desires comes midway between someone who pursues or gives into unbridled desires on the one hand, and the person who has little or no natural desires at all on the other – though he admits that people in the latter category are rare. The desires for food and sex are natural and are good, so long as they are kept under control. However, in 1 Timothy 4:3 we find an indictment of those who forbid marriage and require people to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. It appears that some people were seeking to counter natural human desires by saying that what was desired was bad and forbidden. However, Paul maintains that everything God has created is good; nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer (1 Timothy 4:4): God richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment (6:17). Being self-controlled does not mean depriving ourselves of all avenues of enjoyment! When it comes to enjoying the good things in life, why and how is self-control preferable to self-indulgence or self-denial?

The pastoral letters repeatedly commend self-control over self-indulgence (1 Timothy 2:9; 5:6; 2 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:8; 2:4, 6 12). Would you say that as a society we have grown more self-indulgent over the years? If so, why do you think that is the case, and what have the consequences been?

Self-control is also about managing our fears: what happens when fear starts to dictate our behaviour? How does 2 Timothy 1:7 help us overcome our fears?

‘God, let me out right before interest; let me put others before self;

Let me put the things of the spirit before the things of the body.

Let me put the attainment of noble ends above the enjoyment of present pleasures.

Let me put principle above reputation. Let me put thee before all else. Amen.’

(John Baillie)