

SELF-CONTROL

Two-year-old Johnny was sitting in his mother's lap at the kitchen table. He reached for a dish of steamed squash, but his mother pulled him, back and said "No." He twisted his shoulders back and forth as if to break her grasp, and then he defiantly slapped the table with the palm of his hand. His face expressed anger. He made grunting noises that were clearly designed to imitate an angry bear. He highly resented his mother limiting his powers of indulgence. He wanted to indulge his sense of touch, smell, taste, and sight, along with the human drive to manipulate. And finally, he wanted to indulge in controlling his environment and those in it. This mentality of 'give it to me now has been developing since the day he was born. He has now had two years to accept it as a way of life. His parents are wondering if they should start training him to exercise self-control. However, they are two years overdue.

Parents are responsible to impart values and self-control to their children, but there is a dilemma. The infant has fully developed fleshly desires and habits of indulgence long before his mental faculties have developed to the level where he can understand the need to exercise self-control. When a child gets old enough to begin to develop a will to exercise self-control (possibly around three or four) his flesh is already well practiced in the dark arts of indulgence. His flesh will get a three or four year head start on the development of his sense of duty. He is born with a **wanter** but no stopper — with a gas peddle but no brake. At age three or four he will already be a confirmed 'pleasure junkie, a 'do as I please rebel, an 'if it feels good do it hippie, a 'nobody tells me what to do politician, a spoiled brat. With intemperate habits already well formed, he is not going to appreciate the call of his newly developing conscience toward self-restraint. Nor will he appreciate anyone else trying to impose limitations on his addiction to indulgence. In the extraordinary ignorance of modern psychology we are told that the child should be left to his own free expressions, that we must be careful not to suppress his personality. What will you do when his free expressions are antisocial, when his behavior is disgusting and embarrassing? Will you call it modern art, and appreciate it for its original departure from the prudent? To allow 'free expression is to allow the child the freedom to be in bondage to appetite and carnal desire. We would no more allow a child the freedom to wander and explore the bounds of his drives and passions than we would allow him the freedom to wander in traffic. If you lovingly provide everything a child needs, but fail to cross his will with enforced boundaries, you will by default produce a self-centered, carnally minded, emotionally disturbed, and, at the best, an average member of the group hanging out at the mall.

Selfish Self-control

If parents don't institute and enforce boundaries, the child will eventually develop some of his own. It happens by osmosis as he bumps into the boundaries that society erects for its own selfish ends. A man that wants to eat everything learns to control his drive until he gets out of the store. A man that wants to get drunk, yet wants to keep his job so as to have enough money to keep drinking, learns not to drink on the job. His self-interests will cause him to exercise the level of self-restraint necessary to continue functioning in a circle that 'indulges and lets indulge. Any self-control your child develops out of his contact with society is going to be for the purpose of advancing his indulgence with the least amount of friction.

It is universal to disguise one's fleshly living as some form of self-restraint. This is possible because of that segment of society that has thrown off all restraint and indulges its flesh to the extreme. The radical fringe makes the vast majority of intemperate sinners look normal by comparison. The socially conscious majority are pragmatic enough to exercise sufficient self-restraint so as to maximize their indulgence without diminishing their mental pleasure in regard to their pride of life. In other words, the middle of the road sinner will learn to balance intemperance over against his desire to appear moral. His relative self-control is prompted by desires to both indulge and maintain a reputation that offers the most mental satisfaction. It is a juggling act of balancing one pleasure against another — the end always the same: self-gratification. This calculated and rationed self-restraint will never produce benevolence and godliness; it will produce sophisticated, culturally adapted hypocrites, who seek the fulfillment of animal drives while pretending a higher motive.

If you learn to function this way without hurting anyone other than a few people close to you, society will consider you mature and emotionally stable. You will succeed in life and will be considered a good "Christian." Wanting to appear righteous is not the same thing as wanting to be righteous. Sin has many roots and quite a few disguises. Jesus said, "You do indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but within you are full of dead men's bones."

In our present age, a child has no hope unless his parents have the wisdom and courage to ignore modern psychology and the low expectations of the church as they train up the child in the way he should go. Basically a child needs two things: a stable secure environment of love and understanding, and boundaries consistently enforced by a dignified authority.

It is the parents responsibility to cause the child to exercise moderation and restraint. When a child is less than two years old, you cannot expect him to offer any assistance in constraining his appetites and drives. He will eat everything that tastes good, demand anything that appeals to him, expect to be the center of attention, and is unwilling to wait for any reason. Face the fact: no child is going to develop wholesome self-control naturally, and if you wait for him to get old enough to adopt the relative standards of society, you will find yourself fighting a battle against well entrenched depravity.

So how do we induce a child to practice self-control in the early years before he is mature enough to understand the need to do so? A small child learns self-control when his will is constrained by an outside force — in our case, that outside force is his parents. For the constraint to translate into soul training it must make use of the child's will. If you tie a child's hands behind his back, you have negated his ability to learn to control his hands. Likewise, if you place an object out of reach, the child cannot learn to restrain himself from reaching for it. Self-control is learned when self is controlling self. Pressure must be placed on the child's will, not restraint on his body. The will of the child must be bracketed with constraints that cause him to *choose* to control his impulses.

You may ask how it is beneficial to *constrain* the child to choose the end we dictate if his choosing does not spring from his own values. Is the child building character if he chooses 'A simply because we are there to make it very unpleasant for him to choose 'B on which his lust is focused?

Here is the key, the reason behind early conditioning. We are constraining the volitional part of the child to control the appetite part. In other words, we are exercising the spirit and will of the child, causing the soulish self to exercise command over the fleshly self. Just as we move the limbs of a stroke victim in anticipation of the day when he will be able to move them, so we exercise the child's will against the resistance of his fleshly drives, and this in anticipation of the day when his soul will be mature enough to value temperance. By causing the child to employ the mechanics of moral choice, he is denying his propensity to intemperance and is stunting the growth of his flesh, keeping it from gaining ascendancy over the soul. Thus, when the child is old enough to hold his own moral values, he will already possess a will that is accustomed to exercising control over the flesh, and he will already be comfortable with the idea that life is built around the concept of self-control and self-denial. By way of illustration, we are not waiting for him to become a confirmed alcoholic; we are causing him to refuse the first drink.

People control impulses to seek pleasure only when they deem it needful to do so. Adults can see the future and recognize the ill consequences of indiscriminate gratification, but a child can see only immediate pleasure or pain. His reason and conscience is worthless as a guide — powerless against the ever-present lust for pleasure. He knows no tomorrow, no day of judgment. If ill consequences do not come with the first bite or first touch, he does not consider the consequences. Don't bother to tell him that too much candy will give him cavities or incline him to diabetes. Don't bother to warn him that too much television will stunt his intellectual and social growth and diminish the quality of his life when he is grown. If it promises to feel good right now, he will do it. You are wasting your time to warn a little fat girl that she must exercise self-control in her eating lest she will produce more fat cells, thus inclining her to obesity when she is grown. It won't even do any good to warn her that when she is older and wanting to impress the fellows that most of them will pass her by because she is fat. She just says, "Pass the mayonnaise and cheese dip." You are wasting the child's time to tell her to wait because "patience is a virtue." She can't eat virtue, and she thinks patients are in hospitals. "I want to eat now, so why shouldn't I?"

Later on she may give up food because she values her sex appeal and social image more than eating, but she has just traded one indulgence for another. She has not learned self-control. She has learned to discriminate between the various roads to pleasure. Her soul still has but one end — self-gratification.

Self-control is not expressed in any one act; it is a condition of heart. It is the character to sacrifice any gratification, legitimate or otherwise, for the sake of divine principle. It is following the high road at the expense of any pleasure or comfort. The entire moral condition could be summed up in the concept of self-control. While we live in these bodies of flesh, the definition of righteousness is almost synonymous with self-control. If you have not trained the child to temperance by the time he is three or four years old, then you have allowed depravity to perfect itself.

So how do you cause a child to make a choice to deny his most pressing passions? If flesh is more fun, why would a child choose principle? He won't unless you add some element that convinces him there is more immediate pleasure in principle than passion, or more immediate pain in passion than in principle.

The child cannot yet understand that which is obvious to a mature Christian, that lack of self-control is sin, and in the end sin brings misery and death. There is a sowing and reaping principle in place. "*For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.*" (Galatians 6:8). Sin (lack of self-control) has negative consequences. Self-control (righteousness) has positive consequences. All intemperance, willfulness, lust, greed, self-seeking, and carnal indulgence is sin. Sin ends in death. The Bible testifies that in eternity sin will end in damnation. The consequence of sin may not come for 80 years — until judgment day, but it will come.

The child is incapable of understanding long range consequences — whether one year from now or eternity. Parents must modify the child's environment to make the negative consequences immediately apparent to the child. This will require the fabrication of a rule of law based on real reward and punishment in the here-and-now. Parents must construct circumstances so as to give the child a true representation of reality. You cannot explain to a two-year-old that if he runs into the road he could be hurt, but you can apply a rod that causes him to feel the hurt when he crosses the sidewalk. You cannot tell a child that it is illegal to ride in a car unless in a restraining device. He will not understand the cost of a ticket or the potential for harm, but he can well understand the harm to his backside if he does not immediately sit down, buckle up, and enjoy the ride.

Keep in mind, the younger the child is the less he is able to retain in his memory the association between the act and the consequences. The smaller a child is the more he lives in the present only. That is why so many parents have found their spankings so

ineffective when they remove the child from the scene of the transgression to administer discipline. By the time the child has been led into the bedroom, he has forgotten the transgression. He associates the spanking with the bedroom, not the deed done in the living room. The same loss of association occurs when you delay spanking to grill the child with long lectures. He forgets the transgression and thinks he is getting a spanking for being bored with the speech. It is much more effective to keep several rods handy — one in every room — and be ready to administer one or two licks within seconds of the transgression. You don't need to make a lengthy ritual out of it. Some parents try to turn discipline into a revival meeting, complete with altar calls.

Likewise if you are not consistent, and you allow the child to occasionally get away with his lack of self-control, you are allowing a seed of dark hope to grow in his imagination.

It doesn't matter that you spank him five consecutive times for the same offense; if you fail to spank him the sixth time he commits the offense, he will keep violating the rule, bearing the pain, hoping for the exception to roll around again.

You need to compare the child's desire to indulge to the desire of an alcoholic. It is not rational. It is idiotic. Just the smell of indulgence will drive a child to absurd lengths. If every time an alcoholic took a drink, the alcohol produced an immediate hangover, once the drunk convinced himself that the pattern would never change, he would cease to drink. He drinks because there is immediate pleasure in it. Children abandon themselves to uncontrolled indulgence because it is immediately pleasurable, and they care not for the next hour, much less for the rest of their lives.

Parenting is being on the spot to bring discipline to every area of a child's life. If the child is to grow morally, we must arrange the consequences so that the child is always rewarded for the proper behavior and suffers for the negative. Make all negative behavior counterproductive and all positive behavior productive. Thwart any attempt of the child to act without restraint, by artificially constructing negative consequences. The rod is the ultimate negative consequence.

But don't depend on the rod alone. In reality, the rod is not sufficient by itself. Training is much broader, and in most cases can achieve the desired end very effectively long before you must resort to the rod. If you can consistently deny a child the indulgence he desires, you need not spank. The bottom line is not that the child be spanked, but that the proposed infraction is thwarted to the point of being unpleasant.

If you arrange circumstances so as to constrain the child to choose correctly, you are strengthening his soul while starving his flesh, and you are preventing bad habits from developing. Then when the child is old enough to possess the reins of his soul, the transfer will be easy. He learns why one thing is right and why another is wrong, and he begins to make his own decisions based on values that are now his own. Self-control is the foundation of all civilization and the essence of law and righteousness. Start training from the day he is born. If you missed the first few years, you will experience a lot of resistance to the new order from the older kids, but you must stand by your guns until they are convinced that you will not vacillate, and then reconstruct your home around peace, love, and self-control.