

A large, gnarled, white-barked tree with many thin, upright branches, standing in a dry, open landscape under a blue sky. The tree has a thick, textured trunk and numerous thin, upright branches that spread out in all directions. The ground is dry and brown, and the sky is a clear, bright blue.

EXERCISING SOBRIETY AND SELF-CONTROL

Biblical Research Library
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CONTENTS

Introduction – 3

1 – *Key Words And Concepts* – 5

2 – *Thinking Soberly* – 7

3 – *The Demeanor Of The Christian Life* – 8

4 – *Sobriety In Action* – 10

5 – *Signs Of Moral Degradation* – 11

6 – *Control In All Matters Of Life* – 12



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Exercising Sobriety & Self-Control

In 1 Kings 18 there is an interesting event that took place in the life of Elijah. It was an event that helps us identify the behavior of religionists who have created religion after their own extravagant emotional outburst. The occasion was Elijah's contest with 450 Baal prophets on Mount Carmel (1 Kg 18:19). When the prophets and people were gathered, Elijah challenged them, "**How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him, but if Baal, follow him.**" The people did not answer.

Elijah stood alone on this particular occasion. He affirmed to the misguided religionists and self-proclaimed prophets, "*I, even I only, remain a prophet of the Lord*" (1 Kg 18:22). To prove his affirmation, he challenged the people to collect two bulls and put each on an altar. He then challenged the preachers to cry out to their god, "Lord, Lord." He would simply call on the God of heaven. Whichever god answered with fire, then that would be the true God (1 Kg 18:23,24). That would be the God who had not been invented after the misguided imagination of religionists.

You know the story. From morning to noon, the Baal preachers cried out to the god they had created after their own imagination, "*O Baal, hear us,*" they pleaded (1 Kg 18:26). Throughout their cries, notice their foolish behavior. "*And they leaped on the altar that was made*" (1 Kg 18:26). They exerted great physical performances, jumping up and down

and carrying on like mad men in frenzied emotionalism. People who have created a religion after their own human emotionality behave in such a manner. The more they exert their emotions the more they think they validate their faith.

Elijah mocked the false preachers for their beliefs that led to their senseless behavior. "*Cry aloud,*" he chided them, "*for he is a god. Either he is meditating or he is busy or he is on a journey. Perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened*" (1 Kg 18:27). Now notice the incredible behavior of religionists who had created a religiosity after their own imagination and according to their own fanatical emotionalism. "*So they **cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their custom** with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them*" (1 Kg 18:28). These preachers continued to frenzy until the evening sacrifice. But still, there was no answer from the god they had created after their own image and a religion that was based on the misguided emotions of man. Their senseless behavior manifested the religious delusions of their own invention (See 2 Th 2:10-12). And according to the context, they acted "according to their custom." This was not a onetime outburst on their part, but a behavioral custom that identified their religiosity.

And so it is today with countless churches that have created a religiosity that produces bazaar behavior as the Baal preachers. Adherents carry on with hys-

terical and uncontrollable behavior while they cry out, “Lord, Lord.” In their ignorance of the word of God, they have fabricated a religiosity that is extreme in behavior because it lacks the substance of the controlling power of God’s word and the sobriety of a Spirit-guided life. Religionists who lack Bible knowledge will always seek to validate their religiosity “according to their customs” of colorful assemblies and uncontrolled behavior. “According to their custom” they will seek to prove their faith by their spiritual “cutting of themselves” until their own emotional “blood gushes out on them.” The more emotionally extreme they behave, the more they assume that there is a god out there who will hear them. But they are wrong. Their god does not answer, for their god is not “out there,” but only in their own minds. The only god who hears is the one that they have created in their own thinking. They are thus crying out to themselves in a futile effort for their god to send “fire from heaven.”

In the context of this emotional extremism, many religionists today have hijacked the name “Christian” in order to justify their amalgamation of some Bible with a lot of Baal. As the Baal preachers, they often lose control, forsake the sobriety by which Christians are to be known, and allow themselves to be carried away, as the Baal preachers, on a downhill spiral of emotional chaos and exhaustion. They have forgotten some very important characteristics of the Christian’s behavior that are identified in the word of God. For this reason, we

call for a restoration of the behavioral principles that are set forth in the word of God by the Holy Spirit. These are principles by which the Holy Spirit seeks to lead us lest we be brought into the subjection of our own misguided thinking and ignorance of His direction through the word of God. Through the Holy Spirit, God gave us the Scriptures “*for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness*” so that we might be complete and thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tm 3:16,17). For some emotional extremist, therefore, it is time for reproof, correction and instruction in the word of God. Their misguided emotionalism and behavior must be brought under the control of the word of God.

Our source for reproof, correction and instruction can only be the Scriptures. If we do not allow the Scriptures to guide us in these matters, then we are hopeless, carried about by every wind of teaching that comes forth from the mouths of false prophets who claim to be leading people closer to God. In the midst of emotional extremism in a chaotic religious world, there are many who care little for what the Bible says on these matters. Paul warned Timothy of such people. “*For the time will come when they will not endure sound teaching. But to suit their itching ears, they will surround themselves with teachers who will agree with their own desires. And they will turn away their ears from the truth and will be turned to fables*” (2 Tm 4:3,4). It is time to call “itching-ear churches” out of their emotional delu-

sions back to a life of self-control and sobriety that is led by the Spirit.

Chapter 1

Key Words And Concepts

There are some key words that the Holy Spirit used in order to define the demeanor of the character of Christians. In His use of these words in different contexts, the Spirit wanted to define the character and behavior that would identify the people of God. In our efforts to be Christ-like in our behavior, therefore, it is our task to pattern ourselves after the demeanor of character that is directed by the Spirit through the word of God.

A. Sobriety:

Sobriety, or soberness, is from the Greek word *sophrosune*, meaning “soundness of mind” (See At 26:25; 1 Tm 2:9,15). Sobriety refers to an inner self-control that brings into subjection one’s passions, emotions and desires. Sober-minded people have established in their lives an inner strength that consciously subjects all aspects of their demeanor of their will. The sober-minded person will never allow his mind to be driven uncontrollably by extreme emotions.

Sober is from the Greek word *sophron*. This word denotes one of a sound mind, and thus, one who continually lives the self-controlled life (See 1 Tm 3:2; Ti 1:8). The sober-minded person guards himself from emotional hysteria and extremism. Though the sober-minded person will experience great

excitement that leads to rejoicing, he or she will never allow his thinking and behavior to become senseless and beyond control. The mandate that comes from the Holy Spirit’s use of the words “sobriety” and “sober” means that Christians should under no circumstances voluntarily allow themselves to lose control of their senses and behavior.

B. Temperance (self-control):

“Temperance” is the older English word that is used to translate the Greek word *enkrateia* (See At 24:25; Gl 5:23; 2 Pt 1:6). Most modern translations render the Greek word “self-control.” Use of the word in various contexts refers to the will of man being brought under the subjection of the will of God. In “righteous” self-control, righteousness is defined by the direction of God through His word (At 24:25). Self-control in righteousness, therefore, is determined by the word of God. “Knowledge” in reference to self-control, as in 2 Peter 1:6, assumes that the knowledge that should lead us originates from God. The knowledge that one learns from the word of God must be implemented in the life of the student as he directs his behavior by God’s instructions. We would correctly assume, therefore, **that the one who is ignorant of the word of God will be carried**

about by every wind of teaching, being deluded by his own thinking (See 2 Th 2:10-12). Those who have little knowledge of the Bible have no end to the delusions they will produce in their minds. It is very difficult for one who is experientially subject to the religion of delusions to prioritize the word of God as the source for reproof, correction and instruction. Misguided emotionalists will always follow their emotions over following the word of God. Just ask Elijah who confronted such religionists on Mount Carmel.

C. Discipline:

The English word “discipline” is used to translate the Greek word *sophronismos*. The Greek word was used when one was admonished or called upon to be of a sound mind. When one disciplined himself, he exercised control over his mental facilities in order to adhere to a designated goal or “discipline” (See 1 Co 9:27). The disciplined person was one of a sound mind as opposed to one who gave his senses over to intoxication or hysterical senselessness.

The general definition of all forms of the preceding words emphasize the fact that the Christian must exercise self-restraint of his passions and desires. He must always be of a sound mind. Through the cultivation of sound judgment and prudent behavior, Christians are to be known as a people who are in control of their being. Throughout the New Testament there is no occasion wherein

Christians emotionally lost control of themselves. In fact, the opposite is seen in the lives of Jesus and the early Christians. In a chaotic world, Christians were those who maintained control of themselves because they knew that God was in control of all things.

In the religious world today of Christendom, if occasions are found wherein people lose control of themselves as the Baal prophets on Mount Carmel, then from a Scriptural perspective we would judge that the adherents of such a group are lacking in the sobriety that is to be characteristic of the Christian life. The Corinthians had fallen victim to a lack of control in their assemblies. Not only did Paul say they were behaving carnally, but he also added that they were behaving childishly. Notice carefully his exhortation of 1 Corinthians 13:11: “*When I was a child I spoke as a child. I understood as a child. I thought as a child. But when I became a man, I put away childish things.*”

The demeanor of the Christian life is to exercise self-restraint over one’s spiritual excitement, in which area of behavior, spiritual people often have a problem. How does one become and remain spiritually excited, and yet in behavior remain mature in one’s emotional expressions? Webster’s Dictionary gives an appropriate definition of the word “temperance” by defining that the temperate person is “not extreme or extravagant.” Add to this Webster’s expanded definition of temperance, that a temperate person is one who is “characterized by reason, sanity, or self-control; showing mental and

emotional balance.” By this demeanor of life, the Christian must be known. This must be the nature of the behavior of the leaders of God’s people, and such nature

must be characteristic of those who follow. This is evidenced by the examples of the early Christians that are recorded in the word of God.

Chapter 2

Thinking Soberly

Christians are not those who walk in darkness. They walk in the light (1 Th 5:4,5). They are “*the children of light and the children of the day*” (1 Th 5:5). And because they have been enlightened with the truth, they are sober-minded to watch for our Lord. “*Therefore, let us not sleep as others do, but let us watch and be sober*” (1 Th 5:6). People who allow themselves to lose their senses, are not sober minded. They are as drunken people who have lost control of their senses, for they have put themselves in an emotional state wherein they cannot seriously consider the work of the Lord. We can identify Christians by their sobriety, as Paul wrote, “*But let us who are of the day be sober ...*” (1 Th 5:8). The church is led by those overseers who are sober-minded, for leaders understand the serious spiritual warfare in which we are involved against the evil influences of Satan (1 Tm 3:2).

Paul’s exhortations to Christian women in reference to sobriety is pointed. “*Let a woman learn in silence with all subjection*” (1 Tm 2:11). Subjection is a demeanor of life wherein a Christian woman does not seek to be dominant over man. In her spirit of subjection, even the woman’s dress must manifest sobriety (1 Tm 2:9).

Some women have allowed themselves to dominate in the assemblies by allowing themselves to emotionally go out of control, and thus they sacrifice their spirit of subjection for a moment of hysterical madness. By doing such, they seek to dominate by their lack of self-control, and thus, their lack of sobriety when in the company of the saints. But such behavior would certainly not manifest the nature of what Paul exhorted women to be. “*But I do not allow a woman to teach or to be dominant over a man, but to be in silence*” (1 Tm 2:12).

There is no assembly context of the church wherein members are to be allowed to emotionally be out of control. Assemblies of the saints are for the purpose of exhortation, not opportunities for emotionally showcasing oneself before others.

Being sober-minded and maintaining self-control are two virtues that should characterize the thinking of every disciple of Jesus. Sobriety is not an option. Peter commanded, “*Be sober*” (1 Pt 1:13). “*Therefore, be sober and watch unto prayer*” (1 Pt 4:7). And why such an exhortation? Peter explains. “*Be sober, be vigilant. Your adversary the devil walks about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour*” (1 Pt 5:8). Those

who lose their sobriety, lose their self-control, and subsequently are opportunities for Satan to use an individual to cause chaos among the disciples.

A lack of self-control is evidence that one has little sobriety. Those who pretend to worship God, while at the same time lose their senses in uncontrollable hysteria, have deceived themselves. **God is not worshiped by senseless people.** Neither would the Holy Spirit instruct through the Scriptures that we must exercise self-control in all things, but at the same time, move people to behave senselessly in worship of God. People who are senselessly out of control cannot be worshiping God with their soul, mind and spirit.

Many should listen to the words of

Paul that he wrote to some Christians in Corinth. Some were behaving senselessly when they came together in assembly with the other saints. *“But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified”* (1 Co 9:27). It is easy to understand from this that if a leader, as Paul, allowed himself to uncontrollably behave before others, he would be disqualified. Many who claim to be disciples have so disqualified themselves by their senseless behavior in a supposed worship of God. We must “discipline our bodies” at all times, both in our daily walk of life, as well as in times when we are in the presence of others in the assembly of the saints.

Chapter 3

The Demeanor Of The Christian Life

One might define sobriety as maturity. When one grows up from childhood, he puts away his lack of self-control as he brings into control the demeanor of his behavior. He grows up in order to be mature. We correct the frivolous behavior of our children by admonishing them to “grow up.” When an adult acts frivolously and silly, we likewise exhort such a one to “be mature.” Maturity is identified by one’s control over his or her behavior. Immaturity is simply identified in the lives of those who exercise no self-control. Through His word, God guides us to “grow up” in Christ in order that His people be an example to the world

of the mature obedient life (Compare Hb 5:14; 1 Pt 2:2; 2 Pt 3:18). Paul exhorted, *“Brethren, do not be children in thinking. ... but in thinking be mature”* (1 Co 14:20). The behavior of Christians should reflect the spirit of Jesus of whom we claim to be a disciple. Unruly behavior is evidence that we are still children in our efforts to grow up, or the fact that we seek to behave carnally as some in Corinth. If we seek to grow up in Christ, then it is imperative that our lives manifest the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Maturity involves implementing in one’s life the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit about which Paul speaks in

Galatians 5:22,23 is not divided into parts that can be exercised individually. In the context of the fruit of the Spirit, Paul does not say “fruits.” “Fruit” is singular. **The “fruit of the Spirit” is a singular identity of the disciple of Jesus. The individual characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit come as a whole.** We cannot pick and choose any one of the characteristics, and then separate that characteristic from the whole. It is all or none when we speak of the fruit of the Spirit.

Here is how it works: We are to **love** our neighbor as ourselves (Gl 5:14). The product (fruit) of the Spirit is founded upon love. The totality of the fruit of the Spirit is a manifestation of love. When we love our neighbor as ourself, then **joy** comes into our lives. Therefore, in order to preserve our joy, we seek to maintain **peace** with our neighbor. And in order to maintain peace, we must be **patient** when there is a disagreement with our neighbor. Lest our patience turns into impatience with the faults of our neighbor, we work on our **kindness**. And in being kind to our neighbor, we cannot help but **do good** to our neighbor. The cure for impatience is doing good, for in doing good to others, we preserve our joy (See Jn 13:17). In our goodness, we are showing **faithfulness** to our neighbor. We stand by him in his time of trial and need. In all things, therefore, we are **gentle** in our relationships with others lest we sacrifice our joy in a time when we lose control. In all things the Christian must exercise **self-control** in order

to maintain the fruit of the Spirit. There is no situation in which the Christian is to lose his self-control, for when he does, he loses his joy. If we forsake one characteristic of the fruit of the Spirit, we lose the whole. We may be weak in one area of behavior, but we must continue to focus on growing in the whole in order to grow up in the Spirit.

In this context of discussion we must consider Paul’s specific instructions to women. They must “*continue in faith and love and holiness with self-control*” (1 Tm 2:15). They are to continue in faith, love and holiness. However, it is “with self-control” that they are to continue in these virtues. Self-control is the foundation virtue upon which the others rest. If there is no self-control in their lives, then their faith, love and holiness are unfruitful. Self-control is the impetus, or driving virtue, by which the others grow. Paul is writing these instructions to Timothy, the young leader. As a leader, Timothy must encourage the self-control of the women by exercising the same self-control in his life. A leader who allows women to go out of control is not a good leader. When the disciples come together in any assembly, therefore, it is imperative that the leaders of the assembly manifest a spirit of self-control in their own lives in order to maintain control in the assembly. In his final admonition to the Corinthians in reference to their assemblies, Paul wrote, “*Let all things be done properly and in order*” (1 Co 14:40).

Chapter 4

Sobriety In Action

In Acts 24 Paul stood before government officials, which officials had the power to condemn him to death. In this case, they sent him on to be tried before Caesar in Rome, where there was usually harsh judgment. But in his defense before Felix in Caesarea, it is interesting to note that Paul spoke of self-control in his defense. “*Now as he [Paul] reasoned about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix became frightened ...*” (At 24:25). The subject of self-control is mentioned by Paul in the context of other serious subjects as right living before God and the final judgment. We would conclude that self-control, therefore, is also a serious subject to be considered when discussing the behavior of anyone who would stand before God in judgment. When discussing the conduct of the Christian, and the Christian’s understanding that he will give account of his behavior in the final judgment (2 Co 5:10), self-control is a major character virtue of those who would behave according to the will of God.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul referred to the self-control of athletes when they competed in games. “*And every man who strives exercises self-control in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we an im-*

perishable” (1 Co 9:25). With the same amount of self-control that athletes exercise in training to compete in athletic games, so Christians should exercise the same in the demeanor of their lives in order to receive the crown of life when they finish the race of life. It is the nature of the Christian life to exercise personal discipline in all aspects of one’s life. Under no circumstances or on any occasions should a Christian relinquish his responsibility to maintain self-control. As athletes exercised self-control in **all things**, so in **all things** must the Christian do the same.

We would certainly assume that the “all things” about which Paul speaks includes occasions when Christians come together in assembly. In fact, the Corinthians were not exercising self-control when they came together in their assemblies. Paul said that their behavior in their assemblies would be judged by the unbeliever as an assembly of mad people (1 Co 14:23). **The assemblies of Christians should be a manifestation of the self-control that is typical of the demeanor of Christian behavior.** If our assemblies as Christians are out of order (1 Co 14:40), then the unbeliever would judge us to be people of chaos and madness.

Chapter 5

Signs Of Moral Degradation

Paul writes his final words to Timothy in 2 Timothy. In this letter he spoke of perilous times “in the last days” (2 Tm 3:1). We could debate what times to which he refers as the “last days.” But one thing is clear in the context of the “perilous times.” Unrighteousness would define the times. “*For men will be lovers of themselves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, haters of good . . .*” (2 Tm 3:1-5). We need not go on. Among the characteristics that define a wicked and depraved society are those societies in which the inhabitants exercise little or no self-control. It is for this reason that Christians must make every effort to be sober-minded and in control of their demeanor. They must set an example of self-control in societies that are out of control. In all things of life, Christians must manifest a spirit of control. Since those of the world are known by their lack of self-control, Christians are known by their self-control. A Christian, therefore, should not put himself in a situation where he might lose control over the demeanor of his conduct.

This is especially true of older men and women who should give an example of self-control and sobriety. Older women are admonished to “*be sensible, grave, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, in patience . . . reverent in behav-*

ior” (Ti 2:1-3). Those who would lead the church must be examples of sobriety. They must teach self-control by the behavior of their lives. They must “*think soberly, according as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith*” (Rm 12:3). If a woman is out of control in an assembly, then she is setting a worldly example for others. She is manifesting the “perilous times” in which people exercise little or no control over their behavior.

It is our goal to know Jesus. We seek to have a Christ-like life that manifests to the world that we are disciples of Jesus. For this reason, the disciples of Jesus give all diligence to add to their knowledge self-control, and to self-control patience (See 2 Pt 1:5-8). Peter exhorted, “*For if these things are in you and abound, they make you to be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (2 Pt 1:8).

Those who lack self-control, **do not know Jesus**. Jesus would not swirl senselessly in the presence of others, faint from dizziness, and then collapse to the ground. Such foolishness would never characterize one who truly knows Jesus. If we would be disciples of Jesus, then we must understand His behavior as it is explained in the Spirit-inspired records of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. As disciples of Jesus, we do not simply believe His teachings. We seek in our lives to become Christ-like in His behavior. Under no circumstances did Jesus ever

lose control of His senses. We should do likewise.

Chapter 6

Control In All Matters Of Life

Christian husbands and wives have the opportunity to give themselves to fasting and prayer. In their time of fasting and prayer, they can fast from sexual relationships with one another (1 Co 7:5). For Christian couples, therefore, abstention from sexual intercourse during times of fasting and prayer is an opportunity to increase their self-control over the lusts of the flesh. In Paul's instructions concerning fasting from sexual intercourse among married couples, he urged the couples to fast from such for a specific period of time, *"so that Satan not tempt you because of your lack of self-control"* (1 Co 7:5). We fast to build our self-control. Whether as married couples abstaining from sexual intercourse to give ourselves to fasting, or Christians in general fasting from food, our goal is to build our self-control.

Paul also gives instructions to single Christians in reference to their urges for sexual relationships. In reference to the trying times of distress during which Paul wrote, he advised that people remain single (1 Co 7:26). However, if single Christians at that time had a difficult time exercising self-control in reference to sexual intercourse, he advised that they marry, *"for it is better to marry than to burn with passion"* (1 Co 7:9).

Paul's point in reference to self-control is that even in the sexual relationship between a husband and wife, self-

control must be exercised. Sobriety and self-control must identify the relationships that Christians have with one another on every occasion. Through fasting and prayer one builds his or her self-control in all areas of life. No occasion wherein Christians come together should be made a platform for any one Christian to lose control of either his or her senses or behavior. No occasion should be a justified environment in which a disciple of Jesus should be allowed to lose control.

In any discussion on self-control and sobriety, we should conclude with James' truth that we can never completely control the tongue. *"For every kind of beast and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no one can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil full of deadly poison"* (Jas 3:7,8). And so true this is. In our efforts to lead the self-controlled and sober life, we always stumble over our tongues. *"And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity"* (Jas 3:6). James' admonition in reference to the tongue reveals the truth that if we can control our speech, then we are on our way to controlling the totality of our lives. Herein we do find comfort, since God knows that we cannot completely control our speech. All that we can do is to do as James admonishes, *"... let everyone be swift to hear, slow to speak ..."* (Jas 1:19).