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PREFACE:

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

It was likely to be the last time I would ever meet with Mark. At least in this way. We had enjoyed a weekly rendezvous in the same coffee shop for the past fifteen months in order to study the Bible. Now Mark had graduated from uni and was moving south to take up his first job.

Although I was old enough to be his dad, I thought of him as a friend and longed for the best for him in the future. I wanted him to make the most of the rest of his life. Not least of all, I wanted him to live all his days wholeheartedly for Jesus Christ.

So the day before our last meeting, I considered what I should study with Mark. What would be the most important teaching to impress upon him as he turned the page into the next exciting chapter of his life?

I considered reminding him of the gospel, going over what he already knew. I could take him to the cross to marvel again at the love of God in the sacrificial, substitutionary, saving death of Christ.

I wondered about helping him think through his evangelistic responsibility. After all, Jesus' last words to his disciples were to 'go and make disciples' (Matthew 28:19).

I thought about spending our last hour together talking about the glorious new creation. Having eternity clear in our minds is a sure way to have a right perspective on life.

Then I could always talk about the amazing grace of God. That would lift Mark's heart and be the perfect motivation for living for Christ.

Or perhaps I should impress upon him the importance of having a regular, daily time of reading the Bible and praying. That would keep him in good stead for the rest of his life.

There were so many things I *could* go through with Mark. But I couldn't do them all – we only had an hour. Besides, we'd spent the last fifteen months talking about all these crucial and fundamental points. So what *one thing* should I focus on? What should I leave with him, in this our last ever one-to-one Bible study?

If you were in my shoes, drinking a cappuccino in that coffee shop, what would you have talked to Mark about?

In the end, I did none of the above, but decided the one thing I should talk to him about was self-control.

1 ONE THING

Self-control seems so ... well ... so ordinary. Don't believe that's the case; it's in fact extraordinary. A self-controlled life can enable us to make the very most of the one shot of life we have. On the other hand, without self-control, we will never make the most of life. Worse still, if we lack self-control, we can make a complete hash of life – even shipwreck our lives. Sadly, in my last thirty years of pastoral ministry, I've seen this again and again. Maybe that's why Paul urged Titus to teach the Christians in Crete to be self-controlled.

Titus 2 highlights how perceptive Paul is. He understands clearly the weaknesses of different age groups and therefore what each needs to be taught to grow in godliness. In verse 2 he tells Titus, 'Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance.' Those are precisely the things older men need to be taught.

Many older men demand respect just because they are older, as if simply reaching a certain age earns respect. Of

course, young people would do well to respect their elders, but Paul effectively says to older men, ‘You can’t demand respect just because you’ve survived a prescribed number of years on planet earth. You need to be *worthy* of respect.’ Interestingly, many blokes, as they get older, become less worthy of respect. Grumpy old men who are cynical about everything, and frankly a misery to be around, are not worthy of respect. As Paul says, older men need to learn to be self-controlled temperamentally and in every other way, and then they’ll become *worthy* of respect.

Paul has wonderful insight into the particular issues, struggles and temptations of older men, but it doesn’t stop there. In the next verse we see that Paul also understands the specific struggles of older women. So in verse 3 Paul tells Titus, ‘teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good.’

Again, Paul’s very perceptive. Older women are prone to becoming gossips. Yes, I know we can all gossip, but it’s a particular character flaw that is likely to afflict older women. That’s why one of the archetypal caricatures of women of riper years pictures them with curlers in their hair, gossiping over the garden fence, and in the process, say, slandering Mrs Scroggins from No. 22 and assassinating the character of Ethel Braithwaite from the Bridge Club. So Paul tells Titus to teach older Christian women not to be slanderers.

Paul then expects older Christian women to train the younger women in the church family to live godly lives. In a culture of arranged marriages, those young wives might well feel resentful and trapped in their home situation. It’s not difficult then to understand why, in verses 4 and 5, younger women need to be encouraged to love their husbands, and to be busy and kind.

The last age group Paul addresses in this section are the younger Christian men who live on the island of Crete. Paul gives the other groups (older men, older women and younger women) a list of things they need to deal with. But when it comes to younger men, he mentions just one thing – self-control (Titus 2:6). When you think about it, this is brilliantly insightful for two reasons.

First, it’s full of insight because self-control is *the* issue for all young men. If you’re driving along the motorway and someone cuts you up as they tear down the slip road in a souped-up Ford Fiesta – alloy wheels, a throaty exhaust and a flashy paint job – you can bet your bottom dollar it’s a young man at the wheel. Or if you find yourself woken up in the wee small hours by rowdy voices shouting and singing after a boozy night out – and, after rubbing your bleary eyes, you peep through the curtains – it’s almost sure to be a group of lads in their twenties who have robbed you of your beauty sleep. I could go on and on with examples. Of course, not all young men are into fast cars and not all young men drink excessively. But the formidable desires

of money, sex and power are forever trying to burst into the driving seat of a young man's life. And when those immense forces are at work, a lack of self-control can result in young men failing and falling, sometimes in the most spectacular ways and with catastrophic consequences.

Paul knows self-control is the one big thing that young men need to put in place, which is why I talked to Mark about it in our last ever one-to-one Bible study. That said, it's not just young men who need self-control. Old men need to be taught to be self-controlled (verse 2). It's also implied in verse 3 with the older women, because if they were self-controlled, they'd not be addicted to wine and they'd be able to control their tongues and not be slanderers. And in verse 5 younger women are to be taught to be self-controlled too. Self-control is an issue for everyone, whatever our gender or age.

Second, Paul's identification of self-control as *the* issue for young men is brilliantly insightful because, while it may seem so ordinary, it's key. If you're self-controlled, then everything else falls into place.

Some years ago, a friend of mine passed on to me a number of daily prayers. One of them goes like this: 'Heavenly Father, help me to be self-disciplined in eating, drinking, sleeping, reading, working and exercising.' I could add, 'and with my time, my money, my speech and what I watch.' Stop and think about that list for a moment. As the Lord answers that prayer, and we grow in self-control

in every aspect of life, we'll be protected and rescued from all manner of things that could harm and destroy us. Self-control is like a fortress.

BUILDING PROTECTIVE WALLS

For our fifteenth wedding anniversary, Caroline and I were able to escape for a weekend break. We spent a baking hot, sunny Saturday in September at Warwick Castle. The castle is in a great state of repair, and there are loads of things to see and do. I highly recommend it. (And no, I'm not on commission from the English tourist board!)

My abiding memory of our day was how thick the castle walls were. At one point during our day trip, there was a most impressive display: the largest working siege machine in the world launched a projectile through the air for over 150m! As I watched the burning missile fly through the air (yes, they actually lit it), I considered the depth of the castle walls. I thought how even against such an impressive arsenal, this castle would be safe because of its walls.

One of my favourite proverbs is: 'Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control' (Proverbs 25:28). It's a powerful image. When the walls of a city are broken down, anything can get in. It is defenceless. In no time at all, the enemy will overwhelm it. The proverb

tells us that being self-controlled is like building castle walls. The way to protect yourself against the enemy is by self-control.

If I'm self-controlled in my speech, I'll not say dumb things, or hurtful things, or anything that will incriminate me. If I'm self-controlled in going to bed on time, I won't be tired the next day, so tiredness won't lead me to make rash and ill-considered decisions. Self-control in drinking will tell me when I've had enough and rescue me from foolish actions. Self-control behind the wheel of a car will stop me from driving too fast or recklessly, and it'll stop me checking my phone when I should be giving my full attention to driving.

Self-control is a most powerful defence against all manner of things that can hurt me and others. Self-control is a protective discipline that keeps me and others safe.

Perhaps you think that self-control is just not part of your make-up. Maybe you write off self-control because you're a free spirit and not the self-disciplined type. Or it could be you discount self-control as a serious option because you've tried to be self-controlled in the past but couldn't keep it up. If that's the case, let me encourage you. Building the walls of self-control is not simply down to your self-determined effort.

IT'S A SPIRITUAL ISSUE

If you're a self-disciplined person who's super organised, just reading Proverbs 25:28 may well have already convinced you of the enormous value of self-control. You might be ready to put this book down right now and get on with such a life. In your mind you may have already started to write lists of the things you need to do: you'll be early to bed tonight and up early tomorrow. But just hold your horses! While I'm glad you're already motivated to build the walls of self-control, there's something you need to know before you do anything.

By contrast, others reading this will already be plummeting into the slough of despond. You've always struggled with self-control. You can't resist temptation, so when there's chocolate in the house, you just have to eat it. You find it hard to drag yourself away from a screen, even when you have pressing and important things to do. You rarely get out of bed when the alarm goes off. Yes, you can see that being self-controlled makes sense, but you've lost count of the amount of times you've tried to turn over a

new leaf. You've made countless New Year's resolutions, but never reached February before your old habits ruled your life again. If that describes you, you may well be ready to throw this book down because it just sounds like I'm imploring you to try harder, and frankly that's never worked in the past.

Whether you're saying, 'Bring it on', or, 'Oh no, not again', please understand that Christian self-control is not a *self-help* project. It's not just down to *self*. This is a spiritual issue.

There are two extremes in the Christian life – and, like most extremes, neither are helpful. One extreme suggests that living the Christian life is down to us: God tells us what to do; now we just have to get on and do it. At the other end of the spectrum is a super-spiritual attitude that suggests the Christian life is all down to God. It's summed up in an expression that used to be banded around in some Christian circles: 'let go and let God.' In other words, stop trying so hard (let go) and let God work in your life. There's an element of truth in both these extremes, but neither reflects balanced biblical Christianity. There's a middle ground when it comes to self-control.

When I was at theological college, I used to meet every week with a student from Middlesex Polytechnic (now Middlesex University) to read the Bible. To say he was not the most self-disciplined person in the world would be a considerable understatement. He rarely turned up to our meetings on time. He was always *about to* start an exercise

regimen. He could not resist the last slice of cake even though he wanted to lose a few pounds. He struggled to hit essay deadlines. If he could get away with it, he would persuade his tutor for an extension on an essay deadline. Even then, the night before the extended deadline, he'd have to ply himself with caffeine as he attempted to try and pull off an all-nighter to get his work in on time.

On one occasion he asked me to pray that he would get out of bed in the mornings. It was a great desire and I was happy to pray for him. But I knew that he was prone to thinking that if he prayed about something, God would do it all for him. So I said to him, 'I tell you what, I'll pray that God would get one leg out of bed, if you'll commit to getting the other out!'

The Bible tells us that the fruit of the Spirit is self-control (Galatians 5:22–23) and that we should add self-control to our faith (2 Peter 1:5–6). So does the Holy Spirit bring self-control to my life, or am I to add it to my faith? The answer is both. Biblical Christianity gives me commands to act on. But it's never a case of 'just try harder' – that would be too depressing. Nor is it simply, 'let go and let God' – it is, after all, *self-control*. In the person of the Holy Spirit, God gives me all the resources and help I need to live out his commands, but I have to make the effort.

But there's more to biblical self-control than this. In God's word, the gospel gives me all the motivation I need too.

A RIGHT MOTIVATION

Motivation is a huge thing. I'm a keen tennis player. I'm not particularly good on the tennis court, but I'm enthusiastic. A few years back, I got so fed up with my backhand letting me down again and again that I went right back to basics. I remember the moment when, on match point, I hit yet another duff backhand into the net and I thought to myself, 'This has got to change.' In truth, it was because my doubles partner verbalised exactly that!

So, the next week, I asked someone to teach me the right technique. Then, in order to remodel my backhand, I started hitting soft training balls – the ones that are usually used to help five-year-olds starting to play tennis. At first my backhand seemed to get worse, even using kindergarten balls. The balls buried themselves into the bottom of the net or flew into the fence at the back of the court. I was ready to give up. But my old backhand had let me down so many times, and lost me so many matches, I was determined to keep at it. I was highly motivated to keep going. After months of hitting thousands of backhands, it started to come together.