Character Matters: Week 4, Self-Control

**Series Overview:** We build our lives by the choices we make. We build good character brick by brick, thought by thought, action by action, habit by habit, through daily exercising of courage and determination (Merritt). As followers of Jesus, we are called to live a life that honors him and shows his love to others. We cannot do that without good character. We must do the right thing, no matter the cost. Character still counts. It always has, and always will.

**Week Overview:** Character Matters, Week 4 – Self Control

* Self-control has the power to make or break us in this life. If we do not practice self-denial and discipline, we will give into our flesh and end up like the rest of the world. But if lead ourselves well, deny our desires, pick up our cross and follow after Jesus we will see the eternal fruits of self-control. God wants us to live life to the full, and that begins with self-control.

**Grab the Room (Intro):** Story where you went absolutely bananas as a kid/teen and the situation didn’t turn out so well

Give everyone in the room a piece of candy/chocolate. Tell them that they can feel free to eat it right away. But if they wait till the end of the message, they can get another, or a café coupon, better treat, etc.

**Tension (What’s the Struggle):** We face countless number of choices every day: What I want to do vs. what I should do. Self-control is denying our wants and choosing something better. It is about keeping the end in mind and looking beyond the here and now. The problem is, if we lack perspective of life beyond ourselves and just today, we will always choose what we want to do, rather than what we should do.

**Text (+ Supporting Text):** 2 Timothy 3, Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 9:24-25

**THP:** The Holy Spirit must be in control

**Supporting Points (Not Required):**

* A life lived apart from Jesus is a wasted life
* We need to have a direction and purpose if we are to practice self-control
* Atomic Habits

**Application (Call to Action):** Possible dedication/line in the sand moment for students who find themselves struggling with self-control with habits, appetites, or sin in their life. Make this the day where you take the first step to denying yourself, picking up your cross, and following after Jesus

*One easy illustration that you could use to start this message is give one piece of individually wrapped, bite size candy to all the students. As they are being passed out, give very clear instructions to not eat the candy right away. Once everyone has a piece, you can give them two options. They can either eat the candy now, or they can hold onto it and if they do, they will get another piece (or a better prize, maybe café coupon or something) at the end of the message.*

*You can use this illustration or have a personal story of when you were a kid/teen and did not exercise self-control, and the situation did not turn out so well. For the purpose of this message, I will be using the candy decision scenario.*

Now that everyone has their piece of candy, you have a decision to make. You can either eat that piece of candy now, and enjoy it, or you can choose to hold onto it until the end of the message. If you do, you will get a café coupon at the end of the message. It is your decision, completely up to you.

You have probably guessed by now where this is going. You may have participated in something like this before. What we are doing is an exercise in self-control. You have something in front of you, and it is something good. It is ok to enjoy that thing right now, but if you practice self-control, you can have a far greater reward later.

This is our final week of Character Matters, where we have talked about what it means to have character that honors God. We have taken a deep dive on different attributes of character each week, and this week we are talking about self-control. It is essential for a person of good character to practice self-control each and every day.

I will hammer this point home each week till I am blue in the face: as followers of Jesus Christ, the LORD AND SAVIOR OF OUR LIVES, we are called to live a life that is holy and set apart because he has set us free from the old way of living and given us a new life that is far greater than anything we could experience living for ourselves. Because of that, we are called to live a life according to his design. Within God’s design we find life, and life to the full.

It is not a boring, shrewd life where we judge everyone else because we are “holier” or better than them. If that is our attitude that would call into question if we actually have a genuine relationship with God because that is not in his character, and so it should not be ours either. Rather it is a life that when we have this character that God wants us to have because of what he has done in us; we love people like we never have before. We have compassion, selflessness, gentleness, respect, courage, boldness, wisdom, leadership, etc. Our heads can hit our pillows each night knowing that we are satisfied that we have everything we need in this life because we are aligning ourselves with God’s desire for our lives, to be obedient to him and to live for him.

That’s what life to the fullest brings us, but we don’t get to experience that if we aren’t living out a life of Godly character. There is nothing that we can do to earn our salvation. God’s grace does that for us. But once we have said yes to following Jesus, the ball is in our court. Yes, the Holy Spirit enables us and gives us the strength to endure trials and live the way God calls us to. But something we are really bad at as Christians is when the ball is in our court, we are expecting Jesus to pick it up and score all the points, play all the defense, and do everything for us.

It is time for us to draw a line in the sand and say enough! It is time for us to say thank you Jesus for saving me from sin and death and giving me a life, eternal life! Now, because of that, I am going to stop making excuses and I am going to live for you! I am going to follow you and with the help of your Holy Spirit I am going to live a life with Godly character that honors you and loves others.

Listen guys, I am right there with you! There are areas in my life that as I have prepared this I need to stop making excuses and remember that my past sins are forgiven, I am not the same as I was before because of what Jesus did for me and it is time to start exercising self-control in my own life! It is time for me to start thinking about my legacy, the persevere through trials. It is time for me to stop making excuses and step into the life that God has called me to and wants for me. We all want amazing lives, right? We all want great experiences, awesome community, amazing purpose, etc. etc. Well we have the road map right in front of us!

We have spent the last 3 weeks reading from legendary people of the faith, Peter, Paul, and James telling us what is required to have that kind of life! And it is a life of character that honors God. They lay it out for us: time to stop fooling around. If Jesus has really made us into new creations, then let’s have new character.

So back to self-control. There are tons of attributes of a Godly character, but the 4 we have looked at in this series are some of the most important and the last one we are going to examine is self-control.

Paul says this in Romans 12:1-2, Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Paul lays it out for us right there. In view of God’s mercy (what Jesus has done for us by giving us new life) we need to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. This can look a lot of different ways, but it starts with this idea of sacrifice. We are to deny ourselves of things that we value, for the refinement of ourselves. We are not to indulge ourselves in the sin of this world. We are called to strive to be made new each and every day. And when we do, that results in us having a eureka moment to say: “Wow, God’s way of life is just as he promised. Better and wilder and more fulfilling than I could have possibly imagined.”

But again, we can’t experience that without self-control. In another letter to his disciple, Paul tells Timothy about the dangers of not having self-control. 2 Timothy 3:1-5, But mark this: there will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people.

*Pause and let the Scripture speak for itself there. This is a difficult teaching, and to do it we must first examine it in our own lives before we preach it to students. This is a difficult passage to reconcile, but if we can set up the first part of this message with the grace that has already been given to us and the new life found in Jesus, we need to drive the point home that there is no more time for excuses. The eternity of people’s lives hangs in the balance. This can also be a good time for transparency. It is not Catholic confessional time up on stage saying, “Forgive me northview students for I have sinned here, I have been slanderous, I have been a lover of money, I have been a lover of pleasure” none of that. But it can be a time to say listen, I am emphasizing this from a place of I have fit into each of these categories before that Paul is talking about. But I need to remember that I am not who I was before because of Jesus, and he has provided everything I need to exercise this self-control in my life.*

Paul says in Romans 7, “Since grace abounds, should we keep on sinning? By no means!” We need to exercise self-control to have character that honors God and loves others. So when it comes to temptation in our lives, are we going to just give in immediately because we know that Jesus will forgive us anyway? No! That’s abusing grace. God is calling us to lead ourselves by making our bodies a living sacrifice to him. Does that mean we selfishly and carelessly indulge ourselves with food, media, substances, gossip, drama, racism, hate, foul language, etc.? By no means! We must deny ourselves of participating in such things because of the new life we have been given! Only then are we able to live up to the call that God has placed on our lives, to live with God honoring character that loves others, preaches the gospel and makes disciples.

To exercise self-control, we must deny ourselves, and understand that there is a reward waiting for us. We talked about it for the last few weeks: the sufferings and trials we go through in this life gives us a reward that will last forever. Not exercising self-control will cost us that reward. Because if we don’t exercise self-control, we won’t be able to endure trials of any kind. And if we don’t endure trials, we don’t persevere, resulting in us giving up on our faith. There is a domino effect with character that happens with self-control. When we don’t exercise self-control when it comes to our daily decision making in the things we participate in, partake in, etc., the rest of our character tends to fall to the wayside.

So who is in control of your life? Is it the things of this world that continually eat away at you each day? The Holy Spirit must be in control when it comes to our character. When it comes to the idea of self-control, directing our steps, making both small and large decisions, **the Holy Spirit must be in control.** We have to be asking God every single day to allow his Spirit to renew us, to make us into the people that he created us to be! If not, our minds that are so easily manipulated by the things of this world will continue to give into temptations and bad habits that lead to sin in our lives. When we let the Holy Spirit be in control of our lives, we begin to change. We begin to say no to the things in this life that had a hold on us before. We are continually made new, and we can experience victory every single day in our lives because the Spirit is in control.

So, if you have lasted this long with your piece of candy still in your hands, congratulations, you are getting a café coupon! You have received a greater reward because you have exercised self-control. That is the promise that lies before us. When we exercise these attributes of God honoring character, we get an eternal reward that is better than anything we have ever known. But it starts with us realizing that Christ’s saving work in our life has made us new. His grace has given us new life, and we are called to live according to his purpose. We didn’t earn that or do anything to deserve that. We simply confessed and believed.

But now the ball is our court. We have our part to play now that we have been saved and made new. There is no more room for excuses for me, for you, for any of us. We have the help of the Holy Spirit living inside of us to provide comfort, peace, courage, and strength to endure challenges and sufferings; to live a life of integrity and to practice self-control and have a God honoring character that displays the love of Jesus to others. God is calling us to lives of character that honors him. With the help of the Holy Spirit, step into life, and life to the full.

\*\*\* I need a new THP for this message. In the overview I made a few months ago, I had this message heading in a different direction, but it doesn’t fit for this anymore. Suggestions welcome\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*Updated, new thp is in. The Holy Spirit must be in control

**Aaron:** Very important message here! I think it needs some very specific ways that Students are struggling with self-control right now. Potential examples are social media, video games, the way they treat their parents/siblings, how they approach homework, how they act around friends, etc. I agree that the THP doesn’t totally match-up with the direction of the message. Here are some suggestions: Don’t Sacrifice What’s Eternal For What’s Temporary ; Temporary Happiness =/= Joy ; Self-Controlled or Sin-Controlled? (kinda cheesy haha) ; Take Your Life Back (you could head the direction that sin is taking control of their lives when they do not practice self-control).

**Micah:** I think this is a super important message and want to make sure we get this one right. Especially if it’s the last week of the series. Self-control is a lost art in our generation. We live in a “I get what I want when I want” time. I love the exercise of the candy. I think we need to get super practical and call out some ways students don’t exercise self control. The THP needs to be reworked to align better with the script. I see your note at the bottom—we can discuss as team. Overall, I like the direction this script is headed—I like the tension you end the script with. I think there’s an opportunity to really CHALLNEGE our students in this message. How are we going to call them to a higher level of self-discipline? I think that needs answered in the script. Possible bumper idea: 5 minute marshmallow experiment. I can show you guys. Great job on the series, Ryan! I think you honored Merrit well! Well done, my friend.

**Scott:** I think we could spend more time on the scripture where it talks about renewing your mind. What does that mean? What does it look like? We don’t renew our own minds. That’s the Spirit’s job. But we also don’t play a passive role. Renewing our minds over issues of racism means listening to stories and allowing ourselves to soften and see new perspective. Renewing our minds over difficult people means to see their humanity as the same as our own. We need to put ourselves into a position for the Spirit to renew our minds. That could mean having self-control over our anger or pessimistic attitude. That could mean having self-control over a sin issue in our life. Either way, we need to view that the way Christ does, or we’re always going to defeat ourselves. But we can’t do it on our own. Like your message says, we can’t expect God to magically do it for us. We need to own our issues and own our growth. I think when the secret to self-control is hidden in the scripture, we need to do what we can to draw it out and make it easy to understand. Self-control starts with a Spirit led mindset.

I love your passion, bro! Keep it up!

Kent: THP work... how about Lead Yourself, The worth in the wait, not totally sure... brainstorm session could work here.

I think to close out this series we need to make sure they walk away remembering the 4 weeks somehow... maybe a take home (it's been a while since we have thought about these types of things) Giving students something to take with them that will remind them about their character and WHO God has made them to be and pursue.

I like the idea of giving them something at the beginning but I think showing them that marshmallow video could have the same effect... could be a good physical illustration though, I don’t mind it!

For branding this series... what about doing a throw back to “Family Matters” the show... design, theme song, etc?? Just a thought...

Harrison: Loved the illustration! THP could be “lead yourself well.” If you add more practical steps that they can do I really think it would help the students. It ends with them having knowledge and a broad idea that they should be more self controlled. Specific examples of how to practice self control would be awesome. You could even get ideas from psychology realm on that one. I agree with Scott that some more time diving into the scripture would be helpful, especially an explanation of what it looks like to put off your old self and what it looks like to renew your mind. Give the students practical ways they can do renew their mind. Great job with this whole series!

**Kylee:** Another idea for the opener...there is a video online where they challenged students not to touch their phone for 20 minutes. I think that also plays into the opener for an engagement piece. I also agree that some more specific examples could really get this idea to hit deep with students!

*Holy Spirit reliance needs to be a heavy emphasis with whatever THP, metaphor, analogy that we end on*