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The Challenge of Choice

1223-B

Series: I Timothy

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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All of his life Jerry had been the epitome of spiritual maturity. In Christian circles he always said the right things, did the right things, and was revered by all those who looked to him as an example of how to do it right. In public he manifested the life of a saint, but there were times in his personal life when no one was around that he seemed to lose control. It was always when he was either alone or with his family or his loved ones that things didn't stay together.

Nobody at church knew it but he had a drinking problem and would sometimes make a fool of himself in front of those loved. Several times he reacted in uncontrolled anger with his children or his wife and destroyed his witness to them by using abusive language and even throwing things, behaving more like a child than an adult. Each time he was filled with remorse and asked for forgiveness and would get it. But as time went on those closest to him respected him a little less. It wasn't because his heart wasn't right, they knew it was. It was because they didn't think his life was consistently in control.

One day a group of men came from the church and interviewed him with the thought in mind of making him an elder of the church. They gave him a list of things to consider and asked him to study I Timothy, chapter three, measuring his heart against God's plan. Much to the committee's surprise, he turned down their gracious offer. Why? He came across one little Greek word *sophrona*, and he began to do a word study of its meaning. Suddenly, it hit him. God's man is a man whose life is in control. Not in his control, in God's control. It is in God's control because of the discipline of decisions: choices that have been made with such regularity that the enemies of the *sophrona* life have had no chance to make inroads and create uncontrolled behavior patterns.

This is no lightweight subject. It touches the life of every man in the church, and it acts as a measuring stick by which Christian leadership must be gauged. *It is the measuring stick of self-control.*

Paul, you remember, has been sitting behind his desk in his Macedonian denominational headquarters, dictating letters to the young preachers he had sent to the field to do missionary work.

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In far-off Ephesus, a critical church in the scheme of things, a young man named Timothy was trying to uncover and discover the roots of the heresy that had begun to spread like wildfire in that once thriving body of believers. In an effort to be sure that Tim understood that worldly skills and experience do not a pastor make, Paul began to outline the requirements for the office of overseer (one who shepherds) and the office of deacon (one who serves). It was like an employment application divided into four distinct sections: who he was, how he behaved, how he responded to time, and how he responded to experience.

In our last two studies, we have looked at the character of the man of God, in particular, Paul's assessed need of men who were calm, gentle, dignified, and content. Now the apostle turns from the matter of character to the matter of behavior, and he focuses on one key point: *"Is the man in question, a man of self-control?"* Is his behavior controlled by choice? by circumstance? by decision? by emotion? by deliberation? or by uncontrolled appetites? The man who would lead the church must not be a potential crisis in the making. He mustn't be a time bomb about to explode. This calm, gentle, dignified man must be always in control of his life. No surprises. No unexpected changes of character just when he was needed most.

To make his point, Paul takes four Greek words, three of which amplify the fourth, and slides them into his application blank for greatness as *necessary requirements for leadership*. And it is those four words we will look at for the next few moments together. Our title and outline: The Challenge of Choice,

- I- A Description of Self-control
- II- The Hindrances to Self-control
- III- The Absence of Self-control
 - A- Addiction
 - B- Initiation
 - C- Retaliation

A DESCRIPTION OF SELF-CONTROL

The first Greek word, and the key to this whole lesson is that word "sophrona" which so stirred the heart of our friend in the opening illustration. Its variations in Scripture are several, but its meaning is constant. Here is how it is defined:

sophrona— sober, sober-minded, serious-minded, self-

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controlled. Of sound mind; sane. To act discreetly with sound judgement and moderation.

Prudence; discretion which controls all inordinate desires and exercises a dignified restraint on all actions.”

Simply put, *sophrona* is a life under control. It is the will, responding to the Word, over the objections of the appetites and emotions. It is a life in which the desires and feelings which would govern wrong choices are overridden by the Scriptures which are planted in the heart. When a choice is to be made, the appetites will send up their desires. “Satisfy the flesh,” they cry. The emotions chime in, “It feels right; do it”. But suddenly, the Word of God enters the mind. It has been laid up there for such a time as this. The Word calls to mind an absolute of Scripture that you would be violating if you were to make that choice.

Immediately, you *choose to obey*. Not because you feel like it. You don’t. Not because you don’t *desire to do the opposite*. You do. But because you have become a man of such *sophrona* that you are serious and sober-minded about every decision, and the only thing that matters is what’s eternal.

Example 1: You are at work and a fellow employee takes advantage of you; then when you confront him, he lies and blames you. Anger begins to swell up within you. Your face turns red. Your heart begins to race. You are about to make a decision to retaliate based on *how you feel*. You *feel angry*.

Suddenly, it happens. You have been memorizing and meditating on Romans 12:19b. Your mind hears the words,

“Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. (NKJV)

Matthew 5:44,45a follows suit:

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,

that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; (NKJV)

You turn to that lying, spiteful, ungrateful employee and respond in love. You give up your rights to success and give in to a higher law, the law of demonstrating the Mind of God. You have just exercised *sophrona*. You made a choice. You rejected your emotions and listened to God’s Word instead. In heaven, you will be blessed. You have just made a deposit in the Bank of Eternity that moth and rust cannot corrupt, and thieves cannot break through

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and steal. But *that decision may not be recognized on earth as a good one*. Mark that. If it is, *you may already have your reward*. You can't collect in both worlds (Matthew 6:14-21). In fact nobody may praise you for what you did. You may be ridiculed by your own family and further be misunderstood, but you did the right thing because you obeyed the Word of God over your feelings.

Example 2: You want to go on a diet. In fact, you do. Sort of. Well, kind of. I mean, again. You decide that for one month you will eat no desserts, no bread, no second helpings. I have found that the best weight-loss diet is the "nothing-nothing-nothing" diet. "Nothing-nothing-nothing" means that you eat nothing that looks good, nothing that tastes good, and nothing that smells good. At any rate, you go on this diet. Your intentions are good. You pray for grace. You pray that your spouse won't take you to that cafeteria up the way where they spray the pies with that shiny stuff that makes it cry out to you, but she does. You slide your tray almost helplessly, fearing the worst; you get as far as the double chocolate fudge pie with the apricot whipped cream on top. Your mind says, "That is a sin." Your appetite says, "Who cares? I'll diet tomorrow (if I don't die tomorrow)." For a few brief seconds, you are about to give in. Suddenly Proverbs 13:25 begins to ring in your ears. It says:

The good man eats to live; the evil man lives to eat. (TLB)

You are reminded of another verse from the Living Bible which says:

...don't even turn your head to look. (Proverbs 4:25b TLB)

You still do not have the willpower to say no. But you *do have the Holy Spirit*. And He in you will always respond to the Father's Word. So quietly in your heart, for a brief second, you choose to yield to the Scriptures. God takes over. You z-o-o-m past the chocolate fudge surprise so fast you almost knock the cashier into the cash register. But in a moment of crisis, *you chose the Word over your appetites*. It was the challenge of choice, and you made the right one. The minute you did, God's Spirit empowered you to overcome.

This is *self under control*. This is a life that is controlled by the will in response to the Word *over the objections of the appetites and the emotions*. It is the mark of a man of God.

May I remind you this morning that the Word of God laid up in your heart is the key, otherwise, you'll be making choices and

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responding to your will and the strength will not be there to do otherwise. You see there is no consistent authority in you. I would remind you that if the Word is not there you are trying to make a choice on you're own. On the one hand is what I feel about what I want and on the other hand is what I say about what I want. You can't fight that battle. But if the Scripture is in your heart, it's how you feel versus what God says. Now you've got an authority to respond to. That's why it's so important that the Word of God be laid up in your heart. I think it's important to be laid up topically so that your spirit can respond quickly to what the Scripture says about gluttony, anger, envy, whatever... So memorize the Word, memorize in sequences that the Spirit has shown you to lay up in your heart and will keep calling to your remembrance when you're really in the battle. You go back to Matthew 4—that's all Jesus did when He was confronted with the greatest evidence of spiritual warfare listed in Scripture. You simply say, "It is written... It is written...It is written..."

THE HINDRANCES TO SELF-CONTROL

The average Christian has a tough time living that way, I know. We have the best of intentions, don't we? (I mean it would be good if we could just live off our intentions or even off the fumes.) But the will gives way to the flesh and doesn't listen to the Word and it goes downhill.

So let's look at that word *sophrona* in Scripture and I think we can find out why we continually fail. There are three evidences of the use of that word and all of them really act as specific things that keep us from making the right choices.

The Hindrance of Pride

First, there is the hindrance of pride. In Romans 12:1-3, we find a fascinating sequence. Verse one is that famous "commit- your-bodies-a-living-sacrifice" verse, the ultimate surrender passage in Romans. Verse 2 follows with a clear definition of spiritual transformation and its effect on doing the will of God. Then verse 3 adds:

For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly [there's our word], as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.

(Romans 12:3 NKJV)

Then comes that wonderful explanation of the division of

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spiritual gifts in the Body of Christ.

The call is to commitment. The command is to surrender. The catch is pride. If you begin to think higher of yourself than you ought, you begin to think, “Hey, God and I are a team.” No. You see, God and I are not a team. God is everything. And when we begin to lose that sense of total dependence because God has used us in the past, we say, “Wow”. Our emotions begin to make our decisions. It’s the opposite of sobriety. The honest response to the Word of God is the opposite of thinking more highly than we ought to think. So if you are having a problem with self-control, the first thing to consider is the problem of pride. It may well be that you are not leaning completely on the Word because you have come to trust in yourself and what you can do apart from God just a little bit. And it only takes a little bit because when you are dealing with an absolute, when you vary from that absolute it is all over.

It’s like if you can’t swim and you only go 10 ft. out into the water where it is 50 ft. deep. It doesn’t matter that you’re only 10 ft. out in the water, does it? You are gonna drown! That is the issue.

The Hindrance of Lust

The second hindrance to the self-controlled life is found in Titus 2.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men,

teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, [there’s our word] righteously, and godly in this present age,

looking for the blessed hope and the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, (Titus 2:11-13 NKJV)

The grace of God, the person of Christ has appeared. He has reminded us of the reality that we are to live a life of self-control. But we can’t live that life unless we deny worldly lusts. Lust, you recall, is the call of the appetites to the will. When you lust for food your eyes have seen or your nose has smelled or your mind has remembered something that from experience you know will satisfy your taste buds. The computer of the mind makes the connection. It calls into memory a remembrance of how good that tastes. Left to fester, lust multiplies until it so controls the thoughts that the will has no choice—you’ve got to grab that stuff. We’re like robots, we bypass the challenge of choice and we respond to our desires.

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When you lust for drugs or alcohol, your body is responding to an addiction that has satisfied it before. Unless the lust is immediately destroyed by the Word, it will snowball until you cannot help but have it. The lust of the eye is the same way. Only the Word of God released from the heart can pull down that stronghold and give you the strength to say no. It's the only way to deny worldly lusts. It's the challenge of choice.

The Hindrance of Temporal Vision

The third hindrance to the *sophrona* life is found in I Peter.

But the end of all things is at hand; therefore, be [sober] serious [there's our word] and watchful in your prayers.

(I Peter 4:7 NKJV)

The man who doesn't take his spiritual life seriously can't really expect to ever be a man of self-control. Scripture says the reason he can't is because the decisions the Word wants him to make is always be based on eternal choices. Eternal choices will always be the opposite of man's ways when choice-time comes. And even if the Word rises in his mind, he will reject it and move with his impulses unless he believes that "the end of all things is at hand". Unless he is convinced in his heart that this world is passing away and when it is gone, only what is laid up for eternity will last, he will not make the right choice. It doesn't matter how much Scripture he knows. He will start to, but his spirit will not bear witness with the Spirit of God, and when the Word surfaces, he will yield to his desires instead.

You think about those two decisions we talked about. Faced with the decision to retaliate against Bob, your fellow employee, with a right hook he deserves, unless you believe there are eternal rewards, you're going to make the wrong choice. That's what Paul is saying.

THE ABSENCE OF SELF-CONTROL

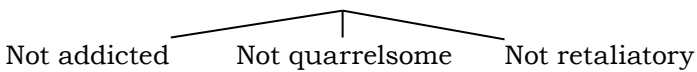
So Paul has described for us the life of self-control. It is a life that views circumstances from God's perspective, flees worldly lusts as though they are the poison they are, and is utterly convinced that "apart from God he can do nothing".

But there is more. Paul now gives us three additional Greek words that actually are a portrait of a life of self-control.

Those three words paint this kind of picture:

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A life of self-control is a life that is



They tell us that the self-controlled man is:

- a) not addicted (*me paroinon*)
- b) not combative (*amachon*)
- c) not retaliatory (*me pleken*)

Not addicted

The first word (*me paroinon*) literally means “not one who tarrys at the wine”. A Christian leader cannot be a man addicted. He cannot be one subject to the control of external substances. His mind must always be crisp, his spirit sensitive, his reflexes able to yield to God’s Spirit. The word “sober” or “self-controlled” (*sophrona*) is interpreted by some to demand this quality. Just to be sure, Paul underscores it on his application blank for spiritual usability.

Please remember from a previous study that the word *drunk* literally means “any state of mind that is impaired from its best”. So it isn’t a matter of being so drunk you can’t stand up; it’s a matter of being impaired in any way. To any degree alcohol or drugs are affecting you, even slightly, to that degree God’s Spirit cannot control you. That’s why Paul used the analogy he did in Ephesians 5.

And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but
[instead] be filled with the Spirit, (Ephesians 5:18 NKJV)

The opposite of being affected by addictive substances is to be controlled by God’s Spirit. The two are incompatible. They are contrary terms. That is why, I believe, that the self-controlled man of God will pay any price not to have his life affected by any potentially addictive substances. I’m not arguing whether or not the Bible says you can’t take a drink. That’s not the issue. The Bible doesn’t say you can’t walk down the freeway. It doesn’t say not to jump off a cliff. It assumes that you would use reason in applying absolutes. And Ephesians 5:18 is an absolute. It says do not allow your spirit to be affected by tarrying at the wine, or partaking of that which would addict or control. Instead, let God’s Spirit be free to control you always.

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For me personally, that means never touching alcohol. You must have your own convictions. But the issue isn't what you are free to do. The issue is what you are free to do that will not compromise God's ability to totally control your spirit. One thing is for sure. The man of God is *me paroinon*. He does not "tarry at the wine"...¹ not even long enough for it to have any effect on his life. To do otherwise would limit his ability to live soberly, righteously, godly in this present world.

Not combative

The second word in Paul's portrait of self-control is *amachon*. It is a word that is used to signify the absence of a combative spirit. Its literal meaning is "one with whom no one fights". Another translator words it "peaceful; disinclined to fight". It is a person who has no chip on his shoulder. He is the opposite of paranoid. He not only doesn't think everyone's out to get him; he gives everyone the benefit of the doubt.

He sees the clerk in the store who waits on everybody else first as just doing his job. He sees the fellow who refuses to let him in on the freeway as having a personal emergency. He sees the neighbor who borrows his tools and doesn't bring them back as having a good reason. And anyway, since it's God's lawn mower, God's time, and God's car—it's God's problem. And even if he knows there is wrong intent, it simply becomes a motivation for prayer. That clerk in the store—who's praying for her salvation? That guy on the freeway—has God allowed him to cut in front of you so you'll pray for him? That neighbor? Are you praying for those who spitefully use you and persecute you? You are, if you are a non-combative man of God.

Not retaliatory

The third word is *me plekten*. It is closely aligned with the second. It, too, involves self-control; and it, too, involves the temper. But instead of indicating that the godly man does not initiate quarrels, this word indicates he does not *retaliate*. It is a term of response rather than aggression. It is a person who learns what it means to turn the other cheek and to go the second mile. We don't dwell much on those principles in our day; for we live in an age where everybody fights for his rights—in court, in the family, even in the church. Instead of a servant world, we live in a selfish world. God help us. That is not the Gospel. The Gospel is so non-

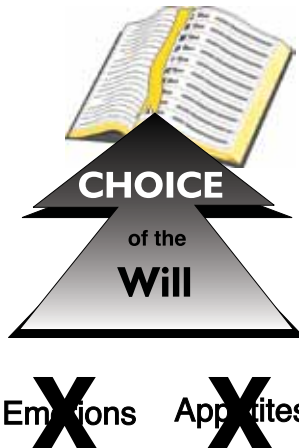
¹ Proverbs 23:30

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combative that the unbelieving world calls us fools.

And God's man must be non-combative. It doesn't mean he doesn't stand for what is right. He does. But he's not looking for a fight, and he's not wearing his feelings on his sleeve. He's looking for a way to avoid conflict and promote unity. So long as he can do that without violating absolutes, he does. He is a man of a *sophrona* spirit—under control—under God's control. Not addicted, not combative, not retaliatory. His decisions are the result of choice, not feelings.

**TO OBEY THE WORD
is a**



So let's go back to our basic definition of self-control. It is a life of predictable responses based on controlled behavior. It is the will responding to the Word over the objections of the appetites and the emotions.

It is a life not under the influence of addicting or controlling substances. It is a life that is not combative, not retaliatory, and not angry. It gives others the benefit of the doubt, and rests its case in the arms of Jesus. It has had to overcome the hindrance of pride, the hindrance of lust, and the hindrance of a temporal value system. It has had to refocus the whole of its thinking on God's perspective.

Men, here is the next test of a man of God. Is self under control? Are you predictably well-behaved? Can you be counted on to keep your cool when the tempers around you are rising? Can you say

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“no” even when the flesh is crying “yes”? Do you understand just how vulnerable you are? Or has pride so entered into your spiritual life that you have decided it “can never happen to you”? The self-controlled man takes nothing for granted. He bathes himself in the Word of God knowing that only the Scriptures called to the mind by the Spirit can meet the challenge of choice. Only the Word is strong enough to quench the emotions and control the appetites. Nothing else works.

Men of self-control—that is what the church is looking for, because that is what God is looking for. Therefore, it must become what we are striving for, as well. Let us pray,

Our gracious, living God,

Thank You for the absolutes of Your Word that make our choices so clear and the benefits so real and eternity so promising. But, Father, we live in a world where choices are not easy, but they never have been. We live in a world, Father, that is just trying its best to squeeze us into the mold of—if it feels good do it, if the door is open rush through them and God will just have to bless.

Some of us here this morning, Father, need to examine the absence of self-control in our own lives, our inability to quietly allow the Word of God to make decisions for us no matter what our emotions are crying for what our appetites are longing for. Some of us this morning, Father, need to make some hard choices so that in the days to come we might become men who are willing and able to lead the church because we are men of self-control. Guide us through the week to come, Father, and make our hearts more sensitive to those choices we want to make but shouldn't and the choices we must make if we are to be men of self-control.

May we lay aside anything that might stand in the way, and get on with the business of choosing to be the men of God we were meant to be. The choice is ours, the power is Yours and all the glory as well.

Amen.

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