

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH
Elements: The Secret to Self-Control
Mark Batterson

Welcome to National Community Church! It is a joy to have you here this weekend. We are wrapping up our 'Elements' series. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and last but not least, self-control. Why is it last? In my personal opinion, I think it is probably the most difficult fruit to cultivate in our lives. In fact, I might suggest that it takes the longest to germinate but it is a master virtue. Check this out. Proverbs 16:32 says

³² *Better a patient person than powerful,
one with self-control than one who takes a city.*

If you can conquer yourself, you can conquer anything.

This is a little bit of an oxymoron because we are talking about self-control and yet it doesn't come from us. In fact, I wonder if it would be better to say spirit-controlled than self-controlled? This is not a message about trying harder. The same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead dwells in us and that gives us the power to do exactly what God has called us to do. That's what we are going to talk about this weekend.

Turn to I Corinthians 9:24-27 and we'll get there in just a moment.

When I was 28 years old and just a few years into pastoring, I went to something called the School of Pastoral Nurture. It was a week long and intensive with Jack Hayford who pastored The Church on the Way in California. I don't have very many heroes. I could count them on one hand but Jack Hayford is one of them. I think he is a pastor's pastor and someone who has faithfully served the Lord for so many years. God has used him in a powerful way and I thought to myself if I have a chance to hang out with Jack Hayford, I'm in! It was an incredible week, like drinking from the fire hose! We had dinner in his home. I was trying to pick up what he was throwing down. It was unreal! I would even put it this way. I've done two Master's programs and I've done a Doctoral program and I don't know that I wouldn't trade that one week with Jack Hayford for all of those classes. It was unbelievable.

That's the backdrop, I'm going somewhere with this but let me hit the rewind button. I met Jack Hayford when I was a teenager. He came to speak at Calvary Church where my father-in-law pastored in Naperville, Illinois for many years. We were excited. Jack Hayford was on the radio across the country including the Chicago area, so a lot of people had listened to him and had been taught by him and so everybody was so excited. It was a mid-week service and Jack got up to speak and how do I say this, he left the barn door wide open! You should check your zipper before you get up to speak! The stage was about five feet high. So when Jack got comfortable and got in his groove, he will put on hand in his pocket like this and once he gets really comfortable, we're talking two hands in the pockets, not helping things! It was so very bad that my father-in-law had to write a little note, 'Jack, your zipper is down' and he walked up on stage and put it on the pulpit and it was the most incredible thing I've ever seen. Jack Hayford, just turned around, did the fly up, and the next second he was back. The funny thing is, afterwards

we went out to dinner and this was a moment for me. I was a 19 year old kid and I was able to have dinner with Jack Hayford and I will never forget what he said. He said, 'I don't think anybody noticed.' I was like, Jack, we were all peeping toms tonight! It was bad!

So fast forward nearly a decade and I find myself spending a week with Jack Hayford and it changed my life and changed the trajectory of my ministry. Last year, Jack, who is now in his 80s, was in the DC area at a gathering for pastors and I wasn't about to miss it. He talked for two hours and it is a message I will never forget. So powerful to me that I hired a transcriptionist to take that audio recording and put it into words on paper so that I could read it whenever I wanted to or needed to. It was a message that only could come out of 80 years of living life. I want to tell you what he said, 'Make decisions against yourself.' That's it. He spent two hours talking about the decisions he had made against himself. What I mean by that is decisions against his ego, decisions against the flesh, and decisions against those things that might be second best. And for two hours, he elaborated an unbelievable message.

Let me hit the pause button for a second. I want to give you a definition of self-control. It is making decisions against yourself. Let me put it this way, anybody who has six-pack abs had made a decision against himself! They went to the gym when we went to the buffet. Anybody that has a PhD, they got it by going to the library when we turned on the TV. They made a decision against themselves. I could keep going but I don't want us to feel too bad right here at the beginning of the message.

World class athlete, world class musician, they are making decisions against themselves. If you want to grow in your relationship with God and fulfill all of that God-given potential that you have, you are going to have to make some decisions against yourself.

Jesus said, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me.' That sounds like making a decision against yourself. Resisting temptation is a decision against yourself. By the way, Rick Warren once said, 'Many Christians are frightened and demoralized by tempting thoughts, feeling guilty that they aren't beyond temptation.' I want to tell you something this weekend, there is not one of us who is beyond temptation. So let's not beat ourselves up about temptation. In fact, why don't we just reframe it a little bit? Temptation is an opportunity to once again prove ourselves to God. He is more important than anything that fulfill the desires of the flesh.

Back to Jack, he shared a few experiences and these might not be as meaningful in this context as hearing Jack share them. He shared about when he was 31 years old, a church came knocking, the largest church in their fellowship, very prestigious, he was 31 and they told him they wanted him to be their pastor. One problem, the Lord had spoken to him and told him that he would be in his current capacity of ministry for five years and he was only three years in and he wasn't willing to compromise what he knew the Lord had spoken to him. Long story short, years later he would take a tiny little church, The Church on the Way, and it would become one of the most influential churches in the country for many decades and is still a powerful expression of the gospel. But he had to make a decision against himself. He could have taken the shortcut and leap frogged right into that thing. But he made a decision against himself. He share about a moment, and this crazy and you really need the full context but there was a moment where the Lord told

him not to eat chocolate. Jack would be the first one to say there is nothing wrong with chocolate. Thank God for chocolate! But sometimes the Lord will ask you to relinquish something, not something that is wrong, but maybe something that if you are willing to give it up, it shows Him that you care more about your relationship with God. So Jack said he didn't even know why the Lord spoke that to him but for 30 years, he did not eat chocolate. For the record, he weighs now what he weighed when he got married 60 years ago. Connect the dots! Then he shared about how he refused a salary increase his entire ministry. These were things that were hard for Jack to share but he knows he is not doing anybody any favors if he pulls punches at 80. So he took a little bit of a risk and said at one point the church board came to him and said they wanted to increase his salary by \$100,000! This was 25 years ago. He said no. He made a decision against himself. You are never going to know how the Lord is going to honor it and we are not talking legalism here. But when the Lord speaks to you, you have to be obedient and make that decision against yourself.

So my question is, what decision do you need to make against yourself? For some of us, it is very obvious. It is an addiction that we are struggling with. It is something we know is outside the boundaries of God's good and pleasing and perfect will. For others it might be a little bit more tricky. But let's dive in. I Corinthians 9:24-28

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

I think what Paul is talking about here is effort. Let's run! Let's go for it! Go big or go home! When I was a kid, they gave academic grades and then they gave effort grades for the kids like me who weren't as intelligent as the other kids. You're not really that smart but good try. A for effort. In an academic setting, I really don't want the A for effort. I want the A! But biblically speaking, I think this is a beautiful thing. I want an A for effort! At the end of the day, God is not going to say, 'Well said, good and faithful servant.' He is not going to say, 'Well thought' or 'well planned.' We want Him to say, 'Well done good and faithful servant.' You have to do it. You have to put in the effort. I want an A for effort.

²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things.

Just for this weekend, could we all consider ourselves athletes? You now the older you get, the better you were. He puts it in an athletic context and talks about self-control. I love doing chapels for NFL teams. It is fun! I love being in that environment. I remember I was doing a chapel a couple years ago and I walked it, it was Saturday night before the game and one of the linebackers on the team was in the hotel gym working out like you wouldn't believe! I was thinking to myself, the game is tomorrow, what are you doing? I'll tell you what he was doing. He was doing what athletes do. They exercise self-control to maybe gain a little bit of an advantage over an opponent. The chaplain of the team said this guy always works out. And a few times, I've had this thought, if we had half the intensity as someone who played a professional sport, if we had half the effort or discipline, if we would hit the word the way they hit the gym,

and I'm not even talking about what's on the field. The amazing thing to me is how much time is spent in the film room. I got to sit in on a team meeting before one of these chapels and it was crazy. They were scripting out the first 15 plays. They have this thing down to a science and I remember thinking to myself that if we had half the intentionality, half the intensity, if we put in even just half the effort. It is our walk with Christ, game on! I would be a game changer! So I'm trying to spur us on just a little bit and I have a feeling our Campus Pastor at Kingstowne, a former Washington Redskin, I think there was an Amen probably right in there somewhere. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things.

We are going to have some fun, stick with me. One of the best things that you can do for your spiritual growth, for your spiritual maturity is go to the gym and work out. What do those two things have to do with each other? Here's what I have found. The more disciplined I am in one area of life, the more disciplined I am in another area of life. These things are not unrelated. If I am disciplined in my diet, it helps me be more disciplined in my spiritual diet. If I am disciplined in going to the gym, I find it helps me be disciplined in exercising spiritual disciplines. These things are not unrelated to one another. I think sometimes we treat gluttony as the least of the seven deadly sins. It doesn't seem as insidious as jealousy or greed. It doesn't seem quite as wrong as lust or pride. But if you can't control your appetite for food, it is hard to control your appetite for anything.

What I am saying is, these things are not unrelated to one another and it is our inability to control our appetite for food, for fame, for money, for sex, that 9 times out of 10 is what gets us in a place where we are in a tough spot.

There is some hope here. Can I just suggest that the spiritual discipline of fasting is huge? Fasting is us saying no to food for a season. Here's what I've learned, if you can say no to food, you can say no to just about anything else. When did we start believing this thing was going to be easy? No! Taking up your cross and denying yourself, this is not a walk in the park. It is more like work out your salvation with fear and trembling. Work out sounds like resistance training. This is not easy stuff but this is what God has called us to.

I want to suggest that maybe you are in a spot where there is not as much self-control as there is demand and you find yourself losing more than winning the battle against whatever it is that you struggle with. I think all of us struggle with something that would master us and there is a fine line and sometimes we have to be honest enough to ask if we are controlling it or is it controlling us. If we cross that line, we have to take some radical measures to get some help. Sometimes that is getting counseling. Sometimes it is getting an accountability partner. We have an incredible group called Celebrate Recovery where people who have the courage to admit they are wrestling with this part of my life and I need help. Just like at the gym, you might need a spotter to get that last rep out. We need spotters spiritually and we need to invite accountability into our lives and I think Celebrate Recovery is one of those incredible groups. Here's what I'm getting at. I can't tell you how many counseling sessions I've done with people all across the map and it doesn't matter whether they have a big decision to make or what problem or issue they are wrestling with, if I am the doctor writing out the prescription, what I'm prescribing is a fast. A fasting just has a way of transitioning us, helping us leave the past in the past. It helps us get just enough self-control with the help of the Holy Spirit that we can start winning a few of those temptation

battles. I also know that many of us, what we need is God's deliverance. Psalm 32 says He is singing songs of deliverance around us. I want you to know that there is a God who doesn't just deliver the Israelites out of Egypt. There is a God who can deliver you out of whatever bondage you have. But here's what I want you to hear. I've seen too many people experience the deliverance of God but then not back it up with daily disciplines. You have to back up the deliverance with a decision on a daily basis to exercise that self-control.

I Corinthians 10:23 says all things are permissible but not all things are beneficial. That's huge. This is the difference between average, mediocre and someone who God's hand is on in such a powerful way that they become something that really brings glory to God and advances his kingdom. This sounds like making decisions against yourself. Let me ask you a question. Are you asking what is permissible? In youth group, it always the question, how far is too far. What can I get by with and still be ok? Beneficial is saying good isn't good enough. What is best right here? What is going to bring me closest to God? And what that's going to require is making some decisions against yourself. You can't settle for permissibility. You have to go after what is beneficial.

Here's the heart of it. Let's talk about it in terms of a trend line. Are you trending towards what's permissible? That is the path of least resistance and my concern is, you might get in at the end of the day if you put your faith in Jesus Christ but is there going to be any reward there to offer back and put at the feet of Christ? Or is your trend line going after what is beneficial? What I know for sure is that often what it takes is just the defining decision and saying good isn't good enough and go after God and believe that you are going to experience Him in a new and greater way.

²⁶ *So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air.*

One of my favorite moments in NCC history was at Union Station when we had three services and going back and forth between theaters and we had some interesting moments at Union Station. You never knew who was going to show up. At one service, a woman walked in and I kid you not, she was walking down the aisle playing the air guitar all the way! Killing the air guitar! No one knew exactly what to do. We were a little slow on the draw. She got all the way to the front and she took a rubber band and put it on her finger and flicks it at the feet of our worship leader at that service and then turned around and air guitared her way back out of the service! We were like, did that really happen? It was pretty bizarre. That is beating the air. That is like you don't even know what you are doing. It is like zero intentionality. There is no point. Beating the air. It's like running a race without knowing where the finish line is. You're just running around aimlessly. This is no rhyme or reason whatsoever. I think what Paul is getting at here is if there is no goal, no plan, no routine, good luck! That is a lack of self-control.

So let me give you three quick thoughts. Number one, establish goals. What does that have to do with self-control? It has everything to do with self-control. First of all, faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. So an absence of goals, goals that would honor God, is an absence of faith. If you don't have any goals, you are aimlessly going through life. It was hard to put them out there but I put 113 life goals in the Circle Maker and part of the reason why I did that is to model something. If you don't know what you are going after, you will not

accomplish 100 percent of the goals that you don't set! So part of self-control is having goals that we are going after.

Last week, Lora and I were planning out some of the summer months. As I've mentioned, we are taking a little sabbatical after 19 years of pastoring. So we've got a few special things planned. Josiah and I are going to raft the Colorado River and end up in the Grand Canyon and then we are going to hike out of it. I've hiked the Grand Canyon from rim to rim before and it is the mother lode. And I did it in 130 degree weather. I lost 13 pounds in two days! And then I think at some point this summer we might hit Half Dome. I went to the gym twice the next day! I really did. If I don't have something I'm training for, I think if your goal is to lose weight, good luck with that. You might lose it but you will probably put it right back on. What we need are goals to go after whether they are physical or spiritual, I need a goal that I'm progressing towards to exercise the self-control to be able to accomplish it.

One other thought, you can try to not sin by not sinning. Good luck with that too! You can do nothing wrong and still do nothing right. Righteousness is not just not doing nothing wrong. Righteousness is doing something right. I think the reason why many of us struggle with habitual sin or with addictions is that we don't have a greater yes that enables us to say no to something lesser. What we need is a huge vision from God that will keep us busy and keep us on our knees. God makes big people with big dreams because then you don't really have time for the other stuff.

Proverbs 29:18 says that without a vision, the people perish. The word 'perish' refers to fruit that is overripe and rotting. Isn't it true? If you don't have a vision, you are rotting. Another translation says where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint. Cast off restraint is the opposite of self-control.

We need a vision from God that is bigger and stronger than the desires of the flesh. You get that in the Word of God and in the presence of God and in prayer as God begins to reveal who you can become in Christ.

Establish goals and establish boundaries. I only do 12 overnight speaking trips a year. It is a boundary I had to put in place a few years ago because I want to be famous in my home and it is hard to be famous in your home if you are not home. I realized that my priority is to be there for my family. And I'll tell you what happened, every opportunity is an amazing opportunity. I started over-extending myself and started saying yes to too many things and at some point, God in his graciousness, made me realize I needed to start saying no to some things. So I decided 12 overnight speaking trips was where I drew the line. And I'll tell you something, on one level it is a decision against yourself. It's funny because the moment you do that and then you get to your quota and then the next invitation is the greatest one you've ever received! But you have to establish boundaries.

What boundaries do you need to establish or re-establish in your life? You have to define it and know what it is.

And you have to establish routines. One of the most spiritual decisions you make every day is when you set your alarm clock. The earlier you set your alarm clock, the more of a decision you are making against yourself.

Whenever I speak to writers, I always tell them if they ask for one tip, I say set your alarm clock early in the morning. That's it. Get up early. Make a decision to get yourself up. By the way, I had this strange thought today that every time you hit the snooze button, you are delaying your dream by about nine minutes. Isn't that what we are doing? Jesus had a routine. Mark 1:35

Very early in the morning while it was still dark, He got up and went out to a deserted place where He spent time with his heavenly Father.

He had a routine. Do you have a routine? Routine is part of self-control. It is finding a rhythm to your life. It is this idea that you have to pace yourself in a way that your routine is leading you closer and closer to God.

Here's how we are going to end this series. Charles Spurgeon is one of history's most famous preachers. In fact, when I graduated from Bible College, I got his entire set of sermons. It was like 100 books. It took up half of my bookshelf at that point. I was so excited. This was the greatest graduation gift ever! Spurgeon was a preacher's preacher but there is one thing he said that is probably to me is more powerful than any other. He said, 'I take my text and I make a beeline for the cross.'

See, we are talking about the fruit of the Spirit and what I want to say is, what do you need? Do you need love? Make a beeline for the cross.

For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

You need joy? Make a beeline for the cross.

The joy of the Lord is our strength.

Do you need peace? Make a beeline for the cross.

It is the peace that passes understanding.

Do you need patience? Make a beeline for the cross. The Lord is patient with you.

Do you need kindness? Make a beeline for the cross. It is his kindness that leads us to repentance.

Do you need goodness? Make a beeline for the cross.

No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly before Him.

Do you need faithfulness? Make a beeline for the cross.

He will never leave you nor forsake you.

Do you need gentleness? Make a beeline for the cross.

Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest for I am gentle and humble in heart.

Finally, do you need self-control? Make a beeline for the cross.

Let's pray.

Father help us to not just be hearers of your Word but to be doers of it. Would your Holy Spirit come and meet us right here right now in this moment? I pray specifically for those who need to make a beeline to the cross, that they would have the faith and courage to surrender themselves to You. Lord to fully yield themselves to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Lord, thank You for the miracle that is happening in people's hearts right now as they are making that decision, a decision that will change the trajectory of their life for eternity. We celebrate and rejoice with the angels in heaven. In Jesus name, Amen.

Transcribed by:

Ministry Transcription

margaretsalyers@gmail.com