

WISE SELF-MANAGEMENT**PROVERBS 25:28**

Scott Peck was nine years old and it was a beautiful summer morning. He'd recently learned how to ride a bike and was exploring all the fun stuff you can do on it. About a mile from his home the road went down a steep hill and then took a sharp turn at the bottom. He decided to coast down the hill allowing his bike to go faster and faster. This was so much fun! To give up that fun feeling by putting on the brakes seemed – at the time – to be an absurd form of self-punishment. So Scott decided not to slow down at all. His fun came to an abrupt, painful end. A few seconds later he was propelled about a dozen feet off the road and into the woods because he couldn't make that sharp turn at the bottom of the hill. Scott got badly scratched up and was bleeding. The front wheel of his new bike was twisted beyond further use from its impact with a tree. What happened? Yes, it was an accident, to be sure. Scott didn't intend to lose control, crash his bike, or injure himself. But it was a preventable accident. The truth is Scott had failed to manage, discipline, or control himself.

Scott Peck was a psychiatrist and author who died several years ago. He concluded from that childhood incident that learning how to manage, discipline, and control yourself – all pretty much the same thing – is an essential building block to being successful in life. If you don't develop self-control, you end up crashing a lot in life. Managing yourself is an appropriate way to love yourself. A lot of what Scott Peck wrote about from a psychology viewpoint was already said first in the book of Proverbs.

How To Live Wisely & Well is the name of our current message series which is exploring several dominant themes in Proverbs. Proverbs doesn't tell us how to become Jesus' followers or how to get into Heaven. That only ever happens by God's grace and when you put your faith in who Jesus is and what He did for us at the cross and the empty tomb. Instead, Proverbs focuses on how to be successful in life once you've decided to follow Jesus.

Self-management, self-discipline, or self-control is a primary theme that comes up over and over again in Proverbs. Here's our key verse for today. The literal Hebrew there refers to a person who lacks control over his or her own spirit. Godly self-management is the ability to control your feelings, your reactions, and your words because you love and respect God. The writer of Proverbs was saying that when you lack this ability, you're like a demolished house. We've all seen pictures of homes devastated by tornadoes or hurricanes. Walls are broken down. Roofs are torn off. No one can live there anymore. When you fail to manage yourself wisely and well, your life resembles a busted up house good for nothing else but to be torn down and hauled away. It's easy to forget self-control is identified as one of the marks of being filled with the Holy Spirit over in the New Testament. "But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!" (Gal 5:22-23 NLT) Wise self-management matters to God! Proverbs supplies a wealth of information on how to do it in a way that pleases Him. Let's look at...

THE SIGNS OF GODLY SELF-CONTROL.

The first sign is the willingness to delay gratification. You're willing to schedule the pain and pleasures of life in such a way that you deal with the painful stuff first knowing it will make the pleasurable stuff even better. Unfortunately, we live in a culture that worships at the temple of instant gratification. We want all good things NOW. We want the bigger house NOW even if we can't afford it. We want the expensive car NOW even though it will mean excessive debt. We want the great job NOW. Forget paying your dues. All we need to do is examine the attitude of most Americans toward consumer debt to see that delaying gratification isn't high on the values list. Those plastic cards in our wallets whisper, "You can have it NOW. Go ahead, what's a little more debt? The thrill of having it NOW will cancel out the extra stress." Instant gratification shows up in other places. We might want a great marriage NOW. Forget the reality that most great marriages are the result of relational work. We want to be a great parent NOW. But learning how to be a better parent is a life long educational project. We want to be a part of a great church NOW. Forget the fact no church started out being great.

You know what's another word for instant gratification? Envy. Proverbs says, "It's healthy to be content, but envy can eat you up." (Pro 14:30 CEV) Envy says, "I refuse to be content with what God has given me today. I refuse to believe many good things in life take time to acquire or receive." Either we put the brakes on that kind of attitude or we're headed for a crash. We've all heard how stress can affect our physical bodies. That's no surprise to God. He said here that unchecked envy will eat you up. But when you manage yourself wisely, you learn how to be content. That results in better health.

Proverbs also says, "If you plan and work hard, you will have plenty; if you get in a hurry, you will end up poor." (Pro 21:5 CEV) People who want instant gratification are usually both hasty and lazy according to God's Word. They resist the obvious truth that most success in life happens rather slowly over time: financial success, relational success, spiritual success. Instead, they're convinced everything in life worth having can be gotten quickly, sloppily, and half-heartedly. The inevitable result is poverty in every area of life. Self-controlled people, however, plan their work and then work their plan. They seek out God's perspective and are content to wait for His timing. Most of the time, they eventually experience prosperity in every area of their lives.

Here's a second sign of godly self-control in people: they avoid temptation. Every last person here has character weaknesses that the devil can exploit. We all have chinks in our armor! Do you know yours? When you're managing yourself wisely, you learn how to avoid situations that exploit your weaknesses. Proverbs says, "Only a stupid fool is never cautious – so be extra careful and stay out of trouble." (Pro 14:16 CEV) "When you see trouble coming, don't be stupid and walk right into it – be smart and hide." (Pro 22:3 CEV) The alcoholic stays away from venues where alcohol is served. The "shopaholic" leaves the charge cards at home. The man who struggles with lust avoids certain movies, magazines, or internet sites. The woman with a hair trigger temper or weakness for gossip learns when to walk away from a conversation. A person who is

overly competitive learns to avoid circumstances where the ugly side of that competitive spirit might show itself.

Do you remember that old TV show, “Hee Haw”? In one comedy skit, Doc Campbell was confronted by a patient who said he broke his arm in two places. Doc replied, “Well, then, stay out of them places!” Pretty sound advice! Godly self-control recognizes there are just some places or situations you and I need to stay out of or avoid. But a person who refuses to manage or control himself – who always thinks he’s going to defeat any temptation that comes along – is a fool according to God’s Word. The fact is you’re headed for a crash and it will hurt plenty.

A third sign of people with godly self-control is buoyancy under stress. What’s that? God treasures the ability in His people to take whatever life gives and stay positive. That’s the ability to stay buoyant under stress – not the absence of stress. It’s a sign of wise self-management. Proverbs says, “A glad heart makes a happy face; a broken heart crushes the spirit.” (Pro 15:13 NLT) “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a broken spirit saps a person’s strength.” (Pro 17:22 NLT) All of us have periods in life when our spirits feel crushed for one reason or another. But the child of God can’t let discouragement become a habit of a lifestyle. When you’re a follower of Jesus, there are many reasons to live life cheerfully and courageously even in the midst of stressful times. God loves you. Your sins are forgiven. You know God is somehow working out all things in your life – even the bad stuff – for His glory and your good. One day every tear, every loss, and every sorrow will be wiped away because then you’ll be in your eternal home in God’s presence forever. Sometimes wise self-management means the ability to say to yourself, “I will not allow a negative, crushed spirit rule my life! I’m a child of God. Jesus died and rose again for me. I will not let stress destroy me, because I know greater is He within me than the one who is in the world.”

Another sign of people with godly self-control is the ability to control their anger. When it takes a whole lot to push your personal anger button, that’s very wise. God approves. Proverbs says, “Slowness to anger makes for deep understanding; a quick-tempered person stockpiles stupidity.” (Pro 14:29 MSG) “Controlling your temper is better than being a hero who captures a city.” (Pro 16:32 CEV) Consider the analogy found in that last verse. If you were trying to defeat someone safe behind the thick walls of a fortified city, it would demand loads of personal discipline, careful planning, as well as lots of courage. But a person who can control their temper is even more impressive to God. It’s God’s will and desire that you control your temper. Anger is not to rule over you; instead, you are to take authority over your anger. Don’t ever shrug off a quick temper with the excuse, “Well, that’s just the way I am. I can’t help it” as if a quick temper is like being born with blue eyes or brown hair. No, not all anger is sinful. Of course not. After all, Jesus got angry on occasion. But there’s an appropriate time and place for anger. The person who manages it wisely knows and understands that “You should be quick to listen and slow to speak or get angry. If you get angry, you cannot do any of the good things that God wants done.” (Jam 1:19-20 CEV)

I was fascinated to learn how top athletes have to learn how to control their anger in order to be successful at their sport. Norm Evans, an All-Pro tackle years ago for the Miami Dolphins football team, once confided, “It’s really dangerous for a pro football player to get angry. In fact, that’s when linemen sustain their most serious injuries. Anger is so harmful in football that if I can get an opposing lineman angry at me, he will concentrate on beating me and forget to attack the quarterback. And that’s my job – protecting the quarterback.” An angry person makes poor decisions, wounds those he loves with his tongue, overreacts, disciplines her kids too severely, and does things that calm thinking would never permit.

I’m sure there are many more signs of godly self-control, but here’s just one more for today. You use words carefully. You know how powerful words can be and you use them accordingly. If you want to manage your life wisely, you will manage your words wisely. They go hand in hand. Proverbs says, “You will say the wrong things if you talk too much – so be sensible and watch what you say.” (Pro 10:19 CEV) “The right word at the right time is like precious gold set in silver.” (Pro 25:11 CEV) Words can lead us straight into sin – critical words, sarcastic words, thoughtless words, abusive words, controlling words, gossiping words. But words can also be like this exquisite piece of fine jewelry, too – carefully planned out and beautifully presented. Wise words are appropriate to the occasion, fit the need of the moment, bring joy, give encouragement, offer comfort, and provide blessing to those around us.

Christian author, John Trent, remembers playing for his high school football coach. This man was not prone to use encouraging words with his players ever. John remembers one game where his team was favored to win, but they were losing it with little time left on the clock. John thought he’d played a pretty good game, but he groaned inwardly when he was pulled out after making a tackle late in the fourth quarter. Since he was the captain of the defense, John braced himself to get a thorough tongue lashing from his coach. But that’s not what happened. His coach said, “John, I just want you to know I wish I had ten more of you out on the field. I’m proud of how you’re playing today. Now get back in the game!” It’s been many years since John Trent heard those words, but he’s never forgotten them. He still remembers how he sort of floated back out onto the field and played harder than ever. Those are a few signs of godly self-control in God’s people. There are more, to be sure, but you get the idea. Proverbs points us to another important aspect of wise self-management.

THE SOURCES OF GODLY SELF-CONTROL.

The first source of godly self-control is both the most obvious and the most forgotten: the fear of the Lord. We began this series of messages acknowledging this is the single most important, essential attitude for living life wisely and well. Again, its basic meaning is offering God a loving and obedient respect in all things and at all times. “Fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.” (Pro 1:7 NLT) “Don’t be impressed with your own wisdom. Instead, fear the Lord and turn away from evil.” (Pro 3:7 NLT) A fool isn’t someone with a low IQ or a meager education. You can be very educated and highly intelligent but still be a fool according

to the Bible. A fool is simply anyone who ignores God. A fool may believe in God's existence, but God is simply irrelevant to their everyday life. The fool is wise in his or her own eyes regardless of what the Bible says or godly people may advise. If you want to manage your life wisely, start out with the fear of the Lord, end with the fear of the Lord, and make sure you do everything in between in the fear of the Lord.

This might surprise you, but Proverbs says a second source of godly self-control is getting corrected as a young person. Moms and Dads, listen up! You can help your kids become self-disciplined and move towards godly self-control if you take seriously the responsibility to correct them when they're wrong. Proverbs says, "Correct your children before it's too late; if you don't punish them, you are destroying them." (Pro 19:18 CEV) "Teach your children right from wrong, and when they are grown they will still do right." (Pro 22:6 CEV) If someone loved you enough to correct you appropriately when you were young, you were actually given a great gift according to God. Habits start when you're young. Bad habits have a way of getting ingrained in our personalities. They're much harder to change later in life. If you wait until you're an adult to start wise self-management, it will be a whole lot harder on you than if Mom or Dad got the job started earlier. Foolishness comes naturally to all of us. So does lack of self-discipline. We all have to learn wisdom and why self-management is wise.

Picture a young mother with a four year old approaching a bench in the mall for a much deserved rest. The little girl points and says, "Mommy, just one more store. I know I can spend my money there." Mom replies, "Kimberly, we agreed on three stores. We've done that. You didn't find anything. When Daddy gets here we're going home." "But, Mommy, PLEEZE!" "No, Kimberly." Dad finally arrives, offers Kimberly his hand, and says, "Let's go." She responds with engaging charm, "Daddy, can't I please go to just one more store. I know that store has something I want." Kimberly's parents exchange knowing looks. Dad says no, too. Kimberly pulls out all the stops hoping something will work. She rolls pleading eyes at Dad. She glares at Mom. She refuses to move her feet. She gets angry. She whines. She cries. Finally, Dad says firmly, "When you're done, we'll leave. If you don't wind it up soon, we're going anyway." Kimberly trudges out of the mall the picture of deep dejection and disappointment. Mom and Dad get the cold, silent treatment. What were Kimberly's Mom and Dad doing? Teaching her self-control. Kimberly had agreed in advance she would visit three stores. But after visiting the third store, she hadn't used her money to buy anything she wanted. In her mind, it was time to dismiss the prior agreement and continue shopping. Her mom and dad just held her to the original agreement. They weren't nasty, ugly, or mean about it. They just set a boundary, a limit, and stuck to it. That's effective parents teaching their child self-management.

Wise parents know kids just don't evolve naturally into self-controlled adults. You teach a child self-control just like you teach him how to brush his teeth correctly. I like how someone described the task of being a parent: "saturation leadership." Wise parents take the time to make all the adjustments as needed. They listen, they tighten up here, they loosen up there, they give mini lectures, words of encouragement, little hugs, little

pats on the back. What's the result? In most cases, the result is an adult who will allow God to teach him or her self-control much more easily and at deeper levels.

The final two sources of godly self-control are closely related. The first is the counsel of wise people. When you want to manage your life wisely and well, you develop a healthy, God-honoring caution. You don't become casual about important decisions. You pray and ask God for wisdom. You seek out wise, godly people and listen to their advice. Proverbs says, "Fools are headstrong and do what they like, wise people take advice." (Pro 12:15 MSG) "Take good counsel and accept correction – that's the way to live wisely and well." (Pro 19:20 MSG)

The last source of godly self-control is the companionship of wise people – not just their counsel or advice, but also their companionship. Don't ever confuse godly self-control with being self-sufficient. You will always need God and you will always need other people who know God. Why? Because God often speaks and works through people. Proverbs says, "Become wise by walking with the wise; hang out with fools and watch your life fall to pieces." (Pro 13:20 MSG) "Listen to good advice if you want to live well, an honored guest among wise men and women." (Pro 15:31 MSG) Most of the time, you and I become a lot like the people we choose to hang out with on a regular basis. So find people who want to be better people than they are right now and who – above all – want to become more like Jesus and spend time with them intentionally.

I read a story about Columbus' own Jack Nicklaus, arguably the best golfer ever. It was a cold, wintry afternoon and Jack had just shot an opening 72 at a major golf tournament. Now, most people would be ecstatic about shooting a score of 72, but Jack was unhappy with his round of golf that day. At the end of that dreary afternoon, he took his caddy and a large bucket of golf balls, went to the edge of the practice fairway, and started driving golf balls into the growing darkness. The rest of the players had hurried off to the clubhouse to enjoy its warm, refreshing showers and hearty meals. But Jack just kept driving those golf balls until even his calloused hands became sensitive and sore. Someone who was watching him asked him, "Why are you doing this to yourself?" Jack's reply was matter of fact, "Because I refuse to play golf like I played it today."

What we need are more Jesus' followers who say, "I refuse to keep living my life the way I did today. I need to change. I need to do better and be better. I need to be more like Jesus." What kind of a person do you want to be? If you want to live your life wisely and well, you will understand the great value in wisely managing yourself and in discovering godly self-control.