

Guarding the Walls of Your City: A Consideration of Proverbs 25:28 (Part One)

This is the first in a series of meditations on living a life in “control of ourselves.” It is based on Proverbs 25:28, but also uses it as launching point for a robust discussion of holy living.

We’ve all had the experience of being out of control. Losing restraint. Letting things get out of hand. We never intend for it to happen, but when it does, it can be so hard to reign in our emotions, words, impulses. Why is this? Do we simply chalk it up to sin . . . shrug our shoulders and say, “What can I do? Nobody’s perfect!” Or is our chaotic lack of control something more than simply generic sin? In other words, of course we are sinners, but is our inability to control ourselves driven by other sinful and worldly factors? By a lack of pious practices?

Consider this scenario. You get into a discussion with a family member. Maybe there is a history of contention between you, or tender spots from past skirmishes. Soon the discussion devolves into personal attacks. Your face flushes. You can feel the anger coursing through your body. You love the person, but in the moment all you desire to do is lash out and hurt them. You begin saying things . . . things that aren’t really true, but you’ve lost control of your senses, and your tongue is unleashed. You call them names, ascribe false motives to them, misrepresent what they’ve said, and put the worst construction on *everything*.

Consider another scenario. You’re trying to make changes in your life for your health and family’s sake. You have a problem with gluttony and binge-eating. You’ve tried different things to control your eating habits, but when you’re alone or lonely, when you’re stressed and tired, even when things are good (let’s celebrate!), you begin to snack, and eat with little control. The sugar and starchy food produces a chemical reaction inside you—you can feel your inhibitions lowering and your cravings increase. Soon, you’ve lost all restraint and are eating or drinking with no regard to your health, or diet, or commitments you’ve made to yourself and family.

Do either of these resonate with you? We’ve all done things like them . . . but are these types of behaviors a common occurrence? Do you feel like much of your life is “out of control”? I would suggest that our lack of self-control is not merely a problem with self-discipline, but goes much deeper. It’s a spiritual issue, a problem with sinful desires unleashed on a flesh that is weak and vulnerable. As well, we live in a society that enables, indeed promotes, out of control behavior. Our technology and lifestyles feed a lack of restraint. In many ways, “to lose control” is celebrated and commended, catered to and marketed toward. Is there any hope or help to our sinful lack of restraint?

The Bible and the pure Word of God has much to say regarding self-control and what is called “temperance.” In fact, self-control is a fruit of the Holy Ghost. Did you know that? In this series of articles, we will explore what the Scriptures teach us about the dangers of lack of restraint, the importance of self-control in a life of faith, and ways that we can deal with this spiritual issue, as well as a bodily one. We will use a single proverb as a jumping off point, and then look at other Biblical passages to better know the role of forgiveness in Christ, and how we are to “seek the

above things” with regard to self-control. The goal is to be better equipped with God’s Word and the wisdom of spiritual practices that can help us gain control of our tongues, our minds, our hands, our desires. For God desires a holy people, ones who promote what is good and abhor what is evil. This involves not only right thinking, but right practices.

Proverbs 25:28 . . . and the Surrounding Context

So, without further ado . . . I give you the proverb:

Like a breached city without walls is a man who lacks restraint of his spirit.

This is a faithful translation of the Hebrew. But let me give a handful of English translations:

A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls. (ESV)

He that *hath* no rule over his own spirit, *is like* a city *that is* broken down, *and* without walls. (KJV)

Like a city that is broken into *and* without walls is a man who has no control over his spirit. (NASB)

Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control. (NIV)

Like a city breached, without walls, is one who lacks self-control. (NRSV)

Hebrew poetry can be tricky to render in smooth, consistent English, which is why we see so much variation in the translations. But observe the common elements. The man (any human) who is unable to control oneself, that is, his spirit (his inner desires) is like a city or town that has its walls broken down and therefore has become breached . . . overrun. The metaphor is striking. One can imagine a city in ancient times that would rely on natural barriers to give it security, but the *last and best line of defense is its outer walls*. These are not flimsy fence boards or a chain link fence, but strong, thick walls of stone and rock. Without the walls intact, the city is completely vulnerable to outside agents seeking to overrun the city and conquer its inhabitants.

Obviously, the metaphor communicates the danger to a man (again, any human) when his defenses of control are laid waste and walls of restraint broken down. Without these barriers, that man is completely vulnerable to attack from outside agents. What or who are these? For simplicity’s sake, we use Luther’s triad of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. The proverb recognizes that a person has enemies. They may take many forms, but the emphatic point is to realize these enemies seek the man’s destruction—physical as well as spiritual harm.

It is helpful to look at the wider context of this particular proverb. The book of Proverbs can be simple to read but tricky. Each verse of each chapter stands on its own, like a fortune cookie from God. But there are broader themes and grouping of topics. There are also repeated warnings dealing with the same sins and vulnerabilities. The immediate context of this proverb though, while it stands alone, helps us to see that there’s more going on. Proverbs 25:28 introduces a set of verses that focus on *the fool*.

The Wise One and the Fool

There are several figures of comparison and contrast throughout Proverbs. An overriding one is the comparison between the wise person (or righteous) with the foolish one (or the unrighteous). The wise one and the fool. The chief part of the “wisdom” section is at the very beginning—Proverbs chapters one through nine. But there is a singular verse that echoes throughout the book:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Wisdom is way more than knowing tips and tricks to live one’s best life now. The wise one is the one who trusts in the Lord for all things, who looks to Him for all his good and blessings. While this is articulated in the Torah (the way of walking in the Lord), this wisdom culminates in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Wisdom in Proverbs, in fact, is a personification of Jesus, Who is God’s embodiment of His Word. He is wisdom-made-flesh, so to speak.

The fool, then, is one who does *not* fear the Lord, in fact *despises* His wisdom. Our proverb (25:28) kicks off a mini-section of a further description of what a fool, an unrighteous person, is and does (26:1-12):

Like snow in summer or rain in harvest, so honor is not fitting for a *fool*.
Like a sparrow in its flitting, like a swallow in its flying, an undeserved curse goes nowhere.
A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey, and a rod for the back of *fools*.
Do not answer *fools* according to their folly, or you will be a *fool* yourself.
Answer *fools* according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes.
It is like cutting off one’s foot and drinking down violence, to send a message by a *fool*.
The legs of a lame man hang limp; so does a proverb in the mouth of a *fool*.
It is like binding a stone in a sling to give honor to a *fool*.
Like a thornbush brandished by the hand of a drunkard is a proverb in the mouth of a *fool*.
Like an archer who wounds everybody is one who hires a passing *fool* or drunkard.
Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a *fool* who reverts to his folly.
Do you see persons wise in their own eyes? There is more hope for *fools* than for them.

So, what do these *foolish* behaviors have to do with our proverb? A man who lacks restraint of his spirit, his passion, his desires, his tongue, his body, his mind, his heart . . . is a fool. A fool is impulsive, quick to anger, a gossip and liar, conceited, lustful, disobedient, and stubborn. *He has no self-control*. A fool is not wise, that is, he does not trust in God, and in light of Christ, does not follow God’s Son. A fool, then, despises the things of God and the teachings of Christ. A fool goes his own way instead of following God’s path. A fool is spiritually bankrupt and under the influence of Satan. A fool gives no thought to restraining his impulses and does whatever he wants, whenever he wants, irrespective of God’s will and other people around him.

Guarding the Walls of Your City: Something Practical, Part One

The book of Proverbs speaks to ones who fear the Lord. The good news is, that's you! While the fool rejects Christ and does not bear the Spirit's fruit, you have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus and are indwelt with the Holy Ghost. But we are also sinners, through and through. We battle our own foolish and wicked impulses and have moments where we absolutely lose control. In subsequent months, we will get more into the specifics of self-control in the Christian life and how we might strive to guard our own walls, but let's end this article with a basic framework that invites more restraint into our lives and helps us have a sense of order and peace.

You may already know where I'm going . . . but a life of repentance, and bearing the Spirit's fruit begins with *a life of worship*. "Hey Pastor! I already go to church!" Likely, if you are reading this, you are. Keep it up. But if you are not gathering together with the saints often, and not receiving the body and blood of Jesus on the regular . . . start today! Every week begins with the Lord's Day, the "little Easter," the first day of the week where God's people receive God's gifts afresh. To gain control of our emotions, our bodies, our lives, we must be in the presence of God in the Divine Service. We must worship Christ and receive what He has to give us.

This means that we actively restrain our impulses to do something else on the Lord's Day, and prioritize God's gifts for us. This means we build the habit of coming to church. It becomes such a habit that we don't even think about *not* going. In fact, when something comes up that threatens our worship, we look for other ways to accommodate the "threat"! I have found this is normally not the way people contemplate worship. But once we properly order our lives around "the fear of the Lord," the more we are open to other aspects of His Divine counsel, the better we are equipped to receive His instruction and implement it into our daily walk with Christ.

For to live a life with order, restraint, and bearing the Spirit's fruit means we must regularly come into contact with the Spirit. Worship is the chief (though not only) way God gives to do this. Consider what worship is, and does. It is a gathering of saints together. The pastor speaks a word of forgiveness straightaway, before we begin the Service of the Word. In that service, we hear readings, participate in liturgy drawn from Scripture, sing hymns loaded with Gospel. We hear the proclaimed Word of Christ. The sword of the Spirit, the Word, is delivered again and again, in various and repeated ways. Then we get to the Service of the Sacrament! Once more, the Spirit is delivered. We pray to God "in groanings too deep for words," by which the Spirit intercedes for us. We then together eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Savior, another means of grace. In all of this, we are fed, forgiven afresh, and comforted by the work of the Spirit. We then are equipped to go out into the world and "serve the Lord in peace."

Next month, we will consider how the New Testament takes the exhortation of this proverb and gives it to us specifically in light of Christ's work and the Spirit's power . . . that we may guard the walls of our city in daily life.