



Galatians 5:23

(23) gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.

New King James Version

In [Galatians 5:23](#), "self-control" (*temperance*, KJV) is the translation of the Greek word *enkrateia*, which means "possessing power, strong, having mastery or possession of, continent, [self-controlled](#)" (Kenneth S. Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*, "Galatians," p. 160). *Vincent's Word Studies of the New Testament* adds that it means "holding in hand the passions and desires" (vol. IV, p. 168). The word thus refers to the mastery of one's desires and impulses, and does not in itself refer to the control of any specific desire or impulse. If a particular desire or impulse is meant, the context will indicate it.

Self-control is comprehensive in practical application to life, but the Bible does not use the word extensively. It is implied, however, in many exhortations to obedience, submission, and sinless living. The noun form is used only three times, the verb form twice ([I Corinthians 7:9; 9:25](#)), and the adjective form once ([Titus 1:8](#)). The negative form of the adjective is used three times. In [II Timothy 3:3](#), it is translated "without self-control [*incontinent*, KJV]"; in [Matthew 23:25](#), "self-indulgent [excess, KJV]"; and in [I Corinthians 7:5](#), "lack of self-control [*incontinency*, KJV]."

Another Greek word, *nephalios*, has the same general meaning, but it generally covers a more specific area of self-control. It is often translated as "temperate" or "sober." Even though its root condemns self-indulgence in all forms, the Bible's writers use it to refer to avoiding drunkenness.

Despite self-control's obvious importance, we should not limit our understanding of these words to merely the stringent discipline of the individual's passions and appetites. These words also include the notions of having good sense, sober [wisdom](#), moderation, and soundness of mind as contrasted to insanity.

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We see a good example of self-control implied in [Proverbs 25:28](#): "Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls." No specific Hebrew word in this sentence means "self-control," but "rule" certainly implies it. In its comments on this verse, the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* states:

The picture is that of a city whose walls have been so nearly destroyed as to be without defense against an enemy; so is the man who has no restraint over his spirit, the source of man's passionate energies. He has no defense against anger, lust, and the other unbridled emotions that destroy the personality. (vol. 4, p. 267)

[Proverbs 16:32](#) shows a more positive side of self-control: "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city." Here Solomon uses an entirely different word for "rule," but the sense of self-control remains. A comparison of the two proverbs reveals the great importance of self-control as both an offensive and defensive attribute.

Undoubtedly, self-denial, self-sacrifice, and self-control are inextricably linked in Christian life; each is part of our duty to [God](#). Yet human nature exerts a persistent and sometimes very strong force away from God, as [Romans 8:7](#) clearly shows: "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the [law of God](#), nor indeed can be." It is this force that each Christian must overcome. Controlling ourselves, denying human nature its impulse to satisfy its desire, and even sacrificing ourselves are necessary if we are to stop sinning as a way of life. When we add the concepts of self-denial and self-sacrifice to our understanding of self-control, we can see more easily how large a role self-control plays in the Bible.

— John W. Ritenbaugh

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