

Digging Deeper : altered states

Many religions encourage a loss of self-control through religious experience including ecstatic experiences. This is also found in forms of mysticism.

The Apostle Paul describes an out of the ordinary religious experience in 2 Corinthians 12.1-5 which may have been his own. However, the person (Paul?) does not seem to have lost control during the incident any more than John did when God revealed to him the things he recorded in the Book of Revelation. Furthermore in Christian meetings Paul stressed that things should be done decently and in order (1 Cor 14.40) which suggests self-control. Even the gift of prophecy was supposed to be dealt with in an orderly fashion.

The encouragement of the loss of self-control under spiritual influence involves seeking to enter an altered state of consciousness. This can also be achieved by the use of drugs and some pagan religions do this. But the fruit of the Holy Spirit includes self-control and we are exhorted to remain (eg. 1 Thess 5.6-8).

Some churches encourage meditation as a way of disengaging the mind in the belief that this helps us better communicate with God. The assumption is that God is so other that we can only truly encounter Him if we jettison the restraints of our human nature. By contrast Biblical meditation seems to involve reflecting on the Law (Josh 1.8), the works of God (Ps 77.12) and godly virtues (Phil 4.8). The reason why this is possible is that we are made in the image of God, God has endowed us with language and communicates using that language, and because the Son of God took flesh and was made man.

Do you think it is fair to say, therefore, that the goal of losing control of mind or body in the search of spiritual experience and of encounter with God is not Christian?

David Phillips, June 2012

The Fruit of the Spirit is ... self-control.

Bible Study 9 on Gal 5.22-23



The Greek word *kratos* means power and occurs in words like **democracy** and **aristocrat**. *Enkratos* means to have power, or control over oneself. It was considered by Greek philosophers to be the chief virtue. In the New Testament love is the chief virtue and the *enkratos* word group only occurs ten times, although there are other words with similar meanings.

In training

What aspects of training and what hardships do Olympic athletes have to go through in order to compete at the top level? In what ways must they exercise self-control to achieve this?

What is it that makes them want to go through such hardships?

Read 1 Corinthians ch 9 vv 19 to 27.

(The word enkratos comes in 25, the NIV translates it as 'goes into strict training').

In verses 19-20 what hardships has Paul endured for the work of the gospel? In what ways might life have been easier for Paul if he had been less conscientious?

Do you face situations in which it would be easier not to be a Christian? Or are there situations where you know you are failing to live up to what Christ has called you to? How does self-control have to be exercised in such situations?

In verses 23-24 what does Paul say makes the hardship worthwhile? Is this something that encourages you to go on as Paul did?

In verses 25-26 pick out the sporting imagery and discuss how this compares and relates to Christian experience.

Verse 27 could be easily misunderstood and some have and still do take it quite literally. Given what Paul is saying in verse 19-27 what

do you think he means here by beating his body and how does that fit with the imagery of what athletes endure?

Some today seem willing to put their body through pain and contortion in the gym but are unwilling to undergo any hardship for sake of lost souls.

Felix

Paul not only practiced self control, he preached it.

Read Acts ch 24 vv 22-26

What indication do we have in these verses that Felix misused his position as Governor of Judea? This was just the tip of the iceberg.

Felix already knew something of the Christian message (v22). Why was it therefore important that Paul spoke to him about righteousness, self-control and judgement?

What do you think Paul might have said about self-control?

Should this be part of how we speak to others about faith today? How do you think they might respond?

Knowing Felix' reputation would you have had the courage to speak to him as Paul did?

Tongue control

Read James ch 3 vv 2-10

The word for self-control does not occur in these verses but James' vivid language of bridling the tongue shows us that it is a similar idea.

Can you think of occasions when you felt as if you had spoken before you realised what you were saying?

In what different situations can an unguarded tongue do damage? (You will have to use experience and imagination - but no gossip!)

In the situations you have just considered what would it have been better to say? Is it sometimes better to say nothing?

Does what James says here suggest that there are times when it is better to lie? (See 1 Peter 3.10.)

Quite a few of the Proverbs in the book of that name are about what we say. You may like to look up some of the following : Prov 10.19, 3.2-3, 15.2, 18.21 & 21.23,.

Godlessness

In 2 Timothy ch 3 vv 1-5 Paul lists a range of godless behaviour including the opposite of this fruit, translated in v3 as 'lack of self-control'. The disturbing thing is that Paul says that this will be the conduct of many who claim to be believers in the last days.

In these studies we have focussed on the fruit of the Spirit, but Paul first listed the fruit of the sinful nature in Galatians 5.

Read Galatians ch 5 vv 16-21

If the fruit of the sinful nature and the fruit of the Spirit are in conflict (v17) what does this suggest that keeping growing the former will do to our attempts to cultivate the latter?

In Galatians chapter 5 what does Paul say is the consequence of continuing to live in the old nature?

Some of the things Paul listed may seem extreme (you may never have been to an orgy or engaged in witchcraft) but others are not. If you are inclined to think you are alright with this list take a look at the one in 2 Timothy 3 mentioned above.

"Besetting sin" is a term used to describe those sins that we seem to struggle to defeat. It can be like a horror film when you think the evil fiend is dead only to find that when you turn your back they spring to life again.

Do you think that sin feeds off itself so that the more we indulge it the stronger it gets? Why is this?

Are there particular things we can do to try and break free of besetting sins?

One answer to this question is in verse 16. The more we cultivate the Fruit of the Spirit the less space there is for the weeds to grow. I trust that in these studies you have been helped in doing just this.

Finally **read Galatians ch 5 vv22 to 25** and then turn to prayer.