

“Michael Phelps, what were you thinking?” That was my first reaction when I saw the picture of him smoking pot at a party. Besides being illegal, it was just so stupid! With all he had to lose – health, reputation, income, fans, even the right to compete, a little more self-control sure could have spared him a lot of trouble!

So...*“Michael Phelps, what were you thinking?”* The answer, of course, is that he probably *wasn't* thinking. And in that respect, he has a lot of company. In fact, I suspect we can all look back on mistakes we have made, which if not equally public, were equally regrettable and so unnecessary that even today we ask ourselves, *“What was I thinking?”* And we have to admit that we *weren't* thinking. A little more self-control could have spared us a lot of trouble, too!

And it's not like we're incapable of self-control. In certain areas of life, we can do just fine! As could Michael Phelps, by the way! I mean, think how much self-control it has to have taken over the years for him to eat right, exercise, get up very early, and practice, practice, practice! The guy is certainly capable of self-control! Yet at that party, it was noticeably lacking, wasn't it? In just one area of his life, self-control was lacking, and look at what a price he paid! So that is why I mention him this morning. Not to pick on him but to learn from his example how important it is to think through our priorities, make careful choices, and as St. Paul says in our text, **“exercise self-control in all things.”**

Now, I know that **“self-control”** is not the most treasured virtue these days! Many don't like control of any kind. In fact, some treat **“self-control”** as if it were the exact opposite of more popular virtues like creativity, acceptance, even love. But let's not be fooled! **“Self-control”** is just as much a fruit of the Spirit as love, and when you think about it, real love *requires* **“self-control”** – at least, love that is mature, unselfish, Christ-like. The same is true for any virtue. In fact, it's true for spiritual growth in general. Yes, this growth must come from the Holy Spirit working within us. But how do we keep ourselves open to the Spirit? How do we keep distractions and temptations from undermining the work of the Spirit? And how do we stick with disciplines that the Spirit uses to nurture growth – like prayer, Bible study, and service? In each case, the answer is the same: **“self-control.”** So if we want our faith to grow and flourish, we need to treasure this virtue. We need to **“exercise self-control in all things.”**

“But doesn't that take a lot of work?” we may ask. And the answer is, “Yes, it does.” *“But then,”* we may ask, *“doesn't that conflict with the Gospel – that we're saved by faith alone, not by works?”* To that, the answer is, “No, it does not!” Though...it may seem to. So let's tackle this question before we go any further.

The Gospel truth is: No one can earn their salvation, and no one needs to. When Jesus died on the cross, He paid the price of our salvation in full. Now He offers it as a gift. Just believe and receive! Scripture is clear: **“By grace you have**

been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, not because of works, lest anyone should boast.” So bottom line: We are saved by faith alone, not by works.

But now, let’s talk about faith. Yes, it is a gift, but once we have received it, how do we make the most of it? How do we keep faith strong and make it stronger, so that it’s durable, wise, and resilient? That takes work. It takes work from the Holy Spirit, improving things inside us, but it also takes work from us – clearing out things that hinder the Spirit’s work; practicing disciplines that open us to the Spirit’s work. So even though we are saved by faith, not by works, there is a work side of faith. And Scripture is clear about this, too. St. Paul told the Philippians: **“Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work within you, enabling you to will and to work for his good pleasure.”** Paul didn’t say, “Earn your salvation.” That is a gift of grace received through faith. But he did say, **“Work out your salvation”** – that is, live it out, nurture it, build it up. And there is no conflict here! It’s just a two-step process. First comes justification, where we’re saved by faith alone. Then comes sanctification, where we gradually grow in faith, becoming what God wants us to be. This growth doesn’t just happen. God doesn’t change us without our consent. So there needs to be openness to the Spirit, cooperation with the Spirit, learning from the Spirit. There is a work side of faith!

Just to illustrate this, imagine a young man who has been blessed with great gifts for basketball. Tall, agile, with great instincts, his only problem is that he doesn’t know the game; hasn’t learned the rules or developed the skills. But seeing his potential, a certain coach figures: *That can change! I’ll send him to a basketball camp to develop his talent.* So with that in mind, the coach arranges everything. He pulls the right strings, gets him a full scholarship, and even pays for the extras out of his own pocket. So once school is out, this kid goes to basketball camp.

But once he arrives, suppose the kid figures: “Yes, I could learn about basketball and probably should, but camp is supposed to be fun. So that’s how I am going to spend my time here: having fun!” And does he ever! Instead of getting up at the crack of dawn for the morning workout, he sleeps in, then eventually wanders over to the cafeteria for breakfast...or lunch – whichever they happen to be serving. Now and then, he does go to class, but instead of listening and learning, he jokes around in the back of the room. The same at practice: he just goofs around on the court. So this kid has a lot of fun, but when camp is over, he has nothing to show for his time there.

Back at school, though, the coach is looking forward to seeing the results. Right away, he puts the kid in a game to let him show what he has learned. It’s a disaster, of course! The kid fails miserably! And not only that, but when the game is over, the kid is furious with the coach! “How could you do that to me? I was terrible! It was so humiliating! And it’s all your fault! Basketball is supposed to be fun, but that was hard! And you’re a rotten coach for putting me through it!”

So now, what would you expect the coach to say? For that matter, what would tell the kid? Going to basketball camp was a wonderful gift, wasn't it? But obviously, the kid wasted this gift. He squandered the opportunity. So whose fault was it that he didn't learn what he needed to learn, and couldn't do what he needed to do? Putting in some work would have helped him a lot. And we might add, a little **"self-control"** would have spared him a lot of trouble, too!

...Which brings us back to our topic. There may be some who think the Christian life should just be smooth, and easy, and fun; and that if it's not, then somehow God is at fault. But you and I know better. We know that life is what it is; Christians are not exempt from its ups and downs. Yet we also know we are not alone in this life; we have a God who loves us, is there for us, and offers us help with the ups and downs. We know it takes faith to draw upon God's help. Hopefully, we also know we need to work on our faith to make it durable, wise, and resilient. So there is a work side of faith, as Paul emphasizes in our text: **"Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable garland, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after preaching to others, I myself should not be disqualified."**

Okay, so let's move on now and take a closer look at **"self-control."** First of all, it involves restraint, and we've already touched on this with Michael Phelps. When we face temptation, we can spare ourselves a lot of trouble by simply restraining ourselves, telling ourselves "no," refusing to go down the forbidden path. If you went through Lutheran Confirmation, you remember that Luther's explanations to the Ten Commandments usually begin, *"We should fear and love God that we may not..."* That's not a bad rule of thumb, especially when we're not sure whether such and such is the right thing to do. *"We should fear and love God that we may not..."* Just don't go there. Practice restraint.

But that's just one side of self-control. When Paul says, **"I do not run aimlessly,** that suggests another side – a need for spiritual focus: *What is the aim of my life? What is my ultimate goal?* This is easy to answer in theory, but day to day, it's just as easy to lose our focus – to **"run aimlessly."** We can get so wrapped up in this life that we forget *"I'm but a stranger here; heaven in my home,"* or we can get so wrapped up in spiritual minutiae that we lose sight of what the Christian life is supposed to be about. Remember, our ultimate goal is to be able to stand before God in heaven and present Him with a life that has honored Him and shown what a difference His grace can make. That means our short-term goal is to live for God and let His grace make a difference. That won't happen if God is low on our list of priorities, or if we let life revolve around work and play, or if we waste time judging other people, or if we spend time wallowing in "Why me?" All such things distract us from the goal and make us **"run aimlessly."** We need to keep focused – and that takes **"self-control."**

Here again, we see why Paul used athletic imagery to make his point. Can you imagine an Olympic sprinter taking off like a shot, but then pausing to re-tie his shoes, then maybe checking out a pretty flower on the sidelines, and then standing there making snide remarks about how badly the other competitors are running? Of course not! That's no way to run a race! We would want to shout, *"Focus! Exercise some self-control and focus on the goal!"* Well, that's just as important to remember in our Christian lives. There's plenty of stuff that can distract us from God, plenty of stuff that can distract us from spiritual growth. To not let that happen, we need to focus – consciously focus on the goal, where we want our lives to go, what matters most along the way. Yes, focus!

And to help us do that, there is one more side to self-control, which Paul suggests when he says, **"Nor do I box as though beating the air."** There needs to be a purpose to what we're doing, and we need to stay clear on our purpose. *Why am I doing what I'm doing? How will this help me reach the goal?*

I am no athlete – obviously! – but I have heard that to stay motivated and keep on putting themselves through the grinding, exhausting practice-practice-practice day-after-day-after-day, athletes must keep reminding themselves why they are doing what they are doing – why it matters; how it will help them succeed. Otherwise, it's easy to burn out or give up. Well, I can well imagine how important that is, because the same is true in any other area of life, especially in our spiritual life. Think of all we're called to do! **"Deny yourself, take your cross, and follow..."** **"Turn the other cheek, go the extra mile..."** **"Pray without ceasing."** **"Love one another."** **"Forgive one another."** **"Do not grow weary in doing what is right."** All that can be just as grueling as any athlete's workout, especially doing it day after day after day, which means it can be just as easy to burn out or give up, unless we stay clear on our purpose: *Why am I doing what I'm doing? How will this help me reach the goal?*

Case in point: when I was in seminary, I once talked with a man who had left the priesthood. I wondered if it might have been to get married, but actually, he gave a very different reason. "It was just too hard," he said. "I had no life of my own, I was constantly tired, and I didn't seem to be accomplishing anything. Finally, I just decided enough was enough. It wasn't an easy decision, but I didn't see any point to it anymore." You can imagine how that struck me, just starting out in ministry! Also why it has stuck with me all these years. He had lost his sense of purpose, hadn't he? Lost his sense of why ministry mattered. Even more, he had lost his sense of Who he was really doing it for.

And you know, this is not just a warning for preachers. I think there is a warning here for all of us. We really need to stay clear on our purpose! Why is it important to work on our relationship with God? Why is it important to pray, to serve, to witness? Why is it important to do things the Lord's way, when human nature so doesn't want to! And why should we keep working at it day after day after day? Why? Because that's what it takes to become all we're meant to be!

That's what it takes to fulfill our potential! That's what it takes to make a difference with our lives. And when we get to heaven, that's what it'll take to offer God a life that has honored Him and shown the difference His grace can make!

Yes, that's why! But of course, we don't automatically remember all this. Day to day, it's tempting to just think how hard the Christian life is, how exhausting, even how fruitless. So here again, we need "**self-control**" – to rein in self-pity, rein in discouragement, rein in the need for instant gratification, and remind ourselves why we're doing what we're doing. We need to stay clear on our purpose!

So those are the three sides of self-control: restraint, focus, purpose. Now, what do we want to take home with us?

In my office, I have a magnet that says, "*You can either be a great example or a horrible warning.*" I started out talking about Michael Phelps. Time will tell which option he will choose. But really, that's true for all of us, and so much depends on willingness to "**exercise self-control in all things.**" We certainly have the best possible motivation – not just winning a "**perishable garland**" or a bunch of gold medals but living a life that's all it's meant to be; that will shine in the light of eternity. That is our goal. No, it's not easy to show restraint, keep in focus, and stay clear on our purpose, but what a difference it will make! What a difference...when we take seriously the work side of faith! Amen.