

Luke 22:54-62 ⁵⁴ Then they seized him, led him away, and brought him into the high priest's house. Peter followed at a distance. ⁵⁵When they had lit a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them. ⁵⁶A servant girl saw him sitting near the light. She looked closely at him and said, "This man also was with him." ⁵⁷But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." ⁵⁸After a little while someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them!" But Peter answered, "Man, I am not!" ⁵⁹After about one hour had passed, someone else was firmly insisting, "Truly this man was with him too, because he is a Galilean!" ⁶⁰But Peter said, "Man, I don't know what you are talking about!" At that very moment, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. ⁶¹The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the Lord's word, how he had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today you will deny me three times." ⁶²He went outside and wept bitterly.

Self-control. That's something everyone should have isn't it? I mean, when someone shows he doesn't have self-control, we all kind of shake our heads and wonder what's behind it, "what that person's problem is." The very young child in school who breaks down and cries because the scissors is sticking or the math problem is a little difficult. Or the child who is just shaking with anger and can't control himself because he got called out in kickball. "Man, you need to control yourself," we might say. You can't just go into a tizzy whenever something doesn't go your way. Or the teens who will risk ruining their whole lives for some short-term gratification of sex or drugs. Or who could go on to college and promising careers, but don't feel like doing what it takes to complete their high school work. All it would take would be a little self-control, right? Then they would have such a better future. The professional athlete who keeps being given chance after chance, but still can't seem to get a handle on his substance abuse problem, or the violent reactions that keep getting him into trouble with the law. Or whatever bad habit or character flaw it is that keeps any of us from being the best spouse or worker or person we could be, from being as fulfilled in our lives as we could be. That sin that we would laugh at the idea of anyone calling an addiction, and yet, as much as we tell others or ourselves we are in control and could stop it if we wanted to, the very fact that it damages our relationships; the fact that we end up doing it even though it could bring harmful consequences; the fact that we feel guilty afterward; all proves that we don't have the self-control we think we have.

No wonder there is such a lucrative market for self-help books. You even look at the shelves in a Christian bookstore – if you can find one anymore, and that's the biggest section – How to books. Christian how-to's, of course. Ten steps to being a better Christian father, mother, teacher, whatever. Christian rules for financial success. The Christian primer on diet and aerobics. And the list is nearly endless. Some of it good sound advice. Much of it trying to use law and rules as the motivation for Christian behavior; really a way of trying to prove one's faith by achievements and successes and excitements. And all of it having to do with self-control. And the connection is easy to make. After all, think of how much better everything would be if I could just have a better handle on my habits and emotions. What a much more effective Christian witness, if I could just hold my temper in check a little better, how much better a person I could be with just an ounce or two of patience. Self-control. And yet, what we really need is not another how-to book, but the why Book. The Bible. Because what God's Word shows us is that it's not about self-help and how-to's. In fact we see here in St. Luke's Gospel why that doesn't work as we are encouraged to follow Jesus with self-control, something missing from sinful humans, but made up for by our perfect Savior.

Self-control is missing from sinful humans. The apostle Peter is a good example of that; well, a bad example. Peter, the chief of the disciples. The leader. The strong one Jesus had renamed the Rock. And yet as we find him on that cold Thursday evening, slash, Friday morning – hours before Jesus was put to death – we see that he had some problems with self-control. Oh yeah, the classic

warning signs had all been there. The self-confidence that wouldn't take Jesus' warning to heart. "Me, deny you? No way, Lord. Maybe the rest of these characters. But never me." Famous last words, right? And not just for Peter. Because as God had Solomon note in the book of Proverbs, "He who trusts in himself is a fool." So when Peter had bragged, "Even if I have to die with You, I will never disown you," he was already showing a lack of self-control. A weakness that led him to seriously overestimate himself. A weakness the devil is usually very quick to exploit. And this was no exception. Once Satan exposes the lack of self-control that allows a person to let up his guard and puff himself up with how strong he is, then this enemy just piles on. Because once one part of self-control falls apart, well, listen to how God describes it in Proverbs 25: "A person who lacks self-control is like a broken-down city without a wall." And then the dominoes start to tumble.

Like for Peter. Self-confidence. Boasting. Pride. Not taking Christ's warning seriously. Not being prayerful as the tests and trials started to come. The impulsiveness that led him to mistrust the Lord's way of dealing with Gethsemane, and to lash out with the sword instead. And then the unfaithfulness. Running away when Jesus was arrested. But that's when it turned around, right? In the middle of his headlong retreat, he was ashamed of himself and decided to make things right. Regained his composure, and decided to suck it up and turn this thing around. Well, maybe in the American pick yourself up, dust yourself off, start all over again version it might. But not in the real life version. Because in the real life version, the sinful humans who get themselves into these messes don't have the capacity to get themselves out. So even when Peter tried to do his best, his lack of self-control was exposed. As verse 54 tells us, "Peter followed at a distance." And that's understandable, isn't it? He felt that he should be following the Lord; I suppose to satisfy a conscience still stinging from deserting Jesus earlier. So the right thing to do would be to follow, but hey, there's no reason to get crazy about this. Maybe the way we sometimes follow Jesus from afar – close enough to feel like I'm doing okay, but far enough away that I don't have to worry about any discomfort or expectations or commitment coming out of it.

Add to that the self-control problem that led Peter to feel like he could fit right in with worldly people and not have it affect him. But that's what overconfidence does. Thinks that the warnings of God's Word must be for someone else. Like Psalm one's directions not to "walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers"... Not to let ungodly influences gradually work their way into our lives. Hanging around with the sinful world and making ourselves at home with them. Being too proud to realize that their selfishness and materialism and immorality can take its toll on our attitudes and priorities. That sure put Peter into a situation where he was easy pickings for the devil. As he sits by the fire to try to get warm, a young servant girl comes up, looks at him, and says, "This man was with Him." And with that Peter, who would "die before disowning Jesus," denies his Lord. "Woman, I do not know Him." And like just about every other sin, this one wouldn't stop there. Once self-control springs a leak, sin has a way of adding to itself, and then it just snowballs, as those sins become patterns and one sin leads to another, and another. And as Peter tries to blend into the background, someone else gives him a chance to stick up for Jesus. "Sure, you're one of them." And Peter denies even more strongly. And now he's sunk. As the others join in: "Truly this man was with him, for he is a Galilean." "Don't give us that, Peter. We'd know that accent anywhere. You're from Galilee, just like Jesus." And then all self-control is gone as he rants and raves, denying he's ever been with or known Jesus; even calls curses down on himself, swearing he's got nothing to do with the Savior. How far he has fallen.

Like you and me, who like to call ourselves friends of Jesus, but so often treat Him the same way. As Martin Luther used to say, "If Peter fell, I too, may fall." And not only may fall, we do fall. And not only the same way as Peter, denying our Savior, passing up opportunities to show our

association with Him because it might make things inconvenient for us. But also the lack of self-control that keeps us falling into the same sins over and over again. Or looking to ourselves, who got us into the quicksand in the first place, to get us out, when really, like Peter, all we can do is kick and struggle so we sink even deeper. Which explains why those who think they have the greatest self-control are often the ones who crash the hardest. When I'm looking inside myself for the answers, I'm looking inside a sinful human. Which means all the self-help books and advice in the world can't get me where I need to be. Even when they're Christian self-help books that tell me all the right rules and show my Savior as the perfect example. Because all the rules are law, and while law can tell me what I'm supposed to be doing and what I'm falling short of and what big trouble I'm in because of that, it has no power to change my heart, no power to change my situation before God. And as far as the good example thing, well not too long ago I saw a program where they showed an actual brain surgery. Now I paid pretty close attention, but just having seen the example of how to do it didn't qualify me to perform that surgery on anyone. And even if you were a surgeon, you have to remember that this time the surgery needs to be done on yourself. The example thing doesn't work.

The good news is that the self-control that's missing from sinful humans, it's made up for by our perfect Savior. Peter had turned his back on Jesus, but Jesus had not turned His back on Peter. Just as Peter made his last denial, the Savior was being led from one kangaroo court to another. And as He passed, He looked straight into Peter's eyes. Notice it's the Lord who does the turning and seeking. We're told here, "**The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered *the Lord's word*.**" The look of the Lord, a connection to the Word He had spoken. Yes, the word of warning and the rooster crowing, the word that pointed out Peter's sin, but also the word of comfort and love, the fact that Jesus would still be there for him. Now I don't know if when Jesus looked at Peter, Peter could see how swollen His face was from all the slapping and punching, or if he noticed the spit dripping from Jesus' hair and from his eyebrows. But what he saw for sure was a look of love. The love that said, "Peter, you may have denied Me but I won't let *you* down. The love that caused Jesus to show an unbelievable self-control. As one who is like us in every way, as the book of Hebrews points out, yet without sin – He never once had a lapse in His self-control. And was that ever showing now. As false charges were flying at Him left and right. People, even religious leaders making fun of Him and beating Him and insulting Him. But Jesus' self-control was always perfect. As was His sinlessness in every way.

And as for Peter's sin and all of ours, that's why Jesus was keeping His composure. He definitely had the power to put an end to the whole thing with a snap of His fingers or a word of His mouth, but that would have blown our whole eternity. So in perfect self-control He put up with it all. And then for all the times we lack self-control, for all our sins which would separate us from God forever, well listen to how this disciple Peter would put it in his first epistle, "**Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.**" Jesus gave His life as the perfect payment for our lapses in self-control and every other kind of sin. And His perfect life with His perfect self-control was credited to us. See the answer to Peter's self-control problem was Jesus not himself, Jesus' perfect life, Jesus' perfect payment. And then it was a new Simon Peter, not the self-made man who relied on himself, but the perfectly forgiven man who could rely on His perfect Savior. And that is our solution too. Not a how to. But a why. Why? Because we are forgiven because of the perfect life and death of Jesus. And through the faith He gives us through the Word and keeps in us through the Word, that works. That self-control of Jesus that made it through a perfect life and that paid the whole price for all our sins, that's what makes us willing and able to have self-control. See, the more He is in control of our lives, the more self-control we have. So maybe we should call it something else. Christ-control? Amen.