

LIVE UNDER CONTROL

“The Fruit of the Spirit... is self-control.”
(Galatians 5:22-23)

The premise of this entire book is that when you know you are loved, you are free to live your life under new management in every area. To live under the control of the Spirit of God is one of the most difficult tasks for many of us. We step out on the dance floor and pretend to know the steps but then stumble along and never really get the groove. That’s me when it comes to certain areas of self-control.

I’ll begin here, a place where I have already admitted I struggle: my mouth. Taming the tongue has been a constant struggle my entire life. I have vague memories of second grade and how I rarely got to play at recess because I had to stand and face a brick wall as punishment for talking too much in class. If you knew me, you would just nod and say, “Yeah, not surprised.”

The older I’ve gotten, the more my voice has changed. Rather than talking just to talk, I now talk to help. Sure, that’s good when I’m speaking to a group of ladies who want to hear me talk, but what about this family of mine when I want to “help”? I have all these handy suggestions that I want to share. That’s helpful, right? I mean, I’ve been there and done that: had kids, struggled as a young parent, traversed the job market, etc. Why shouldn’t I give my two cents? Why would anyone not want me to?

It’s funny that this topic came to mind just yesterday. The more I considered it, the more I knew it would be a chapter someday. I happened to be making the eight-hour drive to see my oldest son and his family in South Carolina as I pondered what I would include. Now, here I sit at 5:30 the next morning, in my hotel bed, typing about last night’s failure. So much for someday.

I was one of “those mothers,” the one who comes to town full of suggestions and criticism. I even heard myself as I was speaking and finally gained some control over my mouth. My son is dealing with an unforeseen job loss and move. They are having to start over, and they are struggling to get back up on their feet. I want so much more for him than the hand he’s been dealt. It seems as if he takes one step forward and two steps back. It pains me, like, it literally causes pain in my heart to watch his struggle. As a parent of an adult child, I am limited. I can’t take over, which is in my nature. I can’t make him think like me, which I try to make him do. So in the absence of any control over the situation, my mouth engages.

When we love someone and want what’s best for them, it’s only natural to try and help God with the work He’s doing in their lives. That’s exactly what I do. I lay in bed last night thinking over some of the things I had said and how frustrated I was over the entire situation. I knew I wouldn’t sleep. Trouble sleeping is typical for me while traveling, but because I hurt over my son and his family’s situation, I was even more burdened than usual. A phrase came to mind: Live out of control, the chapter title of what I had just written.

That one thought began to ease my tension. I have no control over what happens now or next. God does, though. He is in control. With that truth in mind, I went right to sleep and slept well. Funny how living loved can bring peace even in the midst of watching those you love suffer and struggle and fight to survive.

I prayed early this morning, sitting with God the Father. After pouring out my heart, I feel He spoke these words to me: “Tame your tongue, be helpful, love them, and go home.” What wise advice from an expert in parenting. I can now see how these four guidelines are required in every area of living under control of the Holy Spirit.

Tame the Tongue

“She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness.” (Proverbs 31:26)

Yeah, I’ve pulled out the Proverbs 31 woman for this one. I needed to look at her this morning as I prepare for the day ahead. Notice, she opens her mouth with wisdom. The truth is, much of the advice I’m giving my son is wise, based on my own lessons learned by life experience. There is nothing wrong with

sharing wisdom, but the second part of the verse above sets the tone. What does it look like to share wisdom with the law of kindness on our tongue?

For me it's in the delivery of what and how I say things. I'm straight-forward in the way I speak. Ask anyone who wishes they hadn't asked my opinion. The older I get the better I am at controlling my mouth, but still, I know I can be too direct. While it all stems from the desire to be helpful and guide others in the right way, I know I can come off as pushy. Recently, I've watched a few TV shows and movies where the mother or mother-in-law is pushy and opinionated. Every time I see that, I think how much I don't want to be that person. Truth is, I am that person without the Spirit's control and the law of kindness governing my tongue.

Sometimes taming the tongue isn't just in our delivery, it's holding our tongue and not giving advice even when we think we might burst if we don't. Besides our children, this lesson applies when we deal with aging parents, co-workers, spouses, and friends. I mentioned before about interfering with God's work. When we are too often the source of wisdom for others, we get in the way of them going to the true Source of wisdom. In our attempts to advise and guide, we may be inadvertently keeping the person we care about from seeking God through prayer and Scripture reading on their own. Why would they if we keep stepping in and solving their problems?

When we think of taming the tongue, we think of not being rude in line at the store when we've had to wait too long. That's an elementary lesson of the faith walk. The true test of keeping your tongue under control is how you use it to speak into the lives of others and how you balance when to speak and when to bite your tongue.

Another angle from which to view this:

"He who rebukes a man will find more favor afterward than he who flatters with the tongue." (Proverbs 28:23)

Other times taming the tongue implies that we must speak hard words. If you are a non-confrontational type of woman, then speaking up when it's needed is just as hard for you as not speaking up is for me. Though I do speak too easily at times, I can also be guilty of not advising wisely when I should. Sometimes I'm just too tired for confrontation. We all get there. It's easier to allow something wrong to slide than it is to address it.

Since we must keep Jesus as our model, we should allow His activity to guide our own. Many of His interactions with the religious leaders of the day were confrontational, so much so that they ordered His death. I'm not saying that we are in such a precarious position, but we are called to speak truth when the truth is needed for the good of someone placed in our sphere of influence, even when we know they will push back.

We began this chapter with the words: "The fruit of the Spirit is...self-control." I know in my case that my self can't be trusted to a great degree, but my self and my tongue under the Spirit's leadership can be controlled and used wisely.

Be Helpful

"Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in the power of your hand to do so." (Proverbs 3:27)

We are called to be helpful, even when it doesn't align with our own personal agenda. That often requires the power of the Spirit to guide us, not just to motivate us to get outside of ourselves and help, but also to direct us where and how much to help. Need abounds no matter where we look. There's a homelessness crisis in our nation, at risk children and youth, hunger and poverty. The need is so great and overwhelming, it's easier to shut down and do nothing than to figure out where you can and should help.

Where is your place? There are the big-picture needs, like those of orphans worldwide and helping ministries and missionaries. Your help in those areas should be governed by the Spirit's leading. What breaks your heart? Whose plight so consumes you that you absolutely have to volunteer or give money to their cause? That's helping in a broad sense.

In a narrower sense, the best place to start is in your today. What needs of others are you aware of today? Who and what has God brought into your path, and how can you help?

Today, we will rent a truck and move my son's furniture. I can lend a helping hand and be encouraging. I can help with the baby while they move, but I don't have to take over as is my usual way of operating. I can allow them to make the decisions and simply nod and go along with it. As adults, they need to make their own way without my "expertise" in every area. This will be a struggle for me, since I'm a take-charge personality by nature. My son is too, so you see the head-butting that could take place. A Proverbs 31 woman would allow her grown son the freedom to take charge today and allow him room to grow and thrive.

There is a delicate balance between being helpful and being a hindrance. I'm not sure I will ever strike the right balance in this area, especially where my kids are concerned. When I see someone I love in need, I want to help. Our verse from Proverbs 3 may help to shape our way of considering the extent of our help.

Let's begin with the second part of our anchor verse for this section: "when it is in the power of your hand to do so." There are obvious times when we do have the power to help others, so we help. In light of the delicate balance between help and hindrance, should we always help?

"Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due..." Today is the first time I've really dissected this verse and absorbed the qualifier, "to whom it is due." Normally, in Christian culture, we are made to feel guilty if we don't help everybody all the time. Maybe that's why we stop helping altogether. How can we possibly keep up with everybody all the time? This verse may help us when helping others.

I don't think the word *due* necessarily means worthy of our help. I think it might be pointing toward the idea of timing. At that time are they due your help? Or, at that time would your help interfere with the work God is doing in teaching them to depend on Him and not on you and others? Your only way of knowing if the person is "due" is through your own dependence on God through the Spirit's leading.

Love Them

For this we will revisit the Proverbs 31 woman. I've read this chapter with fresh eyes this morning and now see it from a new perspective. Though we often consider her a woman who seems to be working herself to death, the real undercurrent of this passage is love, a woman who exemplifies love in action.

When we are loved by a God whose actions are evident in our own lives, we, too, can love in action. When what we do doesn't line up with our verbal expression of love, then how can it be called love? Love acts.

It requires the power that only the Spirit can give to love people well. At times, loving well means allowing life and consequences to happen to the one you're tempted to bail out. Tough love is great in theory until you comprehend just how tough "tough love" is while watching your child or friend reap what they've sown.

Since those of us with a rebellious and independent streak tend to learn best from life experiences, including mistakes, consequences can be the best teacher. It helps to mature those still trying to do things their own way. You will find moments in your life when love requires your inaction. Weak legs won't get any stronger if you keep carrying the one who keeps falling.

What if, however, the situation isn't a case of them needing tough love? What if it's a case of you having powerless love?

In the Book of Acts (3:1-10), Peter and John were walking into the Temple when they encountered a lame man begging at the Temple gate. When he asked them for help in the form of a handout, they stopped and told him to look at them. That they would have to instruct him to do so causes me to speculate that the man was looking down or away in what was likely shame over his predicament, even though we later read that the man had done nothing to cause his situation. He had been born lame and had no means of income other than depending on the generosity of passersby. Or maybe he had been stepped over and overlooked so many times that he didn't expect someone to stop.

Whatever the case, verse five tells us that the man gave them his attention expecting to receive something from them.

"Then Peter said, 'Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.'" (Acts 3:6)

These two disciples were wise enough to know they didn't have the power to change this man's life for the better, but they knew the name of the One who did. Here's a point we shouldn't miss: At times people need our help, but even when we are willing to help, we are powerless. There are occasions when only the activity of God can stand a person on their feet.

My son is trying, yet he has consequences that have followed him from years of bad decision-making. I can keep giving him money—I'm technically able to—but it isn't always wise or what's best for him when I do. He must learn to stand. He needs to see God's hand in his life and not only mine reaching out. The balance that I spoke of earlier will always be something I must pray over. In many ways I'm not able to help and am left with a heart filled with powerless love. I can't provide him with a stable job or the will to walk out his life following Jesus. I can only resort to trusting in the power of Jesus to make his life more stable.

I know I'm not alone in this. You face learning a similar balance of loving well. It's a common issue, one that God uses to grow us and show us His activity in our lives and in the life of the one we're tempted to help beyond the point of what's wise. Ultimately, because we know God loves us, we can believe He will guide us to know how to love best and not easiest. Easy is always saying yes to the one you love. Best love sometimes says no.

Go Home

I have the cutest, sweetest little grandbaby in the history of the world. I'm sure of it. To leave her and go home was difficult for more reasons than just my being in love with her. Because of my son's current situation, Ellie isn't living in a stable environment. Until they find a new place to live, she is in upheaval. I wanted to fix that. Now that I'm back home, I still want to fix it. I can't. This is my son's journey with his family and his journey with Jesus.

What I can do is remember Who is in control. If you recall, that one point is what helped me go to sleep that first night in my hotel—and every night after. I'm not leaving my precious family out on their own. Instead, I'm leaving them in the capable hands of the God who loves them all more than I ever could.

A thought came to mind while I was there and fretting over the issues my son is facing. God carried me through my toughest times to the life I now know. He will do the same for Adam. It was because He carried me that I was able to draw near to Him. My lack of interference in Adam's situation will allow God to be God to Adam.

I can't stress enough how difficult it is to resume normal life here while knowing Adam is facing such difficulty. It takes intentionality to let go of all the things I would change about their situation. Here is where my faith is most tested, and I have to choose: I can pray for Adam and allow this to all play out, or I can butt in and make sure things are handled the way I think they should be.

In case you're wondering, right now, I'm praying. I said before that love is action. In this instance my action is prayer. That's enough. That's everything for a worried mom.

Living under control isn't only about behaviors or self-will. It is listening to the Spirit even when the answer is contrary to what your heart is telling you to do. I made a point in an earlier chapter that the heart lies. Any activity that stands in the way of God's progress in your life or another's is a lie.

You and I will face these dilemmas for our entire visit on this earth. We can't help it when we love flawed people. Just remember, difficulties here aren't forever. They are mere seconds in light of eternity. Someday Adam will get it together. Someday I will quit stepping in. In the meantime we must all learn to live under the control of a Father to whom we can entrust the ones we love.

CHAPTER TAKEAWAY

Key Point

Tame the tongue. Speak when you should and don't when you shouldn't.

To offer wisdom to others, it must be attained through walking closely with Jesus and reading His Word. Being intellectual isn't wisdom. Having street smarts isn't wisdom. Wisdom is having God's mind on a matter.

- 1) How can you know when to speak or when not to speak?

- 2) Good advice isn't necessarily godly advice. Read James 3:17. How can you obtain these traits of wisdom from above so that you are able to share true and godly wisdom?

- 3) Do you have issues with taming your tongue? If yes, when is it most difficult for you?

- 4) Do you consider yourself non-confrontational, or are you easily able to speak up? Can you think of a time recently when you had to speak a hard truth to someone you care about?

Key Point

Be Helpful. Love is action.

- 5) Do you have a heart to help others, or, if you're honest, do you find it hard to get outside of yourself and notice others' needs? If you find you're often self-absorbed, write your prayer below asking God to help you be more willing to engage in the lives of others.

- 6) With global needs so overwhelming, how and where to act can be paralyzing. Start in your today. Who and what has God brought into your path, and how can you help? (Matthew 25:40)

- 7) Is there a specific love-in-action that you know God has called you to?

Key Point

Love Them. Love can be inaction.

- 8) Are you often guilted into helping others? List a recent example below. Read Proverbs 3:27. Not every need is yours to meet. Ask yourself: Is God truly inviting me in, or will my help interfere with the work He is doing in their life?

- 9) Share a time when tough love was needed even though you knew the consequences would be hard, both on them and you.

- 10) What about a time when you helped, only to discover you made the situation worse? It could be something as seemingly insignificant as bailing out a child who didn't complete their homework or as big as giving money to the one who needed to feel the sting of burning through their own.

- 11) Is there a current situation in your life where you want to help but are powerless to do so?

Key Point

Go Home. Live life knowing God is in control.

- 12) How do you "go home," meaning that you go about your daily life while knowing the ones you love are in turmoil or pain? How can fixing your eyes on Jesus rather than the situation help you?

- 13) Any activity that stands in the way of God's progress in your life or another's is a lie, no matter how right it feels at the time. Don't play God. How can creating boundaries, like not stepping in when you want to or think you should, protect you as well as them?
