

If you knew when the world was going to end, how would you react? Or even if you just knew when your own end was coming, how would that change how you live today? That's a question we encounter all the time in our culture, especially in books and movies. Because how often have we heard a story of someone who learns what's going to happen to them in the future and then they get a second chance? They can do it all over again and change what they were going to do wrong. They change how they're living because of what they know. But this doesn't even have to be knowing exactly what's going to happen, either, because it would still be the same thing. After all, we have all heard the expression "you only live once," so you should enjoy life, right? You should live it up a little bit. Or we've heard the expression that "life is short," so make the most of it. Focus on the good things in life and make that your priority. All of these sayings are more or less the same thing: that we change how we are living now because of what we know is going to be in the future.

But the trouble with these is that they're all very worldly sayings. Because they take that knowledge to mean that you need to enjoy yourself right now. You should eat, drink, be merry. Live life to the fullest. Don't let anyone else tell you what to do. Live for the moment. Whatever makes you happy. That's usually how the world approaches these things. It's just like Peter says right before our reading. He says, "doing what the Gentiles want to do: living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry." That's what life's all about, the world says. Or you should just make yourself famous, get successful in some way, and then that will make this life worth living, at least in the eyes of the world.

But Peter reminds us in our reading, Christians, that the end is also coming, but he does so for a very different reason. Because knowing that everything will soon come to an end when Christ returns, that leads us to be, as Peter says, "self-controlled and sober minded." Jesus will soon come back, or we will come to our own end. Whatever the case may be, we are going to have to stand before the judgment of God. And knowing that leads us to live as Christians right now, to be sober minded, to be self-controlled, especially for the sake of one another.

But what exactly does Peter mean by self-control here? Christian self-control, of course, is being temperate. It is being moderate, not being given to extremes. But it's not just about having willpower or being some kind of centrist, always in the middle of things. Christian self-control means that we are in control of ourselves. It means that we are in possession of ourselves so that we are doing what God wants us to do. Take, for example, Luke chapter 8, verse 35, talking about a man who had been possessed by a demon. Luke says this: "Then people went out to see what had happened, and they came to Jesus, and found the man from whom the demons had gone, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid." "In his right mind" is another way to translate what Peter calls "self-control" here. So in other words, we are in our right mind. We are in control of ourselves. Because the man who was possessed by demons was not being self-controlled. He was not in his right mind. Something else was causing him to do or to say things that he wouldn't normally do. That's why he was out of his mind. But once Jesus had cast those demons out of him, now he is self-controlled. Now he is in his right mind, able to think clearly and to say and to do the things that he intends to do. So self-control, then, means that we are not being ruled by something else, either in the world or by our own desires and passions. We're in control of ourselves. And this kind of self-direction, this self-possession is important for us as Christians.

But on the other hand, Peter says something similar when he talks about being sober minded. A man who is drunk, after all, is a man who is not doing what he is supposed to. He is susceptible to all kinds of suggestions, doing things he wouldn't normally do, because the alcohol has impaired his mind. It has caused him to not think very clearly. He's kind of hazy in his thinking. And in the same way, anything that causes us to be drunk in the mind takes us out of control of ourselves. It causes us to be under the influence of something, so that we are persuaded to do something contrary to God. It doesn't have to be just alcohol, although that's certainly included. But it could be anything that leads us away from God. Whether it be like letting our entertainment, for example, get in the way of the things of God. That would be one example of being drunk in our minds. Or whether it being focused entirely on the world or on our work at the expense of what God wants us to do. That would also be being drunk in our minds. So being sober, then, as Christians means we're not under the influence of anything. We are thinking clearly. We are acting clearly. We are making our judgments clearly and not addicted to the things of this world. So Peter calls us, then, to be self-controlled and sober minded, so that we live as the Christians that we are called to be.

But what does that look like, exactly? What does it mean, practically speaking, to be self-controlled, to be sober minded? Well, Peter uses several examples here. He says, for example, in verse 7 that we should do this "for the sake of our prayers." Because if we are lacking self-control, Christians, our prayers suffer. If we are drunk in our minds, under the influence of something, our prayers are pushed aside for something else. Because then we are losing sight of God and losing sight of our need for God. And the less we feel our need for God, the less and less we are going to pray. But being in our right mind, we are able to see God clearly and to see our need for him clearly, so that that leads us to pray, not only for ourselves, but also for other people. So our prayers, then, are a good indication of the kind of self-control that we have as Christians.

Peter gives another example, verse 8: "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins." So, lacking self-control, then, makes us loveless. Being under the influence of something in the world turns us into nitpickers, the kind of people who get very angry with other people's sins, other people's faults, but we're unable to see our own very clearly. Because we are fuzzy in our minds, because we are not self-controlled, we are unable to see ourselves for what we truly are. But when we are sober minded, Christians, then we see ourselves clearly too. We know that we are sinners. We know that God has forgiven us in Jesus Christ. And for that reason, we forgive others too. We're a lot more patient with their failings. So our love for one another is also a good sign of our Christian self-control.

Peter gives another example, verse 9: "Show hospitality to one another without grumbling." If we have no self-control, then we are selfish. We don't care about the needs of other people. Or we start grumbling because we have to take care of them, and we're tired of helping them. We would rather focus on ourselves and our own needs at the expense of someone else, because I just don't want to deal with it anymore. But being clearheaded means that we do care for one another. It means that we are patient with each other, bearing with each other sins. Especially because we know that the Lord has been patient with us. And so our care for one another is also a good indicator of our Christian self-control.

Peter uses one more example, verse 10: "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace." So if we lack self-control, then, we misuse the things that God has given to us, either because we use it for a selfish reason, because we start to use it for our own profit, our own benefit, or because we just don't want to use it at all. "I know what God has given me, but I don't care. I don't want to do that for other people." We take what was given to us to help others, and we use it for something other than what God intended it to be. But when we're in control of ourselves, Christians, we can see why God has given us such gifts. And then we can use them for the reasons he has given them. As Peter says, "Whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God." Like a pastor who speaks the Word, using his gifts, using that Word in service of others and not just in service of himself. And also, "Whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies." Those acts of service which we all have, that gift which we have, whatever it may be, to use it in service of one another, knowing that God has given it to us for that reason. So how we use those gifts, then, also says something about our Christian self-control.

But what is ultimately the purpose, we might ask, of such self-control? Why does God want us to be sober minded? It's not just for ourselves, Christians. That would be self-serving. That would be a lack of self-control in itself. We don't do these things because it's good for us, or it's the right thing to do. We do these things because, as Peter tells us, "in order that in everything, God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." So that when we are self-controlled, Christians, when we are sober minded, Jesus Christ is magnified through us. We become a living witness to him and to his power to change lives. Because Jesus did not do these things, Christians, for his own sake. Jesus was not selfish. Jesus was not impatient or drunk or out-of-control or whatever it may be. He did all of these things so that we would become the Christians that we are today. And when we live as self-controlled, sober minded Christians, we are no longer in slavery to the world. And we show Christ through everything that we say and do. And as a result of that, the world will glorify God, whether now or in the judgment. And that is the reason why we are sober minded and clearheaded: for the sake of Jesus Christ.

So Christians, let us not be addicted to this world or be possessed by it. Let us be self-controlled and clearheaded. Let us not be drunk, under the influence of the world or our own desires. Let us be sober minded. Because Jesus Christ has come to set us free from the world. And Jesus Christ is coming soon--and it will be sooner than we think. But when he does, we will be ready for him, because we will not be fuzzy-minded like the world, but clearheaded, sober Christians, just like him in everything. So let us be these things for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have made us one with your Son, Jesus Christ. We pray that you would help us always to think like him and to follow after him in everything, so that we would not be caught up in this world. In his name we pray. Amen.