

Fruit of the Spirit
Self Control
August 7, 2022

We are concluding this morning our study of the Fruit of the Spirit. The virtues that the Spirit of God produces in followers of Jesus.

Up for consideration this morning: *self-control*. I have to wonder if maybe for some of us, self control doesn't sound quite as appealing as the other things we've been discussing. *Peace?* Yeah we all want peace. More peace would be great. *Kindness?* Yeah we all want kindness. Or bare minimum, we want people to be kind to *us*. *Love?* What the world *needs* now, is love. *Sweet* love. But *self-control*? I don't know about that. That doesn't seem super fun to me. Self-control...I'm more of a *treat yo' self* kinda person. In fact, for some people, self-control could be misconstrued as repressive. Bare minimum, my hunch is that self control does not have the immediate appeal that some of the other Fruits of the Spirit have.

So let me try to win you to the idea if it doesn't sound initially appealing. What I'd love to do this morning is try and show you, from the Scriptures, that self-control is not only massively important to *possess*, but also something we all desire down at our core, and an absolute asset for life in the kingdom of God. That's all true, even *if* it doesn't seem immediately compelling to us.

In the Galatians list of the fruit of the spirit, the word for self control (*egkráteia*) means to have power over or mastery of or dominion over yourself. It's dominion within. Literally control of yourself.

Turn with me to the book of Titus, chapter 2, pretty please.

The book of Titus is a letter written *from* The Apostle Paul to a pastor of a church named Titus. Titus was one of the appointed leaders over this church plant, and Paul is writing to him with some help and instruction on how to help lead the church there. pick it up with me in v. 11.

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, Okay, stop with me there for just a minute. We're not to the part of the passage about self-control yet, but we just read something that is absolutely crucial to the discussion. Paul just made an announcement. The announcement is that "the grace of God has appeared," and it has brought with it salvation for all people." So let me remind you, that **every instruction in the bible is actually rooted in an announcement**. Specifically, the announcement that "the grace of God has appeared." That is a direct reference to Jesus coming to earth, living the life you and I were meant to live, dying the death that we were supposed to die, and rising from the grave. All of this securing our salvation when we place our faith and trust in him to make us right with God.

Now, here's the reason we have to start there when talking about something like self-control. If you miss that announcement, you actually miss the whole point of self-control entirely. If you understand self-control as some sort of means by which we appease God or gain acceptance from him based on our behavior, you've actually missed Christianity entirely. **We do not enter into self-control with the hopes of being accepted by God; we receive and cultivate self-control in our lives as a byproduct of the acceptance we already have**. It's a fruit, a blessing, a gift that we receive and cultivate...the ability to have control of ourselves. All of it because we have already received "salvation," through Jesus.

And that's what Paul says next...

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, **12** training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age,

So this same grace that saves us, also teaches us. It trains us. It creates a heart posture as a response. When we become followers of Jesus—when we accept and understand God’s saving grace towards us in Jesus—that is us acknowledging that we were wrapped up in things that we needed saving from. Right? Otherwise I’m not sure exactly what we think becoming a Christian is. We’re saying “I was on a path that was not honoring to God nor leading to life and joy and hope and peace. But then God intervened through Jesus and did something that rescued me out of that place, and brought me into something far better.” And once we understand that, it begins to teach us that it makes no sense to wander back into our old ways of thinking and feeling and acting. Because then, what exactly did Jesus intervene for? So the more we grasp and reflect on what the grace of God did for us, the more and more we want to live into that as a result.

Paul here describes the specifics of what grace *teaches* us in two different ways. And I think these can serve as two “categories” in our minds for self-control.

Let me show you the 2 categories.

(grace) 12 training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions,

The way the NIV translates it is, “teaches us to say ‘no’ to ungodliness and worldly passions.

So that’s our first category.

1-Self control is the ability to NOT do what I want to do when what I want is bad for me (or my neighbor)

Example, eating a second dessert. I know I don't need a second dessert. I recently turned 40 and my body doesn't work like it used to. Now I gain weight when I smell dessert. But I want a second dessert. Self control is the ability to say no to what I want to do, because what I want to do isn't good for me.

Now here is our second category, still in vs 12

12 training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age,

2-Self control is the ability to do what is good (for myself and/or my neighbor) even when I don't want to do it.

I don't want to exercise. No part of me wants to exercise. But it's good for me. Self control is the ability to do what is good even when I don't want to.

You will notice that I have picked what I think are some of the only categories our culture has right now for how self control is a good thing. Diet and exercise. Inside those arenas, we have a category for self control being a good, needed thing. A valuable thing.

If you're into a particular sport, and you are training and pushing yourself. You want to quit but push through because you know there is a reward on the other side or being more skilled or whatever. We have that concept, that category. In fact, in this area of life we will pay people when we don't have self control. We will hire personal trainers to function as self control supplements when we want to quit...they say "Don't stop. Keep going. That's it. 3 more, you can do it." You are paying someone to help you do the good that you don't want to do. It's like a self control supplement.

Alright, so self control is the ability to do what is good even when I don't want to. And it's the ability NOT to do what is bad, even when I do want to do it.

Ok let me show you a biblical simile from the book of Proverbs.

It's from proverbs chapter 25. And for the record, my wife is a former English teacher with a masters in writing and I had to ask her if I was using the word simile correctly. Without her help I probably would have called this a metaphor and boy would I have been wrong.

"Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person without self-control." (**Proverbs 25:28**)

A city whose walls are broken through. Think about that imagery. A wall around an ancient city is there primarily to protect. To keep out people who are a threat, who would attack. Building a wall around a city is an investment in you and your neighbors' future. You are safe and you know you are going to be safe from attack.

Solomon here says that lacking self control is like being in a city with walls that don't do their job. You are vulnerable. Your future is in doubt. But unlike a city being attacked from the outside by others, when you lack self control, you are metaphorically attacking yourself. You are the threat. Your future self is vulnerable to your current self.

Have you ever spent way more money than you meant to spend? Have you ever done that *repeatedly*, in such a way that it created much bigger financial problems for you as a result? Have you ever *said* something to someone that you shouldn't have said, and created real hurt because of it? Have you ever found yourself on websites you don't need to be on? You ever find yourself meaning to spend just a few minutes online but looking up and realizing you've wasted hours. You ever find yourself on social media accounts playing the comparison game, when you know for a fact it will not be good for your future thought life?

And then, have you ever experienced the shame, the regret, the difficulty, the disappointment that results from situations like that?

So this is where I have to deliver some true but uncomfortable news. The greatest human threat to your future joy and contentment... is you. I would submit to you that no person has caused you more pain, gotten you into more trouble, robbed you of more joy... than you have. We can blame it on other people and circumstances if we want. But if we're honest, that's only one piece of the puzzle. And even *in* those moments where *other* people have caused us pain, we've often *compounded* it all by responding in sinful, destructive ways. No person has caused *me* more difficulty in my life, than *I have*.

Whereas Self-control is a gift to your future self. It helps minimize future regret, future shame, future relational fallout, and future pain.

A few years ago a guy in my LifeGroup of mine was part of an AA group. And he was about to receive his 1 year chip in AA. Meaning he had been sober for 1 full year. He was beaming as he invited our lifegroup to come to the meeting where he would receive his chip.

A few of us went. It was my first and only AA meeting. And I can tell you that I was there but I can't tell you who else was there. And at one point there is a share time, and person after person gets up and says their name and then shared heartbreaking stories of how their inability to say no to alcohol ruined their life and the lives of people around them. And I'll never forget sitting there thinking how relevant Jesus was to all of this. Jesus, who offers us his Spirit, to indwell us and over time produce the fruit of self control in our lives. The outcome or product or end result of self control.

How many lives would be saved if people had the ability to say no to something, even if they really wanted it...because it was bad for them or their neighbor. How much suffering would be avoided if people had the ability to do the right thing even when they didn't want to do?

I would argue that in particular, our society has a profound problem with men lacking self control. Or maybe the better way to say it would be that when a man in particular lacks self control, the

damage done to himself and others can be catastrophic. Many of the horror stories in the news are actually about a man who did not have control over himself. Didn't have mastery over his impulses and desires.

So let's talk for a bit before we're done about how to achieve that ability. **How do we learn self-control as followers of Jesus?** As we've said throughout this series, there is an element of growing in the fruit of the Spirit that is *mysterious*. God does a miraculous work through his Spirit and these things just inherently grow in us as we learn to walk "in step" with him. But just like growing *actual* fruit, *we* also play a role. There is gardening to be done; watering, weeding, pruning. There are things that you and I can do that help us grow in self-control, with the Spirit's help over time. So I want to give you three of those type things this morning. First...

1) Fasting

The first way to join with God in cultivating self-control in your life is fasting. And by this I mean the bible kind—not the "get your body ready for summer" kind. God's people going back thousands of years have seen fasting as one particular way to remember and remind themselves of their connection to God himself. Going without food, for decided-upon lengths of time, is a way to help cultivate the work of the Spirit in your life.

Fasting is essentially self control practice. is a relatively low-stakes scenario (going without a meal or two or three), that helps you learn that you can indeed have control over your desires. You can indeed have dominion over yourself. You're choosing to say no to a very baseline human need (the desire to eat) as a way of demonstrating that you can say no to other desires. And the idea is that if you regularly train yourself to do that, when a much higher stakes moment comes, you'll have an ability to say no then as well. Which isn't to say it'll ever be easy to say no to some things. But it can be easier. Because you've done the work to show yourself you can do it.

Fasting is a way to remember—and this is a very counter-cultural belief in our society—that you are more than your desires. You are more than the things that you want. It's a way of training yourself to delay gratification for a greater good. And through that, you can learn the ability to say no to certain desires when those things don't serve you and others well.

Now, that is a lightning fast intro to the practice of fasting. We have taught way more on this in the past and we're gonna get you some resources on this week's sermon page on the website.

2) Prayer

Now here, I have in mind a very specific type of prayer. It's the type of prayer we see in many places throughout the Psalms. It's the kind of prayer that takes our raw, unfiltered emotions and desires—and lays them bare before God. Have you ever read some of the prayers in the Psalms? If you *haven't*, let me just warn you: prepare to be made *very* uncomfortable. There are prayers about intense *loneliness*. There are prayers where the psalmist expresses intense *anger*, calling down curses and judgment towards his enemies. There are prayers where the psalmist says he's *jealous* of people that don't know God, because their life is going *better* than his is. There are prayers where the psalmist even *accuses* God of not caring about him or about justice.

The point isn't that the psalmist *should* or *shouldn't* have felt this way; the point was that he *did* feel that way, and so he said those things directly to *God* in *prayer*. Does that make sense?

Okay, here's why I think that's important when it comes to self-control. **I am convinced that some of the people who have the hardest time controlling their impulses and emotions are also the people who spend the least time taking their emotions and passions to God.** You show me a

man or woman who can't control their anger, and usually that's a man or woman who hasn't spent much time talking to God about their anger. You show me a person who blindly follows their desire into destructive ends, and I'll show you a person who hasn't spent time acknowledging their desires to God and letting him mold and shape those desires.

So often, **the reasons our emotions and desires control us is because we don't recognize prayer as an outlet for them.** Prayer was *intended* to be a place, among other things, where we could bring our raw, unfiltered selves before God. Where we can be *brutally honest* about them, and then allow God to shape and form them to helpful ends. When we *don't* do that, we end up unleashing them on people and situations around us. But when we *do*, we gradually gain the ability to live in control over them. So let me just encourage you: bring everything you've got before God, emotions and all. He can handle them. And if you do that and allow it to happen, he may just use that whole process to make you more like him along the way. To help you process and filter and channel those emotions and desires to helpful ends, and help you live in more control *over* them. That's the power that prayer grants us.

3) Environment

Last one. Let me see if I can thread this needle. It is true that the Spirit of God empowers us to operate in Godly ways even when nothing around us is conducive to it. I think of Daniel who is in Babylon. Babylon is in no way set up culturally to make it easy to honor God. In fact, most of the norms there make honoring God difficult. And yet Daniel is able to operate in godly ways. So that's true.

And. I used to have a very good friend named Willy. He passed away around 10 years ago. He had been homeless and joined our LifeGroup and I loved him very much. And Willie had a saying. "If you hang around the barbershop long enough, you gonna get a haircut."

Some of you put yourselves in horrible situations and then are shocked when it doesn't go well. If you lack control of your spending habits then stop looking at stuff you could buy online all the time. You know what I mean?

We follow hundreds of people on social media that have cooler lives and nicer houses and better fashion sense than we have...and then we can't figure out *why* we end up struggling with comparison and envy and discontent.

Some of you are like "I'm just really cynical and sad lately." Ok well what tv shows have you been watching? 'Murder shows.' What podcasts you listening to? 'True crime.'

"I don't know Adam. My girlfriend and I are really trying to honor God and have a biblical sex ethic but it is not going well." Ok well what kind of situations are you putting yourselves in? "I don't know, like, normal ones. Like last night we were alone at 2am so we started watching a boring movie and giving each other massages and it just got out of control."

So in 1 Cor 15, Paul quotes a Greek poet named Menander when he says "bad company corrupts good character."

I'm quoting my friend Willie. If you don't want a haircut, then don't go to the barbershop. Sometimes self control looks like not even putting yourself in the situation to begin with.

Set yourself up to win. The earlier you exercise self control in a given scenario, the less of it you need.

So *fasting, prayer, and environment.* Three ways to partner with God in learning and growing in self-control, with the help of the Spirit. So with all of that unpacked, I'd love to end by closing out our passage from Titus 2. Look with me at v. 13 and 14. Paul says we do all of this while, v. 13...

13 waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, **14** who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Paul says that we're all waiting for the day when Jesus returns and makes all things new—including *us*. We're waiting for the day when Jesus aligns each and every one of our desires, emotions, and passions to be precisely what they should be, when they should be, and how they should be. That day is coming. There will be a day when we don't *have* to learn self-control, because the Spirit will have reconciled *all* of who we are with who Jesus is. But in the meantime, we make that our trajectory. We remember that Jesus gave himself *for* us, to *teach* us self-control. To *teach us* to walk by the Spirit, motivated by the Spirit. And his grace is more than enough to train us in all that along the way.

So that we increasingly become a people who belong to Jesus and are “purified and eager for good works.” Like, jumping at the chance to be a blessing to our neighbors and our city in ways that bring glory to God. This is what our whole study on the fruit of the spirit has been about. Learning ways to cultivate the fruit of the spirit in our lives so that we increasingly become people of love, full of joy and peace, people who know our purpose and are full of goodness, people who are faithful and hang in there come what may. It's about being a community of people who belong to Jesus, who are purified, and eager to be a blessing wherever God has us.

Let's pray