

Series: "The Fruit of the Spirit"
"Self-Control"

For the last two months we've been looking at the fruit of the Spirit - virtues, character traits, that will be evident in our life if the Holy Spirit is in us, and controlling us. These are accurate measuring tools to show us how spiritual we are, how far along and mature we are in our walk with Christ. So far we've looked at 8 fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness..." (Galatians 5:22-23). Today we look at the last of these 9 fruit of the Spirit: *self-control*.

The Greek word translated *self-control* means "self-mastery", the spirit that has mastered its desires and its love of pleasure. This particular word for self-control is only used several other times in the Bible, but there are other places where Scripture talks about the value of self-control. For instance, the Apostle Paul talks about the need to control our sexual desires (1 Corinthians 7:9). He refers to an athlete's need for self-control: "Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one" (1 Corinthians 9:25).

Self-control. How are we doing with this one? *Most of us struggle with being able to control certain parts of our life.* For some, it's controlling our *eating habits*. We want to diet, we try to cut out certain foods. But, oh, it can be so hard! Some have trouble with our *spending habits*. We buy things we can't afford, or don't need. Perhaps we've run up a lot of credit card debt. Others struggle with our *sexual desires*. It's hard to control lustful thoughts. In fact, one of the classic books dealing with sexual temptation for men is a book called *Every Man's Battle*.

Some of us may have difficulty controlling our *tongue, what we say*. The Book of James tells us how difficult it is to tame the tongue, control what we say. We say things we just wish we hadn't said. Where else do people struggle for better self-control? Alcohol, drugs, gambling. Curbing our fears and anxieties. Controlling our temper, our thought life.

We can have it together in most facets of our life, but have one or two areas where we lack self-control, and it can color our whole life: The person who's fun to be around, just a nice person, but can't control their tendency to talk too much and always hog the conversation. The guy who's the most caring, unselfish person you'd ever meet, but has trouble staying away from pornography. The dynamic leader, bright, take charge person, who has trouble controlling her fear of heights, or of flying in planes. Many of us know from experience that when areas of our life are out of control it can cause us great embarrassment, it can destroy relationships, it can cause much pain.

Gaining self-control is so important if we're going to live a worthwhile life. If you visit the Oregon Caves National Monument the guide will say, "I hope you enjoy your trek through the caves. Please do not destroy or take any of the rock formations. Actually we have had very little trouble with this. I don't know if it is our visitors' great love for nature or the 500 dollar fine, but we are grateful for your cooperation." So, will you follow the rules because of your *inward* love for nature, or because of an *outward* threat of a \$500 fine? Parts of our life can be governed by *outward* controls: laws and restrictions that help keep us under control. But a sign of growth and maturity is *when we do the right thing and live the right way because of an inward self-*

control. 2 Peter 1:5-7 says, "For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with excellence, and excellence with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love."

Notice, we are to make *every effort* to bolster our faith with self-control. Someone has said, "The professing Christian who lacks self-control does more damage to the cause of Christ than any atheist ever could." "But the fruit of the Spirit is.....self-control" (Galatians 5:23).

So what do we do? Are there ways we can progress in bringing these out of control areas of our life more under control – under God's control? Let's look. *First of all, have a worthy goal – something to aim at.* Self-control starts with proper motivation.

Most of us recognize the name Michael Phelps. He's a swimmer. During his prime he practiced 5-6 hours a day, 6 days a week, swimming nearly 50 miles every week. He lifted weights 3 days a week, plus doing push-ups and pull-ups. Why did he do that? *Because he had a goal – to win an Olympic medal.* That he did! He won a total of 28 medals (23 gold) in the Olympics. The most decorated Olympian in history. He once remarked, "I think everything is possible as long as you put your mind, work and time into it."

The first step in gaining self-control is *motivation.* I want to look better and be healthier, so I'm going to cut out junk foods and eat healthier meals. I want to be able to respect myself, so I'm going to do all I can to overcome this undesirable habit or addiction. I want to be closer to God, so I'm going to learn to take more control of my time, so I have time for prayer and daily devotions.

Have a worthy goal. Know where you want to go. I love Yogi Berra's words of wisdom: "If you don't know where you're going, you might wind up somewhere else."

A second pointer for gaining more self-control: Avoid playing with fire. If I want to cut back on eating sweets, stay out of the bakery and the candy aisle! If I'm trying to control my spending, cut up the credit card, quit searching for things on Amazon, spend less time in your favorite dress shop or department store. If I know going on a certain website or watching a certain movie or TV show will get my mind going in the wrong direction, avoid that website, movie, or TV program. You get the point! It's like the recovering alcoholic determining not to take that first drink! *Avoid playing with fire!*

Thirdly, enlist the help of others. One of the U.S. Presidents, during his term in office, grew somewhat overweight. One day his wife challenged him with this blunt assertion: "You can't run the country if you can't run yourself." Respecting his wife's wise observation, President Lyndon Johnson lost 23 pounds. (I'm not sure President Johnson wanted Lucy Baines' help, but she gave it anyway!).

In most cases, we make better progress in learning self-control if we share our struggles with

others. AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) has their meetings, and also "sponsors", someone you can call when you're battling the urge to drink. There are all kinds of self-help groups, support groups, recovery programs for those struggling to get an out-of-control part of our life under control. For Christians, it could mean we share our struggles with those in our small group, or friends in the church; that we ask someone to commit to pray regularly for us. Invite others to walk with us on our journey towards wholeness.

Finally, commit our struggle for self-control to God. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit helps us control that part of our life we find difficult to control. I came across a fascinating article about self-control. It was written not from a religious or Christian point of view, but more from a psychological perspective. It's from a book called *Making Habits, Breaking Habits*, by Jeremy Dean. His findings are based on studies that have been done. He says all of us have a finite amount of self-control we can exert each day. Self-control is difficult and energy-depleting, and each time we exercise self-control during the course of a day, we have less remaining for later in that day. He goes on to say people consistently overestimate their ability to control themselves. But everyone's self-control is a limited resource. The more we use it, the less remains in the tank, until we replenish it with rest.

To me, those words are kind of a reminder that we need help in our battles for self-control. We need help beyond our own – God's help. And God wants to help us! He's given us the Holy Spirit to live in us, and give us a power beyond our own for breaking bad habits and establishing good ones!

When you think about it, Jesus' life was never out of control, was it! If Christ lives in us through His Spirit, He can help us gain self-control!

So, we've finished this series of messages on the fruit of the Spirit. *Remember, fruit takes time to ripen, doesn't it?* Maturing in our faith, growing in the Lord, embodying all of these wonderful qualities – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – takes time. It's a lifelong process. But I hope and pray that we're on a journey where God's Spirit is more and more in control of our life as we surrender more and more of ourselves to Him!

Take time to nurture the Holy Spirit inside of you. Take time to meditate and pray. Turn from evil and choose what's right. Give each day's activities over to the Lord, and doing His will!

Before I close this series on the fruit of the Spirit, let me just say a few things about *our fruit bearing mission for God*. If we're followers of Jesus, our mission, our destiny, is to bear fruit for the kingdom of God. Jesus was plain about this: "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last..." (John 15:16).

What does it mean to bear fruit? It means to *reproduce!* When God told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, that meant to have kids! To reproduce ourselves in others! To be fruitful spiritually means to reproduce our faith in others. To have spiritual children and grandchildren!

Who has come to faith in Christ because of you and your witness? Who has been drawn closer to God because of your testimony for the Lord? Hopefully, someone! To bear fruit means to make an impact for Christ, to influence others for Jesus!

We can do this by giving our testimony, what the Lord has done for us. By sharing our faith with others. We can bear fruit by doing good in Christ's name. The Apostle Paul prayed that the Colossian believers would "lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as (they) bear fruit in every good work" (Colossians 1:10). Certainly if people can see the 9 fruit of the Spirit in our life, it can have a positive influence on them, and point people to Jesus!

Jesus stressed how essential it is that we bear fruit, and how that can happen. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful...no branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing...this is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (John 15:1-2,4-5,8).

Followers of Jesus are supposed to bear fruit! We do that by being connected to Him (He is the vine, we are the branches) - to have faith in Him, to walk with Him, to make Christ a part of our everyday lives. If we don't bear fruit, God cuts us off (vs. 2). If we do bear fruit, God prunes us so that we bear more fruit (vs. 2). When we bear fruit, we bring glory to God, and demonstrate that we are Jesus' disciples (vs. 8).

I want to do that! Don't you!

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