

The Fruit of the Spirit: Self-Control

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Galatians 5:22-23; Proverbs 25:28; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

<http://youtu.be/6EjJsPvIEOY> (Contemporary Marshmallow test 2:54)

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Fruit of the Spirit Worship Series

Today we are concluding our summer worship series entitled *The Fruit of the Spirit*. Galatians 5:22-23 describes nine characteristics of the Christian disciple: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

These holy attributes naturally appear in our lives when we abide in Jesus Christ and walk by the Holy Spirit. Today we explore the final quality of **self-control**.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Introduction: Wrestling with Hogs

During a hunting trip, I rode with some friends to a meat processing plant. We arrived to find a truck unloading a herd of **hogs**. One of the porkers suddenly decided that he did not want to become a Honey Baked Ham. Without warning, the pig broke from the line and made a mad dash for freedom.

If you have never watched six grown men chase a hog in the dark, then you have missed one of life's true spectacles. I laughed until I hurt. The THIRD time around the building, one of the pursuers tried a new tactic. He launched himself through the air and tackled the pig.

Have you ever tried to wrestle a full-grown hog? Neither had he! I'm not sure if the man had the hog or the hog had the man. Either way, it didn't slow down the swine one bit. Faster than you could say, "This little piggie went to the market," they both disappeared around the corner into the darkness.

The experience reminded me of an old adage: "*Never wrestle with a pig. You will both get dirty—and the pig likes it!*"

A People of Passion

God created us as a people of **passion**. Our human desires are good gifts from the Creator. They add spice to life, sprinkling it with zest and zeal.

However, we engage in a lifelong struggle to determine whether we control our passions or our passions control us. Human desires make wonderful servants but terrible masters. When we exercise the spiritual discipline of **self-control**, our passions take their proper place in life. When our piggish appetites get out of control, life runs hog wild!

In 1972, a Stanford University psychologist named Walter Mischel conducted a study on delayed gratification and self-control. He worked with a group of preschool children at the local daycare center.

A child was placed in a room with a table. On the table was a plate with a single **marshmallow**. The child could eat the marshmallow immediately; BUT if the child

waited 15 minutes without eating the treat, then s/he would receive a SECOND marshmallow. Then the researcher left the child alone in the room.

Mischel observed that some would “*cover their eyes with their hands or turn around so that they can’t see the treat, others start kicking the desk, or tug on their pigtails, or stroke the marshmallow as if it were a tiny stuffed animal.*” Out of the 600 children who participated in the experiment, about one-third exercised enough self-control to wait for the second marshmallow.

A follow-up study 16 years later in 1988 revealed that the preschool children who practiced delayed gratification were described by their parents as “*significantly more competent.*” A second study in 1990 showed that the children who exercised self-control also had higher SAT scores than those who ate the marshmallow. (see *Stanford Marshmallow Experiment*, wikipedia.com)

Out of Control

Eat the marshmallow or wait. Practice delayed or instant gratification. Master or serve your passions. Choose life in control or out of control.

Let’s be honest: sometimes we eat the marshmallow. And a second and a third until the entire bag is gone. Then we experience the glut of guilt and regret—at least until the next marshmallow comes along!

In a fallen world, it is easy to live a life that is out of control. We are constantly tempted to allow our desires to drive our decisions. Then we discover that our good servants have become terrible masters.

Remember last winter’s **ice and snow storm**? It was treacherous just to walk out the door—much less drive on the road. But ask any Southern man—we KNOW how to drive in the snow—even if we have never done so before. After all, we are manly men! It’s all those other people who cause the problems. Here’s the reality: no one can drive on ice. The lack of friction makes it physically impossible.

Some here have experienced the sheer terror of sliding on a sheet of ice. It is such a helpless sensation. Pump the brakes, turn the steering wheel, adjust the radio, nothing helps. The car is out of control until it hits dry pavement or a telephone pole.

It’s a sickening feeling in the pit of the stomach when life is out of control. This is exactly what happens when passions run wild. Lack of self-control eventually leads to collisions of self-destruction.

Since we are created as unique individuals, our self-control is tested in a variety of ways. Each person wrestles with different desires. What tempts one is not a temptation to the other. My weakness is your strength. Your vice is my virtue. It is not a question of IF our self-control will be tested, but HOW it will be tested.

Author Michael Lewis is best known for his book The Blind Side. In another book entitled Moneyball, he explored the success of the *Oakland Athletics* in Major League Baseball. One chapter examined the art and science of batting. Lewis wrote: “*Every hitter has a hole. The strike zone is too big to cover it all.*” Even the best hitters have a pitch that they cannot hit: down and out, up and in, high fastball, low curve. “*The issue isn’t whether a hitter has a weakness, but where it is.*”

Lewis illustrated this point with Jason Giambi of the *Colorado Rockies*. “Every pitcher in the big leagues know that Giambi’s hole is waist-high, on the inside corner of the plate. It is about the size of a pint of milk, two baseballs in height and one baseball in width.” The secret is hitting the hole—a task most pitchers find impossible when facing Giambi. (p. 145)

To echo Michael Lewis’ words, “*The issue isn’t whether we have a weakness, but where it is.*” Where is the hole in your swing? What is your weakness? What temptation entraps you? What sin ensnares you? Where do we spin out of control?

Our struggles span the spectrum of human sinfulness: covetousness, lust, anger, hatred, bitterness, idolatry, adultery, drunkenness. We say to ourselves, “I will never do that again.”

Then we find ourselves doing it again and again. Engaging in addictive behavior. Losing one’s temper. Visiting inappropriate web sites. Saying hateful words. Nursing long-term grudges. Stirring up conflict. Gossiping about neighbors. Spinning and spinning further and further out of control.

Proverbs 25:28 says: “*Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control.*” In Old Testament times, a strong and high outer wall was the first and best defense of a city. If an enemy broke through one section of the wall, then the entire town could be lost.

Question: Where are the walls breached in your life? Identify the one critical area of your life where you are out of control. What new thing does God need to do in my life? So that I can become the person God created me to be—and in the process, be a better witness to others.

My guess is that something immediately came to mind. This is the Holy Spirit at work in our lives, troubling our conscience and calling us to change. The Biblical and theological terms for this experience are conviction and repentance.

Self-Control

God’s people are called to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit which includes **self-control**. People who practice this virtue rule their passions and master their desires. They have learned the discipline of delayed gratification.

Paul wrote in a culture highly influenced by **Greek philosophy**. The Greeks understood self-control to be a life lived in harmony and balance. Consider the **statues** of the day that exemplified their image of a perfect man or woman. All the parts of the body were in perfect proportion to one another.

The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, said that a self-controlled person was neither cowardly nor foolhardy, but courageous. She neither practiced gluttony nor fasting, but a healthy diet. He was neither ignorant nor absorbed in books, but educated. Self-control sought to live the golden mean—moderation in all things, including moderation!

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul used an athletic image to describe this virtue:

Do you not know that in a race that the runners all complete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-

control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified. (RSV)

“*Athletes exercise self-control in all things.*” Those who seriously compete in a sport subjugate everything in their lives to the pursuit of excellence: exercise, diet, rest, practice, thoughts, conversation, study, and more.

We have witnessed throughout this series that Christian discipleship is not an activity but a lifestyle. It informs every aspect of who we are. Our faith permeates our entire being with the end goal of transforming us into the image of Jesus Christ.

Someone once defined idolatry as the worship of God AND anything else. There is no other allegiance or loyalty in our lives that equals Christ’s call to follow him. Christians are not simply students, adherents, followers, admirers, or fans of Jesus Christ—we are DISCIPLES. By definition, discipleship includes **discipline**.

God-Control

In the Christian life, self-control is ultimately **God control**. This entire worship series has emphasized that abiding in Christ and walking by the Holy Spirit naturally produces the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. Paul deliberately used an agricultural analogy to illustrate this point.

I began this series with these comments. When we abide in Christ, the Lord abides in us. Like the branches of a grape vine, the natural result is that we bear fruit in our lives. Then Jesus said, “*I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much **fruit**; apart from me you can do nothing.*”

You don’t need to be a master gardener to understand this simple concept. Suppose you carefully plant healthy **tomato** plants. Then you fertilize, water, and weed the plants in appropriate amounts. You protect the plants from disease and insects. Do you know what will happen? You’ll get tomatoes! The plants naturally bear the fruit.

Jesus emphasized this lesson when he said, “*Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit!*” (Matthew 7:17-18)

In the same way, those who abide in Christ naturally (and supernaturally) **bear the fruit** of Christian living. An ongoing relationship with the Holy Spirit cultivates holiness in our lives. Abiding in Christ makes us more Christ-like. It’s crucial to understand that discipleship is an ongoing, lifelong process of growth and maturation.

This **organic image** is a critical point in cultivating the fruit of the Spirit. Do you ever find yourself picking and choosing what characteristics you need to produce in your life? “*Hmmm, I need kindness, gentleness, and self-control, but I’ve got all of the rest of them down pat—especially humility!*”

Like the Galatians, we begin to think of holiness as a **checklist** of things we DO—a result of human effort. We apply this same attitude towards spiritual fruit. We view Paul’s nine characteristics of holy living like **Boy Scout merit badges**. They are something we are called to work on and earn.

Oftentimes, I talk with Christians who are focusing on one of these attributes. They say, “I need to be more patient,” “I need to learn how to hold my temper,” “I need to practice self-control in diet and exercise,” “I need to quit worrying so much.”

Did you note the common pronoun in all of these statements? It’s “I!” If this is our approach to cultivating holy practices in our lives, then we will fail.

We become like Charlie Brown in the batter’s box, saying to himself: “If I grit my teeth, then I can hit the ball.” You recall the results—an inside fastball spins him around and leaves his clothes scattered on the ground!

We’ve all seen those bumper stickers that declare: “*God is my co-pilot.*” I understand the sentiment, but the statement misses the entire point. If God is only flying as your co-pilot, then you are sitting in the wrong seat! Self-control IS God-control. This is the only way we will be able to live out the discipline of Christian discipleship.

Christian author, Max Lucado, put it this way:

I am a spiritual being. After this body is dead, my spirit will soar. I refuse to let what will rot rule the eternal. I choose self-control. I will be drunk only by joy. I will be impassioned only by my faith. I will be influenced only by God. I will be taught only by Christ. I choose self-control.

Conclusion

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells a parable about a life lived without self-control:

There is a story told of a man who died after having led a thoroughly selfish, immoral life. Moments later, he found himself in a world of bright sunlight, soft music and figures all dressed in white. ‘Boy, I never expected this,’ he said to himself. ‘I guess God has a soft spot in his heart for a clever rascal like me.’ He turned to a figure in a white robe and said, ‘Buddy, I’ve got something to celebrate. Can I buy you a drink?’ The figure answered, ‘If you mean alcoholic beverages, we don’t have any of that around here.’ ‘No booze, huh? Well, then, what about a game of cards? Pinochle, draw poker, you name it.’ ‘I’m sorry but we don’t gamble here either.’ ‘Well, what do you do all day?’ the man asked. ‘We read the Psalms a lot. There is a Bible class every morning and a prayer circle in the afternoon.’ ‘Psalms! Bible study all day long! Boy, I’ll tell you, heaven isn’t what it’s cracked up to be.’ At which point the figure in white smiled and said, ‘I see that you don’t understand. We’re in heaven; you’re in hell.’

Heaven, the story suggests, is having learned to do and enjoy the things that make us human, the things that only human beings can do. And by contrast, the worst kind of hell I can imagine is not fire and brimstone and little red figures with pitchforks. The worst hell is the realization that you could have been a real human being, and now it’s too late. You could have known the satisfaction of caring for another person, of being generous and truthful and loyal, of having developed your mind and your heart, **of controlling your instincts instead of letting them control you, and you never did it.** (When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough, p. 156)

The challenge and promise of the Christian call is not only that we should be but also that we can be different people. In Christ, we are new creatures, being remade into the image of Jesus. Sin is powerful, but God is more powerful yet. In our weakness, he is made strong. *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”*

Don't be pig headed and allow your passions to run hog wild. In Christ, we are invited to cultivate, harvest, and enjoy the fruit of the Spirit, including self-control.