

Spiritually Grown and Sustainable: Self-Control

2 Samuel 11:1-5, 14-25

Titus 2:11-14

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The sermons this summer have reflected on the various traits of the fruit of the Spirit, which we find in the fifth chapter of Galatians. This being the last Sunday of summer as far as the calendar goes (though meteorologically we still have a couple of weeks to go), we come to the final trait of the fruit of the Spirit: self-control. Interestingly enough, where all the other traits of the fruit of the Spirit have a parallel and a model for us in God's character, especially as revealed in Jesus Christ, self-control is the one trait for which we don't have an example through God's character. That's because God does not need self-control. God does not need to curb any kind of sinful inclination or behavior in himself, because there is no such tendency in God. No, the need for self-control is unique to us.

The King James Version uses the term “temperance” for our modern term “self-control.” Temperance refers to “moderation or self-restraint in action or statement; it also refers to a habitual moderation in the indulgence of a natural appetite or passion...”¹ Self-control, then, means that we apply discipline to our lives, we resist succumbing to temptations of harmful behaviors. To acknowledge that our moderation needs to be habitual, ongoing, reinforces the idea that self-control is to be a daily exercise; we can never really say that we've made it, because each day we will face new challenges which we must resist.

As Paul ends his list of the character traits of the fruit of the Spirit with self-control, it brings us back to the verses just prior to his description of the fruit of the Spirit. That's where he describes the “works of the flesh.” Here's how the Good News Bible translates what Paul says about the works of the flesh:

“What [sinful] human nature does is quite plain. It shows itself in immoral, filthy, and indecent actions; in worship of idols and witchcraft. People become enemies and they fight; they become jealous, angry, and ambitious. They separate into parties and groups; they are envious, get drunk, have orgies, and do other things like these...”

¹ <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/temperance?s=t>

I refer us back to the works of the flesh because self-control is the reining in of the sinful nature, so that the Holy Spirit can bear fruit in our lives. Self-control is what makes it possible for the other traits of the fruit of the Spirit to rise to the top and manifest themselves over and against our sinful nature.

In regard to self-control, I think it is helpful to see what life is like when there is no self-control, in order to know just how important self-control really is. If self-control is temperance, then the lack of self-control is intemperance. Intemperance is marked by a lack of restraint or moderation; it is indulging in an excess of appetite or passion.

To see what intemperance looks like and the damage it can bring about, the biblical figure of David gives us a prime example. It started with David innocently looking out the window of his palace. When he saw Bathsheba bathing on the roof of her house, David did not control his desire; instead, he went after that which was not his. But it didn't stop with that, did it? Because when he learned that Bathsheba was pregnant with his child, David had to do something about Bathsheba's husband, Uriah. When Uriah exhibited the kind of self-control that David was unable to attain, David arranged for Uriah to be killed in battle.

David's intemperance led to the destruction of someone else's marriage, and the death of a noble man.

The story does not stop there, does it? David's lack of self-control diluted his moral authority in his own family. Later on, a further weakness in David's character is exposed, and his own son Absalom rebels against David and divides the kingdom against David. Absalom is killed, and David is restored, but much damage has been done; the entire nation was thrown into turmoil.

There is a lesson here. Lack of self-control is never simply a private matter. Like a rock thrown into a lake, there are ripple effects all around. Intemperance in one's personal life WILL spill over into one's relationships, and beyond.

There is no such thing as a purely private intemperance. Intemperance in one affects everyone around us, sending our world spiraling out of control.

Of course self-control entails more than sexual inclinations. There are other tendencies, desires, bad habits and temptations that must be subject to self-control. Things like temper, fits of anger; jealousy and envy; appetites for food and drink that lead to gluttony and drunkenness; selfish ambition; and, of course, speech.

In his epistle toward the end of the New Testament, James speaks at length about the dangers of an unbridled tongue. "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!" says James, "And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is

placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature... Every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue..."²

It is so true, what James says about failure to control our speech. A few ill-spoken words can destroy a lifetime of goodwill.

Billy Graham talks about intemperance in his book on the Holy Spirit. He wrote the book in 1978, but his warning then still rings true today: "Intemperance has brought about the fall of kings and tycoons. History illustrates this. Someone has said, 'There are people who can command armies but cannot command themselves. There are people who by their burning words can sway vast multitudes, who cannot keep silence under provocation or wrong. The highest mark of nobility is self control. It is more kingly than regal crown and purple robe.'"³

I truly believe that one of the greatest motivators for self-control is to recognize how destructive it is to lack self-control.

The truth be told, the term "self-control" is a bit of a misnomer. Because on our own we are unable to rein supreme over our sinful nature. To exercise self-control requires divine assistance. It requires an effort of our own will, but it also comes as a result of the inspiration and empowerment we receive when the Spirit of Christ dwells – and rules – in our hearts.

Self-control requires that we identify those inclinations and tendencies and temptations that we need to curb; and then it requires that we cooperate and submit to the Spirit of Christ as he leads us through and beyond those inclinations and tendencies and temptations. It is the exercise of self-control by the power of Christ at work within us that enables us to turn the corner and leave an old way of life behind, while we strive each day toward Christlikeness.

You see, that is the purpose of the grace of God. The grace of God is given so that we can grow into Christlikeness. Paul wrote to Titus, "For God has revealed his grace for the salvation of all people. That grace *instructs us to give up* ungodly living and worldly passions, *and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives* in this world, as we wait for the blessed Day we hope for, when the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ will appear."⁴

Life in Christ means the death of an old way of life, so that we can be given new life in Christ. That's what Paul means immediately after he describes the fruit of the Spirit when he says, "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us

² James 3:5b-8a

³ Billy Graham, The Holy Spirit: Unleashing God's Power in Your Life (Waco: Word Publishing, 1978), p. 208.

⁴ Titus 2:12-13

also be guided by the Spirit.”⁵

I think one of the more compelling reasons for us to pursue the fruit of the Spirit is so that people will see an accurate reflection of Jesus Christ when they see us. The fruit of the Spirit has a very evangelistic purpose: to make us look like the Christ we proclaim. There is a remark that has been variously attributed to Ghandi and others, but it goes something like this: “If you Christians lived like the Jesus in the Bible, then Christianity would be irresistible.”

That is, on its own, reason enough for us to pursue the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. Do we live like – do we look like – the Jesus in the Bible?

I'd like to end this sermon series as I began it, with a with a prayer. It is the prayer that the late British theologian John Stott prayed at the beginning of every day. It is a prayer that both lifts up the fruit of the Spirit as our goal, and turns to God for God's help in making progress toward that goal. For the truth is, the fruit of the Spirit are not possible without the Spirit of God at work in our lives. Paul doesn't say the “fruit of John, or Betty, or David, or you, or me,” but the “fruit of the Spirit.” We cannot on our own be loving, joyful, peace-filled, etc. – at least not in the manner of Jesus Christ. That's why this sermon series has been titled “Spiritually Grown and Sustainable” – not simply as a play on the whole “locally grown and sustainable” movement for food, but even more as a reminder that it takes the Holy Spirit ever and always at work in us if we are going to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit.

So, recognizing that the fruit of the Spirit describe the kind of person that you and I should strive to become as followers of Jesus Christ, and also recognizing that we can only cultivate the fruit of the Spirit when we open ourselves to the authority and power of the Spirit in our own lives, let us pray:

“Heavenly Father, we pray that this day we may live in your presence and please you more and more. Lord Jesus, we pray that this day we may take up our cross and follow you. Holy Spirit, we pray that this day you will fill us with yourself and cause your fruit to ripen in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”⁶ In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

⁵ Galatians 5:24-25

⁶ Wright, Christopher J. H.. Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit: Growing in Christlikeness (Kindle Locations 64-67). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.