

Introduction

When the idea of this series first landed in my email, I was drawn to speak on self-control. Now that's a little crazy – because it's an aspect of the Spirit's fruit which I have significant lack of.

For many years of my life I was a plaything of the other fruit mentioned in our passage from Galatians... you know, the ones from verses 19 to 21, whereby those that do such things shall not inherit the Kingdom.

So, I come to you this morning speaking from a position of great weakness, and not a great deal of personal authority. But I still hope that I may be used to bring some insight, and to provoke us all in some way to be changed.

Galatians 5:22-25 - ***“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”***

We've already learned something of the other aspects and now we come to this last word from our passage, **self-control**, which I will introduce by way of doing a very brief recap.

Review

Seeing as the illustration of fruit is consistently used in scripture, I want to return to it with a slightly different slant than we've used before, and for my purpose I've chosen an orange, which was Margie's tool originally – not an apple which was Allen's, but hey, they also don't fall far from the tree.

Orange trees will always produce oranges, you see, but no orange is exactly the same as another. Even though fruit from the same tree is quite similar,

oranges from different trees can vary a great deal – for instance the colour itself may vary to some degree; likewise the texture of the skin could be more or less dimpled, or may even be blemished. Both the pith and the skin may be more or less thick, and the segments may be big or small, more or less juicy, and even the taste may vary from sweet to quite bitter. There may be more or less seeds, the fruit may be immature or overripe, or it may even have a worm in it!

However, they are all oranges!

And can a bad tree bear good fruit? No!

Or can a good tree produce bad fruit? Perhaps...

You see each aspect is vital in right proportion for us to say we are bearing good fruit, and if we don't accept the watering of the Spirit, if we don't accept his feed, if we don't allow the sap of his life to permeate the whole tree, to bring the goodness to a mature form – then we may just bear bad fruit.

As I go through this list I want you to think of Pastor Evan, and the events of this week. As a very topical example of self-control, I believe, he has been used to display much of the Spirit's fruit in all its aspects, both for this nation and for the world.

Joy – this is an inner sense of well-being that is deeper than happiness and comes from knowing that God is with you. Through self-control it was displayed by his good attitude despite the dire circumstances.

Peace is what we show as we trust on, and are confident in the Lord rather than relying on our own understanding. So how could he remain peaceful in

the middle of a hugely fear-inspiring situation unless he exercised godly self-control?

Patience is not the ability to wait, it is that which manifests while we are waiting. God will test our faith with difficult situations to bring out patience - but first these situations tend to bring out things like pride, anger, rebellion, self-pity, and complaining. Self-control must have allowed him to overcome all these kinds of things so that patience could show forth.

Kindness is the quality of being truly caring about others and treating our fellow human beings with respect. Kindness cost Evan sacrificially this week, here requiring positive self-control – in that he seemed to make a deliberate decision to respect the authorities and urge non-violence despite the obvious platform to do otherwise.

Goodness is what God is, and because He is good, He's gracious to us every single moment, and we are to reflect God's graciousness toward others, but we can only do this by getting off the thrones of our lives – and that requires a good deal of self-control! I reckon that Evan has had to consistently do just that as he's led the **#thisflag** movement, despite the obvious threat to himself and his family.

Faithfulness was reflected by Evan in remaining committed to doing what he obviously believed God was leading him to do - no matter the personal cost of arrest and prison. Even though he must have felt like quitting, he exercised self-control, and didn't give up. And here I would also like to say that I don't think it's over yet, just because he's left the country.

Gentleness... how do you respond when someone rubs you the wrong way? Are you harsh, or are you humble? Meekness is not weakness – it requires great strength. Jesus didn't have to go to the cross, but He humbled himself under the hand of God's purpose – and then exercised supreme self-control with His life-giving words - "Forgive them Father".

Love is best seen as the first fruit of the Spirit, although I touch on it last, and the other aspects of the Spirit's fruit may even be seen as an expression of love.

Everything that Jesus did was motivated by love. A selfless, humble kind of love that washes feet and seeks to build others up, but yet is full of fire and the kind of passion that chases moneylenders from the temple!

1 John 4:7-8 - ***"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love."***

We as the children of God are called to feed the world around us with this heavenly fruit of love – and that, my friends, requires self-control. It's not just a feeling but an action, and if it's only expressed in words, it's essentially meaningless.

Please don't get me wrong - I'm not equating Evan Mawarire to Jesus, but I am saying that this week I saw a godly man, standing up for what is true and right in the face of great danger, and I don't believe that was possible without the enabling power of the Holy Spirit.

Main Topic – What is Self-Control.

In fact, I maintain that it is virtually impossible to show forth the other eight aspects of the Spirit's fruit unless we walk in self-control.

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So what is godly self-control?

The Greek word for it is, "*egkrateia*" (pronounced: **eg-krah-the-ee-ah**). It can also be translated as "temperance."

The English dictionary tells us that self-control is the ability to exercise the will so as to restrain one's desires, emotions, and behaviour. The word "restrain" implies that if we don't control our desires and emotions, that our behaviour will likely become unruly and offensive.

The Greek word for self-control used here in Galatians is also a compound word that begins with the word for "strength" or "power" and attaches the prefix meaning "in or within."

In other words, godly self-control is the Holy Spirit's strength and power, growing in us to exercise this restraint over our emotions, actions, and desires so as to be in harmony with God's will.

Main Topic – What Self-Control is Not.

Let's also have a quick look at what self-control is NOT.

Well it's not about living a life without any enjoyment. God calls us to a balance between genuine enjoyment of His blessings and moderation in their consumption.

Self-control is not the same as self-improvement. Apart from God's help, self-improvement may work outwardly, but deep down the discontentment and dissatisfaction remain. To be self-disciplined without the Holy Spirit infilling will leave you still filled with the impulses of the world, the flesh, and the devil, regardless of your outward layer of conformity.

Main Topic – Illustration of a Lack of Self-Control

Self-control is a concept that can only be understood or practiced when an organism actually has "self-consciousness".

The story goes that if you tie an anteater close to a large ant hill so that he can't leave, he will eat himself to death! Apparently, every time he sees an ant he just has to eat it – no self-control, just raw instinct.

There are many people in the world today who take the same approach and claim they have "no control" over their actions because it is "instinct", or the result of some kind of "disease" - whether it be social, mental or physical. Yet the very fact that they claim to have "no self-control" reveals they are conscious of the fact that they should control themselves.

The real problem is that temperance, or if we avoid the old word - call it moderation or self-restraint - is quite simply foreign to our human nature, and especially to our worldly culture.

We see a lack of self-control in the way politicians run our government, in the lifestyles of the rich and famous, and in the behaviour of many powerful individuals. We see it in the way people drive on our roads, jump queues, lie, cheat and steal. We can see the way that the world encourages us to do

whatever seems good to us - by the content of many movies, and by the many adverts telling us how much we “deserve it”!

Main Topic: Jesus as an illustration of Godly Self-Control

But Proverbs 25:28 tells us that - ***“Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control.”***

Jesus illustrates for us the kind of self-control that is valued in the Kingdom of God. It’s not a display of power or strength over the acts of the flesh, but rather a yielding that flows from love for the Father and results in a redirection of the desires of the mind and heart toward others rather than self.

It’s obvious that self-control does require an exercise of the will, but we must realize that our own will has its limits. The amazing truth of God’s Kingdom is that self-control is realized when self is set aside for the good of another, while those who try to “control” self by any power other than God’s really end up losing the battle.

Now as a bit of a control freak, this is an arena in which I’m truly expert – ***losing the battle that is*** – but what I can tell you all is the when I’ve by grace allowed the Holy Spirit to actually have authority over my own will then I do make better decisions. Praise God!

Main Topic: Paul and the Purpose of Self-Control

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul uses the word “self-control” to describe an athlete who masters his emotions and his body in order to run a race.

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all

things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified"

I want you to notice how self-control isn't an end in itself - it's always for some greater purpose. Obviously when we can't control our emotions or desires or behaviour, we end up hurting one another, and that's exactly what was happening to the Christians in Galatia, when Paul wrote his letter to them.

And Titus 2:11–12 tells us - ***"For the grace of God ... teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age."***

Self-control is more about the positive though – its just that until we can master the drives of the "old man" in order to enthrone Christ as Lord in our lives we will not be able to bring out the new man, the born again man who is Christ in us, the hope of glory.

Main Topic: The Divided Self

The very concept of "self-control" implies a battle between a divided self. It implies that our "self" produces desires we should not satisfy but instead "control." Just as the Hebrews were promised the land, but had to take it by force, one town at a time, so we are promised the fruit of self-control, yet we also must take it by force. We have to make the effort, but success comes by the empowering of the Spirit.

Now, I have to admit to you all that the last couple of weeks has been exceptionally difficult for me, as I prepared to speak about this subject of self-

control. As I mentioned earlier, I have more than a few challenges in this department, and I began to feel some of the force of Paul's words in Romans 7:24 –

“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

In that passage he is again talking about the war which is waged in us between the flesh and the Spirit, and he immediately answers his own question –

“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

I submit to you that as humans we are exceptionally depraved, and not one of us is worthy of God's indwelling presence. Not one of us would have the moral fortitude to even choose Christ as Saviour if it were not for grace.

Again, I take comfort from John, in Chapter 15 vs 16 - ***“You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain.”***

That means that God chose us before we were even born. He has a purpose for our lives and that is to bear good fruit.

The latter part of the passage in Galatians 5:22-25 says it clearly - ***“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”***

Every believer has two natures struggling to dominate him—an old, sinful nature, and a new, spiritual nature. I reckon we must pray, with St Augustine, “Lord, deliver me from that evil man, myself.”

I recently learned a little about how the brain works, as we did the Conquer series. It seems at the core of the brain is what's called the limbic system, and apparently this area is responsible at an unconscious level for our most primeval instincts of self-preservation, reproduction and aggression. The whole system works through rewarding certain behaviour by releasing pleasure-giving chemicals. This is essentially what we combat – but there are some differences between us and the anteater.

For a start anteaters aren't born again – or at least I don't think so!

We are regenerated by the Spirit of God and enabled to have faith in Christ, and that smallest mustard seed of faith then grows in us through the process of sanctification. With the Spirit's indwelling, the seed form of all His fruit is in us. We must water it – by obedience, by reading, studying, praying, spending time in His presence.

What we must do – though again I believe it is a work of grace, is choose who is really in charge of our lives – is Christ king, or is it me? The self that we must reign in is the old instinctive nature – who always seeks pleasure and survival at any cost. That self will always seek to usurp Christ, but the new altruistic nature given to us by regeneration willingly submits to the Lordship of Christ, knowing that His glory is our greatest good.

Paul says we must live by the Spirit - this is the only way we can live without gratifying the desires of our sinful nature. Only the Spirit of God is strong enough to overcome our self-centred fleshly desires.

I believe Jesus also found His strength in the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who descended on Him like a dove at his baptism; the Spirit who led Him into the

wilderness to be tempted; the Spirit who anointed Him to preach good news to the poor and recovery of sight to the blind.

I love the way that it's put in Isaiah 61 vs 3, and this is the tail end of that reading of scripture by Jesus recorded in Luke 4 - ***"that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified."***

When we say "Yes" to the Spirit, we can say "No" to our flesh. And when we say "No" our flesh, we can say "Yes" to God and one another.

You don't just say no. You say no in a certain way - you say no by faith in the superior power of God within. It is just as ruthless, and may be just as painful, but the difference between worldly self-control and godly self-control is crucial.

Main Topic: God's Glory is the Goal

The question is who will get the glory for this victory? Will we get the glory? Or will Christ get the glory?

As the Holy Spirit grows roots deeper and deeper into each of us it is He that produces His spiritual fruit in our lives, and the fruit is fully identifiable as His, rather than our own work. It is the Holy Spirit who, despite all our inconsistencies and failings, faithfully remains in residence, and works all things for our good and His glory!

The fruit then, stands in contrast to works - in that works are the result of our own efforts while fruit is the result of God's activity in us. This bearing of fruit is God's will for our lives and it is designed to bring Him alone great glory.

John 15:8 - ***“This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”***

Main Topic: God’s Glory in the Community of believers

And collectively then, this fruit that is produced as physical manifestation of the Christian’s transformed life, isn’t so much a collection of personal virtues, but rather a result of people learning to love and minister to one another.

We are here to be His body, working under His direction. That’s much more than a bumper sticker speech... it’s the reality of our God-given destiny! Just imagine what the community around us might look like if we did just that? Well I tell you, when I read the book of Acts I see the world turned upside down by simple people who took the Holy Spirit seriously.

We are the soil, good or bad, individually and collectively, in which the seed of the Word takes root, in which that fragile but resilient plant of the new creature is nurtured. The question which I am asking myself right now is this – how much do I help or hinder the work of the Spirit in me? Do I much cooperate with Him in the bearing of His fruit, or do I grieve Him, resist Him, and oppose Him?

So I likewise ask you – what fruit are you producing? Is it fruit that looks good on the outside but is really bad on the inside? Is it fruit that is immature or overripe? Or is it fruit that is good to eat?

People are going to come and “pick” our fruit – whether we are intentional about it or not.

Am I, for instance, thinking I'm this wonderful person when in reality I walk immaturely by ignoring the issues in my life and expecting good results.

Do you think everyone else is wrong and you are right?

We can do a world of hurt to others if we don't take care of things like pride, complaining, gossip, un-forgiveness, and so on. If these things aren't dealt with they will produce bitter, or unripe, and even toxic fruit.

Conclusion of the matter

I'm afraid I can't place where this quote comes from but I've heard it said that -
"You need linger in His presence so that His presence lingers long in you!"

The more we draw close to God in the indwelling person of the Holy Spirit, the more we are likely to demonstrate His fruit of self-control. Frankly speaking, as I've prepared these last couple of weeks, my greatest challenge and personal conviction has not been related to self-control as such, but that I found myself to be distanced from God.

It's possible to know a great deal about a person, and yet not be acquainted with them personally, and possible that very intimate relationships can grow cold – so it is likewise with the Lord.

We are privileged to draw right into the very presence of God, and to not just dwell in that presence but even have Him indwell us!

Let us start with that aspect of self-control... with that discipline!

For me, one of the most eloquent statements to illustrate this goal of being restrained comes from the middle of Psalm 131 – and I’m going to leave you with that.

“O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me.

But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me.

O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore.”