

“Empowered: Self-Control – Always in Season”

July 18, 2021

We’ve been making our way through the fruit of the Spirit since Pentecost Sunday when we started with love - and now here we are at self-control. This is not an easy list. It’s a great list, but not an easy list.

If I was going to figure out a fruit to use today, I wonder if the cocoa bean could work for those of us who might have trouble controlling our love for chocolate. For many of us, self-control brings up our struggles with boundaries and limits. Maybe it's chocolate or food or maybe it's something else, but we all have something that challenges us.

Believing in God, putting our faith in Jesus, and knowing the Holy Spirit guides us doesn't mean that we bear these fruit automatically. But when we worship God, trust Jesus as Lord and Savior, and when the Holy Spirit takes hold of us, then we do bear fruit! That’s the promise. My prayer is that you’ve noticed how God is able to cultivate this fruit in us as we rely on God’s help. Even so, each part of the fruit of the Spirit is another layer of challenge.

Pastor Kim Bos offered a great message on gentleness last week - reminding us that gentleness is not weakness, but meekness and power under control. Gentleness requires strength, and so does self-control. In fact, the Greek word used here in Galatians 5 is EGKRATEIA.

SHOW SLIDE: - ἐγκράτεια

It’s a compound word that literally means "in strength" or "in power." So, we're talking about having strength within ourselves - to control ourselves against our desires that go against God’s will for us. It's not just *knowing* what is right, but *doing* what we know is right. I’ve shared my story of the DIME GAME before, but it always comes to mind when I think of self-control.

Self-control is last on the list, but certainly not least. In fact, without it, we cannot exhibit the other fruit. You might say self-control is always in season because it's crucial to bearing the rest of the fruit! And really, self-control sends us back to the beginning - back to agape love that truly does seek good for others, gives, and sacrifices.

Remember that Paul is writing to the early church, and so is the writer of the passage we read in II Peter. II Peter gives us a list, too - or at least a way of living our faith - with goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection, which leads back to love.

We’re not exempt from the call to self-control. Faith in God doesn’t mean we don’t struggle. We deal with temptation every day. We struggle with passions and

desires that pull us away from what God intends. Sometimes we focus on what we can gain for ourselves and forget what our decisions might do to others. We want to take care only of ourselves instead of putting others first, or even more, seeking God's direction for our lives. We can quickly ignore the fact that our decisions don't honor God and God's gifts in our lives.

Paul's words to the people in Galatia center on the concept of freedom in Christ - not to do whatever we want or whatever feels good, but what God calls us to do as faithful people who seek to follow Christ and represent Christ to the world. That's who we are - representatives and ambassadors who show Christ to the world.

When we seek to bear the fruit of the Spirit instead of falling into self-indulgence, self-control is vital. It is easy to go too far and take our basic human needs beyond what we really need into the realm of what we want - whether it's food, clothes, sleep, intimacy and the like.

So, freedom in Christ is not license. We cannot go around doing whatever we want because we want to. Calling myself a Christian does not give me license to sin, and sin should bother us. My sin should bother me. I don't mean just looking at other people - but looking at ourselves. Part of the Holy Spirit's work is to convict us, and we've all been there - when we know we shouldn't do something or say something - or when we've said or done something and felt a nudge (or even a kick!).

Calling myself a Christian means that I seek first the Kingdom of God. It means that I seek to be righteous - not self-righteous - but to be righteous - to have right aim in my relationship with God and with others. It means that I seek God's will for my life first - not my own desires. And if I'm honest, it's enough work to do that for myself rather than worrying about what someone else is doing.

Even saying that, it's hard. It's hard to know if what I'm doing or seeking is right. Is it what I want or what God wants? How do I know? Some important tools we can use: we pray, take time and think, wait for affirmation, seek counsel from trusted friends in faith who will tell us the truth in love.

One writer talks about freedom with a great image. Think about a road with a deep ditch on either side. **SHOW SLIDE:** Image of road
One ditch is legalism where we can get too bound up in rules. The other ditch is too much freedom with no boundaries or limits. Living our faith isn't simply about following rules - nor is it living without any sense of limits or boundaries. When it comes to freedom in Christ, we want to stay in the middle of the road. Self-control is vital to staying in the middle of the road so that we can live joyfully in the freedom we have to love and serve Christ while recognizing that freedom in Christ demands discipline and commitment. We live in strength and in power by God's grace.

Paul says that those who walk in the Spirit have crucified the flesh. In Paul's terms, the works of the flesh are literally nailed to the cross. *My sin, not in part, but the whole, is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more.* As we admit our need for God's help, grow in faith, and trust in God's grace, then the works of the flesh have less power over us. They are always still there, but the Holy Spirit gives us strength to keep overcoming them. And remember that the works of the flesh are anything that seeks human desire over God's will, anything that causes us to live at odds with God and each other like jealousy, envy, anger, and more.

Maybe the best way to focus on self-control is to think about someone who shows it. Who has been an example for you? Some of the first people who come to my mind have deep and intentional prayer practices. They are people who know that they can't bear fruit without going to the Caretaker of the Orchard first. And their prayers aren't just a list of needs or wants, but sincere prayers that grow out of a true desire for God's help to be holy and faithful. They say, "God, help me, lead me..." instead of "God, do this for me."

Self-control shows up as the early church is getting its bearings, but it's not new. Jesus teaches it when he speaks about prayer. In the Gospel of Matthew, right after an account of those who pray for attention, Jesus calls us to center our prayers on God: our heavenly Father, whose name is holy. Jesus tells us to pray for God's Kingdom to come, and then he offers a poignant lesson on self-control. He says to pray "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

We know that praying for God's will to be done is what we should do. And yet, that's the crux of self-control, too. It's not just about getting over ourselves, but seeking God's will for our lives and for our world. When Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane just before he was betrayed by Judas, he prayed. The disciples who went with him couldn't stay awake even when he asked. But we hear his prayer, and even after he asks for God to take this cup, we hear echoes from Matthew. "Not my will, but your will..." It is the ultimate example of self-control - to seek God's will even when we know that it is not what we would choose.

Back to Jesus' teaching on prayer: We pray for our needs. We pray to forgive. And again, a message about self-control. "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil..." Self-control isn't just about overcoming temptation. Sometimes we have to avoid temptation altogether.

If I don't want to be tempted by chocolate, I shouldn't have it in my house! If I struggle with lust, I shouldn't put myself in a situation that challenges me - whether in person or online. If I get out of control with alcohol, I shouldn't drink or I should ask someone to hold me accountable. If I can't stop at the slot machine or the game table, I

shouldn't be at the casino. If I tend to respond quickly in anger, I have to be intentional about taking time before I react.

When we pray "Lead us not into temptation," we seek to work against its power in our lives. We know how powerful it can be. We know the damage it can do to us and to others! We are not strong enough on our own. We need God's help - and we may need the help of others, too.

Most of the time, those who are faithful in prayer focus not on themselves and their struggles, but rather on their relationship with God and how they can pray for others. When the focus is on others, then they are not as concerned or preoccupied with themselves. It makes sense, but it's difficult. And I want to be clear that it's not a call to be a martyr, but rather a call not to be centered on ourselves to the point that we aren't thinking of others.

I think of people who can be silent even when they know they are right. People who can control their anger and seek reconciliation. People who seek to forgive. There is great strength in self-control - not seeking revenge when it's our first reaction, not doing what comes naturally to us in terms of our physical or emotional needs when it just serves us. How many times do we allow our anger to get the best of us? How often do we seek what we want at the expense of others?

I've realized again that Paul reminds us of the importance of community because the fruit of the Spirit is ultimately relational. This is about how we live together - and how we witness to the world. If we claim Jesus, then we are a reflection of Jesus to the world. Can you imagine if the church was always bearing fruit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? That would transform the world!

Self-control ultimately allows us to be faithful servants who seek to be more like Christ in how we speak and act and follow where Jesus leads. It is constant work to rise above what comes easily to us. But we are called to be strong by the grace of God. So, self-control is always in season. May we pursue God's will and God's way - and find freedom to live and love - and transform the world.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.