

“Fruit of the Spirit” series- STUDY 10

SELF CONTROL

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Temptation is like a hungry lion
The more you feed it the stronger it grows
We know the answer to our salvation
Why do we fight it?
We know the difference between right and wrong
Why do we fail over and over?
Like a city whose walls are broken down
So the last days people will be without self control (1)
Attacks from all sides, defences give way
Temptations, floodgates, smashed to the ground
This is done so you may be ineffective and unproductive
The kingdom’s work placed aside
You must die to sin, don’t be controlled
when sinful nature rears its ugly head.
Let the Spirit be your guide, hold on tightly. (2)
Believe in God and His power to change you.
Desire to do what is good.
How do we know what pleases the Lord?
Study His Word, listen to His people.
Surround yourself with the things of God.
Starve the lion of its food.
Self control is not easy. Persevere! Persevere! (3)

Bible references : (1) Proverbs 25:28, (2) Romans 7, (3) 2 Peter 1:6

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Introduction. During his term as president of the United States, Lyndon Johnson was rather overweight. One day his wife challenged him bluntly: “You can’t run the country if you can’t run yourself.” Respecting his wife’s wise remarks, Johnson went and lost 23 pounds. Benjamin Franklin had said, “He is a governor that governs his passions and he is a servant that serves them”. To a lot of the ancient Greek philosophers self-control was very important. Aristotle once said, “I count him braver who overcomes his own desires than him who conquers his enemies; for the hardest victory is the victory over self.” Plato believed that our animal urges needed to be governed or else they would produce “a feverish state in the soul, a city of pigs” which knows no limits. When we’re not self-controlled our life is like a pigsty. That’s a graphic picture isn’t it?

Self control or control by the Spirit? I mention these Greek philosophers because in Paul’s time when he wrote Galatians the concept of self control was very important to them, especially the Stoics. They were very much on about self-mastery, having this powerful control over themselves. You see the Greek word, which we translate as “self-control”, *egkrates*, has in it the word *krates*, which means power (bureaucrat, technocrat). So the word literally means power over self or self-mastery. Now while this is a good translation of the Greek, (and how the Greeks thought of it) it’s not exactly what Paul had in mind. It’s interesting to note that the word *egkrates* is never used in the gospels and only 10 times in the rest of the New Testament. The word is a bit deceiving because, if we are honest as Christians, we know we can’t control ourselves simply through our own willpower. Self-control is more than self-help. Paul writes of our dilemma in Romans 7:18; “*I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good but I cannot carry it out.*” On our own we may have a certain self control that any one can exercise, Christian or non Christian. But if we are talking of self control as a “fruit of the Spirit” we need a power beyond our own. It is interesting that the word “*kratos*” is translated as “power” in Ephesians 1:19 “*...his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength which he exerted in Christ Jesus when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms...*” So the same strength and power that raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him to heaven is available to us for the growth of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. So not self-mastery, but control by the Spirit.

Greek – *egkrates*
(self – power)

self mastery
or
control by the Spirit

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Self control to run the race. We get a fuller idea of what Paul means by self control in what he writes in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; “*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into*

strict training (NIV; Gk “Every athlete exercises strict self control in all things.”). *They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.*” Paul here contrasts exercising control over his body with running “aimlessly” in verse 26. He argues that athletes exercise self-control because they have a clearly defined purpose or goal. They cannot afford to be distracted by every passion or desire that comes along. So we can define this final fruit of the Spirit as the “control of self by the Spirit for the sake of the gospel.” What looks like self control is actually letting someone else take control. Self-control, biblically speaking, means walking by the Spirit, under the Lordship of Christ.

Self control

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motivation

*

focus

*

goals

OHP

Self control needs a goal. Now let’s apply two key elements in this passage to helping us keep control under the Spirit, namely having clear goals and discipline. Notice how Paul says “*Run in such a way as to get the prize.*” The prize is the motivation you need to undergo the training and discipline. The prize, the goal, provides focus. The reason so many of us do not exercise self-control is because we do not have a goal. There is no motivation to discipline ourselves. Or if we do have some goals they are often too vague to provide focus and a way for us to measure if we are on track. For example why should we control our spending at Macquarie Centre if we have no financial goals that will stimulate us to save. Why should we control our mouths and the hurtful things we can say if we do not have as our goal the deep desire to bring the love of God into the lives of the people around us. If we, in faith, desire deeply to bring the love of Christ into the life of our spouse, we will be much less likely to stray into an affair. I would suggest that one of the reasons so many of us battle to have good habits of bible reading and prayer, good personal time with God, is that we have no spiritual goals. We plan many things. But do we plan to get to know God better? Do we have a goal we want to reach in terms of living holy, Godly lives? Good discipline, hard, solid training will only come about if there is a clear goal. And our ultimate goal is to gain “*the crown that will last forever.*” Our aim is eternal life with Christ on the new earth. So how do we line up our lifestyle for that goal? The advantage of having goals is that it becomes easier to make decisions. An athlete has little trouble saying no to things that will not help him win the race and win the prize. We are constantly faced with all sorts of things. Many are good, others definitely not. But many of them will not help us move toward fulfilling our goals. Staying focused on the goal makes self control easier. Is what I am faced with going to please or grieve the Spirit. Is it helping the progress of the gospel or hindering it. Will it move towards the prize, the crown of life or away from it?

The absence of self control. In order to fully understand this fruit of the Spirit, its helpful to describe what things look like if self-control were absent. Proverbs 25:28 provides a clear picture of an individual living out of control. “*Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control.*” When the book of Proverbs was written, one of the main sources of strength and protection for a city consisted in building and maintaining of its walls. A wiped out wall was considered a breach in security. A city with walls in disrepair was a city with a shameful reputation. The city was open to attack and destruction. The man or woman without self-control is like this city with no effective defence. They are not able to resist those things that can destroy their lives and the lives of others. There are numerous examples in the Bible of people who lacked self-control. Think of Samson who was one of Israel’s judges and was empowered by the Spirit. But he self-destructed because he couldn’t control his desire for women. He visited Philistine prostitutes and eventually told Delilah about the secret of his power. He soon lost his hair, his strength and his life. Saul was another man who self-destructed when he couldn’t control his urge to kill David. He ignored the important things in his life in order to chase David all over the place. David, on the other hand, showed remarkable self-control when he had the opportunity to kill Saul. Instead of allowing his passions to control him, in 1 Samuel 24:6 David says “*The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord’s anointed...*” Tragically, several years later when David was king, his self-control goes out the window when he commits adultery with Bathsheba and murders Uriah, which had a major impact on his family and the nation.

No self control
No effective defense
Leads to disaster

Eg Samson, Saul, David
Eg Roman empire, our culture?

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Paul’s presentation to Felix. It is interesting in the New Testament, that when Paul is given the opportunity to present the gospel to Felix, a Roman governor, in Acts 24:25, he chose to emphasise “*righteousness, self-control and the judgement to come.*” Why did he do that? Well, Paul knew his audience and his times. Felix had no self-control. Historians make it clear that he had indulged in all sorts of cruelty and lust, having murdered and committed adultery. Felix was no different to many of the others in the Roman Empire. Scholars tell us that when ancient Rome was disciplined and controlled it was a great empire. But when it indulged in all its pleasures, drunkenness and orgies, bored and into an “anything goes” mindset, it crumbled from within. The Goths and Huns were able to conquer Rome because the place had become so rotten and corrupt. I wonder if western civilisation is going down that road? Numerous folk think so. Unfortunately, there are many even in the churches who have let their walls be broken down. Instead of governing our desires and appetites, so many of us can be “bingers”. Some binge on food, some on drinking, some on anger, some on work, others on TV, sports, spending, even sex. Are you struggling in any area with self-control?

Titus 2 on self control. Perhaps we wonder if we can display a real sense of self-control in a culture like ours that is so self-centred and self-seeking, so pleasure orientated with an “anything goes” mindset. Perhaps you have tried to control areas in your life and seem to get nowhere. So you feel like giving up. Before you throw in the towel have a look at Titus 2. This is the best passage on self-control in the New Testament. The young pastor Titus did not have an easy ministry on the island of Crete. Crete was known as the first century “party place”. It was the place to rage. Paul describes the people who lived there as (Titus 1:12) “*liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons*”. The new Christians in the church on Crete came from the raucous world around them. They all still had friends who were taking part in the drunken love fests for which Crete was famous. It was not an easy place to get converts nor was it easy for Christians to maintain their self-control. So it’s no surprise to read in this brief letter that Paul challenges four groups of people to be “in their right minds” by being controlled by the Spirit. In Titus 1:8 we see that elders are to be men known for their “*hospitality, good works, holiness, discipline and self-control.*” In 2:1 Titus is to teach the older men to be “*temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled...*” In 2:2 older women are not to be slanderers or addicted to alcohol, but teachers, training the younger women to be “*self-controlled and pure, busy at home...*” In 2:6 Titus is to be an example to young men and to “*encourage them to be self-controlled.*” Then we see in verse 11-14 the solution to having this self-control. It’s not about us trying on our own. But we see that we desperately need God’s power and grace. “*For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope- the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.*”

Developing self control

Admit the problem of self control

Yield to the Spirit

Be regular in reading and prayer

Be accountable to friends

Avoid temptations (know your weaknesses)

Welcome correction

OHP

How to develop self control. You notice the emphasis in the passage is on “*grace*”. That’s how we develop self-control. We note that grace redeems us (11,14a). There is no way we can save ourselves. God took the initiative and brought salvation. Grace also reforms us (12,14b). By the work of Jesus we are not only forgiven with a changed position before God. We’ve also been given a change in attitude and appetite. We are freed from the domination of sin. It is the Spirit who works new life in us, and teaches us to be different. Notice it says in verse 12 that we can say “*no*” to *ungodliness and passions*. The Spirit gives us the ability to withstand the temptation. It’s no longer a case of “I can’t help it, I’m a sinner.” The Spirit removes the domination of sin. We don’t have to conform to sin. The question is will we yield to the Spirit and follow him, or ignore Him and grieve Him. There are some practical ways that can help us say “No” to that which is

destructive and “Yes”, so that we are “eager to do what is good.” 1. Admit you have a problem with self-control. As long as you think you are fine, you are in trouble. 2. Yield to the Lordship of Christ. Constantly be aware of the Spirit in your life and yield to Him. 3. Be regular in pray and bible reading. Reflect all day on what you have read. It will remind of what is good. 4. Invest in spiritual friendships. Have friends who keep you accountable, who have the courage to ask you the hard questions. 5. Know what your weaknesses are and avoid them. 6. Welcome gracious correction.

The big picture goal- Christ’s return. Finally we note in this passage that Paul reminds us of the return of Jesus, and that his return is our only hope and glory. Instead of living only for today, we live for what is to come. This is the big picture as far as our goals are concerned. Thinking of Jesus and the judgement to come is in stark contrast to those who give up self-control and go after all the pleasures that this life has to offer. Knowing that we will see Jesus face-to-face should stir us on to live under the control of the Spirit. Knowing that every thought and word and action will come under judgement generates a very powerful motive for self-control.

Wrap up. As we wrap up this series on the fruit of the Spirit, think about how you are responding to the promptings of the Spirit in your life. Displaying each of the nine characteristics is not about trying harder. The last part of :23 says “*Against such things there is no law*”. It means these characteristics cannot be enforced by a set of rules. You can’t make some one kind, or patient or gentle. Nor can we make ourselves. It is the work, the fruit, of the Spirit. As Paul says “*So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*” Is that what you are doing?

DISCUSSION.

Preparation. Read the sermon notes.

Readings. 1 Corinthians 9:19-27; Titus 2, Galatians 5:22&23

Questions.

1. “I count him braver who overcomes his own desires than him who conquers his enemies; for the hardest victory is the victory over self.” Do you agree with Aristotle on this? What are some of the issues of self control for you?
2. The Greek word for self control literally means self mastery. Why is that not what Paul had in mind? How are our lives to be controlled?
3. How does Paul’s example of the runner help us understand his concept of self control? How does the “prize” fit into the idea of self control? Explain what is meant by “control of self by the Spirit for the sake of the gospel.”
4. What are your spiritual goals? Do you plan to know God better? What are your goals in terms of living holy, Godly lives? What is the ultimate goal and how are you living your life to meet that goal?

5. Explain “The man or woman without self-control is like this city with no effective defence.” Explain why Samson, Saul and David fell. What are some areas we need to look out for?

6. The Roman empire fell because it crumbles from within. Discuss the issue – is western society going down the same road as Rome? Why or why not? What do we “binge” on?

7. Why does Paul stress self control so much in his letter to Titus. Why is it that must develop self control in our lives by grace? What are the six practical ways to develop self control? Which of these do you need to develop further.