

Self-Control

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[0 : 00] So, Tom, this evening, his theme was to be one of the fruit of the Spirit, and the evening worship we're going through, fruit of the Spirit from Galatians chapter 5, and his theme this evening was to be peace.

So he's taken that sermon, and he'll preach that at some point in the future. I hope it's not disrespectful to the Spirit of God to take the fruit out of the order that they're given in Scripture. We're going to do that this evening, because I'm going to speak on the last element of the fruit of the Spirit that's mentioned, which is self-control.

And they remember are all part of, it's not like the fruits of the Spirit. You can pick some, and we're good in that area, and we're poor in another.

It's different facets of the one fruit that we should all strive to look for, and that they all gel together, and they all build on one another, and they all strengthen one another.

[1 : 09] So this evening, for a short time before we celebrate the Lord's Supper together, we're going to look at this theme of self-control as one of the fruit of the Spirit.

Should I do think that in our lives, certainly in my life, there's still the danger of blaming God when we fail, or when we feel like giving up or giving in.

We blame someone, sometimes it's God, sometimes it's someone else. It's usually someone else's fault, these things that happen in our lives. And I guess Jenny spoke very beautifully into that as she worked through her understanding of God and grace as well.

But we can often blame God today. You made me this way. You put me on this path. You made other people the way they are, and it's easy for us just to kind of take the attention of ourselves and blame God.

And I guess it's really, what it is, it's a victim mentality. We feel that we are the ones who are being victimized by life, by others, by God.

[2 : 23] And that's been the case, hasn't it, from the very beginning. Some people laugh and deride the early account of humanity in Genesis 1 to 3, and yet it's so accurate to the way we are.

Right from the very beginning, we see Adam saying, it was you. It was her. It was Satan. It was somebody else. It wasn't me.

And so we blame God. And I think much of that stems from our own hearts and a misunderstanding of the nature of salvation and the new life that we have in Christ.

Because as believers in Christ, what we have is we are empowered people. We're empowered and we're responsible people, and God gives us His Holy Spirit, and we cooperate with Him in our lives. We are now free. That's what freedom means. It means we are free to do right, to do what God, what pleases God, what God wants us to do. Sorry.

[3 : 25] I'm falling apart. Give me the old Madonna mic any day. All these newfangled ideas that people come up. I'm going to go all the way down and that'll be even worse.

Sorry. Andy, this was your stupid idea. Stick to my Madonna mic from now on. What was I saying about self-control?

Right, self-control. Where were we? Yes. Yeah. So we are now able to do what we can choose to do what's right.

Okay. We have no choice and we can choose to do what's right. But it's what we recognize a lifelong battle for us to align our motives, our heart and our mind and our wills towards the great God who loves us and whose grace is in us.

And we're still sinners. So that's really, the core of the matter is recognizing His greatness and the gift He's given us in the Holy Spirit. It's tremendous gift.

[4 : 29] This gift of Himself, this gift of His power, of His love, a new devotion that He gives us and the change in our heart.

That's what we're speaking about when we're speaking about the fruit of the Holy Spirit. And part of that is self-control. And it's probably one of the least favorite of the fruit of the Spirit. It's not quite so gentle and precious as maybe some of the other ones.

We're not so keen on it, but I love it. It's a great fruit. What is self-control? Biblically, it's the ability to do what pleases God in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

So it's the ability to do what God wants us to do. It's expressed, how would we express it? As self-mastery in order to serve in God's strength.

That's what self-control is. It's being continent. It's being in that place where we are controlling our spiritual life. We're taking our passions, our desires, our speech, our actions, and we're aligning them to God's will.

[5 : 34] It's about being made fit for purpose as Christians in God's grace and with God's strength, and it's resisting our sinful passions. So there's something very important I want to say here about self-control in terms of the meaning of the word or the meaning of the phrase.

It means proceeding from within oneself. So it's the control of oneself rather than by oneself. You see what I mean?

It's about what comes from within ourselves to control us, rather than doing it by ourselves. So it's not an individualistic, isolationist thing. It's something we do to control our very selves in the presence and in the strength and in the cooperation with the Holy Spirit.

Okay, in much simpler terms, it's with God in our heart, it's me saying no to things that are wrong. With God in my heart, it's saying no to the things that are wrong, that he sees that are wrong. So self-control is tremendously significant. The opposite of that is very obvious, isn't it?

[6 : 43] It's being unrestrained. It's being out of control. It's not knowing what parameters God has given to us. It's saying yes to our bodies, to our minds and to our desires without any reference to what God wants for us, to his demands, his expectation, his parameters for us.

It's to be thoughtless and careless towards God in our lives and other people, often therefore being unloving.

And I think sometimes the danger we face in our Christian lives is misunderstanding grace to the point of being lazy. See what I mean? A lazy athlete, particularly as a lazy athlete, you're content to just be there at the big athletics meet, to wear the gear, to hear the crowd, to be part of it, to take your ability and gift for granted and then just to expect the glory of the winners podium at the end without any effort.

And one Corinthians 9, 24, 27 speaks about that, says, don't you know that all the runners in the race run, only one receives the prize? And then most importantly, that next verse, every athlete exercises self-control in all things.

They do it to receive a perishable, but we imperishable. So there's this recognition that we put into our lives effort as Christians.

[8 : 13] Grace doesn't make us lazy, in other words. We misunderstand the reality of grace if we think that it's just something we sit back and receive.

We love the promises, we love the wealth, the warmth, the forgiveness, the victory, the belonging, the divine friendship, the answered prayers and the future. What do we recognize the race, the battle, the journey of sanctification?

It's a journey that we're on, which involves a great deal of guts before we see the glory of the promised land.

So self-control is recognizing that God has a cooperative work for us to do with Him, that we are utterly and completely responsible for this in relationship with Him.

Because what happens is our nature tends towards two things. Sinful nature tends towards two things. Tends towards independence and it tends towards a lack of restraint.

[9 : 17] That's what we're fighting all the time. We're fighting independence. We don't want to be governed by anyone. We want to do our own thing. That's what we want. And that can even reveal itself, I think, in a counterfeit self-control, because there's a biblical self-control and there's a worldly self-control.

So we find that many people who would classify themselves as having great self-control, but it would be different from this gift of the Holy Spirit.

So there's people who are fiercely independent in their lives and are tremendously self-controlled, have motivated. They want to look good. They want to last longer. They want for the sake of their bodies to be disciplined. They want great health. And these things can become idols and it can be much pride within it, much comparison with other people and ridiculing of others. Merely as a good way to live. That's not biblical self-control. And sometimes it can even creep into the church. So we think it's self-control, but it's actually self-righteousness.

[10 : 25] We're acting as Christians and we're doing lots of religious things because we think that's what God wants. It's self-controlled and it's disciplined and we can see the indiscipline and the wild living of others.

But we have verses in Colossians 2, 23 that Paul highlights and picks that out. I think, have we got that verse? Yeah. People who have this appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism, severity to the body, but they are doing no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. So there is a self-control that's religious and worldly, but is not of the Holy Spirit. No heart change. It's independent. It's independent of God. And there's no dependence on God or desire to please God out of gratitude for His grace. It's counterfeit. So independence is one of our issues and so is a lack of restraint so that we respond to our passions and we give in to our passions because, well, that's just what we want.

[11 : 32] That's what we love. We love to be critical of others. We love power. We love to binge. We love drinking too much. We love overindulging in different ways.

We enjoy doing what God forbids because that's within our sinful nature. We resist and complain about His parameters. They're so narrow. They're so restrictive. We reject the advice of other good meaning people and the Word of God in our lives because we have this battle against restraint. We love to do what we love to do. And sometimes we find that battle tremendously strong in our Christian lives. We do what we want. Nobody is going to tell me what to do. And so a question for us all is what constrains us?

[12 : 37] What motivates us? What stops us? Who do we respect? Who leads us in our lives? And these are questions we all just wrestle with in our understanding of grace and in our understanding of our Christian faith because our nature is towards independence and towards a lack of restraint.

So briefly biblical self-control, there's different elements to it. A few. Three I've got. There's many, many more. First is, and some of this will dovetail a little bit with this morning, it's God-inspired. Biblical self-control, as with all the fruit of the Spirit, are God-inspired. So 2 Timothy 1, verse 7, for God gave us a spirit, not a fear, but a power of love and of self-control. This is part of God's gift. It's part of being Christian and self-control, interestingly, is part of that. The gift of the Spirit, the gift of life, the gift of freedom, the gift of hope, it all is this spirit of self-control. And that's always for us a vital first step in understanding the gift of the Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit as they're given to us in Galatians chapter 5.

[14 : 00] So we've come to that place, and as we've gone through Romans, I mentioned this morning, the ugliness and the desperate diagnosis that God gives of our own heart. And we've cried out to Christ for forgiveness. And that, however dimly we see that, that leads us to enjoy the beauty of holiness. It's a very old-fashioned phrase. It probably kind of uncool and unpopular today, but that is what will drive us towards living a life of spiritual self-control, where we're loving with a new heart, where we see God and others. It's worth it. He's worth it. It's the beauty of holiness. It's the beauty of what He's done for us. It's the beauty of what we can become, that we recognize in Jesus Himself the great embodiment of self-control, and we long to look like Him. And for the first time, maybe we begin to realize that the good life is about this, there's discipline involved in the good life.

[15 : 08] In the fullness of life, there's this great recognition of a transformed heart, that we walk away from the blame culture.

If only it was different, if only I had this, if only God had given me that, if only my circumstances, if only others understood, and we have the freedom of being able to change despite our circumstances, however good or bad they may be.

And we recognize the power to be new people as we cooperate with the Holy Spirit in this act of self-discipline and of self-control.

And the first battle we face in this God-inspired change, and this is probably the most important thing I'll say, the first battle we face is with our own thoughts and with our own, even more so, imagination.

For some reason, that struck me really powerfully this week, that God is to be sovereign over our imagination and over our thoughts.

[16:16] That's an amazing consideration, because that's where nobody else is. And that's so often the seed of where we rebel and where we are lustful or where we move away from our relationship with God.

I was really moved by the verse in 2 Corinthians 10, 5, we destroy arguments in every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God and take every thought captive to obey Christ.

That's a remarkable verse. We take our thoughts captive, Christ at the very core of our being and our thoughts that we take allow, we are so self-controlled that our thoughts are captive to Him.

And that is the beginning, that's the source of where our whole transformation will be. It's God-inspired from the inside out. And you think, as I need to think, and be challenged and driven to repentance by our thought life, by our imagination, the things that we wish we could do, the things that we think we can get away with doing in our minds that nobody will see as long as we're okay outwardly.

Self-control begins this place where we take our thoughts and they are captive to Christ. So it's God-inspired and it's a trained grace. That's the second thing I'd like to see.

[17:42] Philippians 4, 11, Paul speaks about his own circumstances and he says, you know, not that I'm speaking of being in need for I've learned in whatever circumstance, situation I am to be content.

And that word learned is hugely significant as it reflects the work of grace in our lives. It's something that needs to be worked at.

It's this learned discipline and self-controls at the core of that. It's the behind the scenes athletic training that we don't see on the television, isn't it?

The digging before the diamonds are unearthed. It's recognizing that salvation is absolutely free but we're not freeloaders, it's not cheap. So you see Usain Bolt and you see the fastest man in the universe and the gift of speed that he was given at birth.

But what you don't see unless you maybe watch that program about him, the sweated blood and tears and training to get the prizes, the great work, the great effort, the great self-control, the great energy, it's what I would call, and this is not a right phrase, don't tell us to anyone because they'll think you heard it in a free church.

[18:56] It's the slog of grace. There is a slog to grace, it's a good slog. It's a great slog. But it's the daily discipline of being in relationship with the living God and it's the fruit of the spirit that gives us the self-control.

It's the evidence that we have the spirit that we have this daily reliance on God in prayer so that we know how to live. You see a lot, I'm going back to the athletics or the sporting concept that it could be in the business world, I'm sure as well, but people have got raw talent but it's not guided and you can tell the difference between an athlete that's coached well and one that isn't and so often you'll say, oh, this team or this individual needs good coaching, some expert to take them and to teach them how to express themselves and use their gifts to the full.

That's no different for the Christian life. We need to be, we've got the greatest coach of all in God and in His Word and it teaches us how to channel our lives and be freest and live life to the full and we ask to learn to know what He wants us to do, what He doesn't want us to do.

We ask Him to help us to get rid of our blindness and our wrongful passion and our selfishness so that we can overcome this attitude of, well, I don't feel very much like serving Jesus today.

I don't sense the spirit in my life so I'll just kind of carry on without Him. I need to feel more of Him before I will serve Him but we move beyond that.

[20:46] We serve Him even when we feel rubbish or distant or far away or doubting and we seek to be enveloped by His grace and His love until that we hope and pray and know changes in our

lives.

Because even our feelings need sanctified, don't they? We often put our feelings into a different category. They're just me. This is the real core me, what I feel like.

But our feelings, just as much as our imagination and our mind and our thinking and our actions, they need sanctified. Everything about us needs sanctified, needs the Holy Spirit and needs the self-control of the Spirit and that takes time and energy and commitment.

Are we blaming God for failing us? Are we blaming God for thinking that our spiritual lives are far from Him?

The question is, are we being trained? Are we learning? Are we working in cooperation with Him? In fellowship with Him, in friendship with Him, with an open ear and sometimes a closed mouth as we learn the training and the learning of grace.

[22 : 04] So it's God-inspired biblical self-control. It's a trained grace and the last thing I want to say is that it involves self-denial, which is kind of self-evident.

Titus 2 and verse 12 again talks about this training, that we're training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled upright, godly lives in this present age.

And this whole concept and the whole idea of self-denial coming into our lives, putting God first is very core, the very essence of our Christian lives and loving others with a sacrificial love and saying no to our own selfish desires.

That's probably the biggest battle we face is that each day I will and you will have crossroads every day. Very often, every moment of every day, we will have a crossroads and we will either say yes or we will say no.

And that's where the battle is and primarily can I say that will be in your imagination and in your thoughts. The crossroads that you come to in your thoughts and in your imagination are often the ones before our outward active lives.

[23 : 28] What a great battle there is there, what a need for God's help, for God's Holy Spirit because it's a heart change and it's that self-forgetfulness we've spoken about quite a lot.

It's the willingness to be wronged. It's the willingness to put aside our own agenda. It's the willingness not to seek the world to be aligned to me or God to be aligned to me or other Christians to be aligned to me, but it's recognizing and knowing that our task is primarily to be realigned to the living God.

And that's the most releasing and the most freeing fruit. In many ways, it kind of, it is the foundation for all the others in many ways and yet they're all dependent on one another.

One another. And so it's good for us to focus on Him and His amazing love and how patient and how generous He is and His promises and the future that we have in Him and to work at the unrestrained passions that we so often allow to control our lives and to rather be channeling our passions towards serving Him.

Self-control is a beautiful fruit of the Spirit and we cooperate with the living God in order to experience and know that transformation of life and heart.

[25 : 07] And I hope this evening as we celebrate the Lord's Supper together, we'll think and have a few moments of quiet just to meditate on His Word and on His goodness and on the fruit and how that applies to us in our day-to-day living.

Amen.