

Self-Control

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Date: 09 December 2012

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[0 : 00] Now this morning I'd like to be thinking about the last of the fruit of the Spirit that's mentioned in Galatians chapter 5 which is self-control. We've spent a number of weeks looking at each of these individually but recognizing that they're all part of one fruit, by a cluster of grapes as it were. That's only one example, the other example was an orange with its various segments but it's one orange. So it's not that we're looking at, I like a bit of this and I'm not good at that or I don't have that, we're recognizing that when we are linked to Jesus Christ, when we are remaining in Christ then we will bear to a greater or lesser extent all of this fruit of the Spirit and we are working. And I hope that today I want just to bring it all together. And I think the reason that self-control is the last of the fruit of the Spirit is it kind of brings it all together, it brings all the different fruit together and we need self-control if we are to bear all of this other fruit in our life. So I really want you to, this is a real big important sermon because it's bringing together all the rest and the amazing thing is that it's not just about me, okay? If you will pray and seek God's teaching and learning through the word then we'll all participate together. I know it seems passive, I'm up here please, you're down there listening but it's not, spiritually it mustn't be passive, we must all be feeding off one another and feeding off the Spirit as he speaks through his word. So we get as much out of the sermon as we put into it spiritually, all of us and God will speak to us accordingly.

So I'm going to start off today with an amazing claim, in fact an amazing invitation at the end of the series. You really want a big hit at the end of a series, a great and important and significant claim based on the passages that we've read and the teaching that we've had and my great invitation today this morning as we come round God's word is don't, whatever you do, don't become a Christian. That's my great invitation today, don't become a Christian, okay? Don't become a Christian. Don't claim to be a Christian either with certain provisos, don't become a Christian and don't claim to be a Christian if you are not willing to count the cost of belonging to Jesus Christ. Okay, that's what I want to start with, a challenging thing, a real challenge for us all today. If you want a pampered life, can I tell you, don't become a Christian. Don't become a Christian if you want things easy from this point on. If you're content with your life as it is, don't become a Christian. If there's no place in your life for confessing your need, your sin, your lostness before, don't become a Christian. If you want to leave the place today as number one, as the most important person in the universe, don't become a Christian. If God is the genie of the lamp for you, if you just rub the lamp of whatever it is, of prayer or anything else and you want Jesus to pop out and give you all your heart's desires, I would encourage you not to become a Christian. If you want to sit in your life and remain a victim of all your circumstances, don't become a Christian. If you want to cry out that independent cry and remain sovereign over your own life, don't become a Christian. If hell and heaven are jokes for you, don't become a Christian and don't claim to be a Christian unless you're willing to count the cost. Now you may think, wow, that's a ridiculous thing for a minister to say. Maybe so. But I'm saying it on the back of what Jesus says in terms of counting the cost, in terms that he says that in Matthew's Gospel, he talks about you need to count the cost if you're going to build a building. You need to count the cost that you know you've got all the materials, otherwise you're halfway built and you give up because it's a ruin and it's just ridiculous. You've got to count the cost before you go to war. And he's using these illustrations to say there's a cost to becoming a Christian and he wants us all to count the cost and to continue counting the cost of being a Christian and what is involved. And in many ways, this last gift, this last fruit rather of the Spirit brings that all together. And I would imagine it's probably the least popular if you can divide out the gift of the fruit of the Spirit. It's the least popular of self-control, self-control.

But in many ways, this is the foundation, it's the background to what I want to say this morning as we finish off this series. Self-control, this fruit of the Spirit, fruit of the Holy Spirit, self-control. Sometimes I think we think these two statements are mutually exclusive. Holy Spirit, you know, the life of the Spirit and the spontaneity of the Spirit and the grace of the Spirit and self-control, which we think is a kind of dogged, stoic thing that we don't link with spirituality. Spirituality is about floating around on top of Arthur's seat and sensing God in the wind. And yet here is this great fruit of the Spirit which is self-control in our lives. And so that is by God's help.

What does it mean, Biblical? What does it mean spiritually? Continence. That's what it means. You might know the opposite of that in a different context. But that's the meaning of the word that is about being control over our lives, particularly control over our sinful passions. It's been described as self-control as self-mastery by God's help in order to serve God's people. So it's self-control in order to serve. It's about being transformed from the heart out. It's about being fit for purpose spiritually, living in such a way that enables us to be fit for purpose, to serve God with God's help. Our emotions, our desires, our speech, our life is to be under the guidance and the control of the Spirit of God who works with us in order to have self-control. So this is not a life-coaching encouragement to change your life. If you're in control of yourself as if that is in our ability. It's rather recognizing that we have by God's grace God's help to transform our lives from the inside so that they are controlled in such a way, they're governed in such a way that pleases and honors God. Now that's, I would argue that that's probably, certainly for me and I'm sure sometimes for you, that's not a pleasant thing to be challenged by in our lives. It's not for me. I would rather a looser kind of connection with Jesus and one that wasn't quite so demanding. And I wonder sometimes if we have allowed, and if I've preached and if we're thinking in our secular western society today where we're very consumerist and we expect everything in an instant and want everything right away, whether it's for us all about glory and no guts. It's all about glory and there is no guts. You know, we love what Christianity can give us, what can give me. I love the promises that God makes for me. I love the warmth of Christianity and the forgiveness that God gives and the victory that is assured and the heaven that's promised. I love the company, I love the fellowship. I love all these things about what I can receive, the glory of receiving from Jesus Christ. But we can often be sometimes, I think, blinded to the realities of what Jesus teaches about grace and the conflicts of grace. We read about it in the passage that we began looking at all these weeks and months ago. The conflict of our sinful nature with grace in our lives. The reality of battle and the reality of the pain of healing. I think sometimes we can be blinded to that. Now, when I was thinking about that this morning, sometimes you think about illustrations late in the day. And the trouble with that is you never get them right and you know that. I often get illustrations wrong here. But it was a really powerful illustration and I can't remember the name of the person that's involved in it, but it's from Lord of the Rings and it's one of the kings who is under a, it's almost under a magical spell of aging and darkness and he can't see, I'm not sure of what his name is, but he can't see what needs to be done in this kingdom.

He can't see that the enemy has hypnotized him and that he's dying and he's blinded to his need. I think sometimes we can be like that, that we can just not really see what Scripture is saying, but the effect of that is tremendously damaging in our own lives.

[10:06] In 1 Corinthians 9, I've got just a couple of passages I want to look at. 1 Corinthians 9 verse 25, Paul uses the illustration of athletes, okay, he says, you know, do you not know that in a race all runners win but only one gets the prize? Running such a way to get the prize, everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. Now that strict training is the same word as self-control in the Greek and the original, deep, vast knowledge of the language. You'll find that that's the case. That that is the same word, strict training is the same word for self-control. And so he gives this picture, and that's the one picture I want to think of just for a moment, is the self-control that's needed in the athletics field. You see you have that and it's the cost. It's the cost that we don't see when people are standing on the victory podium, isn't it? You know, the videos come out for Christmas of all the Olympic victories and all, we'll probably see all the races and all the people on the podium, but we don't see the training. We don't see all the tremendous sweat, blood and tears that they have been engaged in in order to get to that. Like the self-control, the self-discipline, the strict training that's been needed, whether it's mofara or whether it's cantona on the football field or whether it's Tim Keller in the preaching field or whether it's Mozart in the music field. All of these people are famous for being on the kind of podium for their genius and for their brilliance. But we don't often hear about the hours and hours from childhood that they spent, the age that they spent preparing the sweat, blood and tears that they engaged in in order to expend the gift that they had in such marvelous ways. And so it's the guts behind the glory, and this self-control that

Jesus speaks about here, it's the guts behind the glory of being a Christian. We've been given the Holy Spirit to help us. We've got great privilege. We are able to change our hearts with God's help. He asks us to cooperate in that work of having a different heart.

That's a great thing. We are empowered. We can't really sit in our lives and be victims forever and say, well, it's just what's happening because we have the power to change the greed or the pride or the selfishness or the bitterness or the lust or whatever it might be. By God's help, he says we have His self-control in our lives. So the athlete is one picture. But there's also another picture from the Old Testament, just to, I hope, try and illustrate what I'm saying. And that's from Proverbs 25. And if I can, if you can find that, Proverbs 25 and verse 28, like a man, sorry, like a city whose walls are broken down is a man, a person who lacks self-control. So you've got an Old Testament picture, you've got the New Testament picture of strict training, same word, going into strict training. The Old Testament picture you've got, it's like a city whose walls are broken down is someone who lacks self-control in their lives. And he's using that picture because he's reminding us that without the self-control of God's spirit in our lives as Christians, as believers, then we'll be spiritually ruined. We'll be ruins spiritually. We'll have no defences against our own appetites and desires which will overwhelm us so quickly and so easily.

If we haven't self-control, we've misunderstood the gospel and the walls of our hearts are broken down and it can lead for us to spiritual ruin. We might look good. We might look good on the outside. We might look good to everyone here. But on the inside, there'll be spiritual ruin because there's no self-control and there's no discipline and there's no lordship of Jesus Christ in our hearts. No protection. A wall that's broken down in the Old Testament is a very powerful picture of a city that was in grave danger because it wasn't protected.

The ramparts, the castle ramparts there would have been very important to protect a city, protect the people. And so spiritually, the picture is that if we are not protected by God and by the Spirit in our lives and our hearts, then our own excesses will overwhelm us.

[14 : 37] We'll be governed not by the Spirit and by Christ. We'll be governed by our own selfishness, by our own temper, by our lusts, our jealousies, our ambitions, our gluttony, our desire for popularity and all these things, these sinful sometimes desires that come in and threaten to overwhelm our lives. And we can only be protected. And my major thing here is about ourselves. It's about our own hearts and about dealing with our own hearts. And the self-control of the Spirit of God begins with our own hearts and with our own needs and with the privacy of our own relationship with God because a lot of these sinful desires are internal, still hidden externally. And you know that's why religion is so dangerous. Religion in its own case, so dangerous because it can just be an outward thing. But we recognize that the Spirit of God comes into our hearts and transform our hearts. We can talk the talk but we can hold on to a cheap grace, a grace that might possibly involve some of the other fruit of the Spirit but definitely not self-control. And that's a challenge for us. So can I say in the second place that knowing grace, and I really want to stress this because I don't want you to think this is a self-help thing. I don't want you to think that this is just about governing our own life without God. That knowing grace changes everything. Knowing the love of Christ and accepting the love of Christ, accepting the truth of Christ, accepting that we need Christ in our hearts to forgive us and redeem us.

And knowing that we will live with Christ's help and the love of that and the love of Christ who died for our sins, who lived the life, the perfect life we can live, self-controlled life we can live, and who died the death we deserve. When we know that grace, when we've accepted it, it changes everything. So the greatest gift in the other words, you have received as a Christian and I've received as a Christian the greatest gift. Just like these guys in human terms, Mozart or Mophan or Cantona, or any of these people who have a gift, how do they use that? How do they control it? How do they develop it? Well, the gift of grace salvation by Jesus Christ is the greatest thing, isn't it? And it changes everything. I am hugely, ugly inside. Jesus says, I forgive you. I hate myself. He says, well, I love you. He says, I'm hopelessly weak and undisciplined and out of control.

And He says, I'm strong. I will enable you to change. I want to change, but I can't. I will help you. You can do it in my strength. But I'm suffering. I know, He says, but I'm with you as a purpose. It will end. I'm lonely. I've put you in family. And I love you. You're my brother and Christ, a sister in Christ. I feel like I'm hellbound. Well, I'm offering you heaven and you have heaven. I'm in misery, but I give you joy, the core of your life and heart. I'm raging in anger and out of control. You can know my peace. So we have grace, which is an amazing grace. It's not a theoretical grace that's floating about somewhere up here in the church roof. It's a grace that comes in to our life in utterly practical life changing ways. And can I just as a kind of caveat, just as we begin to draw towards the end, can I ask you if you've never become a Christian? You may be being associated with the church, but never professed faith in Jesus Christ. Can I ask you to ask yourself that question again today? Why? You know, I love you. I pray for you. I long for you to become a Christian. And sometimes I torture myself that I haven't explained the gospel in such a way that you would just love to become a Christian and let go of everything that is keeping you from that. And I'm asking for you to let Him change you, to go to Him and ask Him if you don't understand and if you can't see, speak to Jesus and ask Him to show you Himself. And for those of us who have accepted Christ, we have this responsibility, he says, to verse 16, live by the Spirit. Live by the Spirit. And at the end of it, live by the Spirit, keep in step with the Spirit. And this Spirit is a spirit of all this fruit and of self-control. And that really is a reminder to us that it's not just about receiving the gift, it's about giving with the gift in our lives. It's about giving back to Him.

It's about controlling our lives with His strength so that we're living for His glory. And that means there's work to be done in our salvation. Right? We'll make that absolutely clear. Not in order to make us right with God, not in order to somehow justify as before God, but in order out of gratitude to recalibrate our lives to the way God wants us to live.

And it's the best way. He knows that He made us. He knows the best life. He's the great mechanic, He's the great architect, He's the great creator of our lives. So He knows what's best for us. And He knows the sinful out of control in our hearts that is deadly and cancerous and destructive. So He says self-control. Now just want to say a couple of things about this before we finish. Self-control itself. It's God-inspired control. That's what it's a fruit of the Holy Spirit. In other words, it comes from God. And now I know it's different because of who God is. God doesn't need to control His sinful passions. He doesn't have evil to deal with in His own heart. But He is the God who is in absolute perfect control of Himself and of His love and of His being and of His will. There's nothing wayward in God. There's nothing wild. There's nothing sinful and bad. Hugely significant for us.

[21 : 27] If He's capricious, if He's unreliable, if He's unpredictable, if, you know, like the ancient gods, you had to curry favor with them in order to be accepted, then let's just close the whole thing down. But God is absolutely and perfectly good in and of Himself and in control of not only Himself but of this universe He has made. But we in our sinful nature are prone to be out of control. How many words have you spoken this week that you already regret? Or maybe last week you already regret actions you've done that you would love to wheel back in, bring back in. Attitudes that you know are destructive and are hateful.

Lack of spirituality, a lack of prayer. Over, maybe we're coming to the season, maybe this is just overtly too practical. Overeating, overdrinking, sexual impurity, selfishness.

You know, the kind of things that are listed in the acts of this sinful nature, which you know, you know, Ben, I know about. These are the things that He says in Christ we're to change with His strength. Grace changes our hearts. Now we play the part. How do we play the part? Well, when we play the part we say no. God's not going to say no for us. He says, I'm giving you a new heart. I've given you a new responsibility. You're my child now, you're in my kingdom and I want you to say no. I want you to know and to understand what's right and wrong with my help and with my grace and with my strength. I want you to be alert.

I want you to be prayerful. I want you to recognize how precious is the gift of grace and live it. Live it for Him. Overindulgence, and we know the effects of overindulgence physically and spiritually, is negative in our lives and grace changes us. So it's God-inspired control. It's out of love for Him. It's out of recognition of what He's done and who He has done. But it's also trained grace. And as some of your, I think we're at different chapters in our Bible studies on the city groups on Wednesday evening. At March when we studied the last chapter, Philippians, I'll come to the end. So Philippians 4 verse 11, it's that verse that says, you know, that Paul had learned, he'd trained himself rather in righteousness, he'd learned to be content. It was that great sense in which the apostle Paul had learned. It's a developmental change in his life that he had been a disciple of

Jesus and he had come to this place where he was learning self-control. And that's what learning's about, isn't that what education's about in a sense? It's about governing and changing and radically moving our lives. And that's a daily process for us. That grace at work in our lives, it needs us to read the Bible, to read God, living Word for us.

[24 : 52] I wonder how many of us Christians, and I do worry sometimes about, particularly the younger generation of Christians, if they're living with that discipline of reading the Bible every day and praying every day. I think we live in a society where we are consumerists, we do expect everything immediately. And it's, when we don't get it, we're not so sure about the work that's required to get something valuable. But we know that anything of value is going to require us to work. You know, you get engaged and you put on a beautiful diamond onto your finger. Well, someone does, a woman does. But you know, it doesn't go behind all the incredible effort and hard work and the diamond face sweat in South Africa or somewhere else that has gone in to hewing that diamond out of the rock and to getting it to the place where it is. And simply with grace is the same, you know, as God's reality. But there is work to be done to understand and recognize the value and the preciousness of His grace.

It doesn't just come onto our fingertips. Why doesn't it just come onto our fingertips? Because we're sinners and because we would just become fat and lazy spiritually and we wouldn't deal with anything in our lives. We'd say, oh, this is great. And it would just become a heavy weight. We need to get rid of the things that are damaging to us. Doing what is right. Very unpopular today to talk about doing what is right as opposed to feeling what is right. You know, today I've said so much about I didn't feel like it or I did feel like it. And that's what I wanted to do. And that can be great. But the story of grace is that, it's just what God wants me to do. It's what He feels like for me. And we only know that through His word. Feelings need sanctified as well. They need to be made holy as well. It isn't necessarily right just because it feels right. The philosophy of letting go and letting God, it sounds great, but it's rubbish. It's rubbish. Because He cooperates and coordinates in our lives this great gift and discipline of self-control.

We need to be workers out of faith. You know, the followers of Jesus were called disciples. They were called learners. They weren't called sunbed liars. It wasn't a holiday for people.

And Jesus wants us to recognize that we are learners. We're always learning. The oldest Christian is always learning, is always submitting to Jesus Christ, is needing self-control.

I need self-control more now than I ever did. I'm more aware of it, the need of it now, more than I ever was. We work our faith. We're accountable to God. We need to know our Bibles. We need to be in fellowship and in prayer with Him. And how longing that is what we do.

[27 : 54] God has given us a spirit of not of timidity, but of power of love and of self-control in our lives. So it's a trained grace. And lastly and very, very briefly, it's self-denial.

That self-control is also self-denial. Mastery over self in order to serve. It's that lovely old adage, joy. At Jesus first, others next, yourself last. It's about living in such a way that denies what we think is hugely maybe significant in my life in order to serve the community of God's people and to serve Christ. It's about giving. It's about making peace with those that we're not at peace with. It's about a debt of love that is beyond simply emotional intensity and feelings. It's about really practicing all the other fruit.

So this self-control, this mastery enables us to be kind and peace-loving, joyful, patient, good and faithful and gentle in Christ. That's why, and I think that's why God and His grace put it last, because it's the kind of cement that binds all the other graces or gifts or fruits here together. And that requires great self-denial. It requires us saying, it's not all about me. And at the core, that is what we battle with. We battle with life being all about me. And He says, no, it's all about Christ. And the fullness of life that Christ offers us, which is huge and significant. And really, that is what I want you to carry on praying about and what I must pray about and live, the kind of Christians that we want here in Sincis, in this community of believers and in Edinburgh South as a church plan or any other church that we grow from here, that we want the kind of Christians that are full of the Holy Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit, that are willing to be wronged, that are willing to be humble, that are willing to be hungry spiritually, that are willing to serve, who find their identity in Jesus Christ, who are students of the Word, who are praying fervently.

And that's one of the things, really long that we grasp more and more importance of praying together. Praying and encouragement together, having a pact, I'm going to mention a little bit on Wednesday maybe, but a praying pact. And you don't need to be messy together with that, but particularly for Sunday, you know, we've got almost a full church here, we want everyone to be praying in a pact with God, that God will work through the preaching and work through the worship and work through the community that we have. And that therefore involves all of you, and it involves me as well. And if we are a people, for me, for the leaders, for the congregation, if we are a people that bear that in mind and take seriously the responsibilities more and more of bearing the fruit of this spirit, I think we will turn this church, we will turn our hearts upside down, we will turn this church upside down, and we will turn the city upside down. And as we go into 2013, that we are counting the cost, but knowing the great thing, so when we count the cost, he resources us to be transformed. He's not saying, count the cost and go and live a Christian on your own and try your hardest. He's saying, count the cost of cooperating with me, I'll give you all the resources you need, but you must depend on me. You must be reliant on me to be transformed.

And that is the great truth that I strive to get across today. Let's bow our heads and pray. Father, we ask and pray that you would guide us in our worship, in our lives, and in our understanding of Scripture. We thank you for the gospel message, we thank you for grace and for the Holy Spirit. We thank you for the amazing reality we have that we can remain in you. And yet we know that's not easy. We know any relationship is not easy.

[32 : 34] That every relationship needs to be developed and protected and nurtured. How much more is there a relationship with you? We know it's not easy. We've got lots of desires within us that pull us away from that, and we've got Satan himself who would love to break our relationship with Christ. So we ask for that sense of urgency and self-control and discipline in our lives on a daily basis to be setting aside time to read your word, to pray, to grow in knowledge of you and understanding, and to find richness and fruit bearing and blessedness and joy even in the midst of difficult life circumstances when we do that. Or you are able, the church is not able, ministers are not able, nobody else is able, but Lord you are able to, you know us from our heart out and you are able to transform us. So please do that today and forgive us when we lack self-control, when we are not allowing you to be lured over our passions, but when we are driven by our own desires and by our own wills and even sometimes calling that God's will. Forgive us when it, that is contrary to your will and to your mind. So help us and bless us and continue with us today we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.