

## ***“FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: Self-Control”***

*1 Samuel 12:14-16 • 1 Timothy 4:4-16*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • November 15, 2020

A first grade teacher one day asks her students to tell her something good they did that week. One said, “I helped my mom wash the dishes.” Another one said, “I cleaned my room.” A third one said, “I gave my sister the last cookie.” And so it went around the room until one little boy said, “I prevented a murder.” The teacher was intrigued by this and said, “How did you prevent a murder?” The boy answered, “with self-control.”

I think all of us struggle with self-control at least some of the time. When people make New Year’s Resolutions they are usually about some form of self-control: I’m going to lose weight or exercise or save money or something along those lines. But most resolutions fail because that kind of change is hard. The majority of what you do every day is habit and habits are difficult to change. When you get to things like addictions, change is even harder. Not impossible, but highly unlikely without some kind of help.

This morning we are concluding our series on the Fruit of the Spirit and we essentially end up where we started when we talked about the farmer who set out early in the morning to milk his cows. On the way to the barn he passed the hen house and decided to stop and gather the eggs. As he opened the gate he noticed that one of the hinges was broken and so he went to get his tools. On the way to the tool shed he noticed that the faucet was dripping and decided to go the hardware store to get a washer. The farmer didn’t accomplish anything that day because he had no self-control.

What do we mean by self-control? The dictionary isn’t much help. It says that self-control is defined as the ability to control oneself. Really. Here’s a better definition for our purposes. In the Bible, self-control refers to the ability to avoid excesses and to stay within the God-given boundaries. In other words, self-control means doing what is right, despite your own desires. It’s the ability to do what is pleasing

to God. We find these God-given boundaries in Scripture. The Ten Commandments, for example, include some of God’s boundaries for our life. He didn’t give us these boundaries to spoil our fun. He gave them to us because it’s what’s best for human flourishing. For example, the commands you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal and the others allow us to live in a society and interact with one another. They also all take self-control.

In Ephesians 4, Paul says, “I...urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” On one hand, you and I are commanded to exercise self-control in order to walk in a manner worthy of our calling. We have to work at it. Humility and gentleness and patience don’t come naturally or easily to us. I’m not always eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. So I have to work at it. I have to put forth effort. You will never accidentally exercise self-control.

But on the other hand, it’s something that you and I *cannot* do. No matter how smart you are or how good looking or how hard you try, every one of us lacks the self-control required to walk in a manner worthy of our calling. That’s why we need a savior. That’s why we need Jesus. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

So the first thing we need to see about self-control is that it is both a call to action AND a work of God. It is the fruit of the Holy Spirit working in your life. The fruit of the Spirit is...self-control. This is important. Because until you understand, and I mean really, deeply understand, that self-control comes from God working in your life, you won’t go to God first seeking the ability to exercise it.

The second thing we need to see about self-control is that even though it is the *work* of God in your life, He doesn’t just give you self-control.

You have to cooperate with the Holy Spirit. You have work to do. And trying harder won't accomplish it. In our passage today from 1 Timothy, Paul writes to his apprentice Timothy, "train yourself for godliness, for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come."

If you have been following NFL football this year, either you are very happy that your team is undefeated, OR you are a Dallas Cowboys fan. If you're a Cowboys fan this has been kind of a tough year. They have struggled all season. Now I want you to imagine for a moment that this afternoon when you get home from church you get a phone call from the Cowboys office and they tell you, "we've had research scientists studying the genetics of great football players over the last 20 years and their computer has determined that YOU are genetically the perfect wide receiver. Jerry's plane will pick you up on Wednesday and bring you to practice and then we want you to play in the game next Sunday. We're really counting on you."

How well would you do playing in an NFL game in a week? Probably not very well. What if you tried really hard? Would that do it? Again, probably not. You see, **trying just isn't enough**. Professional sports takes a lot of skill and those skills come from serious training. Well guess what. Our spiritual life is no different. Godliness isn't about trying, it's about training.

The Greek word that's translated as "train" in this passage is the root for the English word Gymnasium and Gymnastics and it means to exercise or discipline. First Corinthians 9 says, "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."

The fruit of self-control requires serious training on your part. How do you train for that? As we have talked about the past few weeks, it's the spiritual disciplines like reading Scripture daily and meditating on its meaning. Paul tells Timothy to be trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine. Then he says that you need to make sure your life is an example for others in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity.

That's a serious responsibility. What if you fail in one of those areas? What if your speech or conduct or love or purity is not perfect? Guess what – it won't be. No one is capable of perfection except Jesus. But God says in James 5:16, "confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working."

That points us to the final thing we need to see about developing self-control in your life – it requires accountability. You and I were made for community and an important part of that community is to help each other grow. As Hebrews 10 says, "let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another."

To grow into Christlikeness we need close relationships with other people who will hold us accountable and we need to do the same for them. In Galatians 5:19, Paul says, "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these." It takes great self-control to get rid of those things from your life but it's much easier if you have someone you trust and can talk about them. In fact, often times just talking about them, bringing your inner thoughts out into the light will break the grip that these sins have on your life. This has been one of the keys to the success of twelve-step programs like AA.

Admitting the problem out loud, depending on God, and then having someone to hold you accountable has helped millions of people develop the self-control needed to break addictions to drugs and alcohol and it can help you break your addiction to anger and envy and gossip. "The works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn

you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." Not on their own but by training, being held accountable, and most of all by the Holy Spirit.

*Amen.*