***FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: SELF-CONTROL***

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Texts: Galatians 5:22-23 and Luke 14: 7-11

Over the course of this summer sermon series, we have taken a closer look at the fruit of the Spirit identified by Paul in his letter to the Galatians. Many of you are probably relieved that Paul didn’t list any more fruits than he did or there might be no end in sight for this sermon series before Christmas! Fruit of the Spirit are those virtues that are evident in Spirit-inspired lives. And you might rightly ask yourself how many of those fruits are ripening in your life, or to cast it in terms in which we began this series: how many of those fruits would others say are fairly descriptive of you? Of the nine mentioned by Paul as fruit of the Spirit, we have considered seven thus far – *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity,* and *gentleness*. That leaves just two – *faithfulness* and *self-control*. As an illustration of self-control, I will not succumb to the temptation to put it off until the end, but will consider self-control first.

The Greek word *egkrateia* which is translated *self-control* is a familiar term to Greek philosophers, and Paul is here speaking their language. Socrates, Aristotle, and Philo among others extol self-control as a virtue. *Egkrateia* is control over the desires of the heart and thus finds expression in restraint from pursuing desires to excess, whether they be food, sex, wealth, or the use of the tongue (as James would heartily agree).[[1]](#endnote-1) It is considering not only what you ***can*** do, but what you ***should*** do, and resisting the temptation to keep going when you know you should stop – or perhaps resisting the temptation to start at all. We need not look far to find examples of where it is practiced and where it has lapsed.

Spend a little time with the kids in our preschool, and you will find young children learning about self-control on a daily basis, whether it be sitting in a circle with everyone else, keeping hands to themselves, not stealing the block from the classmate who has it, stopping to wash hands after using the bathroom when he really wants to get back to playing, or walking in line when she really wants to check out that bug that just flew into the parking lot. Education is intended to spark creativity, but also to encourage self-control to know when and where that creative spirit can be unleashed without creating chaos in the classroom.

The challenge is not just for our little ones. Teens and adults too have to practice self-control. With the growth of the internet and social media there are continuing temptations to make your voice heard without standing face-to-face with those to whom you are speaking. How many times have you written a biting response to someone before pausing to exercise some self-control before you hit “send” – and then deleting what you wrote? How many times do you **wish** you had taken that moment and regret the words you sent out? In his pastoral letter to fledgling churches, James writes, “*Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger…*” Today he might add “*be* *slow to push ‘send’*”. For, words can do a lot of damage if they are not carefully chosen. James casts them as being akin to a fire that can rage out of control. Knowing what to say, what not to say, and when and where to say what is to be said is indeed a virtuous example of self-control.

Advertisers prey on our lack of self-control with temptations for impulse buys – “just click here” – and targeted ads to convince you to act now – “operators are standing by!” Fast food restaurants encourage you to “super-size” your order without considering how many extra calories that translates to. And a whole industry has arisen around helping timeshare owners divest themselves of their bad investments, made under pressure of a sales agent or on a whim because it sounded too good to believe – and it proved too good to believe! Such purchases are not necessarily sinful in and of themselves, but the gluttony and greed that lurk nearby offer a slippery slope to disaster.

Emotions too need to be held in check from time to time, especially anger and fear. When I worked in the prison in Camp Hill, PA I met a 40-someething year-old truck driver (we’ll call him “Jim”) who had been sentenced to a long prison term for 2nd degree murder due to a road rage incident. He had been driving his truck on I-81 near Harrisburg, when he and another truck driver got into a not-so-friendly game of racing past the other, then pulling back into the lane and slowing down to impede the other’s progress. After miles of this contest, Jim had had enough and pulled off to the side of the road intending for the other driver to go on past. Instead, the other truck driver pulled in behind him and jumped down out of his cab. When Jim looked in his rearview mirror, he saw the driver stalking up the pavement toward him and Jim thought he saw something in his hand. So, Jim reached under the seat, pulled out a gun, opened the door, and shot the man before he could get to his cab. It turned out the man had no weapon. Jim was from Tennessee, but he would spend most of the rest of his life in a Pennsylvania prison because he had been unable to exercise enough self-control to resist getting into the conflict in the first place and, in the grip of uncontrolled fear, killing an unarmed man. Time after time in the prison, I saw young men who landed there, not out of some evil intent, but simply out of lack of self-control in the moment.

Sometimes the self-control to be exercised is simply in favor of the greater good. Some of you may recall the movie *Sister Act* starring Whoopi Goldberg as Sister Mary Clarence who is actually a night club singer named Dolores who is hiding out from the mob. In one memorable scene, she is asked to direct a choir of nuns who, in their own words, are terrible. She divides them into basses, altos, and sopranos and then asks each section to sing a single note in a chord together. That one note practically knocks her off her feet, in part because one of the nuns, a soprano, has a voice that overwhelms the rest. Sister Mary Clarence takes the well-meaning nun aside and says, “*Sister, that is a powerful instrument you have there. But I need you to come down out of the rafters*. *We all want to be closer to God, but I am not sure you can do it with your voice*.” She is asking her to exercise some self-control, to temper her soaring voice so that it blends with the rest of the choir, as the voices in all good choirs must do. A choir is not a collection of soloists mashing their voices together. It is a blend of voices in which the singers restrain the temptation to do their own thing and follow the direction of the choirmaster (more or less) in order to make beautiful music together. Self-control is sometimes recognizing the need to control yourself for the greater good.

In the parable that we heard today from Luke’s gospel, Jesus warns the Pharisees about the dangers of uncontrolled pride. The parable is set at a wedding banquet where guests are invited. The cultural norm is that the most respected guests are seated nearest to the host, and what Jesus observed among the Pharisees who had joined him for dinner at the house of the leader of the Pharisees is that they all chose places of honor. Jesus warns them that their self-important choice may backfire, for someone of greater importance may arrive and in front of all the guests they would be asked to take a seat of lesser honor to make room for the more-honored guest. Instead, he suggests, take a lesser seat and then your host may invite you to a more honorable seat in the presence of all the guests. This is not a lecture on good table manners, but rather encouragement to exercise a little humility, to restrain the urge toward self-importance in favor of a humble, servant’s heart. It is the example Jesus offers – in washing the disciples’ feet, welcoming children, and enduring the cross.

How tempting it must have been for Jesus to defy the chief priests and Pilate and call down the heavenly host to rescue him from his terrible fate! How tempting to lash out at those who wrongfully condemned him and crucified him. How tempting to let his divine nature shine through and put the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the Chief Priests and the Romans in their place and show them what real righteous power looked like! But instead, Jesus’ offers the ultimate example of self-control, humility, and love – not condemning those who persecute him, but forgiving them. He lived into his own teaching about turning the other cheek instead of offering an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth which only makes the whole world blind and toothless.

Can you exercise that kind of self-control and resist the temptation to act unfaithfully? Can you temper your worst impulses in order to be your best self? For faithfulness demands that we do just that. We cannot do it alone; that is why it is a fruit of the Spirit, something the Spirit enables us to do. As Andrew Purves writes in his book *The Crucifixion of Ministry*:

*Christian faithfulness is possible only because Jesus Christ has us grasped firmly by the scruff of our spiritual necks and will not lose hold*.[[2]](#endnote-2)

That is true of all these fruits of the Spirit. We cannot bear these fruits alone; they are nurtured in us by faith, by the Spirit at work in us and through us and when necessary, despite us. We resist them mightily on a day-to-day basis, but God perseveres. Jesus holds on tightly to the scruff of our spiritual necks, and the Spirit continues to urge us, to whisper to us in our best and worst moments:

*Be loving. Be joyful. Pursue peace. Be patient. Be kind. Be generous. Be gentle. Exercise self-control. Be faithful. And so, be fruitful. Day by day by day, be faithful and fruitful – for the apple does not fall far from the tree.*

*And the tree to which you belong is Jesus Christ, son of the living God.*

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit – now and forever. Amen

1. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Kittle, ed., translated by Geoggrey W. Bromiley, vol.II, Eerdmans:1964, p.341 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Andrew Purves, *The Crucifixion of Ministry*, Inter Varsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2007, p.48 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)