



The beauty of Jesus

Galatians 5:22-23

Fruit of the Spirit—Self-control

December 29th 2019 Preacher: Roy Summers

Introduction

This morning, on this last Sunday of the decade, we consider the ninth fruit of the Spirit, self-control. If you have been with us over the last few months, you will know that we have been making our way through the list in Galatians chapter 5, *“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”*

Together these nine describe what Jesus Christ is like. And they also describe the character which the Spirit of God is forging in the lives of his people by his mighty power, according to the Word of God: *“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.” (Romans 8:29)* *“And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 3:18)*

We may not feel that we are becoming more Christ-like as the years roll by, but God's Word says that he is performing this powerful transformation within us every passing year. And yet, at the same time, this is a work we are called to participate in: God is at work in us and we're called to work out our salvation with fear and trembling at the very same time. He is making us more loving, joyful, peaceful, and so on; and we are called to become more patient, kind, faithful, and so on. Those have been the twin foundations of these sermons: God is doing it, and we're called to do it!

And so, this morning, to the last of the nine, self-control.

Someone is perhaps thinking “I am glad pastor is preaching this sermon *after* Christmas day!” But someone else is thinking, “I really wish he'd preached it *before* Christmas!” Someone is thinking, “I don't need to hear this sermon.” This person has narrowed self-control down to one particular area of life which they don't personally struggle with. They think, “I don't drink too much, or eat too much, or sleep too much, or whatever, I've got control over those things, so I don't need this sermon.” I pray the Lord will burst such self-righteous pride! For in the very next seat, there's a Christian who knows that there are areas of life they struggle over and when they saw the title of the sermon, they sighed, because they're in the middle of a titanic battle against, A or B or C.

So let me say at the very start, to the struggling and the self-righteous, every Christian struggles with self-control. Because self-control is nothing other than the life-long battle against indwelling sin. In Titus chapter 2 Paul instructs young Titus what should be taught to different groups in the church: *“Teach the older men to be self-controlled,”* he says. The older women, mustn't drink too much wine—

in other words they need to exercise self-control when it comes to drink, so that they can teach the younger women... wait for it, *“to be self-controlled.”* He goes on, *“Similarly, teach the young men to be self-controlled.”* That’s everyone covered, men women, old and young! Every believer must learn to exercise self-control! It’s not a grace limited to one sex, or one age group, or even to younger believers over older believers! Absolutely every believer must exercise self-control.

1. What is self-control?

“Self-control is the spiritual grace of mastering sinful thoughts, sinful desires, sinful emotions, sinful words and sinful deeds.”

One believer might say, “I have control over my eating habits,” but they may experience great difficulty controlling their thoughts. They may struggle with doubt, or lust, or pride or unforgiveness. From the outside, they may appear a “self-controlled person”, but in their minds they may lack self-control. Or someone may have mastered their thought life, but seem unable to control their tongue—either they just can’t stop talking, or they battle with gossip. In one way or another, whether in thoughts, desires, emotions, words or deeds—these five areas of life—every single believer, struggles with self-control. Let that both bring comfort to those who struggle—you are not on your own—and let it burst the bubble of sinful pride in any believer who thinks they can tune out!

Sinful THOUGHTS. Some believers will struggle with disorderly sinful thoughts. These may be a pattern of judgemental thoughts towards others, or a recurring pattern of unforgiveness or doubt. The people of Israel, saw the amazing miracles of God, the parting of the sea, the 10 plagues, and yet every time they faced a new problem they fell apart instead of trusting in God; they were in a cycle of sinful unbelief.

Sinful DESIRES. Some believers will battle with unruly sinful desires. They may find that their bodies want too much food, or too much drink, or illicit sex.

Sinful EMOTIONS. For others, the struggle lies in controlling sinful emotions. It could be controlling the emotion of anger against some injustice or controlling an unjustified emotion of melancholy or gloominess; or the deeply unhappy emotion of self-centredness, sometimes called me-itis.

Sinful WORDS. For someone else, the tongue is out of control.

Sinful DEEDS. And for another, it’s a sinful pattern of action, some habitual deed that has tripped them up again and again. It could be a repeating sinful relationship pattern in the home, for example. Parent to child or parent to parent.

Whatever the sin, once we note how large the net of self-control is we can see that we are all caught in it, and so we all need to hear God’s challenging and compassionate word on self-control.

Here's a question, which helps us toward a solution for self-control. Does God need to exercise self-control? With all the other eight graces we have been saying, “see this one in God”, “see that one in God.” But does God need to exercise self-control? No! Why not? Well, because he is 100% pure and holy and perfect. There is nothing in his character that needs reigning in, controlling or curbing. That’s

a clue for us: we need self-control because while we have hearts made new by the Holy Spirit, we also have an old sinful nature about us, that wants to do wrong, and needs reigning in.

Here's a second question, closer to home: Did Jesus need to exercise self-control? It's not a trick question but not as straightforward as the first one. Jesus did not have any sinful desires within him, for he was the sinless Son of God. But Jesus was a human being, with all the ordinary human desires that you and I have. So in a way that is different from us, he did have to exercise self-control. Let me give you an example: When Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, he had been fasting for 40 days. His body would have been hungry. But he exercised self-control over the good and natural bodily appetite to eat. So even Jesus had to learn self-control.

You and I have the God-given desires which we must learn to control, and we also have a sinful nature which continually wants to do wrong: self-control is about reigning in sinful thoughts, desires, emotions, words, deeds. How can we do this?

1. Understand yourself

The first thing we must do is to understand ourselves. Yes, we have a new heart, a new nature, we have been born again by the Holy Spirit, but we have an old sinful nature, the flesh, clinging onto us, and it wants to do out-of-control horrible stuff listed in Galatians 5:19-21.

We are engaged in a lifelong battle against sinful tendencies, the Spirit warring against the flesh. Don't be surprised and don't be discouraged at the battle raging inside! Don't think, "I can't be a Christian if I have these inner struggles." Some Christians are puzzled by this inner strife but Scripture warns us that it is normal. Understand this!

2. Own up to your sin

Secondly own up to your sin. Where do you personally lack self-control? You and I will never overcome sin while we pretend we don't have a problem, "*Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.*" (Proverbs 28:13)

3. Make the sin a matter of prayer

These nine fruit are called "The fruit of the Spirit," because they come from Spirit of God. We can't do these things on our own. We need the omnipotent Spirit of God to help us! So pray for help. Put yourself down on your own prayer list and pray for help every day. In the days of chimney sweeps, one pastor said this to his congregation "Trying to get rid of your sins by yourself is like a chimney sweep taking his dirty brush and trying to clean himself off with it." If anything he'll make himself worse, not better. In the same way, you'll never get rid of sin using "will power" - you and I need the powerful sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

4. Be serious about repenting of your sin

In the fourth place, be serious about repenting of your sin. Whatever the area of a lack of self-control, whether sinful thoughts, sinful emotions, sinful words, sinful deeds, be deadly serious. "*Work out your*

salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12) “If your right hand causes you to sin cut it off.” (Matthew 5:30). “I beat my body and make it my slave.” (1 Corinthians 9:27)

A friend of mine was struggling with addiction to computer games. He had a young family but when he came in from work, he had gotten in a habit of going on one of these strategy games to relax, and then a coach and horses could not pull him off it. So he asked me to help him and we agreed to “cut off his hand”: we put his computer in my loft for a while, so he could not play the game any longer. It was up there for months, until the habit was dead, and the computer too old too use! He took repentance seriously! (By the way, we’ve got lots of room in our loft for laptops, Nintendo switches, Xboxes, Ps4s and iPhones!)

Be serious about repentance. If you have a sin you seem to have no control over, then it is very likely that you have never properly renounced it, repented of it, mourned over it. Now let us temper these truths with the balm of Gilead..

5. Be patient with yourself

Ingrained patterns of behaviour may not go away immediately. Sometimes they do, sometimes they do not, so be patient with yourself, as God is patient with you. Paul uses the metaphor of training in 1 Timothy 4:7, *“Train yourself to be godly.”* Suppose you wanted to run a marathon. You would not expect yourself to run even half a marathon in a month’s time, you would not expect yourself to reach the goal quickly, you would be patient with yourself, and work towards the goal step by step. In the same way, says Paul, *“Train yourself to be godly.”* Getting rid of sin requires determination, a plan and patience.

And here’s some more soothing ointment, as you battle for self-control against sin:

6. Remember you are not under law but grace

“You are not under law but under grace” (Romans 6:14). As you pray and work for self-control, remember you and I live under the reign of grace, not of law. What do I mean? Our failures are not the end of the road. Our sins are forgiven and covered, and we can pick ourselves up, confess our sin, move on and put the past behind. If we lived under law, we would feel the crushing weight of condemnation every time we failed. But under grace, while we don’t abuse God’s mercy, we know there is always forgiveness and we know that *“there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 8:1)* Another way of looking at it is this: God is our Father, not our Master, we are his children not his slaves! A slave fears the severe wrath of his Master every time he fails, a child knows that he will always be loved, even when he blows it.

Whenever a crime trial comes on the news, I have made it a habit to look out for and to read about the parent or parents. How often, the mom or the dad, broken-hearted, yes, trails into court, sometimes hounded and judged by the press, but sticking by their beloved son or daughter. God is something like that. He is no doubt saddened by our sin, but he continues to love his blood-bought children as they battle against their sin.

7. Seek the help of a trusted friend

If you cannot exercise self-control over the sin on your own, why don't you share the battle with a trusted friend, who will pray for you and help you, just as I was able to help my friend many years ago with his computer problem. I believe this is what the apostle James meant when he wrote: *"Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."* (James 5:16)

Conclusion

We have come to the end of our series of sermons on the Fruit of the Spirit, and then end of 2019. When the godly anglican minister John Stott woke up every morning, he prayed these three short prayers:

"Heavenly Father, I pray that this day I may live in your presence and please you more and more.

Lord Jesus I pray that this day I may take up my cross and follow you

Holy Spirit, I pray that this day you will fill me with your presence and cause your fruit to ripen in my life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

And everyone who knew John Stott, said that God heard those prayers, for he was a Christ-like saint.

May the Lord make you and I more like the Lord Jesus too, as this new year, and new decade begins. Amen.