

The Fruit of the Spirit – Session 10

Self Control

It's absolutely key for us as Christians to control our passions and emotions. If you have self control, or are willing to get it, many good and positive things can happen to you. On the other hand if you lack self control, many bad and negative things will probably come your way.

Take sexuality for example. The idea of a young person controlling their sexuality is simply too difficult for many. They want sexual privileges without commitment. Yet, co-habiting before marriage increases the risk of divorce. Marriage requires a strong ethic of commitment, but living together before marriage encourages a lack of commitment and autonomy. Once that is learned it's much more difficult to unlearn it and give the real commitment that marriage requires. Co-habiting women are three times as likely to be depressed as married women and are more likely to be subject to physical abuse.

The Greek word translated as self-control in our Bibles is a combination of the two words *en kratos*. *En* means in and *kratos* means strength, power, might or dominion. So a person with self control has inner strength. *Kratos* is a word that comes into English quite a lot in words like democratic, theocratic and autocratic.

Self control is really important for us. As we make dozens of decisions about our lives over the coming weeks, who decides what we are going to do and why? It's not our own ability and strength which gives us *en kratos*, but the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through us. This fruit, like all the fruits we've been thinking about, develops as we stay close to Jesus and mature in our Christian faith. Billy Graham said:

"There are men who can command armies but cannot control themselves. There are men who by their burning words can sway vast multitudes, but cannot keep silence under provocation or wrong. The highest mark of nobility is self control. It is more kingly than a regal crown and purple robe."

Self-control is the means by which we can, in and through the power of the Holy Spirit, refrain from doing those things which Paul tells us are the mark of a sinful nature:

"19 The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." (Galatians 5:19-21 NIV)

People, yes even Christian people, can and do do these things. The sinful nature is a part of us all and we can only overcome it in the power of the Holy Spirit. I believe that God intended Paul's listing of the fruits of the spirit to begin with love and end with self control. The ability to have self control depends on our growing in the other eight fruits of the spirit. All the fruits of the spirit work together.

When we are loving, we are more joyful. When we have both love and joy we have peace. When we have love, joy and peace then patience is their companion. Kindness will naturally emanate from a disposition of love, joy, peace, patience and goodness. With all these

functioning well the foundation is laid for self control which allows us to lead a life of balance.

People can so easily become addicted to activities such as sports, television, exercise or sex. These things are not bad in themselves when done in moderation and in accordance with Biblical principles. But, without self control, each habit or activity can control us. The book of proverbs alludes to this:

“Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control.” (Proverbs 25:28 NIV)

Of course, we’re not perfect. We all have days when we can’t seem to get anything under control. Part of understanding this fruit in your life is to know that you can keep trying, keep working at it, and after some time you’ll be able to look back be pleasantly surprised by the progress you’ve made.

This all has many benefits for us. There is a growing body of evidence that those who attend church regularly and try to live out their faith are better off both physically and mentally. Alcohol abuse is higher amongst with little or no religious commitment. Numerous studies have found a negative correlation between religious commitment and drug abuse. Of course there is a direct correlation between substance abuse and crime. The Christian faith also helps those who are addicted to drugs or alcohol to be rehabilitated. Studies show that Christian commitment is correlated with lower levels of depression and stress. One study finds that those with a strong faith are twice as likely to be very happy than those with no or little faith. Those without faith are much more likely to commit suicide. It has also been shown that there is a correlation between church affiliation and activity and family solidarity and marital satisfaction. Of course, this doesn’t mean that all Christians are happy, but the best single predictor of a happy and fulfilled life is a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Self control is essential if we are to succeed in life. Paul says:

“24 ¶ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. 25 Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever. 26 Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. 27 No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.” (1 Corinthians 9:24-27 NIV)

Where we may have been out of control before we came to Christ, we can now have self control, because the spirit will give us the ability. As we’ve just seen winning life’s race requires keeping our lives under control. As the book of proverbs tells us:

“Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.” (Proverbs 16:32 NIV)

We must discipline our spiritual lives by developing habits of Bible study and prayer. Peter said:

“2 Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. 3 His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. 5 ¶ For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance,

godliness; 7 and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. 8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 1:2-8 NIV)

We need to make a commitment to serve Christ and be obedient to his commands. We need to die to ourselves and live for God. The prize of eternal life is worth all the strict training and denial of our sinful nature. Jesus said:

“ I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (John 10:10 NIV)

If we are to grow in self control we can't let our past mistakes and failures persuade us that we can never live and overcome life. In Christ we can put our past behind us. Paul wrote: “10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, 14 I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:10-14 NIV)

In order for us to become more self controlled we need to prevent our emotions from controlling us. People fall in and out of love, have good and bad days and do healthy or unhealthy things largely depending on how they feel. Temptation feeds on our feelings and that is where we must win the battle against sin and harmful behaviour. Paul wrote: “7 In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness 8 and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us. 9 Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, 10 and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive. 11 ¶ For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. 12 It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,” (Titus 2:7-12 NIV)

God's grace is more powerful than any wrong feeling, desire or temptation. His grace teaches us to say “No, I won't do that, I don't care how I feel about it I'm going to be self controlled. We can take charge of our moods and say “I'm going to have a good day and rejoice in all the blessings God has given me.”

Another step we need to take is to be careful about the company we keep. We tend to be and become like those with whom we associate. Paul wrote:

“Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character.”” (1 Corinthians 15:33 NIV)

The book of proverbs warns us:

“24 ¶ Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered, 25 or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared.” (Proverbs 22:24-25 NIV)

This is especially true of close companions. King Solomon was led astray in his later years by his foreign wives:

“1 ¶ King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter— Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. 2 They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love.

3 He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. 4 As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been.” (1 Kings 11:1-4 NIV)

You can chose by an act of will to overcome your bad moods and harmful emotions. We need to follow Paul’s advice:

“5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. 9 Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.” (Philippians 4:5-9 NIV)

Let the Holy Spirit rule your life, he has everything under control. He has perfect balance, he knows when anger is going to far and when fear is unhealthy. He knows how much self discipline we can handle and when we need to relax. With our permission he will grow the fruit of self control in our lives. Self control is not soemthing we can achieve on our own; it is the fruit of God’s presence in our lives. As Paul wrote:

“16 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. 17 For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.” (Galatians 5:16-17 NIV)

Theologian Gordon Fee wrote:

“ Spirit people march to a different drummer, and the Spirit empowers them to live in such a way that their lives evidence that fact: their behaviour is of a decidedly different character from that of their former way of life Spirit people, by walking in the Spirit by whom they began life in Christ, will thereby not walk in the ways of their pagan past.”

Producing the fruit of self control is not soemthing that comes naturally; it is supernatural. Therefore we need God’s help. Jesus knows exactly what we’re going through:

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15 NIV)

Permit God to show you his love and mercy. Let him fill you up with himself. Surrender your life to Christ and determine that you are going to love him with all of your heart, soul and mind. As you do this let him express his attributes through your behaviour and in the way you treat people. Let God take control of your life. When he does you will begin acting like Jesus. You will remind people of Christ as his fruit is supernaturally produced in you.