

Fruit Of The Spirit – Self Control

Galatians 5:16 – 26, Pg 915

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh,

for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

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.

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.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.”

At long last, we come to the end of our series on the fruit of the spirit landing finally with self-control.

For the final time, let me remind you of the **2** guiding principles over these talks that I’ve given,

Firstly, that the fruit of the spirit, are primarily others oriented.

And **secondly**, we would expect to see this fruit manifest in some way in the new believer, but the extent of growth will vary.

And we will stick with the same 4 questions formula for this word study,

Firstly, what is Self-Control?

Secondly, what do it look like, in God?

Thirdly, what does or it look like in us?

Fourthly, how might we develop our Self-control?

We will begin with definitions, and our 1st question: **what is Self-Control?**

The words we considered in Paul’s description of the fruit of the spirit, self-control might be the easiest to immediately understand.

It is 2 words in English used as a convey a couple of different related closely Greek words.

In the plainest sense, if you are a self-controlled person, you are a person who is in control of you.

No one and nothing else are in control of you.

This would be an easy virtue to exhibit if it were not for the fact that there are so many things trying to control us.

Galatians 5 speaks of the desires and passions of the flesh.

As believers we live in fallen bodies that call out to with various desires.

And so far as our bodies are fallen, our bodies would seek to control us and make God out of our fleshly cravings.

How many of these desires have a wholesome route.

The desire to eat is good, but to allow that desire to rule all our actions, to make God out of food is to allow the desire for food to control our actions.

And so, we are no longer self-controlled, but controlled by our desires.

The Bible uses various terms to describe these inward passions, we might more commonly use the word emotions.

To the Greek Stoics who were philosophers that this was all about how one could take and maintain control of one's life not being controlled by other people or by our emotions.

Think of the Vulcans from Star Trek,

Not led by their emotions or the emotions of others.

We will be majoring on desires, emotions and passions.

But self-control is broad enough to include warfare against many alternatives to self-control we might not immediately consider to be desires.

When I mention other people, it is often the desire to please other people or a desire to not be hurt by the people that causes people to control us, rather than ourselves being self-controlled.

We might give up our self-control in order that we might be controlled by something else or a desire to be out of control.

To give into a rebellious desire to go without control, to give up the effort of self-control.

Many substances that are taken that cause us to lose our self-control are taken out of a desire to no longer have to be in control and observant of ourselves.

We will come back to that thought later.

The world schemes of self-control go through their various fashions but all entirely man orientated.

The biblical self-control however, requires a more nuanced understanding.

Our understanding of self-controlled needs to be refined by 2 further biblical truths:

Firstly, as we can see from Galatians, it is a fruit of the spirit.

True self-control as we will come back to later is only possible through the work of the spirit.

And secondly, our self-control is given to us by God and is under his ultimate overarching control.

And we control ourselves in service to God not in service to ourselves.

As believers we are control is under the control of God. And so, our self-control is limited so far as we remain for also limited by the fact that our self-control is subject to the will of God.

In all of our considerations about self-control should be viewed through a God lens.

And so definitionally, biblical self-control is:

Self-control; is our control of ourselves, given by the Holy Spirit, under the authority of God.

So, with our definition in hand, let's move on to our 2nd question.

What does self-control look like in God?

Well, I hope we immediately recognise that God is in control of all things in that he is sovereign over all things.

But is he in control of himself?

On the face of it, we might say yes, God is in control of himself,

God is self-controlled.

There's some truth in that statement, although it's not as theologically nuanced as we would want because self-control, through a human lens, implies that there is a part of God that needs to be controlled by another part of God.

God does not have a body that needs to be controlled, a body that might rebel against the mind of God.

God's emotions are not like a man's emotions.

So far as God's emotions operate, which is another whole area of theology that we don't have time for,

They do not operate in such a way that is ever in conflict with the rest of his being.

God does not have to resist or control conflicting within themselves, or conflicting with God's reason or his will.

Further to this, God is no change in whom he is. By outside pressures.

He is unchangeable.

The theological term is that he is immutable.

And so, God does not have to control himself ever in contradiction to the rest of his being.

And God does not have to control himself to resist outside pressures.

God is self-controlled,

But it might be better to say that God is entirely consistent in all that he does and in all his being.

There is no battle going on in God.

Perhaps we might say that God does not need to control himself in the way that we are called to control ourselves.

In the person of God, man, Jesus Christ, we have an example of perfect self-control.

The deity of Christ allows him to resist the desires of his flesh to resist, to not allow himself to be dominated by his emotions and not allow anyone to us effect his actions.

The claim that Jesus never sinned includes the extraordinary claim that Jesus never sinned, even though he was saddled with the same fleshly disadvantage that we have.

Hebrews 4 verse 15.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

And so, we can say that Jesus always maintained his self-control.

To summarise, **what does self-control look like in God?**

God has no conflict in himself, and so in that sense he has true self-control.

Jesus is our example of perfect self-control in his incarnation.

Moving on, then to the 3rd question,

What does self-control look like in us?

This requires a longer answer because it is mankind who need to be self-controlled.

In the wild animals are distinct from humans, so far as they are driven by their instincts, their desires for food, safety and reproduction.

Fallen man is incapable of true self-control it said following their sinful desires.

This is the common New Testament assumption about what drives the behaviour of unbelievers.

Paul summarises the **Ephesian church in chapter 2, verse 1,**

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”

An unbeliever might think they are in control, but they are in fact controlled by their desires.

The unbelieving the stoic who is keen to develop their self-control, they do so in service to something else.

To live a prosperous or sensible well peaceful life to be emotions free.

The seemingly disciplined non-Christian footballer seems to display self-control as he forgoes leisure in favour of training and controls his diet.

But this is in service to his other desires.

A desire to have status within the game of football.

A desire for the fame that football brings.

Or perhaps these days, the desire for the money that football brings.

His opponent, self-control in one area speaks to his service of a deeper human desire.

Worldly discipline is merely the exchange of one short-term desire, over and above the long-term desire.

And if neither is subject to God’s authority by the Holy Spirit, then it is slavish adherence to the flesh.

The believer, however, has been given a fresh set of desires.

A new but imperfect heart. A believer is called to self-control because the believer has been given the ability to be self-controlled by the Holy Spirit.

For the 1st time the believer is caused by the Holy Spirit to choose to serve God rather than their own passions, and so is given the ability to battle against the remaining fleshly desires to some degree of success.

We are no longer people entirely driven by our fleshly desires, but instead with full clarity of mind we choose to serve God willingly and openly and our actions are not often in contradiction to those righteous desires.

This is in contradiction to any overzealous notion of “let go and let God.”,

“I’m letting God take the wheel”

Now if folks say these things to mean I’m going to follow God and his plans. That’s all well and good, but if by these phrases, they mean that they should have no agency or control of their life, then it is a mistaken approach.

It would be better to say,

“By the spirit’s power. I am now able to take the wheel and I will drive in the direction that God is given.”

We are made in God’s image and God is calling us to reflect his unity and changeability by being consistent people.

With the consistency between our decisions and our actions.

So far as we maintain self-control we reflect what God is life and demonstrate the spirit is within us.

God has given us heads.

Dwell for a moment on the common phrase, “you’re running around like a headless chicken.”

Think about the fact that these chickens that are freshly headless are still running around.

This is the popular image of what it is to be out of control.

You take your hand off the wheel of a car it may continue in all sorts of directions.

God has given us heads he has given us minds and rationale and abilities to make decisions,

God expects us to use those faculties to wrestle with our desires.

To discern which of our passions is from God, and what is from the flesh.

And to determine to act in a way that is in accordance with the desires of the Holy Spirit within us.

God gave us heads not so that we could be headless chickens, but so that we could be head controlled image bearers.

And the normative pattern is that God reasons with us through his word, which changes the way we feel about things, that affects what we decide to do what we will to do.

He conforms our minds, he changes our hearts and this affects our actions.

So, the question is someone who does things for a reason, and who is seeking to line up that reason with the will of God.

Thus, the Christian is self-controlled under the authority of God.

Brothers and sisters, you have been given this gift of self-control by the spirit you have been given authority over this temporary body with which you are at war.

And Paul here calls you to battle to gain and maintain self-control.

Paul reasons with Felix and his wife Priscilla in **Acts 24**,

“And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment”

Demonstrating the normal pattern but also showing that righteousness can be distinguished from self-control.

This distinction here. I would suggest is that righteousness is about the works we are supposed to be about,

And self-control is about avoiding the evil works are fleshly desires call us to.

And so, self-control in is the ability to fight this ongoing battle.

Now we mustn't be perfectionistic.

Some others struggle with self-control a lot more than others.

For some others. There are certain areas of our life. We have tremendous self-control and other areas where we seem to have none at all.

Things that seem to short-circuit us.

But the promise of the spirit is that we have authority to fight this battle and the promise of some success in this life.

Having made this general call, I must give to caveats.

The 1st is **perfectionism** in this area.

The Bible is very realistic about this battle.

We are being called to fight such battles by any means necessary.

The general principle of the Lord when it comes to battling our desires is to remove the offending bit of flesh.

Jesus speaks figuratively of, plucking out eyes and cutting off hands.

Speaking of the need to take whatever practical action one can to prevent the desires of the flesh.

Now in over righteous person may come and say,

“Jesus, this is wrong, you shouldn't pluck out your eye, you should develop such mental discipline so as your I've never wanders”

Again, this is not a call to perfection.

To give a quick example,

In 1 Corinthians, Paul advises those who are betrothed, as to what do they are unable to treat the person to which they are engaged properly.

He begins like this,

1 Corinthians 7 verse 36:

If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong...

What might we expect him to say next?

Paul is in the middle of speaking to Christians who are single and encouraging them that if they can, they should stay single for the sake of the gospel.

Does he say **“go away and pray about it until your passion subside in order to remain single”**

Does he say,

“If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed if his passions are strong, then he is unworthy of marriage because of his rampant lust.”

When he actually says is this;

“If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin.”

Elsewhere in the same chapter,

Rather than encouraging married couples to abstain from sex for the sake of the gospel. He says the opposite, **verse 5**,

He says to married couples

Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

And to widows, he says;

“But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”

You might say, but Paul surely these individuals need to develop more self-control,

But the Scriptures are much more practical than that.

Taking this specific example of passion for members of the opposite sex,

The answer is, if you're struggling with self-control and you have the opportunity the marriage, then that's the best outcome, rather than burning with passion.

Verse 2

But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.

Now there's an awful lot going in that chapter, and a lot more that could be said on marriage, but I merely take this example to illustrate that in one sense, the Scriptures are quite pragmatic.

We must fight our battle, bearing in mind the strength that we have and if there is a righteous way of making the battle easier than we should take it up.

This is now licensed to unrighteous beams of alleviating the pressure of our desires.

But in a single person cannot get their desires under their control, and the biblical answer seems to be in general to seek marriage not to abstain from it.

This illustrates that we must all be gracious with one another. Some of us will be given self-control by the spirit in order to maintain singleness the sake of the gospel. Others will not.

And this will be the case in every other area where we may consider self-control.

The perfectionistic legal list will say if you're struggling with food as an idol:

“When you need to get to the point where you can go to the shops and buy lots of sweet treats, and incident and look at them without eating them”

I believe the Bible would say to try and avoid buying such things at all, until such time as you find greater strength.

Often times when we can, we are called to flee temptation, and in so doing attain self-control, rather than only being considered to be in self-control if we are able to face every temptation head-on.

So that's the 1st consideration the call to self-control is not the call to perfectionism,

Secondly, briefly, this is not head is always better than heart.

The Bible is not as simplistic as the stoical Vulcan.

This is not a case of emotions. Bad reason good.

We have been given both.

Self-control requires that we discern right just desires from fleshly desires.

Self-control does not involve the destruction of the self.

But there are 2 risks available to us and that are encouraged.

On the one end, some encourages to believe that our emotions and our desires are who we are.

That following our emotions and our feelings is our right and is the only way we can be happy.

We are told that our fleshly desires are unchangeable,

That giving into our desires is inevitable,

That our desires are immovable

That our desires should lead.

You notice how our desires falsely take on the attributes of God in this scheme of thinking.

And as I hope I've demonstrated we are not to be led by our fleshly desires in that way.

But encountering this culture, we must not then engage in the counterculture that says that all desires are evil.

That only logic and reason should prevail in all situations.

That our emotions are not part of us and that they are our enemy.

That we would be headful but heartless human beings.

My friends, the chicken is just as dead without a heart as without a head.

God has given us both and as image bearers we reflect both the fact that God has his reason, and has a great love for us.

Our battle with ourselves is not as simple as suppressing all desires and all emotions.

We must sift, we must compare our desires against the Scriptures to see whether they are righteous.

We can look at the positive and the negative listing Galatians to start with.

The call to self-control the call to wrestle with ourselves.

I've often used the image that our desires and our emotions are like wild horses.

Many of our desires as believers have righteous roots, and a wild horse can be tamed.

And so our emotions should be tamed and controlled, so that our desires can speed us along on a journey towards righteousness.

Wild horses need to be tamed, not gunned down.

But I am known to many Christians who have been taught that the answer to all their problems is to suppress all emotion.

Which is to take the wild horses that we were supposed attain and ride and shoot them in the head instead.

The control of self must not come at the destruction of self.

We must resist both lives.

Emotions and desires are not all that we are.

But neither are they to be destroyed.

They are a part of us, and by the spirit's power, they can come under our control.

Final question very briefly,

How might we develop self-control?

Many of the previous answers about Bible reading and supporting one another in discipleship that I have given at the end of the other talks apply here.

And I'll just add one more that is specific to self-control.

Self-control is very broad.

Any answers many of the specific questions Christians have?

How much should I eat?

Should I smoke?

Can I take drugs?

How much alcohol can I drink?

Can I use this piece of technology?

Can I do this hobby?

Can I undergo hypnosis?

Can I pursue euphoric experiences where I lose control?

I could go on and on.

Many of these things are addressed in the Bible, but all of them are addressed by the question,

“Are you still in control?”

Drugs is 1 of the easier examples.

Are there any Bible verses that specifically say I can't take marijuana as a Christian.

No.

Can I maintain self-control whilst taking marijuana as a Christian?

No.

Perhaps you need to ask.

This thing that I engage in, or I want to engage in, can I stop?

Am I in control of it? Or is it controlling me?

So, the answer to these questions is actually can be very simple.

Remember Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 6 verse 12

“All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything.”

But I will not be dominated by anything

or the King James,

“But I will not be mastered by anything.”

This is the flipside of self-control.

Am I in control or is it in control of me...

It is important that we ask ourselves these questions about what we are desiring to do.

It will help us determine the rights and wrongs of potential actions, and begin the process of interrogating our desires.

If we ask these questions of ourselves in each area, if we audit ourselves in this way, which areas we have been gifted with excellent self-control, and which areas where we struggle make to maintain self-control.

And if we identify an area where we have little self-control, we can then begin the work of fighting for self-control.

Taking whatever pragmatic righteous steps, we can take to make the battle easier.

Praying for the Spirit's aid, in the faith that by the Spirit, self-control is achievable in any area.

That brings us to the end of our study in Galatians 5,

Paul chose these words to try and articulate the many different ways in which the spirit bears fruit in our outward behaviour towards others.

I found going through them in detail really helpful and really thought-provoking and challenging, and I hope that I've been able to convey what Paul was getting at by using these words or at least helped you to think about them in more depth.