

Series: *The Fruit of the Spirit*

The Fruit of the Spirit Is Self-Control

Galatians 5:22-23 (ESV)

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,
23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.



Gods With No Self-Control?

The great king of the gods, Zeus, was discussing with his mother, Rhea, his desire to marry Hera. Mother Rhea advised Zeus that this idea of his was a bad idea and that he should not marry Hera. Zeus became enraged at being told that his idea was a bad idea and he erupted in anger. Who was she to tell him what he could or could not do? He was the most powerful of all the Olympian gods and he could do whatever he wanted to do and no one could stop him.

He cast off all restraint and gave vent to his every desire. He embarked upon a drunken rampage wreaking havoc in every direction. He drank himself silly, throwing lightning bolts at anything and everything in his way and seducing any woman he chose regardless of whether human or divine.

Zeus was completely out of control. Greek Mythology is replete with such episodes. Often the Greek gods seem to be nothing more than spoiled, ill-mannered, selfish children with omnipotent power and absolutely no self-control. What a horrible thought—unlimited power with no self-control!

How dangerously destructive!

The Self-Controlled God of the Bible

The God of the Bible is completely the opposite. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a God who is never without self-control. God never has to say, “Whoops! I’m sorry. I didn’t really mean that.” Or “Will you forgive me? I’m really sorry I said that.” God the Father never flies off the handle in a fit of uncontrolled rage and hurls lightning bolts at wicked people. *God always is who He has always been and will forever be.* His character is perpetually consistent. He is never out of control. If this were not true, we would all be dead by now!

Malachi 3:6 (ESV)

6 “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.”

The Lord is saying to Israel through the prophet Malachi, “The only reason you are still a nation is because my character does not change. I promised that I would bless the whole world through the descendants of Abraham and I do not change and so you are still a nation, even though because of your sins you deserve to be consumed.”

The only reason any of us is still alive is because God's character never changes. He is gracious and merciful to undeserving people. He is a God who is always self-controlled.

The Definition: What Is Self-Control?

Self-control is the ability to “exercise restraint over one's own impulses, emotions, desires,¹ and actions.”² Self-control is the ability to live one's life governed by thoughtful deliberation rather than by spontaneous impulses. According to Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary, self-control is the ability to live life in a place of “habitual moderation in regard to the indulgence of the natural appetites and passions” (i.e. desires). Plato said being self-controlled was “having power or dominion over oneself, or being inwardly strong.”³

Galatians 5:22 and 23 tell us that **self-control is the fruit of the Spirit**. When God puts His Holy Spirit within the heart of His people, He naturally begins to produce the characteristics of His own character within them. Thus, the Holy Spirit produces self-control in the people of God because God Himself is a self-controlled God. God is not controlled by anything outside Himself. He is completely controlled by His own good, righteous, pure, true, and holy Spirit, who always acts according to His own wise counsel (Eph 1:11) and inexhaustible knowledge (Rom 11:33).

God, in all He does, is completely free from the distracting influence of sin and temptation (James 1:13). We are not, therefore, He has sent His Spirit into our hearts to help us.

The Fact of Conflicting Desires

The very fact that the Holy Spirit produces self-control assumes that the life of the follower of Jesus will be one in which certain desires will need to be controlled. The Christian life is one of experiencing conflicting desires.

The Holy Spirit does not automatically and instantly rid us of all sinful desires. If, when we became believers, all of our sinful desires were instantly purified, then there would be no need for self-control because all of our actions would be in perfect harmony with God's good will. However, that is not what happens.

The process of our desires becoming more and more practically holy, which we call sanctification, happens in steps and stages. Fruit grows in stages and in seasons. So the fruit of the Spirit grows in stages and in seasons. Let me share with you three steps in growing in self-control.

Step One: Know the Source of the Problem

The first step in growing in self-control is discovering the source of the problem. We all have a common problem. It is our desires. Even as believers, we can still be influenced by sinful desires. Desire is not sinful, but when taken to extremes they can be. It is not a sin to be hungry, but it is to

¹ Inc Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Eleventh ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible societies, 1996).

³ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-).

be gluttonous. It is not a sin to have a drink, but it is a sin to get drunk. It is not a sin to desire your neighbor's car, however, it is a sin to borrow your neighbor's car without asking and receive her permission. We have a name for that. It is called theft.

James 1:14 (ESV)

14 Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. 15 Then when desire is conceived it gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

If we cannot control our own desires, then we will be our own worst enemy. When we sin, it's no one's fault but our own. Desire unchecked will lead to sin. And sin always leads to death. Therefore, we must learn to control our desires. We must grow in self-control.

Second Step: We Must Control Our Thoughts

If we are to control our desires, then we must control our thoughts. Controlling our thoughts is difficult. We need the help of the Holy Spirit to control our thoughts. The battleground is in our minds.

2 Cor 10:3-5 (ESV)

3 For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh.

4 For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.

5 We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,

Observations

1. The life we are called to live is a life of war.
2. The war we are fighting is not a physical war, but a spiritual one. If we would win, we must learn to use spiritual weapons and not fleshly ones.
3. The power of our spiritual weapons have divine power.
4. The battle ground is the mind. We must take captive **every** thought to the obedience of Christ.

Think of your mind as a control tower at an airport. Any aircraft within range of the control tower can call in and request permission to land, but the air traffic controller has the authority to grant or withhold that permission. Similarly, any thought can pop into your mind, however you have the authority to choose whether or not to dwell (i.e. give permission to land) on that thought or not. If the thought is not obedient to Christ, then do not dwell on that thought, do not give that thought permission to land.

Exercising self-control begins when we, by the power of the Holy Spirit, are able to take captive **every thought** and make them obedient to Jesus. Taking every thought captive is an incredibly difficult work in which we need the help of the Holy Spirit in order to make progress.

Third Step: We Must Identify Every Thought

In order to take every thought captive, we must be able to identify good thoughts from bad thoughts. We have to be able to identify our thoughts in order to control them. Some thoughts we want to land, i.e. to dwell upon, and some we do not.

Philippians 4:8 (ESV)

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

We must learn to focus our thoughts on these things and not on ungodly things. We must ask ourselves this of each thought: is this true? Is this honorable? Is this thought just? Is this thought pure? Is it lovely? Is this thought commendable, (i.e. would I want someone else to dwell on this thought?), could I recommend this thought to someone else? Is this excellent, or worthy of praise? These questions will help us identify each and every thought.

Self control is a great quest. Here is what Solomon wrote,

Proverbs 16:32

32 Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.

The man who can rule his own spirit is mightier than the man who conquers a city! That is an amazing statement. If you want to go on an adventure, then conquer your own desires. If you want to be a might warrior, then exercise dominion over your own desires. If you want to be master over a vast empire, then begin with the empire of your own heart's desires. If you can exercise dominion over your own desires and actions, then you truly will be a mighty man!

With this Plato and Aristotle agrees.

"I count him braver who overcomes his desires than him who conquers his enemies; for the hardest victory is over self."—Aristotle

"The first and best victory is to conquer self. To be conquered by self is, of all things, the most shameful and objectionable."—Plato

We have all we need to do this. The Holy Spirit within us is the power of God. He who is within us is stronger than any force in the universe. If we can walk by the Spirit we will put death to the deeds of the flesh.

2 Peter 1:3-8 (ESV)

3 His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence,

4 by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

5 For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, 6 and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, 7 and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. 8 For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lord has given us all the power we need to live a godly life. He has given us Himself—His very own Spirit, the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead. We can grow in self-control. Growth is possible. I know this because of Galatians 5:24.

Gal 5:24

And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

The dominion of the fleshly, sinful desires has been forever broken in the lives of believers in Jesus. The only dominion sin has over believers is whatever they give it. As believers we are not required to give in to sin. Sin is not our master, Jesus is. His Spirit within us, will give us the power we need to exercise self-control in our daily lives.

Louisa May Alcott put it this way,

“A little kingdom I possess, where thoughts and feelings dwell;
And very hard the task I find of governing it well.”

With Jesus all things are possible. It is possible to grow in self-control and it is possible to exercise self-control over the desires that we struggle with, but only through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. Ask, right now, the Lord Jesus to fill you with His Spirit and give control of your life over to Him and do this every day. Every day when you wake up tell him, “My life is yours. I desire to obey you. Fill me with your Spirit. Live your life through me!” In Jesus’ name, Amen.