

Sermon 3-7-28— The Fruit of the Spirit: Self Control
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This has been one of the longest sermon series I have ever preached. There are nine fruits of the Spirit. That is nine Sundays plus one Sunday for the Global Impact Celebration. That adds up to **almost two and one half months**. It is a long time. However, it is also an important topic. Galatians 5:22 is a reminder that as Christians our power, our gifts, even the growth we exhibit in our lives are not our own. They are gifts of the Spirit. We have been created in God's image, which means that when people look at us they should see a reflection of the God who made us. However, we cannot reflect God on our own. It is the Holy Spirit who equips us and directs us to live lives that reflect the love and holiness of God. Paul called the results of that life, a life led and equipped by the spirit, the fruit of the Spirit.

Listen again to how Paul describes a Spirit filled life: **The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance (or patience), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. — Galatians 5:22**

As I said, we are at near the end of this sermon series. Today we will address the final fruit of the Spirit. The Greek word that Paul uses is "**Eng-kra-ti-a**". It contains two roots, en, which means to be filled with, and kratos, which means power. Thus, to have the gift of engkratia is to be filled with the power that enables us to live the lives we are called to live or, as most translators translate it, to be self controlled.

Paul uses this word when he urges Titus and the church in Crete to live lives worthy of a Christian leader: He wrote: **"Since an overseer manages God's household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it."** — Titus 1:7-9

Paul urged them, as leaders of the church, to live lives that were self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He urged them to turn away from their sins and live as God had called them to live. Which, I suppose, implies that they had not been living self-controlled, holy lives before.

I suppose that should not surprise us. It is always easier to talk about being holy and self controlled than it is to live it out. It is like Mark Twain said, "Everybody talks about the weather, but no one does anything about it." Well, a lot of us talk about living holy, Christian lives, but how many of us do anything about it. Paul is saying that it is high time we did something about it. It is time to live lives that are characterized by self control. Indeed, he concludes his list of the fruits of the Spirit by saying, "OK, now you know what a Christian life looks like. So stop talking about it and do it. Don't just talk the talk, walk the walk."

There is much truth there, but we need to be careful not to be misled by what Paul is saying. It is easy to twist his words so that they support the popular notion that we have to be good in order to earn God's love. That is not what Paul is saying. I want you to notice that Paul lists self control last. Which is just the opposite of what most religions do. It is opposite of what our society does. From the time we are children we are taught that if we are good we will be rewarded. If we are good we will be loved. Indeed, my LDS brother often quotes Nephi telling me, "We know that it is by grace that we are saved,

after all we can do." Even my saintly grandmother cautioned me, "God helps those who help themselves."

The logic goes something like this: If we want to please God we need to show that we are serious about trying to be good. We need to show that we are not just flaky, half-hearted followers. Of course we will never be perfect, but we at least have to show enough self control to begin to walk the walk. Once we do that, once we have shown we are serious about living out our faith, then God's grace kicks in and God loves and accepts us. There is a certain appeal to this approach. It fits the American ideal of self-made men and women pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. It allows us to determine our own fate.

According to this understanding God's love must be earned. We earn it by living a life pleasing to God. And what is pleasing to God? It is a holy life, a life which exhibits self control. My guess is that most of us have tried to earn God's love. I know I did. I tried really hard to be a good person. I tried to control myself, to be a better person. I knew that my sin was not pleasing to God so I promised myself I would not sin anymore. You all know how that worked out. No matter how hard I tried. In the end I always failed. The truth is that we cannot fully control ourselves, hard as we try we cannot pour the sin out of our lives.

Let me see if I can illustrate that. I have a full glass here with me. Can you tell me what it is full of? Some might think it is empty, but it's full. What is it full of? It's full of air. Imagine with me that the glass is my life and the air is the sin that fills it. Let's say that I want to be right with God, I want to remove the sin from my life, how can I get the sin out? I can't blow it out, or shake it out, or pour it out. Oh, if I try hard I might be able to force a bit of it out for a moment, but as soon as I stop the glass of my life fills right back up with sin again. It is the same with our lives. We can try really hard to force the sin out of our lives but as soon as we let our guard down what happens? It comes rushing right back in.

So, how can we remove the air from this glass? There is only one way. If I fill the glass with something else, like water, not only is the air forced out there is now no room for the air to come back in again. In much the same way, the only way to force sin out of my life and keep it out is to so fill my life with something else that there is no room left for sin. According to Paul that something should be the Holy Spirit. You see, at least for Paul, the opposite of sin was not self control. The opposite of sin was faith which opened him up to be filled by the Spirit, allowing him to gradually give over more and more control of his life to the Spirit.

From which it follows that self control does not, cannot, come first. Indeed, there is no such thing as lasting self control without the help of the Holy Spirit. The world tells us that if we exhibit self control then God will love us and if we are good enough God will give us the gifts of the Spirit. But that is not how it works. The truth is that God already loves us and if we are willing to admit we need help and open ourselves up to be filled and led by God's Spirit, the Spirit will gradually push the sin out and our lives and we will begin to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit, the final aspect of which is self control.

Which, I suppose, means that the term self control is a bit misleading. Indeed, as we have pointed out, there is really no such thing as self control, at least not over the long haul. The thing about trying to push sin out of our lives is that as soon as we stop pushing, like the air in the glass, the sin will come rushing back in. Which means that there is no such thing as effective self control without the aid of the Holy Spirit. It is only when the Spirit fills us, and directs us, that we can begin to live lives free from sin.

Which means that self control is less something we do, or have, than than the result of living a life controlled by the Spirit.

From which it follows that the only way to be self controlled is to give up controlling our own lives and hand that control over to the Spirit. Sounds a bit paradoxical doesn't it. It goes back to the paradox of what we call free will. I have witnessed people who were hesitant to give up control to the Spirit because they feared that if they did they would lose their free will. Yet, Paul argues that as long as we are enslaved by sin we will never be able to experience the freedom of living the lives God created us to live. Paul argues that the only way we can truly be free from the power of sin is to give up our freedom and allow the Spirit to fill and guide us.

It sounds confusing, but if you think about it it makes sense. If we truly do not want to live lives of sin, but are powerless to stop on our own is that really freedom? If we, by ourselves, have no choice but to choose sin, where is the choice in that? It is a bit like the choice my dad offered me after school. He would ask, "Son, would you like to go out and care for the cows in the barn right now, or would you prefer to argue with me about it and then go take care of the cows in the barn? Where is the choice in that? It is the same with sin. Would you rather sin now or would you rather struggle really hard trying not to sin and then fall back into sin when you let down your guard? We like to think that we control our lives but we really have no choice when it comes to sin. If you doubt that I want you to try really, really hard not to sin even once over the next twenty four hours. You will discover that you can't do it. You can't force the sin out of your life any more than I can force the air out of this glass.

I guess it all boils down to what we mean by freedom. Many of us think that we want the freedom the prodigal son demanded from his father, the freedom that means no one can tell us what to do. It is the freedom of the 16 year old who can't wait to leave home so that no one will be able to tell him when to go to bed, or what he can eat, or when he can use the car. But too many of us find that when we finally get that freedom our lives start to run out of control. It takes awhile, but most of us eventually discover that there is little joy in living without rules.

Such freedom is like sailing on a rudderless ship. The ship is free to go wherever the winds and current take it. No one controls it. It is truly free. And that is fine as long as no one cares where the boat might drift. However, when those on board eventually decide that they want to go somewhere, they soon discover that freedom is more than being free from. True freedom has to include the freedom to go where you chose to go and do what you chose to do. For freedom to be freedom it has to include more than freedom from, it must include the freedom to...

Too many people want to be free from, free from their parents, free from big government, free from rules and regulations, free from ... They resist being bound by rules or laws or even God. Their lives are like the ship without a rudder, they drift aimlessly wherever circumstances or friends or their latest whim takes them. But in my experience such lives seldom bring much joy. The problem is that, though we were created to live feely, it is less a desire to be freed from than to have the freedom to. More than that, true joy comes when we experience the freedom to be and do what we were meant to do and be.

And that is the freedom that the Spirit provides for us when we allow ourselves to be filled with the Spirit and seek to live under his direction. It is not something that happens all at once. It takes time, as we gradually allow the Spirit to control more and more of our lives, but eventually we begin to desire to be the people God would have us be. We are set free in that we can do what we want, but what we want is to live as the people God created us to be. The Spirit who fills us enables us to be self controlled

because what we desire most is the things of God. And that, I believe, is why Paul listed self control last.

Self control, at least for most of us, is one of the last of the fruits to be exhibited in our lives. It has to be. Because we only begin to desire the things of God when we we grow tired of carrying around a **glass filled with sin** and allow the Spirit to begin to fill us. I don't know about you but, though I do want to be open to and follow the Spirit, at the same time I want to advise the Spirit on how best to manage my life. Don't get me wrong. I have opened up parts of my life to the Spirit and allowed him some control. There are fruits of the Spirit evidenced in how I live. There is far less sin then there used to be. But there is still sin and I am often pulled two ways. On the one hand I crave the things of the Spirit and I want to live a holy life. And yet my old desires and passions are still there tugging at me. At times I exhibit the self control offered by the Spirit. But just when I think I have finally overcome sin the old ways flow back in and in Paul's famous words I find myself doing the very things I do not want to do.

And thus begins the struggle we have all experienced. The Spirit led pull to be holy and self controlled, to be free to, which wars against the old passions and the desire to be free from. Face it, that is the life of the Christian who tries to live with their **glass half full**, with a foot in both worlds.

So what do we do? Let me point out that it is not to beat ourselves up for our failures, or devote all our time and energy to trying to bring our thoughts and actions under control. It is not even to grit our teeth and resolve to be better people. Not only does that not work, it actually focuses our minds and thoughts on the very sins we are seeking to drive from our lives.

What we need to do is focus on our relationship with God. We need to grow deeper and open ourselves to the presence of the Holy Spirit. In short, we need to invite the Spirit to fill more and more of our lives until there is no room left for the sin that seeks to control us. We need to fill our **glasses completely full**. Remember the word that Paul used for self control. It was enkratia. It literally means to be filled with power. I believe the power Paul was referring to was the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

Which is not to say that discipline and self control have no place. Far from it, we need to be disciplined and exhibit self control as we carry out the spiritual practices that open us up to the presence of the Spirit. These are the spiritual practices the church has championed for hundreds of years. They are the practices that we were working on a year ago as we were growing deeper together. They boil down to spending time with God and doing what we can to focus our spirits on God and open ourselves up to the presence of the Spirit. They include things like studying our scriptures, praying regularly (and not just talking to God but opening ourselves up to hear his still small voice), fasting, and serving others.

It is not unlike what we need to do if we want to lose weight. I don't know about you, but if I try to force myself not to eat I grow hungrier and hungrier and what I begin to desire are high calorie, fatty, junk foods that are not at all conducive to better health or losing weight. Before I know it, despite my best intentions, I find myself snacking on chips or candy or pizza. It is so much more effective when I fill my belly with good healthy food that takes away my desire for junk. In the same way, when we fill our lives with the things of the Spirit, sin loses its power. So spend time each day in prayer and Bible study. Pick up some good Christian literature. Participate in worship. Fellowship with other Christians. Share Christ with a neighbor. Fill your glasses full of wholesome spiritual food, knowing that the fuller your life is the easier it will be to live the Spirit controlled lives God calls us to live.

Beyond that, not only will our lives be evidenced by self control, we will begin to exhibit the other fruit of the Spirit, things like love, joy, peace, forbearance (or patience), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and (of course) self-control. And when that happens our lives will truly begin to reflect the creator we were meant to emulate. And others will naturally be drawn to God. That is what happens when we fill a glass to the top. It begins to spill over. May your life spill over with the fruit of God's Spirit.