

Fruit of the Spirit **Part Six**

Galatians 5:22-25

1. What is self-control.

- *Titus 2:11-12*

Self-control in the Bible has more to do with saying "yes" to God than saying "no" to behavior.

2. Who has self-control.

- *2 Timothy 3:2-5; John 4:34; Psalm 103:10-11*

3. How can I have self-control.

- *Romans 7:14-25, 12:2, 8:9*

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The Fruit of the Spirit: Self-Control¹

Picture in your mind a large, wild elephant – imagine it is twelve feet from the floor to its shoulders. This thing is large – weighing over eight tons. Now, picture yourself sitting on that elephant, right on its shoulders and behind its ears. This elephant has never been ridden before, but your job is to drive it where you want it to go. How successful do you think you will be?

This is the analogy that authors Chip and Dan Heath use in their book called “Switch: How to change things when change is hard.”² The analogy is intended to show how hard it is for your rational mind (which is the rider) to control your emotional mind (which is the elephant). Or, in other words, you trying to have self-control is about what it’s like for you to tame a wild elephant.

We’re on the last part of our series on the Fruit of the Spirit, talking about self-control. The passage of the Bible we’re talking about is found in the New Testament book of Galatians, chapter 5 and verses 22-25, and if you’ve been with us, you are getting pretty familiar with these verses by now. This is what it says:

“The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to His cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit’s leading in every part of our lives.” (Galatians 5:22-25, nlt)

Self-control is the last in the list that describes the character or nature of God and His love—and according to that passage, that collective list of fruit is to be evident in the life of every Christian who is filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is God’s own personal presence in the Christian’s life. These fruit not only describe God’s character—they are the “fruit,” or evidence, of His presence and power in the life and character of any authentic follower of Christ. Let’s see if we can figure out what this business of self-control is all about.

To start with...

1. What is self-control?

¹ Much of the research for this sermon is from: Phillip Keller, *Inspirational Writings: A Gardener Looks at the Fruit of the Spirit* (Inspirational Press, 1993), Bryan Wilkerson, *Just Say Yes*, <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2009/june/fruititdoesabodygood8.html>

² Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, Broadway Books, 2010.

As we come to the end of our series on the fruit of the Spirit, we come to what may be the most elusive of these Christ-like qualities.

Self-control is elusive – it's hard to find. When that chocolate cake in the refrigerator is calling your name, when pornographic websites are just a click away, when that difficult person is pushing your buttons and you want to let them have it, it's not so easy to just say "No".

What the Bible means by self-control is different than you might think. The dictionary defines self-control as an ability of the will to restrain strong emotions or impulsive actions.

Notice the word, "restrain." That word suggests there's a problem with our desires, emotions, and behavior. It implies that if we don't control them, they'll get away from us, and our emotions will control us; like wild elephants they might take us places we don't want to go.

Secondly, notice that it requires an exercise of the will. In other words, the strength to restrain our desires, emotions, and actions has to come from within rather than from some outside source. Why is it that we can wake up in the morning to get to school or work, but we can't wake up to go to the gym or have devotions? It's because getting up for school or work involves an external motivator. Your teacher can dock your grade, or your boss can fire you. But no one is forcing you to get up to exercise or to spend time with God. It has to come from within you; it's a matter of the will. But that's not easy for us. That's why we need "Clocky." Clocky is an alarm clock invented by MIT student Gauri Nanda. It's no ordinary alarm clock – it has wheels. You see it at night, and in the morning when the alarm goes off, it rolls off your nightstand and scurries around the room, forcing you to chase it down (in order to turn it off)... Clocky ensures that you won't (hit the snooze button). Apparently a lot of people feel like they need this kind of help with their self-control because 35,000 people bought the clock at \$50 each in Clocky's first two years on the market – with very little advertising.³

The truth is, the fruit of the Spirit is the only internal self-control we can have. The Greek word that's used for self-control is a compound word that begins with the word for "strength" or "power" and attaches the prefix meaning "in or within." So in the Bible, self-control is "strength within." Biblical self-control certainly has something to do with a measure of restraint, but self-control is not the stoic, clenched-jawed, strict disciplinarian kind of religion too many of us have seen in churches. *Self-control has more to do with getting out into the world and living right than it does using legalistic rules to avoid temptation.* Self-control is not about conforming to rules and regulations. But often that is what churches end up doing. They decide what the Christian life should look like and then force people with rules of self-control. *But here is the key:*

*Self-control has more to do with saying yes to God than saying "no" to behavior.
(repeat)*

³ Ibid, pg 5

The Bible says that:

“The grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live (or say ‘yes’ to) self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.” (Titus 2:11-12, niv)

Saying yes to God—self-control—does not mean *me* controlling myself. It means that my “self” – my whole person, my whole being—body, soul and spirit—comes under the control of Christ. It means that I am an individual governed by God. My entire life—every aspect of it, whether spiritual, moral, or physical—is now subject to the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. I am now under His authority. I have surrendered or relinquished the right to run the affairs of my life and turned it over to Him. It is saying “yes” to Him and His control. But the problem is that we don’t like the idea—we are wary of giving up control to God. It’s a matter of extreme trust. That’s hard! So is there anyone we can look to for an example to see what this fruit of self-control is like? In other words...

2. Who has self-control?

There are people we can look to in order to see if self-control works, but we have to look closely and be sure. In fact, the Bible says that:

“People will love only themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred. They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and *have no self-control*. They will be cruel and hate what is good. They will betray their friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God. They will *act religious*, (*act – that means they will look good on the outside*) but they will reject the power that could make them godly. Stay away from people like that!” (2 Timothy 3:2-5, nlt)

I came across a news article that gives an example of people who look on the outside like they have self-control – until they don’t. The article said that a drivers-ed teacher from Durham, North Carolina, gave a lesson he would probably like to forget. According to the Associated Press, police said the teacher, who was thirty-six, had one student driver at the wheel and another in the car when another car cut them off. At that the teacher apparently went into road rage. It is alleged that he ordered the student driver to pursue the other car. When the other car pulled over, the drivers-ed teacher got out of his car and punched the other driver in the face, giving him a bloody nose. The bloodied driver then pulled away.

Amazingly, that wasn’t enough for the angry driver’s ed teacher. He again ordered the student to pursue the other car. Eventually the police pulled over the drivers-ed car for speeding, and the motorist with the bloody nose circled back to report to the police what had happened.

The drivers-ed teacher was arrested and charged with simple assault, punishable by up to sixty days in jail. He was released on \$400 bail. Later he was suspended from his job and then resigned.⁴

Do you think that reaction by the driver's ed teacher was an out of the blue thing, or was there already something under the surface all along that his self-control had managed to keep hidden? His elephant took over!

What we need is a thorough, inside-out self-control.

So who *can* we look to for an example of the kind of self-control that the Bible talks about? Christ, of course. Jesus said:

"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!" (John 14:9, nlt)

Jesus was always completely under Divine control. He came only to do the Father's will. Jesus said:

"My nourishment comes from doing the will of God, who sent Me, and from finishing His work." (John 4:34, nlt)

Because of his Spirit-led inner control, Jesus was in control in every situation He faced. He was never caught off guard, never in crisis, never manipulated, never at the mercy of the mob. Even in those final, dark, evil hours of His time on a Roman cross, He had a quiet strength. Before the Pharisees, the Sanhedrin, the high priests, Judas his betrayer, King Herod, Pilate, the Roman soldiers, the blood thirsty mob, before them all Jesus, the Christ of God was supremely in control. And that was because he was Spirit-controlled. Jesus shows us that it can be done.

If you wonder why your life is a mess, if you get frustrated and fed up because things are out of your control, let me tell you why: it is precisely because you want control. Instead, you need to let go of control by surrendering to God's control.

In our self-determination and stupidity we think we can control our destinies and captain our own ship, only to end up shipwrecked on the rocks of life.

Fortunately, God doesn't pay us what we deserve:

"He does not punish us for all our sins; He does not deal harshly with us, as we deserve. For His unfailing love toward those who fear Him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth." (Psalm 103:10-11, nlt)

Instead, He comes to us in His gracious, generous, kind, and gentle self-control, and he offers to move in and take control—the One and Only truly controlled One longs to be given the chance to govern my life and yours, as God. He brings order out of the inner chaos of your character. In His absolute control He can come to you and bring true self-control. So the last question is...

3. How can I have self-control?

⁴ <https://www.chicagotribune.com/1997/10/21/teaching-rage-a-drivers-education-teacher-in/>

We've already figured out you don't get self-control by saying "no" to stuff, but by saying "yes" to Jesus. It's through Christ that you gain self-control. Do you have an anger problem? Is your mouth an open sewer, spewing out stuff that's bad? Do your emotions run rampant? Do your lusts rule your passions? Do your habits dictate your day? Then quit wrestling and give Christ control.

You know you want this, and you know it's not just a wish; this is possible. You *can* have this kind of self-control that you long for. Your dilemma is no different than the Apostle Paul's. Listen to what he says in Romans 7:

"Yes. I'm full of myself--after all, I've spent a long time in sin's prison. What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God's command is necessary. But I need something more! For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge. I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question? The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different." (Romans 7:14-25, tmt)

That was Paul's testimony before he was filled with the Spirit – because in the very next sentence he says (listen to this!):

"So now there isn't any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death." (Romans 8:1-2, ceb)

So how do we relinquish control and let the Spirit have control? Well, not like the little girl who was reciting the fruit of the Spirit and said it is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and remote control."

God doesn't operate your life from remote control. When you say yes to Him, He transforms you from the inside out—not a forced conformation but an inner transformation. Then you cooperate with him; you say "yes" to him.

The Bible says:

"Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be

able to know the will of God---what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect.” (Romans 12:2, gnb)

Then Romans 8:9 will be true of you:

“But your sinful nature does not control you. The Holy Spirit controls you. The Spirit of God lives in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ (*is not displaying the Fruit of the Spirit*) does not belong to Christ.” (Romans 8:9, nirv)

What's evident in your life? Who's in control?

When we lived in Idaho, we had a friend who owned some dry-cleaning stores. “One-Hour Dry Cleaning.” And I needed a suit cleaned in a hurry so I dropped it off and said I needed it in an hour, he said, “You can’t get it back until Thursday.” I said, “I thought you did cleaning in an hour?” He said, “No, that’s just the franchise name.”

Folks—those of us who carry the name Christian but fail to act like the One whose name we bear create confusion and disillusion for those who are not yet followers of Christ.

You might advertise one thing, but what’s the evidence of your life?

Once you’ve given control over to the Holy Spirit, then you can cooperate with him for your self-control. You do what he tells you. You listen to his voice through the Bible and through other strong Christians and even through his prompting in your Spirit. And then you cooperate. You say “yes” to him.

Let me give you an example of how that works (a friend of mine used this illustration): Let’s say that you decide you want to eat in more healthy ways. But you love chocolate eclairs. So you know that if you are going to get healthy, you need to stop eating chocolate eclairs. But chocolate eclairs taste so good! Still you decide to stop eating chocolate eclairs. But on a trip to the grocery store, you pass by a display of chocolate eclairs, and wouldn’t you know it, chocolate eclairs are on sale. So you decide to buy some – you don’t even feel like eating them – but after all they are on sale. Besides, you think, you’ll show how strong you are at resisting chocolate eclairs because they will be in your refrigerator and you still won’t eat them.

Every time you open your refrigerator, there are those chocolate eclairs. You feel the pull to just take a bite, but you say “no” – you won’t do it! You close the refrigerator door, proud of your self-control.

Until one night, it’s the middle of the night and you can’t sleep so you go to the refrigerator to get a glass of milk. You think – you know what would be great with a glass of milk? A chocolate éclair! Just one bite would help the milk go down better. If you think about it that way, chocolate eclairs are almost like medicine. So you take a bite to help you with your milk. By the time it’s sunrise, your stomach aches, you’ve got chocolate eclairs all over your face and the container is empty.⁵

⁵ Jay Carty, *Counter Attack: Gaining Back Ground Lost to Sin*

What's the moral of the story? *Don't put chocolate eclairs in your refrigerator!* Imagine if that scenario was about sin instead of chocolate eclairs. *By cooperating with the Holy Spirit, you would've never invited the sin into your space.* You would say yes to the Holy Spirit and leave it out of your refrigerator in the first place.

Is your home life out of control? Schedule? Finances? What about your thought life? Do you struggle with things like pornography – or do you flirt around the edges of it? What about your emotional life? Do you struggle with anger or resentment or bitterness or unforgiveness or judging others? Do you always see the worst in people?

You were never really able to control things on your own—God was always supposed to be the one in control.

In a minute we're going to pray. But it's not easy to pray about this—let me tell you, the “self” hates to give up control—that's your sin nature. But the Spirit of God can set you FREE—by taking control.

Here's the thing about the fruit of self-control – it isn't an end in itself; it's always for some greater purpose. It is about how you function in this world toward every person, no matter who they are or how well you know them. Whether they are family or friend or enemy or frenemy.

When we can't control our emotions or desires or behavior, we end up hurting one another. That's exactly what was happening to the Christians in Galatia. That's why Paul wrote this letter. Their differences of opinion had broken out into open conflict, and people were being hurt. Instead of serving one another, deferring to one another, and accepting one another, they were provoking one another, envying one another, and judging one another.

Why is self-control included in this list of virtues?

It's very simple: if we can't say "No" to our own comfort and convenience, we'll never be able to serve one another. If we can't say "No" to our preferences or agendas, we'll never be able to defer to one another. If we can't say "No" to our pride, we'll never be able to admit we were wrong, or to confess what's really going on in our lives. If we can't say "No" to fear, we'll never walk across the room to meet a stranger or come alongside someone in a season of grief. You see, the way to say "No" to ourselves is to say "Yes" to the Spirit.

Now we understand why the Apostle Paul put self-control at the end of the list. Paul begins his list with love, because it's the foundation of all the other words, and he ends his list with self-control, because without it, none of the others are possible.

Remember we do not accomplish these works of the Spirit in our own strength. We cannot produce love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and by ourselves any more than you can cut a branch off an apple tree and expect the branch to keep producing apples. The branch has no power to produce apples by itself; it has to remain with the tree, because that's where the life comes from. In the same way, it's only by remaining in Christ that we can see these

fruit being produced in our lives and our church. And we remain in Christ by saying "Yes" to the Spirit.

It's time to pray and get serious with God. Pray something like this:

Lord, the more I try to control myself the worse it seems to get; the more wound up and stressed I get, the more I seem to do the things I shouldn't. Self-control seems to be lost on me. I give up! I surrender myself to you! I want you to move in and control my life. Would you, Holy Spirit, take possession of me? Would you take full control of me? So that I can know the kind of control that isn't just saying 'no' to sin and the stuff around me, but even more so is always saying 'yes' to you? Jesus, you died for me, now I die for you so you can live in me by your Spirit. I pray it as you would want, in your name, Jesus Christ, Lord of my life."

Let me ask you this: why do we grow apples? What is the purpose of the fruit? Two reasons: one is for our consumption – for our benefit and health. The other is for propagation – so that there can be more apple trees.

Why do you think you are to bear the fruit of the Spirit? It's for the benefit of others, to contribute to *their* health and wellness, and to create opportunities for more people to become Christians. These fruit *might* benefit you, the same way an apple benefits the tree, but primarily it is for *others*.

So are you.

You may feel out of control of your passions and desires today. You'll never be able to change this in your own strength. But if you're prepared to turn to Christ and confess your sin and receive his forgiveness, you, too, can receive the Holy Spirit, and the strength to become the man or woman you were created to be.

Saying "Yes" to the Spirit isn't just a one-time decision; it's a day by day, and sometimes moment by moment proposition. Even if you're already submitted to Christ at some point in your life, chances are there are areas within you that are still out of control—habits or desires or behaviors that you just can't control. Daily surrender your control of these things to Christ.

Benediction:

"God has revealed his grace for the salvation of all people. That grace instructs us to give up ungodly living and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this world, as we wait for the blessed Day we hope for, when the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ will appear. He gave himself for us, to rescue us from all wickedness and to make us a pure people who belong to him alone and are eager to do good." (Titus 2:11-14)