

**But if you let it go**

**Galatians 5:22-26**

**John 12:24-25 (The Message)**

And so, we come to the end of our series of sermons looking at the “fruit of the Spirit”. Over the past 8 weeks we have looked at love and joy, at peace and forbearance, at kindness and goodness, and at faithfulness and gentleness. And today we reach into the basket and pull out the one remaining fruit, self-control Paul calls it, to see what this one tastes like.

You know, if you learn anything from this series, I hope it will be at least these two things: First of all, remember that it is fruit not fruits- singular not plural. It is not so much a buffet in which we pick and choose the ones we like and leave, at least for now, the ones that are a bit harder to chew. But it is rather a sort of combo, if you will- a package deal, they come together and cannot be easily separated.

The second thing I hope that you will remember is that this fruit is a gift to us from the Holy Spirit and not the other way around. It is something that the Spirit manifests and brings to life in us and not something we develop through our own hard work and bring as an act of obedience to God. The fruit of the Spirit is more of a God thing than it is an us thing.

Now when we talk about things like love and joy and peace and kindness, we can understand that as a gift from the Spirit. That makes sense. If we are closer to God, if we are more filled with the Holy Spirit, we will surely at least tend to be more loving and joyful, more peaceful and kind.

But self-control, that sounds a little different, doesn't it? Self-control is...well...control of myself by myself. Self-control is really on me, right? That's my job not God's.

But if that is the case, then it is a bit of an inconsistency for Paul to include it here. I mean, if all the other fruit is a gift or a manifestation of the Spirit then why did he tack this self-control thing on the end which would so obviously at least seem to be achieved by our own will and our own action? Just what is Paul up to here anyway?

The Greek word that Paul uses here that is translated as “self-control” is *egkrateia*. It is the virtue of one who masters his own desires and passions. The Greeks were big on that sort of stuff.

They saw the self as filled with selfish desires and immoral passions that we must constantly struggle to suppress and overcome. It was a sign of strength and integrity to have done so. *Egkrateia*, self-control, was a sign of great virtue and of mastery of one’s weaknesses.

But if that is what Paul is talking about too, about us, through our own hard efforts and struggle, achieving mastery of the self, then it a foreign object in this fruit basket. It doesn’t seem to belong here.

It would also seem to be in conflict with what Paul says both here and in others of his letters. Paul speaks often of dying to the self, about being crucified with Christ, about not being able to do the things he wants to do and doing the very things he wants not to do. So maybe, just maybe, Paul puts this word here. and puts it in the place that he does. to make a particular point.

The Greek thinking world at the time saw *egkrateia* as foundational to all other virtue. When we have mastered the self, only then can we achieve a virtuous life. They would have put self-control at the beginning of the list, the foundation on which all other virtue is built, a personal accomplishment to be proud of.

But Paul puts it at the end of the list, making it, in some sense, a fulfillment of all the others. When the Holy Spirit dwells in us and expresses its lived presence through us in love and joy and peace and forbearance and kindness and goodness, and faithfulness and gentleness, then control of one’s “self” and all that that means will inevitably follow because in living out the other eight we will have already moved the self from the center.

When we are other focused, focused on God and neighbor, then we are no longer so focused on ourselves. Perhaps what Paul is telling us here is that the only true way to control our self is to stop trying to control our self by our self, to stop letting God be our co-pilot and for pity sake, just let God fly the dang plane!

When my two oldest boys were just little guys, we moved to Blowing Rock. Of course, being new to the mountains, one of the first things we all set out to do was to learn how to ski. There was a “Junior Ski League” (they called it) that met once a week and taught the kids the basics of skiing.

So, I enrolled the boys in the ski league and while they were in their classes, I would work on my own skills. Let me say those were rather slow in developing. I took a couple of lessons and I knew in my head how one was supposed to turn and supposed to control one’s speed and to stop but I had a really hard time actually doing it. Most of the time I was pretty much an out of control falling object.

But after the boys finished their lessons each evening, we would ski together for the rest of the night session. And I found that when I was skiing with the boys, something changed. When they went to the right, I went to the right. When they went to the left, I went to the left. When they stopped or fell down, I did a perfect sliding stop alongside them. I had no idea how I did it, but I somehow just did.

You see, when I was with my boys my love for them and my protective father instinct just took over somehow. I couldn’t ski when I tried to control it with my head, but I found that I could ski just fine when I gave it over to my heart.

Maybe that’s sort of what Paul is trying to tell us here. Maybe he is trying to teach us that hard but most helpful of life’s lessons. Maybe he is trying to help us understand here that the best way to be in control is to let go of it.

Theologian Gerald May talks about the difference between “willfulness and willingness”. Willfulness, he says, is a setting of oneself apart from the fundamental essence of life in an attempt to master, direct, control, or otherwise manipulate existence. Willingness, by contrast, implies a surrendering of one’s self-separateness, an entering into the deepest processes of life itself.

Willingness is saying yes to the mystery of the Holy Spirit dwelling and moving within us. Willfulness is saying no to all that nonsense, or perhaps more commonly, yes...but.

Being willing, willing to surrendering our life and our self to the Holy Spirit is not about giving up or giving in, it is not about being a puppet or stopping all thinking and planning. It is rather a peaceful opening to a love we cannot yet fully imagine and a quiet trust in a future we cannot yet fully see.

Self-control, like all the rest of the fruit of the Spirit truly does come, the whole juicy basket of it, through somehow fully giving our heart and ourselves over to the indwelling and moving of the Spirit in our lives. But how do you do that? How do you do that indeed?

And the truth is, we can't. It is beyond our willful capabilities. But we are not without hope, for although we have no prescription that we can fill, we do have an invitation that we can send. And when we do, the guest will come. When we send the invitation, the guest will come.

But what does that invitation look like? Well, I can only speak from my own experience and what it looks like to me. But I have found that it often comes down to the same instruction I have often given to my children. You give the same instructions to your own children. I've heard many of you do it here.

Stop that.

Put that down.

Move over.

Be still.

Be quiet.

You've said it, right? Yeah, lots of times.

You know, it's good advice to tell ourselves, as well. Stop that. Put that down. Move over. Be still. Be quiet.

All I can say is that, in my own life, when I stop, even for a time, doing those things that benefit no one and really only distract me from what really matters,

When I finally put down those things I no longer need to carry, those burdens I no longer need to bear,

When I move my own self over and make room for others in my life and make room for God,

When I am truly still enough and when I am finally quiet enough for long enough the Spirit comes.

5

The Spirit comes,  
And so, does love  
And so, does joy  
And so, does peace  
And so, does forbearance  
And so, does kindness  
And so, does goodness  
And so, does faithfulness  
And so, does gentleness  
And so, does self-control.

Yes, my friends when we send the invitation, the Spirit comes.

Listen Carefully, Jesus tells us. Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal.

But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever. And forever is a very long time.