

Willfulness to Willingness
Titus 2:11-14, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27
First Presbyterian Church
November 11, 2018

Titus 2:11-14

11For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, 12training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, 13while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. 14He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

24Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. 25Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. 26So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; 27but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

You've all seen them – those emails that have a string of pictures of funny things people put up on church signs. I got one not long ago, it read; *“What Is Hell Like? Come Hear Our Preacher.”* Heather and I have been plugging through this nine-week series on the *“Fruit of the Spirit.”* We sure hope it hasn't been hell for you!

And today we come to the final fruit, *self-control*. Paul writes: *By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.*

Sermon¹

Well, Paul may just have saved the best for last! I mean, think about just how many problems in the world today could be solved with *self-control*? Crime would practically disappear... and with it much of the prison population. Alcohol and drug abuse would be drastically reduced... as would sexual, emotional and physical abuse... think of the saved marriages and families and lives if we would just have self-control. The divorce rate and the number of unwanted pregnancies would plummet. Automobile accidents would decline along with road rage... because there was self-control. Obesity would almost disappear more people would quit smoking. The school dropout rate would decline, and job performance would increase. All gossip and ridicule would have to yield to *self-control*. What would the nightly news report if people had self-control? The point is, the world would be a much better place if we would just have more *self-control*. But it's not because we don't.

¹ Throughout this series and again today I draw on two sermons preached by the Rev. Steve Eason. One was to the First Presbyterian Church in Richmond, VA. and the other to the Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church in Knoxville, TN.

Now, that's not to say there is no *self-control* among us. There is. Think of all the people around the world who will get up tomorrow morning and go to work no matter how tired they are or how tedious their job. Think about the man, who after getting cut off in traffic, thinks twice... and takes a deep breath... and just slows down. Think about the woman who realizes she's attracted to a married man she works with, and that the attraction is mutual, and makes sure she is never alone with him. Think about all the men and women who, when the hostess comes around to pour another glass of wine, simply say "No, thanks."

So, it's not that there is no self-control, it's just hard! We humans struggle with *self-control*. And this morning it might be helpful to remember that the Apostle Paul did too. In his well-known confession (which we used in our confession), this man who gave us this spiritual fruit in Galatians, once wrote to the Romans: *"I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want but the evil I do not want is what I do. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"*²

Well, if the great Apostle Paul wrote that, what are my chances? Well, not good... if it is up to me. Not good... if it depends on my willpower. And in Paul's day that's precisely what they thought. The Greek philosophers thought virtue WAS the work of the self... and that self-control was the place to begin. To live a virtuous life, they said, you must first bring your desires under control. Inside each person there are MORE noble and LESS noble aspects... and these aspects are always at war with each other... always fighting to see which will rule a person's life. And temperance, continence, moderation, self-control... these are necessary if our nobler self is to win the war.³ And that's all great, until it isn't... it works, until it doesn't. What happens then? When you look at these nine *fruit of the Spirit* – these nine characteristics of God – you quickly realize that we simply cannot produce these on our own... at least not all the time. I cannot produce unlimited amounts of unconditional love – my *love* will be limited. Your *joy* will likely be tied to circumstances – when things are good, you're happy... when things are hard, you're not. There are some things that we won't reconcile for *peace*. There is a limit to our *patience*, our *kindness*, our *generosity* and our *faithfulness*. I can try hard to be *gentle*, until you cross me. And the same is true with *self-control*. There's something in us that is unruly. We might be able to control our-self for a while, but not forever. So that Paul's battle is also our battle - *"We can will what is right, but we cannot do it. For we do not do the good we want, but the evil we do not want is what we do.*

Now, it's one thing to be controlled by external forces. You know, that's when you're cruising down I 40 and the sign says 70 but you're doing 80 (they tell me some people do that) and all of a sudden you see that state trooper parked in the median with a speed gun in his hand. And what's the first thing you do?

² Romans 7:18b-19, 21, 24-25

³ Phillip Kenneson, *Life on the Vine (Cultivating Self-Control in the Midst of Addiction)*, p. 223-225

Well, other than utter some words we can't say in church, the first thing you do is take your foot off the gas. But that's external control – something or somebody on the outside controlling the self. But as we all know... there's not always going to be a state trooper in the median clocking our speed... there comes a time when there won't be a parent or teacher to hold us accountable for doing our schoolwork... there's not always a friend available who will tell us we've had enough to drink. What happens then? What happens when there are no external controls?

Well, what we have been saying for the past eight weeks is also true today. The question is not so much what YOU are going to do... what I am going to do. It is what God's Spirit... given to each of us... living in each of us... working in each of us... it is what God's Spirit will do

I really believe our relatives and friends in *Alcoholics Anonymous* have much to teach us about *self-control*. The *Twelve-Step Program* developed by Bill Wilson and Dr. Robert H. Smith established twelve life-saving steps for recovery: First, we admitted we were powerless over alcohol— that our lives had become unmanageable. Second, we came to believe that only a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. Third, we made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him. Friends, that's the Christian perspective.

And there's more: Admitting to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. Being entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character and humbly asking God to remove our shortcomings. Seeking through prayer and meditation to improve our contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.⁴ Now did you hear how many times God is mentioned? That's a clear indication just how hard *SELF-control* is... and just how difficult it is to master our-*SELF*. And here's the thing – Though the road to recovery involves a lot of hard work, there's something that needs to happen before that hard work begins. Before the searching and fearless moral inventory... before making a list of people harmed and trying to make amends... before all of that something needs to happen. And I must warn you, it is counterintuitive – it may not immediately make sense. Before you and I will ever have the power of self-control, we must get through that most difficult first step of admitting that *WE* are powerless. Before we can find our true power, our willfulness must become our willingness to be filled and led by the Spirit of Christ dwelling in us. Call it submission... emptying... surrender... releasing control... but maybe what Paul is telling us here is that the only true way to control our self is to stop trying to do it *BY* our self... to stop letting God be our co-pilot, and for Pete's sake, just let God fly the plane! To be the master of myself I must be the servant of Christ.... because for the Christian, self-control is really Christ-control.⁵ By allowing my willfulness to be replaced by a willingness to be ruled by Christ and Christ only... by moving your *SELF* from center stage and asking Christ to be there, we create enough room for his Spirit to fill us and lead us and bear this good fruit in us.

⁴ See https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/smf-121_en.pdf

⁵ Stephen Winward, *Fruit of the Spirit* (Eerdmans, 1981), p. 202-203.

The fruit of self-control begs this question – where do I need it? If you were to go home this afternoon and take a blank piece of paper and draw four or five circles on it... and in those circles write the areas in your life that need self-control... that need to be tightened up because you are ruled by Christ... what would be in those circles? Where is it that you need the power and strength from God to fight a battle that maybe nobody else knows about, but you struggle with and you just might lose that battle if you don't exercise self-control – where is that place in your life?

Once you answer that question, you know where you (with the power of Christ's Spirit) need to go to work. Emmet Fox, in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount writes *If you seek to destroy in yourself everything which you know should not be there – not feeding or nourishing them by giving in to them but starving them to death by refusing them expression...then, you are worthy to be called the salt of the earth.* ⁶The things within me that I know shouldn't be there – whatever they are – I need to starve them. Because if I feed them they stay alive... they grow... and eventually, they take over. But when (with Christ's help) I can shut them down... when by the power of Christ Spirit, I can starve them they are deprived of the nourishment they need... and they will die. When you starve those things that stand in the way of your relationship with God and with others and with yourself... when you starve them, they will die. It's really not that complicated – Self-control is really not that complicated. It's just that hard to do! That's why we need this *fruit* as a gift of Christ's Spirit in us! You can't do it alone... nor can I. It will come from God.

Well, we've come to the end of this series, and it's interesting to me that the Bible begins with a story about people eating the wrong fruit. You've got Adam and Eve in this wonderful garden and the Lord says to them, "You can eat all of this... all this stuff is good... but don't eat THIS fruit." And what happened? That's the one fruit they wanted. Tell me I can't have it, and boy do I want it. And what was that fruit? The fruit of the knowledge of good and evil... the fruit that would make Adam and Eve like God. So, what is that story about? Stay inside the lines of being the creature. When you start trying to rise above what I have created you to be... when you have been given limits, but have no self-control, then our relationship is broken... and you don't stay in the garden because you don't want to be in the garden. And the rest of the book is about God restoring the proper order of creation... about God seeking to mend the break in the relationship... about God trying to teach us that staying inside the lines is best for us. Isn't it interesting... that at the end of the book... there is a bowl of different fruit that makes the life God intended possible? A bowl of different fruit that comes from God and makes God's life possible. *By contrast*, Paul writes... meaning different from the other fruit... different from the other choices... different from the other life... By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. There is no law against such things.

⁶ Emmet Fox, The Sermon on the Mount, p.51