

Self-Control

Fruit of the Spirit Series, August 28 & 29 | Galatians 5:16-24
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SELF-CONTROL IS CRITICAL.

Several employees of a Nashville Taco Bell lit fireworks inside their restaurant on July 5 this year.

After shutting the restaurant's doors to customers, several Taco Bell employees went into the men's restroom to avoid surveillance cameras and set off fireworks in the trash can.

Since that went so well, they lit something, put it in a trash can in the middle of the restaurant, and went outside to a safer distance where they could watch the fireworks go off.

Only later did they realize that they had locked themselves out of the store.

As smoke started billowing out of the trash can and filling the store, they called 911 for help.

The Nashville Fire Department responded, broke into the store, and put the fire out.

The fire did at least \$30,000 in damage.

Everything that happened in the store was caught on camera.

When asked, a Taco Bell spokesperson said that the employees involved are no longer with the company. Imagine.¹

Paul was driving home a point in the book of Galatians that might have helped.

For much of his letter to the churches of Galatia, Paul was arguing against legalism. Paul taught that the Gospel tells us that grace through Jesus Christ is free and that it brings us forgiveness and freedom without obligations. Paul didn't want us to add anything to the Gospel implying that have to earn grace. That's a big theme in Galatians. Legalism doesn't work.

A related theme would be good to keep in mind if you're thinking about setting off fireworks in a Taco Bell anytime soon. That second theme is that license doesn't work either. He even clarified that point in Galatians 5 just before writing about the fruit of the Spirit. In **Galatians 5:13** he wrote,

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh ...

We don't get to do just anything we want and anything that comes to mind.

Instead, Paul was advocating for self-control.

Self-control makes the list of characteristics of the Fruit of the Spirit Paul lists in **Galatians 5:22-23** which reads,

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

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/07/13/taco-bell-fireworks-fire-nashville/>

In Greek, the word for self-control is built off the word for "lord" or "lordship." In a sense, self-control is lordship or control over something or someone. Even better, self-control is leveraging our control of ourselves to gain power over everything around us.

The word "self-control" isn't found very often in the Bible because the concept of us being lords over things isn't native to the Bible. The Bible reminds us that Jesus is Lord and that we are always to surrender to him.

However, Paul used the term here, and we should be glad he did. Why?

Self-control is something most of us need!

Self-control doesn't come naturally to many of us.

We don't have the self-control to say "no" to sinful, unhealthy behaviors.

Nor do we have the self-control to say "yes" to godly, healthy behaviors.

In fact, for some of us, it probably seems at times like we are out of control, and we suffer the consequences of being out of control. We'd like to have more self-control!

Self-control is the last aspect of the fruit of the Spirit Paul listed.

If it's last, it must be important. For us, it's critical.

SELF-CONTROL COUNTERACTS SELF-INDULGENCE.

Galatians 5:16-18 talks about gratifying the desires of the flesh.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

From what Paul wrote in verses 16-18, I want to lift up the phrase, "you will not gratify the desires of the flesh."

Paul uses three terms in that phrase that we need to unpack if we want to really understand what he was writing: gratify, desires, and flesh. We're going to take them in reverse.

First, Paul uses the term "Flesh" to talk about our nature that is opposed to God and spirit.

The word translated as "flesh" in some cases simply means the tissue on our bodies, particularly our muscles. More broadly speaking, it can simply mean our bodies.

However, there are times when Paul uses the term "flesh" that he is contrasting flesh with spirit. There are also times when Paul uses the term "flesh" to mean everything that is not God and is opposed to God.

Paul even uses the term "flesh" to describe the part of us from which sin grows.

So when Paul wrote, "you will not gratify the desires of the flesh," he meant that we will not gratify the desires of the unspiritual, ungodly, God-fighting seat from which sin grows in us.

Backing up, Paul uses the term "Desire" to describe a tug of war going on inside of us.

Paul said that our unspiritual, ungodly, God-fighting seat from which sin grows in us has desires. It wants things. It pulls us toward those things.

At the same time, the Holy Spirit within us wants certain things. It is pulling us to those things—toward those behaviors, toward a certain way of thinking, and toward a character.

The desires of the flesh pull us one way while the desires of the Spirit pull us another. There is a figurative tug of war going on inside of us.

Consequently, when Paul wrote, “you will not gratify the desires of the flesh,” he meant that we are not to gratify the unspiritual, ungodly, fighting against God seat from which sin springs in our lives that is actively tugging, pulling, and dragging us in a bad direction.

Backing up all the way, Paul uses the term “Gratify” to imply that our flesh is taking us somewhere.

The word in our Bibles that reads “gratify” comes from the word that means “to bring to an end or to bring to completion.”

That nuance is important because it reminds us that the desires of the flesh are taking and leading us toward an end or a conclusion.

To us, gratifying the desires of the flesh means doing the sinful things that we dream up.

However, doing the sinful things our flesh dreams up is just the beginning of ensnaring us and making us slaves to sin, slaves to evil, ineffective servants of God, or future residents of hell.

When Paul wrote that we should not gratify the desires of our flesh, Paul was cautioning us to not allow the unspiritual, ungodly, fighting against God seat from which sin springs in our lives to drag us to act on every disobedient thought we have to the end that we become eternal slaves of sin. That’s what Paul is cautioning us against.

What we’re setting up is a massive battle inside us between self-indulgence and self-control.

Self-indulgence is a good way to summarize gratifying the desires of the flesh.

Self-control stands as a bulwark against the desires of the flesh ruining us.

Self-control counteracts self-indulgence.

SELF-CONTROL MEANS SAYING “NO” TO WRONG THINGS.

In Galatians 5:19-21, Paul told us to say “no” to a raft of wrong behaviors.

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Paul told us to say “no” to the works of the flesh.

Practically speaking, if you don’t say “no” at some point, you end up with “Tricki Woo.”

My wife, Tammi, and I have recently found the 2021 Masterpiece Theater version of *All Creatures Great and Small*, and we love it.

All Creatures Great and Small is the story of a young veterinarian in Great Britain in the 1930s.

In season 1 we meet Mrs. Pumphrey, a wealthy lady, and her pampered dog, “Tricki Woo.” Tricki Woo is Mrs. Pumphrey’s companion and obsession. She says “yes” to every desire of Tricki Woo’s heart and stuffs him full of meals, treats, and drinks.

Eventually, Trick Woo gets so large that he wheezes when he breathes and is barely able to move. His size jeopardizes his life and happiness.

If we don't say "no" at some point to gratifying the desires of the flesh, that's exactly what happens to each one of us. If we gorge ourselves with temptations, they ruin us.

Sexual sins held prominent places on Paul's list of the things to which we have to say "no."

Four out of sixteen works of the flesh that Paul lists involve intimacy gone wrong.

Why? Because sexual sin is particularly magnetic for many of us.

Beyond that, sexual sins have rippling consequences through every area of our lives. They touch everything we touch, they reshape our beliefs to justify our actions, they ensnare us at an identity level, and they tend to claim more and more aspects of our lives.

What does that mean?

It means that we need to have a healthy distrust of our own instincts when it comes to issues of intimacy. We are uniquely susceptible in this area.

It also means that we must develop a high capacity to say "no" to gratifying those desires.

At some point, you simply must exercise self-control by saying "no" to wrong things.

We can't wait until saying "no" is easy.

We must exercise our will and begin the process of bending our behavior in a new direction.

However, our will and saying "no" to the wrong things will only carry us so far.

THE HOLY SPIRIT RESHAPES OUR DESIRES.

Simply saying "no" won't always work.

Certainly, simply saying "no" doesn't work forever.

Temptation comes at us like the drip of water onto a stone surface. Our will may feel rock solid at the start. However, if water drips on a rock for long enough—particularly on the right kind of rock—it will begin to wear the rock away. Some kinds of rock will eventually dissolve. In a similar way, simply saying "no" won't work forever to combat the works of the flesh. If the force of our will is all we have, then eventually we will yield to temptation.

This is particularly true for people who struggle with impulse control problems. If you struggle with impulse control, my advice to you is to have a conversation with a Christian who can help. You will need additional support, encouragement, and accountability to get started.

For all of us, it is important that we remember that saying "no" is just one critical step toward self-control. For Christians, the Holy Spirit then changes our desires over time.

In Galatians 5:22-24, Paul wrote about the way the Holy Spirit reshapes our desires.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Ironically, with self-control, there is no matching quality in God.

For all of the other aspects of the Fruit of the Spirit, there is a matching or corresponding quality or characteristic to God.

The Fruit of the Spirit involves love and God is loving. The Fruit of the Spirit involves faithfulness and God is faithful.

That's important because, as we've said before, the Fruit of the Spirit is godly character.

When God the Holy Spirit is cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit inside of us, God the Holy Spirit is really cultivating God's own character inside of us.

However, at its most basic level, self-control is the ability to say no to our own sinful tendencies.

God doesn't have sinful tendencies since God is perfect.

Therefore, God doesn't need self-control.

How, then, does the fruit of the Spirit include self-control? There are two things we must know.

The Holy Spirit has crucified and is crucifying our flesh.

That's a difficult way to put the work of the Holy Spirit.

However, Paul said it directly here in Galatians 5:24 where he wrote that the Holy Spirit has crucified that unspiritual, ungodly, fighting against God seat from which sin springs in our lives. **Galatians 5:24** reads,

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

When we became followers of Jesus, part of our fleshly sin nature died at that moment. It was figurately crucified right along with Jesus.

We all recognize, though, that our unspiritual, ungodly, fighting against God seat from which sin springs is not fully dead yet. Consequently, the Bible repeatedly encourages us to let the Holy Spirit keep killing it until it is fully gone. In **Romans 8:13** Paul wrote,

For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

The Holy Spirit also reshapes us to want what God wants.

Self-control doesn't rise inside of us because God's self-control is shaped in us.

Instead, self-control rises inside of us because God's desires are shaped in us. The Holy Spirit causes us to want what God wants more and more.

Consequently, we develop self-control, the ability to resist our waning sinful desires.

SELF-CONTROL MEANS SAYING "YES" TO RIGHT THINGS.

Self-control means saying "yes" to new thoughts.

Saying "yes" to new thoughts is critical because what we think becomes what we do.

Old, fleshly patterns of thinking lead to old, fleshly actions.

New, spiritual, godly patterns of thinking lead to new, spiritual, godly actions.

Here's the problem: old patterns of thinking hold on tightly to our minds. Letting those old, fleshly patterns of thinking go doesn't happen easily.

The Bible is our weapon here because the Bible exposes the flaws with our old ways of thinking. If we will study the Bible, listen to it openly, and apply it to our lives, then the Bible will point out and root out those old, fleshly patterns of thinking.

Then adopting new, spiritual, godly patterns of thinking takes time, intentionality, and the work of the Holy Spirit as well.

Again, the Bible is our weapon in this struggle. As we study and listen to the Bible, the Bible will tell us how to think in godly, spiritual ways.

The key is to study and listen to the Bible and then to believe what it says. Whatever it says.

Self-control means saying “yes” to new behaviors.

We can't simply say “no” to a raft of old, fleshly, sinful behaviors in our lives. We must replace those old behaviors with something new.

Of course, we need some new “together” habits like regular worship, participation in a group, serving, sharing our faith, and giving generously.

We also need some new “on our own” habits like Bible study, prayer, and fasting.

We even need what we might call “one another” habits. The Bible tells us to love one another, and that thought guides what we think about people, how we talk about people, how we treat one another, and how we spend our time.

Self-control means saying “yes” to new together, on-our-own, and one-another habits.

Self-control means saying “yes” to forgiveness.

We have repeatedly gratified the desires of our flesh. We have all sinned.

We've heard that God offers us forgiveness in Jesus.

We may even have accepted that offer in the biggest sense by becoming Christians.

But when we think about the individual sins in our lives, we frequently hold onto ones that we hope God doesn't know about because we are convinced God would never forgive us if he did. It's a ridiculous thought when we think about it, but it's a silent prison for many of us.

Consequently, we are holding onto deep shame.

Ironically, that shame keeps us from breaking the power of the desires of the flesh over us. That shame makes us slaves to sin.

If we are going to break the power the flesh has over us, then we must accept the forgiveness we have been freely offered in Jesus.

Self-control means saying “yes” to Jesus.

When the Greeks wrote about self-control, they thought we could all be lords over ourselves, and they thought that it would be good to be lord over as much around you as possible through the course of your lifetime.

As Christians, we recognize that there is only one Lord and that we are not him.

Jesus is Lord of our lives and lord of all.

Ultimately, self-control is not getting lordship of ourselves and of the world around us. Self-control is recognizing that Jesus is Lord and obeying him.

When we do, he sends us the Holy Spirit.
Then our hearts can be free, and our will can be reshaped.
If you want to be free, say "yes" to Jesus today.