

## SELF-CONTROL: FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

Galatians 5:22-23

19 June 2011



Good morning and happy Father's Day. Today we conclude our look at the characteristics of a mature Christian life. The bible, in one of the letters from the apostle Paul calls these characteristics the Fruit of the Spirit. We saw at the beginning that the Greek Paul use has the singular "fruit" not a plural "fruits." So what he is saying is that when the Spirit of God lives in you, at your request and invitation, and as you grow into the image and likeness of God through cooperation with God, through the spiritual practices of worship, prayer, bible study, service to others and receiving the sacraments, **then** you will produce in your life a Spirit that is a closer approximation of divine love. The love you have, the love you show, and the love you share, will look different in different situations. So the apostle speaks of the fruit of the spirit being love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, goodness, and self-control. While they are similar in origin, they are significantly different in the way they operate in the world. Today we conclude with a look at divine love expressed in your life as self-control.

I am not really sure just how popular self-control is today. Yesterday Linda and I were shopping for father's day gifts. We stopped at Dinstuhl's<sup>1</sup> to get our fathers the traditional treats. There is a cooler in the store with chocolate covered blueberries, grapes, pineapple and, of course, strawberries. Oh they are so tempting. In the same cooler are cans of Diet Coke. Right—I'm supposed to show self-control by drinking a can of diet soda with all the natural and manufactured sugar in the gift boxes? Something is seriously out of kilter. What is self-control and how do we see it at work in the life of a believer?

We can consider what it means to have no self-control. You know the word atheist. That letter "a" when the Greeks are throwing their words around often means a negation of the word it is a part of. In that case atheist is someone with no God, a-theist. "Akrates" means no control, no government. You can hear echoes of the term in demo-krates, demo of the people, krates, control. Together that means government or control by the people. *Akrates* mean having no government, no control. Control is a good thing for believers. For example, Paul also warns us in 2 Timothy 3:



*But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power.*

People without self-control are quite simply not fully living. Addicts of all sorts, for example, are people for whom self-control is gone. The first step in the famous 12 steps of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dinstuhls.com/>

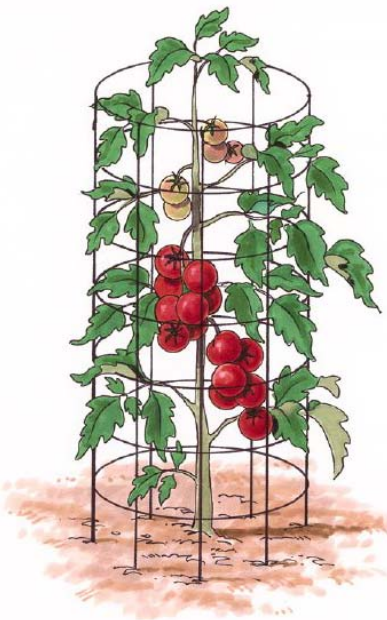
alcoholics anonymous states that truth bluntly. AA meetings begin with the assembled seekers claiming with step one “We admitted we were powerless over our addiction - that our lives had become unmanageable.” That is what Paul warns us about in 2 Timothy.

People who have the form of godliness but not its power, are slaves to every possible addiction, power, money, drugs, drink, sex, gambling, what have you. Without the power of godliness, in addition to its form, there is an empty, bottomless pit where the core of a person should be. St. Augustine,<sup>2</sup> the 5<sup>th</sup> century Bishop of the North African city of Hippo put it this way, “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in God. We find rest in God when we accept God, God’s presence in my life, God’s love active in shaping me and God’s Spirit at work in me, bringing forth new fruit that is good and wholesome and life giving.”

What Paul warns us is that without a governing principle, without a standard, without self-control, without the rest that we need in God’s love, we will follow every flashy, shiny thing that comes along. This is because self-control is always related to some principle, some standard. That principle, that standard, becomes the axis of your life, just as the axis of the earth is the line around which it revolves.

The bible, including Paul’s letters, takes for granted that good people—and believers ought to be found in that category—will have good, healthy, life-enhancing, community-enhancing principles and standards of conduct. The church takes as a given that we are charged with responsibility for dominion, rule over, power over, something, some many things, in fact. In the Genesis story God says that we humans are to have dominion over the earth for example. Dominion is a healthy rule, not harsh and uncaring. The fruit of the spirit expressed as self-control means that we are to govern ourselves, have dominion over yourself, and rule yourself. Christians are not supposed to be governed by or ruled by some lesser desire or standard that this, to grow into the image and likeness of Christ.

That likeness does not come to us all at once, in the blink of an eye. We, as I noted a few weeks back, usually want what we want right now. Instant TV, credit, meals, love, and success. But that is not how life works. We are created to mature, to grow into the image we are to seek. Still, I hear people who “. . . want instant sainthood. We want miracle rather than self-control. At times walking on water seems easier than walking on dry ground as a disciple of Jesus Christ.” (*The Harvest of the Spirit*, Tom Langford) But we are made to grow. We are created to grow into a fully mature person.



A person becomes fully mature through the exercise of self-control. That means that we say yes to some things and no to other things. To what do we say no? Consider tomato plants. My father in law taught me what little I know about tomato plants. I now, for example, that after the first fruit bearing stem is detected, the gardener must remove the “suckers” that grow below that stem. Suckers will produce great amounts of beautiful foliage. What they do not produce is fruit. Suckers absorb needed nutrients and the plant will not produce as many, or a large or in some cases, any more, tomatoes. The suckers have to be removed. That means there are now fewer branches on the plant. The branches that are left, though, are the ones that produce the tomatoes.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustine\\_of\\_Hippo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustine_of_Hippo)

John 15:2 quotes Jesus as saying “God cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.” A person becomes mature but cutting away behaviors, words, attitudes that suck spiritual energy, good growth from them. We become mature as we accept the time to spend in prayer, bible study and worship. We become mature as we give freely our time and talent and money to providing food and drink, clothing and shelter and welcome and loving care to those who need those things.

People become mature as they practice self-control over their words. No one can stop you from thinking whatever you want to think. In many cases the only person who can stop you from saying whatever you want to say is you. Consider US astronaut James Lovell. One of Lovell’s missions was Gemini 7 with Frank Borman. The two men spent two weeks in a space about the size of the front of a VW Beetle. The two did not bathe. They did not wash their hair. They practiced minimal dental care. They did not change any clothes. Is that enough information for you? One interviewer asked Lovell what the smell was like for the navy frogmen who opened up the hatch to Gemini 7 and had all that odor pour out? Lovell is a gentleman by all accounts. He replied to the question, “What did it smell like? It spelled a whole lot . . . different from the fresh ocean breeze of the South Pacific.” Mature people practice self-control over their words. [*Packing for Mars*, Mary Roach]



Sticks and stones may break my bones but words do surely hurt me. Many of us are old enough to remember the original king of bullying comedy, Don Rickles. Rickles once said to a man about the man’s toupee, “All that’s missing from that thing is the word ‘Welcome!’” Tracy Morgan<sup>3</sup> is one in a long line of modern comics who discover that formally silent people will not take verbal abuse even if it is disguised as humor. Lies on the internet, gossip in the office, suggested looks and gestures in church and words damage a person’s reputation, injure relationships and can end careers, friendships and even marriages. Mature Christians do not gossip, even if we pretty it up by calling it a “prayer request.”<sup>4</sup>

We become mature as we practice self-control over our actions. Years ago a friend of mine told me he had to leave the company he was working for. “Why” I asked, he had a good track record as a sales rep. “It’s like this, when the guys and I are on the road too many of them take the attribute “My wife may be married but I’m not. I can’t change them and I am afraid that they are changing me.”

Mature Christian self-control acts on this truth. Our actions reveal what we really value, respect and care about. The old saying in regards to food is “enough is as good as a feast.” Self-control allows us to stop before the food is all gone. No matter how often you had to be a member of the clean plate club as a child. Self-control moves you to seek time with Jesus and to seek time with His followers. Self-control accepts that you might be tired, but prayer time is too important to skip. Self-control allows you to walk away from the provocative word, the disrespectful attitude and the dismissive behavior of those poor wounded people who have not yet learned the strength that is rest in the heart of God.

Christian Self-control is when we practice the five Rs. I don’t know who first came up with these steps, but I am glad there are available to us. Self-control in the face of temptation teaches:

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<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tracy\\_Morgan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tracy_Morgan)

<sup>4</sup> <http://blog.beliefnet.com/stuffchristianculturelikes/2009/11/102-gossip-via-prayer-request-1.html>

1. **Remove yourself from the temptation.** Just get away from it.
2. **Recognize the consequences of your actions.** Sure telling off someone in public with loud voice and abusive language may feel good now, but what about tomorrow? What if the person is a family member or employer?
3. **Remember who you are.** You are a child of God. 1 Peter 2:10 reminds us “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” You are so important that Jesus himself practices the self-control necessary to leave heaven, be born in a barn, live your life and die your death—all of that for your wellbeing.
4. **Rededicate yourself to God.** Annually we have a re-affirmation of baptismal vows here at Mullins. We do that to teach everyone that in the face of temptation, re-dedicate, re-commit yourself to the God who is your strength and protector.
5. **Reveal the struggle.** In the words of an old John Prine song, “Everybody needs somebody that they can talk to.”<sup>5</sup> My office is always open. The telephone works here, at home and by me cell. My path in life is to be pastor. I am not the shepherd of the flock. Jesus is our shepherd. My role is pastor. My calling, training and joy is to be your support, director, counselor, friend and if need be, irritant until you move into a healthy spiritual direction. Pastoral confidentiality is more than a slogan; it is a way of life.

Finally, Christian self-control is really not a battle you fight on your own. It is about turning your control over to the One who not only never will injure you, but the One who is incapable of hurting you, Jesus Christ. When you stop the fight to be king or queen of the hill, when you accept that the only way to real freedom is to turn your life over to Jesus, allow him to have his way with you and actively cooperate with him in the growth of the fruit of the Spirit, then your true self is released from all the temptations that will otherwise trap and twist you. Then self-control is easy because the new, self that Jesus returns to you is healed or healing, renewed and recharged, set free from all the garbage that traps any of us. Or, to use an old fashioned expression, you are given a self that is redeemed, reborn and re-introduced to the joy of living.



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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaZeFibYxr0>