

**THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT, PART 8 (SELF-CONTROL)**  
**Galatians 5:22-23**

Now we've been talking a lot about freedom in chapter 5, how Christ has set us free: free from the Law and from the sin nature – freedom to walk by the Spirit and live for Christ! However, freedom in Galatia was being forgotten. It was being renounced and abused. They had no control over their flesh because they were constantly feeding it by promoting the pride of legalism and the passion of license. So one of the most important virtues, a sort of foundational virtue for all the other virtues we've looked at, Paul saves for last: self-control (everyone's favorite). Self-control is one of those virtues that's so important that if you don't have it, you won't have anything going for you on any level. All it takes to really mess up your life is just one moment lacking self-control. Proverbs 25:28 says, "Like a city that is broken into and without walls, is a man who has no control over his spirit." The flesh wants to destroy our influence for God but self-control is a fortress, a protecting, restraining wall. And many who have let their guard down for a moment have lost their ministries, family, friendships, finances, careers, basic freedom or a host of other things. Self-control is critical and because of the legalism that was going on in Galatia, the flesh was not under control. It was having a hay day. They weren't walking by the Spirit or being led by the Spirit, they were letting themselves be led by the flesh. It had control of them. What the Galatians needed was this final fruit of the Spirit virtue as a foundation for the other virtues. Notice the lack of self-control going on in Galatia.

[Read Text – Gal. 5:13-26]

If you are just joining us we have been studying the book of Galatians this year and have been gratefully hung up in chapter 5 all summer but this will likely be our last message in chapter 5 as we look at this last virtue called self-control. And I just want to praise God and thank God for chapter 5. I remember being at the end of Galatians 4, feeling a little heavy in the head because of all the great arguments given by Paul concerning his apostolic credentials and history from chapters 1 and 2, and the doctrine we were studying in regards to the relationship between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant and our relationship to both covenants from chapters 3 and 4. We had a lot of head knowledge coming into chapter 5, but now, both personally and after talking with many of you, we have certainly felt a lot of the weight in our heads begin to move down into our hearts. And it's been good. When the individual is transformed by the truth of the grace gospel, so is the community. And one of the virtues of the Spirit that would really transform the Galatian community of believers is this **restraining grace** virtue of self-control (2 Thess. 2:6). He is the Restrainer.

**I. THE SPIRIT PRODUCES SELF-CONTROL.**

Now first, the primary danger with the virtue of self-control is to latch onto that word "self" and run with it, thinking that this is just a virtue of self-effort. But that would be to dive right back into legalism wouldn't it? The fruit of self-control is much different than that. The self-control of the Spirit, can be consistent without being cold and rigid like legalism or asceticism. But it would have been a shame if Paul said, "Now the deeds of the flesh are such and such, and those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God," and then just stopped there and said, "Now fix yourself." What a spirit-crushing verse that would be if left to itself, because when we look at that list we know we don't deserve to inherit the kingdom of God – not a one of us. All of us are guilty of things on that list and continually war against the things on that list and it's only a taste sample of the works of the flesh! He says, "Things like these!" – So we're just looking at the cover of the catalog. If it were a magazine, instead of In Touch Weekly, but this is In the Flesh Weekly. Instead of Good Housekeeping, it's Good Fleshkeeping. There's so much more Paul could add to this list in verses 19-21 and already, it's enough to sort of hang all of us out over the flames of hell and

proves all of us sinners. Reminds me of Paul, when he spoke with governor Felix about Christ. Acts 24:25 says, “But as he was discussing righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix became frightened and said, “Go away for the present, and when I find time I will summon you.” This verse can do to us what Paul did to Felix. Paul shared with Felix about righteousness and God’s standards, self-control and probably how he didn’t have the ability to meet those standards on his own, and the judgment to come because of it. Paul was preparing him to receive the good news of the gospel, that Jesus came to rescue us from judgment and give us that much needed self-control. The key word is practice – all who *practice* such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. Which tells us, if we are not to habitually practice such things, we need self-control – specifically, control over fleshly sin nature! And praise God for the breath of fresh air in next few verses because Paul says we aren’t going to do this in our own effort but we have help! It’s only possible through the work of the Spirit who crucified the flesh (v.24) when we believed (*Rom. 6 – sermon on Galatians 5:16-26 – Walk(!) by the Spirit sermon available online*). We fight the flesh from victory. Victory is available and attainable. Before we were saved, we just slaves to the flesh. We had no other option. But now we can choose to walk according to the Spirit and that Spirit is working in us to that effect.

I think the **wax fruit of self-control** would be for someone to stop reading at verse 21 and say, “Well, I’d better get myself under control and just try to be a better person or I’m going to hell” – **missing the gospel message in it** that you can only do it by the power of the Holy Spirit first. Wax fruit self-control misses the gospel message and dives right back into the self-effort realm of religion and legalism. There’s a lot of people out there who don’t smoke or drink or chew or go out with girls who do; a lot of folks who get up and go to church or give money to the church but don’t really know Jesus Christ or have a relationship with Him or His Spirit. They have a form of self-control but are lacking gospel power and the other fruit virtues like love, joy, peace, patience! Look, it doesn’t matter how good you are or how religious you are (how self-controlled you are), it won’t save you. Only faith in Christ will. Legalism says, “I will do this thing or not do this thing to try and earn salvation with God,” but Spirit-driven self-control says, “I will do this or not do this because I am saved and love Him who gave Himself for me.” 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 says it’s the “love of Christ controls [lit., restrains] us...” It is His love for us in the gospel and the new experience of the Holy Spirit that restrains us. Keep that in mind as we talk about “Self” control. **It is a benefit only made possible by grace already received.** Self-control itself is a restraining work of grace and...

❖ **Restraint is required for freedom.**

Think of finances: if you just buy everything you want you’ll always be a slave to debt. Financial freedom requires restraint. And while it seems almost paradoxical or counterintuitive at first to say that the Spirit produces “self”-control, it actually makes perfect sense with what we’ve been saying all along: that we can only walk by the Spirit because we live by the Spirit. The imperative/command to walk is based upon the indicative/spiritual reality that we already live by the Spirit. So we have self-control because the Spirit has control of us. That’s Paul’s balanced approach to the Christian life we’ve looked at more than once here. We work out our salvation with fear and trembling, yet knowing it is God who is at work in us (Phil. 2:12-13). Paul said, “I worked harder than anyone! Yet not I, but the grace of God with me. By the grace of God I am what I am,” (1 Cor. 15:10). So we’re aren’t pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps in a self-sufficient mindset but also aren’t just “letting go and letting God” as if we’re losing all control and just becoming passive. **One of the weaknesses of fallen man is to go to extremes** like that. In regards to Christ, men have argued He is either totally God or totally man. But we know He is both: Full God, fully human. In regards to the inspiration of the Scriptures: Are the Scripture a mere product

of men or of God? Were these men really writing with their own personality and style or were they merely automatons, pens in the hand of God, where they went into a trance? These men weren't robots. They were in control and at the same time moved by the Holy Spirit and spoke from God His exact Words (2 Pet. 1:21). We could call that dual authorship.<sup>1</sup> Men wrote it, but it's not just a book written by men (1 Thess. 2:13). It is God's Word.

I give these examples because this is where some get off balance, teaching or thinking that when the Spirit is in control, they just become robots or something and they lose control of themselves. The idea is the Spirit sort of comes and "fills" them and they are basically a glove to the hand of the Spirit inside them controlling them. A friend sent me a video recently of a preacher guy doing this: Paul said don't get drunk with wine but be filled with the Spirit and so this "preacher" who got up to "preach" sort of staggered up the stair to the pulpit and was slurring his words, acting just like a drunk person, saying he was filled with or drunk in the Spirit. Others in the video lost control of their tongues and were speaking gibberish or rolling around on the ground in what they call "holy laughter". That sort of thing is a mockery of the work of the Spirit. In fact, I would even say it's the flesh work of idolatry. One of the worst forms of idolatry going on in churches today are those who are faking the work of the Holy Spirit like that. It's a terrible distortion of the Spirit's work. The Spirit produces self-control, not lack of control. When we're filled with the Spirit it doesn't mean we get more of Him but that He is in full control and we are fully yielded to Him.

But unlike meekness that we looked at last week, self-control was actually a highly desired quality in Paul's day, a cardinal virtue. Virtue lists were common and Greek philosophers like Socrates or Aristotle certainly had self-control on the list of virtues.<sup>2</sup> And to have self-control is to have **self-mastery** or **self-restraint**. It is a restraining grace of God. **Both the conscious that says "no" and the ability to actually carry it out is a restraining work of God's grace.** Titus 2:11-12 says, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in this present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds." It's God's grace that teaches us to say no and live sensibly. Only when we put our faith in Christ can we truly put our heads on straight and gain control over ourselves. So much of self-control begins in the mind. Self-control really begins in our thought life with thinking sensibly; thinking that which is sound.

❖ **Self-control requires thinking before you act.**

We don't just act on impulse. You have to think is this of the flesh or of the Spirit? 2 Timothy 1:7 says, "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, of love and of a sound mind." Some translate that as power, love and self-control. Self-control only comes from a sound mind given by the Spirit. We're being transformed by the renewing of our mind. We have a sound mind with sound judgment that sees the desire to run off into legalism or license. A sound mind doesn't see either one as profitable. The gospel has restored us to our senses.

## **II. WE HAVE SELF-CONTROL OVER THE FLESH'S DESIRE FOR LEGALISM.**

We are no longer searching frantically to exalt ourselves through works and we're no longer placing unbiblical and unwarranted demands upon people that God doesn't place on them. We have a sound mind produced by the Spirit that no longer sees living by works as sensible and so we are restrained from legalism. We have self-control over the flesh-desire of legalism. What a blessed thing it is to have a mind at rest in Christ that just accepts His sacrifice as enough. To by faith, be able to simply wait for the hope of righteousness (5:5). To live by legalistic works, in light of what Christ has

done, is insane! It's to be out of your mind That's why Paul called them foolish – “you foolish [stupid] Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eye Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?” Think about what you're doing! Why in the world, if Christ did all the work, would you still try and work for it? Why in the world, if God offers you perfect righteousness through faith, would you still try to build your own righteousness? It doesn't make sense. Also...

### **III. WE HAVE SELF-CONTROL OVER FLESH'S PASSION FOR LICENSE.**

And this is most commonly what self-control is contrasted with – immorality. He restrains us from the opposite extreme of the flesh in its passion to indulge in the sin. We have been given a sound mind and have come to our senses. We want to please our new Master, not the old master of the flesh. I think of the story of the prodigal son who took his inheritance and squandered it on loose living in a distant country – after indulging in the flesh until he spent everything he had, he finally saw how hollow and empty it was to live for the flesh, as he was now dining with the swine. But Jesus said, “When he came to his senses,” (Lk. 17) he decided to return home to his father and confess his sin. As believers, we've come to our senses about sin. We are no longer un-controlled, frantically and helplessly trying to find some sort of satisfaction in this world by pleasing the sin nature. Instead, we hunger and thirst for righteousness, but not just for our own sake either – for the glory of God. But there's another element I don't want us to miss. I think we need to...

### **IV. LEARN TO SEE SELF-CONTROL AS OTHERS-CENTERED.**

Many commentators said self-control is mainly a personal virtue, but I beg to differ. I think it can be just as others-centered as the other virtues. Self-control isn't just about self. Certainly, it has its personal rewards, but we need self-control to serve others and influence others for Christ.

#### **A. Self-control is for servicing others.**

Because we're no longer dominated by the flesh with its desire to live for self alone and please self, operating on the whims of our body's emotions and cravings or what the world says we should do with our lives, we now have the ability to really put others first. One man said, “O God, help us to be masters of ourselves that we may be servants of others.” Self-control is foundational for fulfilling the Law of Christ and loving our neighbor as ourselves because it restrains us from only living for ourselves. In order to live for others you have to master yourself first to put your preferences aside. The Good Samaritan who showed compassion to the man on the side of the road needed self-control: to stop and put his agenda for the day on hold, put his own life at risk by stopping and maybe getting robbed himself, and self-control over his finances to give money to the innkeeper. Self-control is for serving others. **Why do you need the self-control over legalism?** So that it doesn't tear you or others down spiritually. Paul just said in 5:9, “A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough.” All it takes is a little bit of legalism for the whole church community to be contaminated by it so for our own spiritual health and the health of others, we restrain the legalism. **Why do you need the self-control over sinful passions like jealousy?** Because, like the writer of Hebrews said, many are defiled by it. “See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.” All it takes is one little root of bitterness for it to become an oak tree in the congregation that requires a lot more work to cut down. I kind of mentioned this a few weeks ago when we talked about goodness but even what we consider our own little personal and private sins, affects others, having ethical, interpersonal, relational results. You have to think about how your sin is supporting the

destruction of others' lives, creating a market for it, or harming the testimony of the church, etc. If you study those works of the flesh again, you'll see most involve relationships.

But I also want to stress that we need the others for self-control. Alcoholic Anonymous knows that it takes a group to overcome addictions sometimes. We need one another. God has so composed the body and imparted and distributed Spirit gifts, all drinking of one Spirit, to care for one another (1 Cor. 12:24-25). We experience the Spirit of God in greater effect when we're together. Being a part of a local church **encourages** us and holds us **accountable** and keeps us **balanced**. Proverbs 27:17 says, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." There's accountability. Hebrews 10:24-25 says, "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another..." So there is encouragement in the body. Someone was sharing with me the other day how interesting it is that we're less tempted to do certain things when others are around, like kids. When we meet together, we know it's not just about us and the Spirit is in it.

#### **B. Self-control comes with reward.**

If we want any sort of influence for God, to be useful, fruitful, have a conscious assurance of our own salvation and have an abundant entrance into heaven, 2 Peter 1 is clear: we are to add self-control to our faith. To supply it on top. To fail to have self-control will make us useless, unfruitful, it will make us doubt our salvation (even if you really are saved – 2 P. 1:10) and stumble in many ways. Self-control *must*, not should, be added to our faith if we ever expect to grow or be useful for the Lord at all and be rewarded greatly in heaven. There's two passage I recommend reading later on self-control: I Cor. 9:24-10:13 and I Thess. 4:1-12. I Thessalonians say we need to learn how to steer our own ship or possess our own vessel. But in 1 Corinthians 9 Paul gets real nitty gritty – talking about boxing yourself. "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize?" This is something the Corinthians could really relate too in their sports culture with the Olympic games and local Isthmian games. They would compete for some sort of an ivy wreath and a plaque with their name on it to hang on their city wall or even for a tax-free status. And if someone wants to win, they can't mess around. They order their entire lives around this goal of winning the race. Michael Phelps didn't become the most decorated Olympian of all time by slacking off. He had to change the way he thought, change his habits, and make sacrifices. He had to say no to certain things – no to sleeping in or skipping practice, no to dessert. I heard about a pastor who liked to have a hot fudge sundae every Sunday night but everyone now and then he says no just to remind his flesh who's in control.

Paul says, "Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises **self-control in all things**. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified." Have you ever done that? Boxed your own body? We get a little taste of each morning we're tempted to sleep in, right? We can't let our flesh win and disqualify us from our rewards. Titus 1:8 says elders are to be self-controlled, because who are we to lead and preach to others if we ourselves don't have self-control? We disqualify ourselves from that position and the future reward of that crown of glory. We've got to make sure we're living it out, keeping in step with the Spirit.

I could probably go on and on about different things that would help us with self-control like a consistent intake of the Word of God and prayer but you know those things. Instead, I want to stick the Corinthian passage and learn from the example of other real people because sometimes that helps it stick the best.

**1. Take heed to warnings. (1 Cor. 10:1-12)**

Paul goes on to talk about the Israelites in the wilderness in 1 Corinthians 10 and picking up in verse 1-11, “Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness. Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink, and stood up to play.’ Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer [probably talking about the sons of Korah]. Now these things were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.” Take heed to the biblical warnings like this that were written for us. Get serious about sin (Gen. 18-19; Mk. 9:42-48). It’s not just a problem or a personality disorder. It’s sin. Do away with immorality, testing the Lord (constantly questioning His character and motives and sovereignty), grumbling... Learn from their mistakes. I bet the Israelites now living in eternity wish they could come back and try again but there’s no place for repentance once you’re on the other side. God laid them low in the wilderness and Jesus can and does do the same in His church (1 Cor. 11:30-31; 1 Jn. 5:16; Rev. 2:19-23). God will not be mocked. You reap what you sow. Everyone runs, but not all win.

**2. Stay humble. (1 Cor. 10:12)**

1 Cor. 10:12 continues, “Let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.” So stay humble. Never think you’re beyond falling like the Israelites. Pride comes before the fall (Prov. 16:18).

**3. Flee immorality. (1 Cor. 10:13; Gen. 39)**

“No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.” One of keys to victory is knowing it is available and attainable. You can flee. I always think of Joseph when Potiphar’s wife was after him. Day after day after day she went after him and he didn’t give in. He avoided her. You know what Joseph said to Potiphar’s wife when she tried to force him to commit immorality? “How...could I do this great evil and sin against God?” You see where his focus and reasoning was. He was all about glorifying God. And one day she tried to grab him by force and make him yield, he had to run. She was left holding his robe but he was gone. Sometimes you have to run like that to keep in the step with the Spirit. Flee immorality! Walk by the Spirit, even if it means run!

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology Vol. 1&2, Bibliology: Inspiration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1976), 73-74.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic of Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 366.