

“The Fruit of the Spirit: Self-Control”

(Galatians 5.22-23a)

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

November 25, 2018

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and – finally – self-control. Nine gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to those of us who bear the name of Christ. Not the only gifts, to be sure, but nine *important* gifts. *Good* gifts. *Special* gifts.

We’ve taken a tour of the first eight; today we come to the last. Many of these, we have seen, are traits that God or Jesus have in abundance. The call laid upon us Christians is to grow to become more like Christ as we grow and mature in the faith. God does not want any of us to just *stay the same*.

This final fruit is “self-control.” The King James and some other translations call it “temperance.” Temperance, according to Merriam-Webster, means, “moderation in action, thought, or feeling: restraint.” Or, “habitual moderation in the indulgence of the appetites or passions;” or, more specifically, “moderation in or abstinence from the use of alcoholic beverages.” You may have heard of the “temperance movement,” a social movement against the consumption of alcoholic beverages, which became prominent in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and led to Prohibition during the 1920s. That’s one example of “self-control,” though of course, whenever you try to *legislate* things like this, it generally doesn’t work very well. Prohibition was repealed in 1933. Self-control isn’t something you can *force* on other people. It grows from *within*. It is, as Paul tells us, a *gift* of the Holy Spirit.

The Greek word is *egkrateia*. It derives from the preposition “en” and the noun “kratos”. “Kratos” means “power,” “dominion,” or “mastery.” It has to do with having power, dominion, or mastery over *oneself*. One lexicon defines it as “the virtue of one who masters his desires and passions, especially his sensual appetites.” It means having *power* over those habits that might get you into trouble, *dominion* over those desires that might lead you astray, *mastery* over all those things that might tempt you. It means: if you like to drink, you don’t drink to excess, and you don’t lose control; if you like to shop, you don’t spend frivolously on things you will never use or wear; if you like to eat, you enjoy your food, but you don’t *keep* eating when your body has had enough (even if that pumpkin pie looks really good!); if you like to gamble, you know when to stop, before you waste away huge sums of money. It means that when you get angry, you don’t take it out on other people (or animals, or things). It means you know how to control your spending, so your household finances are in order. It means you keep your sexual desires within appropriate bounds (the covenant of marriage). It means that whenever temptation comes along – of *any* variety! – you know how to resist, to *stand strong*.

I don't know many people who truly *excel* at this.

We live in such an incredibly *indulgent* culture. Whatever we want, we can *have*. You name it, it's available online, and *you can buy it*, because you've got a credit card, and you don't have to pay for things right away. You can go to a restaurant and order whatever you want, as much as you want, and they'll give you a plenty big plate to put it on. You can watch TV or movies at all hours of the day and night. Remember when there were no DVD or VHS players, when the networks went *off the air*, and all you could see on your TV were those colorful stripes running down the screen? Remember the days before the internet? We somehow managed to shop and communicate without it! Some of you may even remember the days before credit cards. Credit cards *didn't exist* until 1950! We didn't *need* them!

The statistics are staggering. Today, according to CNBC, the average American is \$38,000 in debt (that figure does not include home mortgages). And today, according to the Centers for Disease Control, almost 40% of Americans are clinically obese, with a much greater risk of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and certain types of cancer. We Americans like to *spend money* and we like to *eat*. Both are fine in moderation ... but when taken to excess, they can *destroy* us.

And the fruit of the Spirit is ... self-control. Moderation. A gift, that the Holy Spirit *wants* to give us. Is *trying* to give us. The question is, is this a gift that we want to *receive*?

When you drink ... do you know (before you start!) when you need to stop? Are you *able* to stop, when that time arrives? When you shop ... do you know (before you start!) how much you can afford to spend? Do you *stick your original plan*, even if there's *more* you still "want"? When you eat ... do you have a realistic sense of how much food (and what kinds) your body truly *needs*? Some foods don't even make you feel full, no matter how much you eat them. You eat, and you don't feel satisfied, and so you *keep* eating, and you *still* don't feel satisfied ... and before you know it, you've consumed a whole ton of food that your body *didn't really need* and, frankly, doesn't particularly appreciate.

The fruit of the Spirit is ... self-control. Moderation. The ability to say, "No, I don't really *need* that," whatever *that* may be. Clothes. Food. Fancy vacations that you can't really afford. An excess of *anything*. Too much alcohol. Sex, with the wrong people. You name it. It's the ability to say "no."

I'm not saying, "Have no fun." God gave us hearts; God gave us the ability to have pleasure, in an infinite variety of ways. It is *good* to have fun. To truly *enjoy* life. To enjoy that good meal, that nice outfit, that hobby that makes you feel truly *alive*, that intimate time with your spouse. But God also gave us *brains*, and he actually expects us to *use* them. To know when it's best to say "no."

What the Holy Spirit wants to give us is the ability to enjoy life *in moderation*. With *mastery* over the various desires and urges we naturally have, so that we *won't* be burdened by a massive amount of debt, so that we *won't* end up with all sorts of medical conditions that we could have avoided if we had made different choices, so that we *won't* hurt ourselves or our loved ones because of our own foolish choices. The Holy Spirit wants to give us the ability to make reasonable choices by considering the hidden *cost* of anything we do. A nice meal at that fancy restaurant might cost a hundred bucks, which might be *fine* – except how much are you *really* going to end up paying for it, if your credit card is

overspent and you're already being charged a hefty amount of interest every month? That cigarette might feel really good *now*, but how are you going to feel when the cumulative cost of *all* those cigarettes over the years add up? When I was in my teens, I watched my grandfather die from lung cancer. It sure would have been nice to enjoy a few more years with him.

The Holy Spirit doesn't want us to live our lives with unnecessary burdens. Credit card debt – that's a major burden. Obesity – that's a major burden. Constantly asking people to give you handouts because you haven't learned how to manage your money – that's a major burden. Alienating friends and family members because you haven't figured out how to control your temper – that's a major burden. Addictions, of every variety, everything from sugar to coffee to alcohol to gambling to drugs to sex – those are all *major* burdens. These are not the kind of lives God had in mind when he created us. But, all too often, these are the kind of lives people fall into. Even *good* people. Well-meaning people. *Christian* people. Yes, it happens to us, too, when we're not vigilant, when we pick up some bad habits, when we fail to think through the consequences of our actions, when we don't *really* know how to say "no" to temptation. *Anything* can become a temptation. Even the *good* things in life.

The Holy Spirit wants to give us a gift. The gift of self-control. The gift of moderation.

I have only one piece of advice. Well, two, really. The first is simply this: *count the cost*. Count the cost *before* you make any kind of decision when you are feeling tempted. You know what your issues are; you know what you struggle with; you know what things you find most tempting in life. At least, you *better* know them; we all need enough self-awareness to know where, in particular, the devil like to trip us up. Each of us has *something*. Maybe it's food for some, alcohol for others; shopping for some, cigarettes for others. Whatever. In whichever arena you struggle, whenever you are feeling the urge, *count the cost*. Sure, that drink sounds good, that dessert *smells* good; that fishing rod looks really sweet, that person is truly attractive. But how are you going to feel, *tomorrow*? How are you going to feel, when you next step on the scale? How are you going to feel, when the bill comes in the mail? How are you going to feel, when you have to tell your spouse the *truth*? You're feeling the urge, there's that sweet taste of temptation in your mouth; that momentary pleasure, that temporary delight. It'll last, what? An hour? A few days? A week? *Then* what? How will you feel, when the pleasure fades? Days, or weeks, months, maybe even *years* of regret? What you need to do – what we *all* need to do – is get in touch with the *feelings we will have later on*, right when we're *smack dab in the middle of temptation*. If we can get enough *rational sense* in our brain, we'll say "no." Every single time.

But this is more than just a mental exercise. It's a *spiritual* exercise. There are spiritual forces at work. There are times when we can't muster up the ability to say "no" on our own. The tempter is too strong. Only Jesus was able to resist him at every turn. *Which is why we've got to pray*. Pray, *before* we're in the moment of decision. Pray, *when* we're in the moment of decision. "Lord Jesus, guide me. Tell me what to do. No, scratch that, I *know* what I need to do. Give me the strength to actually *do* it!"

That's what leads to self-control. You can have power, dominion, mastery over the things that tempt you. The Holy Spirit *will give you* the gift – if you're man enough, or woman enough, to *ask* for it.

© 2018 Rev. Bill Pinches