

August 17th: The Fruit of Self Control

Welcome, my friends, to our summer sermon series on the Fruits of the Spirit—this is a way for us to explore some big questions about what it means to be disciples of Jesus in our modern world. We’ve been looking at one fruit per Sunday, all with the goal of offering some practical ways for you to grow in your faith and respond to our broken world. Today we’re studying the fruit of self control, and exploring what it means to be exercise control in a world of chaos. So we’re glad you’ve joined us for these conversations, and we look forward to these last few weeks of this series.

Before we learn more, would you pray with me?

God Who Is Always in Control, we trust that our entire universe is held in your hand. You wrap us in your calming and steady embrace, and so we rest into your gentle presence this morning. As we think about the things in our lives that feel out of control or overwhelming, remind us that you have given us more power than we might realize. Invite us into a new way of living, rooted in mindfulness, centered in love, and resulting in care and compassion. May this time of personal reflection and communal transformation yield new fruit in us this day and this week. Amen.

Today we reach our final fruit of the spirit, and like the other three syllable fruits, it’s a tough one to articulate and unpack. But before I dive into what I think this fruit is all about, I want to invite you to think about your own definitions of this fruit and any ideas about it that you’re bringing to this conversation.

So we’ll start with this—when you hear the word, “self-control,” what comes to mind?

Is it giving up dessert for Lent, or pushing yourself to go to the gym when all you really want to do is relax on the couch?

Is it cutting up your credit cards, or punishing yourself for ruining your budget if you treat yourself to a special coffee on the way to work?

Is it putting a time limit on your scrolling so that you don't lose your day to Facebook or TikTok, or turning off the news at a certain time so that you don't get sucked into another hour of updates?

Is it trying to quit an addiction like smoking, drinking, or gambling, or giving up that vice that you know isn't good for you anymore?

All of these are extremely common ways that we talk about and think about self control. So if any of those examples or any of that language was something that you've heard before, you're probably not alone. In fact, if you stick around for coffee hour, I invite you to ask someone else what they thought of, and see if you're on the same wavelength. I guarantee you'll find someone who has a similar perspective.

As you were thinking and listening, you might have noticed that a lot of these questions have something in common—you might have picked up on the fact that “self control” has a lot of negative connotations, both in our larger culture, and probably within our own minds. To many of us, maybe even most of us, self control has been a mindset of limiting ourselves, it's an inherently prohibitive way of seeing our daily life. In our cultural understanding, self control gives us a list of things we are not supposed to do, and the only way to be good at self control is to remove yourself from situations and objects that might result in temptation. In this modern context, self control is not so much about being good, or doing the right thing, so much as it is about not being bad, or not doing the wrong thing. It's like the word “discipline,” which has been twisted from its original meaning to somehow become a standard of deprivation and intense correction. Therefore, when we imagine self control in this way, it is inherently intertwined with emotions like shame and guilt, and that means that a lack of self control is not just a simple mistake, but a moral failure.

If this is the way that you've always thought about self control, I know that these feelings are very difficult to overcome. In a lot of ways, they are hardwired into us from a young age, which is when a lot of this language that ties self control and punishment together begins. Maybe we've heard it from our parents, who told us that being "out of control" in any way was a one way ticket to being grounded or worse. Maybe we've even reinforced that way of thinking as parents, unintentionally or intentionally, by passing down some of that same mindset. Maybe we've heard it from religious leaders or preachers, who emphasized a worldview that talked more about human brokenness and sin than it did God's love and grace. Maybe you've even caught yourself teaching it to others, in an attempt to pass on the spiritual guidance that we're supposed to share with new disciples.

To be clear, none of that makes us bad people, but it does mean that our cultural understanding of self control might need a little bit of work. We might need to reimagine self control in a healthier way, so that our fruits of the spirit can grow in the way that they should.

And so, I'd like to turn this paradigm on its head, because I don't believe that self control has to be seen this way. And I don't think the Apostle Paul sees it that way either, when he includes in this list of spiritual fruit. I mean, just look at this list—it's full of specific traits that are noticeably positive and encouraging. Why would Paul conclude this teaching on good, holy fruit with a negative trait? Why would Paul talk about cultivating all of these lovely virtues, only to end this lesson with a rebuke? I don't think he would, so it makes me curious about the way that Paul understands self control—if he's not talking about a negative mindset, what is he hoping that these early Christians will build up inside of themselves? What does self-control look like if we choose to see it in a new light? How can we reframe it into something helpful instead of hurtful?

Well, let's start with a little dose of reality:

Paul knows that there is stuff that his friends in the region of Galatia cannot control. These new communities of Christians—they are living under the threat of the Roman Empire, sometimes in conflict with their Jewish roots and neighbors, and dealing with all kinds of cruelty and injustice. They are mostly poor, with little resources, and they do not exist in a culture where “picking yourself up by your bootstraps” is a possibility. They are not fully in control of how their lives have turned out, or the times that they live in.

My friends, the same is true for us, to some extent. As you contemplate our world, and its modern complexity, I’m sure you can name hundreds, if not thousands, of things that you can’t control. You can’t control the traffic pattern on your way to work. You can’t control if your kid gets sick at daycare, again. You can’t control the price of eggs or milk at the grocery store, even though we probably wish we could. We can’t control the actions of other people that we meet in our daily routine, we can’t control how all the other citizens of our nation vote, we can’t control how certain leaders are behaving, we can’t control the climate disasters that keep happening to vulnerable people and places. So let’s be honest about all of that, and not pretend that a spiritual fruit like self control will suddenly bring us ultimate control over our environment. It just won’t. And that’s okay.

But that doesn’t mean that self control is meaningless—in fact, I think it’s far from being meaningless in our lives. And I think the reason Paul includes it in this list of spiritual fruit is because he understands how powerful it can be for disciples to exercise this kind of virtue. And that’s because self control is an acknowledgment of our human agency—self control celebrates that we have free will that can be used to express ourselves, help others, and make choices to better our world. Self control is a power that we can use for good when we understand how important our choices actually are.

So, what can you control? As it turns out, more than you think.

The reality is that you make thousands of choices in a day, sometimes even without thinking. You make small choices, like what clothes to put on in the

morning, and what to eat for breakfast, but you also make bigger choices too—like how you show love to your partner, and how you treat people around you. The small choices don't always have an impact on other people or the world, but the bigger choices do—they have the potential to change someone else's day or even their life. You make all of these choices, and that is a positive way that you can impact the world. All these choices are opportunities to reshape our world into a more loving, more inclusive, and more safe place.

If you've never really thought about this before, here's how you can start examining your choices and looking for ways to use your self control for good.

As you're driving home today, take a few minutes to think about the choices that are in front of you or maybe tonight before you get ready for bed, think about all the choices you made today. Make a list if you need to, even if it feels silly at first. Write down or think of all these different moments, large or small, positive or negative.

Did you choose an outfit that makes you feel like your best self?

Did you choose to have an extra cup of coffee because you're feeling extra tired this morning?

Did you choose to send a text to a friend to check in?

Did you choose to give your partner a hug after a disagreement?

Did you choose to use your turn signal when driving?

When you have your list, either in your mind, or on paper, take a closer look at how each of those moments of agency could have a ripple effect in your life and the lives of people around you.

Instead of being in a rush, did you choose to speak kindly to someone at the supermarket? Instead of being frustrated with your kids, did you take a deep breath and attempt to connect with them? Instead of worrying about the state of the world and spiraling out, did you volunteer or donate to support a cause that you care about?

If you have another few minutes, ask yourself: what has resulted from your choices? Did your decision to make a certain meal bring you and your family around a table together? Did your choice to go on a nature walk give you a greater sense of peace? Did a quick moment of prayer renew your sense of purpose? Did a conversation with a loved one end with mutual encouragement and a feeling of comfort?

It is possible that those results might seem unimportant, especially when we compare them to the vast and complicated problems of our larger culture and world, but just because they're small doesn't mean that they're not impactful. Our lives are made up of thousands of tiny moments and millions of choices, and they add up to experiences, practices, and beliefs that are hugely significant. Over time, we can build strong relationships, mental and emotional health, and so much more. The results of our choices, when measured and seen over the long term, show us that the control we exert in our lives is worth noticing and worth celebrating.

But it's not just about us—there's a bigger picture too. A picture that the Apostle Paul invites us into as part of our discipleship.

In our faith journey, whatever that may look like for us as individuals and as a community, we have a responsibility to use our power in ways that align with our spiritual values. Values like generosity, curiosity, community, and reconciliation—all of which get us closer to the kind of world that we want to live in, and the kind of world that we want to pass down to the next generation. Our passage from Galatians implores us to use these gifts that we have been given for a greater purpose, and the Apostle Paul wants us to know that abdicating what control we do have is not a faithful response. Giving up our agency, or giving in to apathy is not the way of Jesus. With the power of the Holy Spirit, we are equipped for transformation—and we shouldn't let our fears, anxieties, or previous guilt and shame get in the way of our mission. When we leave behind the worldly understanding of self control, with its talk of deprivation and restraint, we can see that we have been given an amazing opportunity to bring healing and hope to our broken communities. Instead of

limiting ourselves, we should look for opportunities to expand our impact, because we have far more to offer than we might have previously imagined.

Together with the Holy Spirit, which dwells inside each of us and guides our way, we can choose how we speak, engage with our neighbors, pursue peace, and spark joy. We are able to live out our faith in ways that promote wholeness and liberation for all. We have control over these fruits of the spirit, and we get to decide how to use them in our daily lives. So my friends, I hope you will choose wisely today and this week. Release the things you are beyond your control, but don't forget—there is so much within your power that can change the world.

Amen.