

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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NO. 9: SELF-CONTROL
THE FORGOTTEN FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT
2 Peter 1:1-9

INTRODUCTION

“The fruit of the Spirit,” we read in Galatians 5:22-23, “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and” (not *remote* control, as the little girl I mentioned last week thought) “self-control.”

As we begin our look at the fruit of the Spirit in reverse order today, it is not *remote* control but *self*-control that I want to talk about this morning.

To focus our thinking on what the Bible has to say, I want to read today from 2 Peter 1:1-9. I invite you to follow along in your Bible or one of the pew Bibles or the Bible on your phone or other device. Let’s give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word.

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On the heels of his religious biographies of Winston Churchill and Mark Twain, my brother Gary has written a new biography of Jackie Robinson called *Strength for the Fight* to be published later this year. It was 75 years ago, in April of 1947, that Robinson broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball, becoming the first African-American player in MLB history.

It was not an easy road. Branch Rickey, the General Manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, wanted Robinson to play for the Dodgers but knew it would take a player with a certain type of character to withstand the onslaught of verbal abuse and physical attacks that would come from fans, teammates, and opposing players, just because of the color of his skin. Rickey asked Robinson what he would do if he were taunted with racial slurs by opposing players, along with deliberate attempts to injure him. Robinson said: “Mr. Rickey, do you want a ballplayer who’s afraid to fight back?”

To which Rickey replied: “I want a ballplayer with guts enough not to fight back. You’ve got to do the job with base hits, stolen bases, and (your) fielding, Jackie. Nothing else.” Then Rickey presented this scenario to Robinson: “Now, (my team) is playing you in the World Series, and I’m hotheaded. I want to win the game. So I (slide) into you spikes first.” (The cleats on their shoes were metal and could cause an injury.) “You (tag me with) the ball and the umpire (calls me) ‘out.’ All I can see is your black face, that black face right over me. So I haul off and punch you right in the cheek. What do you do?”

What would *you* do? What would you *want* to do?

Robinson thought for a moment, then said: “Mr. Rickey, I’ve got two cheeks.” Sounds like Jackie Robinson was familiar with the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, doesn’t it? *He was.*

Branch Rickey was pleased with his answer. They talked about his contract. Then, as Robinson was about to leave, Rickey said: “Remember one thing: No matter what happens on the field, you can’t fight back. That’s going to be the hardest part. You can’t fight back.”

No doubt it was. But Jackie Robinson did turn the other cheek, on the field and off, and became a model of courage, humility, and self-control. As did Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whom we honor this weekend for his extraordinary leadership and powerful example of godly self-control in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s.

THE MEANING OF SELF-CONTROL

What exactly is self-control? The dictionary defines it as the ability to exercise your will so as to restrain your desires, emotions, and behavior. It is the ability to govern your own behavior. It means controlling your desires, your feelings, your impulses, and your passions without being controlled by them. Plato described it as self-mastery. It requires self-restraint, which is the opposite of self-indulgence. As Paul says in Titus 2:12, it involves saying “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions (i.e., desires and impulses that are contrary to God’s way) and saying “Yes” to the godliness, goodness, and gracious life that bring God pleasure. Even when it is hard. Especially when it is hard.

Self-control is the exercise of control or mastery over yourself in every area of your life:

- In what you eat and drink, as well as what you refrain from eating and drinking, understanding that your body, as a temple of the Holy Spirit, is holy to God (1 Corinthians 6:19);
- In what you look at, watch, and read -- in everything you set before your eyes (Psalm 101:3);
- In what you say and how you say it (Ephesians 4:29; James 3:1-12);
- In handling your emotions and desires;
- In where you go; and
- In what you do with your body.

How important is self-control? Proverbs 16:32 says that self-control is better than political power (MSG), that a person who controls his temper is better than one who rules a city or a nation. The point is that power over others is fatally compromised unless you can control or govern yourself. Which means, from a biblical perspective, that a person’s character *does* matter.

Paul wrote to both Timothy and Titus that self-control is one of the qualities to be sought in spiritual leaders (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8). But it is not just for church leaders. It is not just for elders and deacons and Sunday school teachers and pastors and missionaries. It is a quality to be developed in all believers. Read Titus 2:1-12 and you’ll see Paul’s plea for both men and women, older and younger alike, to cultivate the fruit of self-control in their lives.

Unfortunately, self-control is not something that comes naturally to us. It doesn't come easily. The fruit of the Spirit involves more than just trying hard. It is the result of the outpouring of God's grace in our lives. As Paul says in Titus 2, it is the grace of God (made incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ) that teaches us to say "No" to all that displeases God so that we may say "Yes" to the fruitful kind of life He wants us to live. True self-control, like the other fruit of the Spirit we will explore in coming weeks, is possible only through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us. It is the fruit of a vital, vibrant, living, growing, personal relationship with God. The spiritual fruit of self-control is not really about *self* being in control. It is about *God* being in control, because only when you are yielded to the Holy Spirit and under *His* control can you exercise self-control to the fullest.

THE LADDER OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

In our Scripture reading from 2 Peter 1, Peter describes a chain of eight links, or a ladder with eight steps. Think of it as a ladder of spiritual growth. There are several things I want you to notice about this ladder.

First, to climb this ladder requires focus. To grow in spiritual things requires diligent effort. It takes zeal. It calls for seriousness in the pursuit of holiness. "Make every effort," says Peter in verse 5. Spiritual maturity is not a trivial pursuit. Growing in the fruit of the Spirit – becoming more like Jesus – is not a hobby. It is not a game. It takes more than coming to church on Sunday morning. It is the central purpose of your life as you seek to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

"Make every effort," Peter says, in cooperation with the Holy Spirit who has come to take up residence in your life as a follower of Jesus.

The first rung on the ladder is faith. The Christian life begins with faith. It is by faith that we receive the gift of salvation and new life in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is by faith that we live as followers of Jesus. The Bible says: "We live by faith not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). "Without faith," the Bible says, "it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6).

Faith is where it all begins. We receive the grace-gift of salvation by faith. But it doesn't end there. God wants His people of faith to develop a character of goodness or moral excellence as we put our faith into action as living, breathing, walking advertisements for God in the world. So goodness, which, like self-control, is a facet of the fruit of the Spirit, is the second rung on Peter's ladder.

To goodness we are to add knowledge, because faith isn't blind. It doesn't exist in a vacuum. Faith is not a leap in the dark. To know God, we must trust Him. And the more we seek Him and trust Him, the better we will know Him, His truth, His ways, and His will.

To knowledge we are to add self-control, because as important as knowledge is, it is not enough. In too many lives, there is a great gulf between knowledge and conduct, between what we know to be true and good and right, and how we live. So what we need is the fruit of self-control. Or, as I have already suggested, *God*-control.

To self-control we are to add perseverance or staying power, so we can continue on in the faith and not lose heart or give up when we experience hardships in life.

To perseverance we are to add godliness, which means that we are to grow in our devotion to God. Michael Green says that godliness is “a very practical awareness of God in every aspect of life.” This practical awareness of God, I would add, is to lead us to greater and greater yieldedness or submission to God and His sovereign and gracious rule in our lives.

To godliness, Peter says, we are to add brotherly (and sisterly) kindness. The word Peter uses here is *philadelphia*, the love of brothers or sisters for one another. It describes the warm affection that is to characterize our relationships in the fellowship of the family of faith (and Faith).

Finally, to this brotherly kindness or affection, we are to add love (*agape*), the kind of self-giving, unconditional love that God has shown us in the person and work of Jesus on our behalf. This love is the top rung on the ladder. It is the first (and primary) fruit of the Spirit. It is, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:31, “the most excellent way.”

From faith to love, with self-control right in the middle of the ladder, Peter says in verse 8 that God wants us to cultivate these qualities in increasing measure so that we will not be ineffective, unproductive, or unfruitful in our service to Him. Ongoing growth in these qualities is a sign of spiritual vitality and a confirmation of the genuineness of our faith in Christ.

So make every effort, as Peter says, to cultivate all these qualities. Pursue them with heart and soul and mind and strength, knowing that with these God is pleased.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF SELF-CONTROL ... OR ITS LACK

As for self-control in particular, the Bible contains numerous examples of self-control, or the lack of it. Adam and Eve are the original poster children for the lack of godly self-control in their decision to disobey God’s directive and to eat the fruit of the tree from which God had told them not to eat. It was a decision that had consequences for them and for all their posterity. Including us.

Adam and Eve’s son Cain’s lack of self-control led to the first murder in history, when he killed his brother Abel.

King David’s lack of self-control led to his affair with Bathsheba, the murder of Bathsheba’s husband Uriah, and the death of David and Bathsheba’s first son as a judgment from God.

On the other side of the coin, one of the clearest examples of self-control in the Bible is Joseph, one of Jacob’s 12 sons and clearly his father’s favorite. Joseph was not a model of humility or self-control in his youth, provoking his brothers to anger and envy, eventually resulting in their decision to get rid of him by selling him into slavery and telling their father that Joseph had been killed. But along the way, in dealing with adversity in his life, Joseph

learned and developed the fruit of self-control. We see it especially in the self-mastery and self-restraint he exhibited in Egypt when the wife of Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard, tried repeatedly to seduce him.

The story is told in Genesis 39. Time after time Joseph resisted her advances. I think the temptation to give in was very real, because I think Potiphar's wife was an attractive woman. But Joseph refused to go to bed with her, even to the point of running for his life to get away from her. He paid a price for his self-restraint. When Potiphar's wife made false accusations against him, Joseph ended up in prison. But God was with him and used Joseph's time in prison to further refine him and prepare him for greater service.

THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

Jesus, of course, is the supreme example of self-control, in both the Bible and the history of humankind. The whole course of Jesus' life was marked by godly self-control. There was never a time when Jesus was not in control of himself. Think of some of the events of the final week of Jesus' life. He demonstrated self-control:

- When He received a hero's welcome on His arrival in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He didn't let the praises and applause of the crowd go to His head, because He knew the cheers would soon turn to jeers.
- When He was arrested by the religious leaders of Jerusalem just a few days later.
- When His closest friends and followers deserted Him.
- When Peter denied Him.
- When He was tried and condemned by the Jewish Council, and handed over to Pilate the Roman governor.
- When He was on trial before Pilate and then handed over to be crucified.
- When He was mocked by the Roman soldiers.
- When He was crucified amid the taunts and insults of those who were out to get Him. And now they had succeeded.

"He saved others," they said, "but He can't save Himself" (Matthew 27:42).

"If you're the Messiah, prove it to us by coming down from the cross!" (Matthew 27:40).

Through it all, Jesus remained silent. Don't you think Jesus must have been tempted to come down from the cross and give those taunters what for?! Don't you think He must have been tempted to come down from the cross in an explosion of power and righteous anger and show them who is really the boss?! He could have done that. Isn't that what you and I would have wanted to do in that situation? Of course, it is!

But Jesus endured it all for the sake of His mission to save us. He endured it all for our sake. For your sake and mine.

Amazing, mind-blowing, out-of-this-world self-control. The kind of self-control that is possible only when you let God be in control of your desires, feelings, thoughts, and actions.

THE CUTTING EDGE

There is a desperate shortage of self-control in the world today and, dare I say it, in the church, in the lives and relationships of God's people. I don't know what the cutting edge may be for each of you, but perhaps it is in one – or maybe more than one – of these areas:

Maybe it is in the realm of sex, in your sexual desires and what you do with those desires. Maybe it has to do with what you expose yourself to, as in pornography, which, sad to say, seems never more than a few clicks away on your computer or phone. Listen to what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4: "It is God's will that you ... should avoid sexual immorality (of any kind); that each of you should learn to control his (or her) body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who don't know God" (4:3-5).

Maybe the cutting edge in your life is dealing with your emotions – in particular, with anger. Sometimes anger is appropriate. Sometimes it is right to be angry. But if you let anger fester, the devil will use it to gain a foothold in your life, as Paul warns in Ephesians 4:26-27. Anger can lead to a desire for revenge against someone who has wronged you. Taking matters into your own hands in the pursuit of vengeance is not a God-thing.

The advice of James in James 1:19-20 is good to take to heart. James says that everyone should be "quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires." Quick/Slow/Slow: Quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. That requires self-control, doesn't it?

Or maybe the cutting edge for you is your tongue. In James 3, James says that if you can keep your tongue in check, if you can control what comes out of your mouth, you can control your whole body. Though it is small, the tongue has immense power for good or evil. Gossip, for example, is terribly destructive and can do devastating harm to people and relationships. There is no place for gossip in a healthy, fruitful Christian life. Or in the life of the church.

You can tame a tiger, James says, but the tongue is a whole different kind of animal. It is humanly impossible to tame the tongue completely. But what is impossible for you and me to do on our own is totally *Himpossible* with God. God *can* do it. He *does* do it and *will* do it through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.

Maybe the cutting edge for you involves food or alcohol or smoking or drugs. Maybe you eat too much. Maybe you drink too much. Maybe you take drugs you shouldn't take, whether they are legal or not.

Maybe the cutting edge for you is the amount of time you spend in front of a screen, whether TV or computer or phone or any other social media device. Set limits on how much time is healthy to be engaged in any of these pursuits, and stick to them. Time-management is a form of self-management. Or self-control.

Maybe the area of your life where you need self-control is gambling. The best kind of self-control is the kind that says an absolute “No” so that you can say “Yes” to the good God has for you and the good He wants you to do.

Whatever the cutting edge in your life may be, give it over to God, because you can bear the fruit of self-control only when you are under God’s control.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and, yes, self-control. Is it the forgotten fruit of the Spirit? Maybe. Maybe not. But I fear it may be the most neglected fruit in the lives of many.

May the fruit of self-control – and all the fruit of the Spirit – be exhibited in your life, to the glory and praise of God.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.