

Self-Control

10 of 10 in series *Marks of a Flourishing Life*

Sept. 3, 2023

Gal. 5:22-23; 1 Cor. 9:24-27

It's hard to believe, but Labour Day weekend is upon us. Summer's nearly over, and fall is just around the corner.

Not only is summer winding down, so is our summer sermon series. Today's message is the final installment in *Marks of a Flourishing Life*, a series all about the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

The apostle Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians chapter 5 as follows:

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! ¹

The last fruit of the Spirit on Paul's list—but by no means the least— is *self-control*. That's what we're going to talk about today.

In the process, we're going to unpack a well-known text from Paul on the subject. It's found in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. I invite you to follow along as I read that passage now from the NIV— the New International Version of the Bible:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. ²

On the basis of this passage, today we will consider three aspects of biblical self-control: Its *definition*, its *dimensions*, and its *direction*. (That's my little gift to those of you who like alliteration!) After we explore those three "Ds" I'll conclude the message by talking briefly about two practices that can help you grow in self-control.

¹ Galatians 5:22-23 (NLT)

² 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (NIV)

Let me note that as I did my research for this message, I especially benefitted from Reverend Abraham Cho's excellent work on this subject, and what follows includes some of his ideas, blended with my own words and thinking.³ To be clear, though, the goofy alliteration is all mine. That's on *me*, okay?

We begin with:

1. **The DEFINITION of self-control.**

The original Greek word for self-control is *enkrateian*, and it can be found throughout the New Testament, including in Galatians 5 where Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit, as well as in the 1 Corinthians 9 text we just read.

The part where Paul speaks about how athletes go into strict training can be more precisely translated as they "exercise self-control in all things."

The New Testament term for self-control literally means "to take hold of; to grip." So a self-controlled person has a good hold or grasp on their life. Specifically, a self-controlled person is someone who exercises dominion over their own desires, impulses and urges.

The ancient Greek philosophers taught that to have self-control is to have freedom, because when you can control your desires, impulses and urges, you're free to make the noblest choices.

Today's culture, however, essentially takes the exact opposite view. Most people today see freedom as the ability to do whatever you want, whenever you want— to live according to your own instincts with no restrictions. Indeed, we're led to believe that the only reliable guide for living is our own wants, our own wishes, our own urges— and for anyone to suggest otherwise is increasingly seen as repressive and unhealthy.

So while the ancient Greeks believed that self-control allows you to become your best self, many people now believe that self-control prevents you from becoming your true self. This is why self-control is often considered suspect, if not dangerous, in today's culture.

And yet, most of us instinctively know better than that. May I try to prove it to you?

I'd like you to try to think of something you've achieved— something you're especially proud of— an accomplishment that was particularly worthwhile. It might be a degree

³ Rev. Abraham Cho, *Growth in the Spirit: Self-Control* (a Redeemer Presbyterian Church sermon), 2014.

you've earned, a career achievement, a piece of art or music you created, a challenging project you completed, a marathon or triathlon you finished, a relationship you've faithfully invested in for the long term...

Do you have your accomplishment in mind? Now, ask yourself, how did your accomplishment become a reality?

I bet it didn't become a reality by you just doing whatever you wanted whenever you wanted. Very likely, your achievement took a significant and sustained amount of self-control. You had to sacrifice certain things you might rather be doing in a given moment in order to do other things that probably weren't all that exciting but that needed to be done nonetheless. And by reigning in your lesser wants and impulses, you were able, in due time, to accomplish something especially worthwhile.

Along these lines, Abraham Cho offers this helpful definition of self-control:

The ability to rule over our impulses in pursuit of a greater good.

As much as society today may see self-control as repressive, it's not at all that hard to appreciate that the most worthwhile aspects of our lives require self-control. Deep down we all know that our lives will be better if we have more *enkrateian*. I think the ancient Greeks were onto something.

But the Bible takes the freeing and life-giving impact of self-control to a whole other level. When you have self-control in its biblical sense, it's a sign of God's supernatural, transforming work in you. Indeed, self-control enables us to flourish in character, in relationships, and in life-mission as we follow Jesus.

If self-control is our ability to rule over our impulses in pursuit of a greater good, then the Bible points us to the *ultimate* good, and our passage in 1 Corinthians 9 breaks that down for us as we now move on to consider:

2. The DIMENSIONS of self-control.

We're going to look at three dimensions of self-control in particular. The first dimension is **passion for a prize**. In our passage, Paul begins by saying:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.⁴

The imagery Paul has in mind here would have been very familiar to the Corinthian people. Corinth was host to an Olympic-style sporting event called the isthmian games. These games were an integral part of the city's culture.

Think of the athletes in the games, Paul is saying. As they prepare to compete, they exercise self-control every area of their lives. Why do they make the sacrifices that their training requires? They do it out of passion for a prize. In their case, the prize would have been a specially-made victor's crown. It was their version of an Olympic medal.

It's this passion, this overriding desire for a prize that gets the athlete-in-training out of bed early in the morning when it would be so very easy to roll over and go back to sleep for a couple more hours. And while the athlete isn't exactly thrilled to be sipping a kale smoothie while everyone else in her family is digging into dessert, she does so willingly, because her passion for a prize is greater than her passion for cake and ice cream.

She chooses to bypass lesser pleasures, tempting as they may be, for the sake of a higher pleasure—a greater desire, a greater goal, a greater good.

Paul's whole point is that this is not just true of sport; it's true of life: Self-control requires passion for a prize.

And this is where the New Testament authors differed from the ancient Greek philosophers. The philosophers taught that self-control must be sustained by reason and rationality. For Paul, this was a totally unrealistic approach in light of our fallen, sinful human condition.

Cool abstractions can never control burning desires. Self-control can never be sustained by mere reason. It can only be sustained by the pursuit of an even greater desire that outstrips our other desires. It seems counterintuitive, but self-control requires more desire, not less.

Only when you have a passion for a prize—an ultimate goal, an overriding joy above all other joys—will you be able to consistently subdue and order your lesser desires, impulses and urges.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 9:24 (NIV)

The second dimension of self-control is that **the prize must be imperishable**. Here's what Paul says:

Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. ⁵

A crown that is imperishable.

If you were a winner in the isthmian games in Corinth, your prize would be a laurel wreath— this garland woven of leaves and branches that you would wear on your head like a crown. Athletes would go into strict training, exercising incredible levels of self-control to win such a crown.

And let's say that after winning your laurel wreath crown, you take it home and proudly display on your mantle. As the months go by, what happens to your crown made of leaves and branches? It would be like that natural Christmas wreath you once left hanging on your door until Easter. It would go brown and brittle. If you were to pick it up, it would crumble in your hands.

Again, Paul's point is that this is a metaphor for our very lives.

Paul is saying that if you give yourself over to things that are perishable—things that won't last— sooner or later, those things will crumble in your hands and slip through your fingers. And all the self-control you exercised to achieve those things will amount to nothing.

I came across some quotes from Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, who had become incredibly famous after he wrote *War and Peace*. As an author, he had achieved legendary status, success far beyond what most authors could ever dream of. But *he knew it wouldn't last*— and not long after *War and Peace* came out, he sank into a deep depression, which he wrote about in a later book of his called *A Confession*. Here's what he said:

My question — that which at the age of 50 brought me to the verge of suicide — was the simplest of questions... "Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?"

⁵ 1 Corinthians 9:25 (NIV)

Today or tomorrow sickness and death will come... to those I love or to me... Sooner or later my affairs, whatever they may be, will be forgotten, and I shall not exist. Then why go on making any effort?

Tolstoy sought answers in science and philosophy to no avail. It seemed that his question would remain unanswered— until he turned to the long-discarded Christian faith of his childhood. It was in the resurrected Jesus that he discovered, to quote his own words, “an infinite meaning to the finite existence of man; a meaning that is not destroyed by suffering, deprivation or death.”

Do you have a passion for a prize that will not last, or for one that will stand the test of time? What are you giving your life to?

This is what the apostle Paul is leading us to in our passage. Not only do we need a passion for a prize, but the prize must be imperishable— a crown that cannot be destroyed by suffering, deprivation or death. Self-control is to be exercised, says Paul, not in pursuit of a crown that will crumble and slip through our fingers, but rather a crown that will last forever.

The third dimension of self-control (and I had to abandon the alliteration with this one) is that **it demands effort**. Self-control is indeed a fruit of the Holy Spirit, but that doesn't mean you don't have a part to play. You actually have some work to do in the process. Along these lines, Paul says in verse 27:

Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.⁶

If an Olympic runner exercises self-control for the sake of a crown that doesn't last, then how much more should we exercise self-control as followers of Jesus, knowing that our crown will last forever?

Motivated by a passion for an imperishable prize in Christ, Paul himself ran a focused race. In other words, he lived a purposeful Christian life. He didn't just run about aimlessly, but he ran with clear direction.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (NIV)

Paul then deftly shifts to another sports metaphor— boxing. He says he doesn't just shadowbox—he doesn't just punch at the air. He makes sure his blows land— not on an opponent but on himself.

Please, please realize that Paul is speaking metaphorically here—this whole passage is filled with metaphors. He didn't literally punch himself, okay? What he's saying has absolutely nothing to do with self-punishment or self-harm. When he says "I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave," he's simply using dramatic metaphorical language to express that in light of his passion for an imperishable prize in Christ, he puts great effort into exercising self-control in all things, so that he in no way gets sidetracked and derailed by his lesser desires, impulses and urges.

Self-control requires effort on our part.

We're not *saved* by our efforts, but our efforts nonetheless remain a vital component of a life of following Jesus. As the late great Christian philosopher Dallas Willard puts it, "Grace is not opposed to effort. It's opposed to earning."

You can never *earn* salvation. Salvation is the free gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

But as Abraham Cho explains, when God's grace is at work in your life, it stirs you to effort. The Holy Spirit-generates in you the self-control you need to seek God's kingdom first, and to be God's partner — a full participant in his mission to restore this world in Christ. His saving grace creates the effort that we need to stay focused on running the race he has called us to for the sake of his mission, for the sake of others, for the sake of God's kingdom and honour and glory.

Now, as we begin to wind down the message, we can move on to talk about:

3. The DIRECTION of self-control.

Did you notice that Paul doesn't come right out in this passage and say what the prize is? But in light of what Paul explicitly says again and again elsewhere in Corinthians and throughout his New Testament letters, the prize should be obvious: **The prize is a person—Jesus!**

The prize is our salvation in Jesus, which lasts forever. The prize is our relationship with Jesus, from whose love we can never, ever be separated, not even by death, says Paul in

Romans.⁷ The prize is our calling to serve Jesus, which enables us to live purpose-filled lives that bear fruit that's going to last forever.

All of this is wrapped up in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the imperishable prize who is to be our passion. If self-control is the God-given ability to exercise dominion over your lesser impulses for the sake of a greater good, then Jesus *is* the ultimate good, our overriding joy above all other joys, the ultimate desire of our hearts.

It is by fixing our gaze on Jesus and letting his love become real and vivid to us that we can grow in self-control and learn to subdue and order our lesser desires, impulses and urges.

The apostle Peter makes this clear in his second letter, where he writes:

For this very reason make every effort to add to your... knowledge, self-control.⁸

Add to your knowledge self-control. What does Peter mean by that and how is it relevant to us?

Its relevance has to do with what the biblical virtue of *knowledge* is all about. In the New Testament, knowledge is not just about knowing information. It's not about being well-educated, having a high IQ, or being able to answer lots of questions correctly on Jeopardy.

The biblical virtue of knowledge is focused specifically on the person of Jesus Christ. You and I are not just called to know *something*. We are called to know *someone*. That someone is Jesus. And so, when Peter says add to your knowledge self-control, his whole point is that our ability to grow in self-control flows from our firsthand, personal knowledge of Jesus—from our daily walk and relationship with him.

So the biblical virtue of self-control always, always, always points us to Jesus. That's what I mean by the "direction" of self-control. Any talk of self-control should always point to Jesus; it should lead us in his direction. Because he alone is the imperishable prize, the ultimate good, our heart's true treasure and desire, and it is his Spirit working in us that enables us to subdue our lesser desires for the ultimate good of knowing and living for him.

I'd like to conclude by briefly touching on two **practices that can help you grow in self-control**.

⁷ See Romans 8:31-39

⁸ 2 Peter 1:5-6 (NIV)

1. **Worship.** If self-control requires that we make Jesus our passion, our prize, our overriding joy over all other joys, then the practice of worship helps us with that. So let me ask you, how are your corporate worship habits? Do you need to make regular Sunday worship attendance more of a priority in your life? And what of your private worship habits? Do you have a daily habit of prayer and scripture meditation? Do you ever fix the gaze of your heart on Jesus by putting on good worship music that focuses on his beauty and wisdom and grace?

When you worship, whether corporately or privately, do you make it vivid? Do you let the Holy Spirit engage your imagination so that you see and experience Jesus in ways that truly move your heart in such a way that he increasingly becomes the prize you are truly passionate for?

And are you willing to let your worship become more vivid to your senses by worshipping with your body— lifting your hands to Jesus, kneeling before him in devotion, for example? Why do you think Jesus invites us to experience his presence through the tangible sacrament of bread and wine? Embodiment helps make our worship vivid.

Always remember, self-control is sustained not by good intentions, not by cool calculated reason, but rather by a vivid Spirit-generated passion for the imperishable prize that is Jesus Christ.

2. **Fasting.** Fasting is going without food for a set period of time to awaken our body and soul to our deep hunger and need for God. It's a practice where for a time we forego something our bodies legitimately need— food— to focus on our even greater need, our ultimate need for Jesus. At the same time, fasting teaches us self-control because it allows us to practice *not* indulging our every impulse or appetite. Earlier this summer when I was out for a prayer walk, I sensed God calling me to renew the practice of fasting in my life, and since doing so, I've found new strength in Jesus, and better self-control than I was having previously.

<https://cornerstonechurch.ca/the-fasting-practice/>

If you're interested in not only learning more about the practice of fasting, but actually having a space to experiment with the practice along with others who are doing the same thing, then I'd like to invite you to sign up for *The Fasting Practice* which Bethany talked about during announcements. It's a 4-session fall elective that I'll be leading on Thursday evenings starting September 28, right here at Cornerstone Centre. Use the link on the screen to learn more and sign up. And you can always sign up at the hub as well: www.cornerstonechurch/thehub.

Let's close in prayer...

Lord Jesus, the direction of self-control points us to you. You ran a race that took you from heaven to earth. And at the end of your race, you received not a victor's crown, but a crown of thorns— a crown of shame, suffering and death. Why would you run such a race, denying the comforts, honours and pleasures of heaven that were yours to enjoy?

The author of Hebrews tells us that you did it for “the joy set before [you].”⁹ It seems that you, too, had an overriding joy, a passion for an imperishable prize. The one thing you had to leave heaven in order to get was *us*— a people you could call your own. How astonishingly wonderful it is to know that *we* are *your* passion, *we* are *your* prize, Lord Jesus. *We* are the reason you relied on the Holy Spirit to give you the self-control that you needed to endure what you did.

And so, may we fix our eyes on you and your unfathomable love for us, so that every lesser desire we have may assume its proper place beneath our overarching and ultimate desire for you. Amen.

Benediction - Hebrews 12:1-3 [for confidence screen only]

... let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

⁹ See Hebrews 12:1-3