



The Fruit of the Spirit - Self-Control

By: Gary B. McGee

Self-control or “temperance” can be simply defined as the mastery of oneself, the capacity of individuals to so restrain their own emotions, desires, and impulses that they can serve others. The lack of such control in our culture, be it related to chemical abuse, overeating, or a host of other unhealthy behaviors, should concern every Christian, indeed every congregation of believers who wish to be a lighthouse of God’s grace to those who are “out of control.”

In looking at Galatians 5:22,23 it quickly becomes evident that by reserving the mention of self-control to last, the apostle Paul is deliberately emphasizing it as the capstone of all the graces of the Spirit. While the fruits reflect the maturing work of the Spirit in an individual’s life, they also become apparent in relationships with other people.

Obtaining Self-Control

To begin, let us examine what self-control is not. Consider the plight of a person in a television Western who has been shot. Lacking adequate medical care or even the presence of a doctor, a friend takes his knife to cut the bullet out of the person’s body. Knowing that this will be painful, he gives the victim a stick to hold between his teeth to help him keep from screaming and losing self-control. The image is one of grim determination and resolution to the fateful pain. Fortunately, this does not depict the concept of self-control Paul discusses.

The biblical understanding of the term requires crucifixion of the sinful or lower nature by divine grace as we surrender ourselves to the Lord. In Galatians 5:19–21, Paul contrasts the sanctified life with characteristics of the old life: “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness and orgies, and the like.” All these categories reflect behaviors that are out of control and were common in New Testament times.

Living the overcoming Christian life was no small problem for many in the congregations to whom Paul wrote. Yielding to sinful passions was the order of the day. Believers who did not come from a Jewish background, where the precepts of the Old Testament were rigorously followed probably found the level of personal restraint required of a Christian especially difficult to sustain.

The self-control, however, which derives from the presence of the Spirit in our thoughts and emotions, is undergirded by the power of God as believers yield themselves to the Lord in obedience to His will. (Consider also Romans 12:2 where Paul refers to the transformation of the mind.) Several verses help us understand this better:

- * “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature” (Galatians 5:16).
- * “For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13).
- * “You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ” (Romans 8:9).

Self-control enables the believer to overcome sinful and destructive habits, focus on ministering to others, build up the body of Christ, and live in mutual submission to others (Ephesians 5:21), thereby leading a life that is positive and

productive in the family, the neighborhood, the church, and place of employment. For example, Paul exhorted the Ephesian churches: “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need” (Ephesians 4:28).

To the Galatians he wrote: “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other” (5:13,14).

Help From The Body Of Christ

The Christian should not assume maintaining self-control to be a purely individual matter. It is vital to recognize that ministry within the body of Christ entails responsibility to help others. Notice the corporate emphasis in each of the following passages of Scripture:

- * “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently” (Galatians 6:1).
- * “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10).
- * “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26).
- * “Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:15,16).
- * “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel” (Philippians 4:2,3).

The gathering of early Christians in house churches offered ample opportunities for small groups of believers to encourage each other in their spiritual walk.

Christians today struggle as well to gain control of various aspects of their lives. Through members ministering to one another, however, the body of Christ builds itself up in love (Ephesians 4:16) as each person becomes more mature in character and behavior.

In practical ways (easy to implement), healing for emotional and mental ailments that cause people to lose control of their reactions to problems can occur in a variety of church contexts: Bible study and prayer groups, Sunday school classes, Wednesday night gatherings, and many more. A Sunday school class that encourages broad participation, provides opportunities for sharing, and offers prayer and counsel on threatening issues can become a valuable “support group” for hurting people. Spiritual and practical counsel offered in love can help a believer “maintain control” (respond maturely and properly) with the divine assistance of the Holy Spirit.

In the Sunday School class I attend, I observe that every Sunday, when requests are taken for prayer, several needs are always mentioned. In this way, we learn about the hurts of others and prayerfully ask for the Lord’s intervention. Through this rather simple means, we help one another overcome fears and discover anew the abiding grace of God. Bible study and discussion afford us insights into how believers should react to crisis situations or vexing daily problems. The camaraderie of a small group of Christians can greatly enhance the working of the Spirit in each life.

Conclusion

In this life, no one achieves all the fruit of the Spirit equally. Some speculate that Paul might have lost control of his temper when he had a “sharp disagreement” with Barnabas over whether to invite John Mark to join them for another missionary journey (Acts 15:36–41). In regard to gaining perfection in this life, he wrote to the Philippian believers, “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Philippians 3:12).

The Spirit of Christ who works in our hearts to help us live above sinful practices, as well as the offering of loving

counsel by Christian brothers and sisters, enables the fruit of self-control to grow for the glory of God. As a result, we can model God's values, demonstrate in our behaviors His power to aid us daily, and more effectively share His love for others.

Little wonder that human relationships become the battleground for demonstrating the level of Christian graces and self-control. After all, Jesus himself said: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another" (John 13:35).

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