

The Fruit of the Spirit - Self-Control

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[0 : 0 0] Well, today we are continuing our study on the fruit of the Spirit. We've been working through this great topic for the past number of months and our focus is on the words of Galatians 5, 22 and 23. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law. And today our focus is on the last element highlighted by Paul. We are going to look at self-control.

And as we've been saying throughout this study, the fruit of the Spirit is outlining the effect and the evidence of having God the Holy Spirit dwelling in you. So as Christians, the Holy Spirit comes and dwells in our hearts. That has an effect. It changes us and conforms us more and more to the image of our Savior. And so that's the effect. But it is also the evidence. It's the means by which other people can look at us and can see that a change has taken place. They can see that we are God's people. So as Christians, we should all be characterised by self-control. Now this is a fascinating topic. And I want us to start with a question. If you look at that list of elements in the fruit of the Spirit, if you look at the nine items there, which one would you say is the most urgently needed in Scotland today? Of those nine, what would you say is the one that is most pressing? Well, I would say that unquestionably the answer to that question is self-control. And this is because self-control stands in total contrast to the prevailing mindset of the world today.

Because if you think about it, our world today is dominated by self-expression. For so many people, the most important thing in your life is that you must be true to who you are. Therefore, people cannot be questioned if their understanding of who they are goes against the common understandings that have been in society for generations. That's why people can now identify as a different gender or as a new gender because they are expressing themselves. That's why the boundaries of appropriate relationships have been extended further and further. That's why freedom of speech is now limited so that it doesn't cause offence to anybody else's self-identity. Now this is the mindset that we see common today. And we have to be careful here because we must never ever ever dismiss people and think they're foolish or they're bad because they don't think the way that we think. We must never ever be like that. As Christians, we must always be gentle, patient, loving. We can't just condemn people because they don't think the way that we think. But it is the case that self-expression is a God in 2017. And it was interesting, I found a quote that I thought brilliantly summed up the situation today. Here's the quotation. Life has become loud and ugly. Decency and chastity are almost regarded as signs of weakness and incompleteness. Everything is justified in terms of self-expression. Now I think that's a very, very accurate quotation for today.

[3 : 5 0] People say, this is me, this is who I am, and therefore that justifies things. When do you think that was written? You don't need to answer it. It's incredibly relevant for today. It was written in 1941. It was Martin Lloyd-Jones who said that during a series of lectures at the Free Church College in Edinburgh. And it reminds us that there is nothing new under the sun. And so self-expression is a God, but that self-expression from there, the next step is self-satisfaction. So not only do we have the right to express ourselves, we also have the right to satisfy ourselves. In other words, I don't just express what I want, I must get what I want. And that's why we live in a world that's now dominated by a self-focused ambition. If I want success, I'm going to get it. If I want possessions, I'm going to get them. If I want status, I am going to get it. And that's why you hear people say things like, well, if you want something badly enough, you will get it. And that's the mindset that our advertising industry exploits to the maximum, because they see this desire for self-expression in people and they feed into it so that people get what they want. And sometimes I wonder whether we see this in politics. Because if we ask the question, why did Donald Trump or Emmanuel Macron or Theresa May, why do these people stand to be leaders of their nations? It's a

fair enough question. Why are they doing it? Why are they bothering? And when I think about that, I worry that first and foremost, it's because they desperately want to be president or to be prime minister. And I think that's a worry because it means that first and foremost, their position is about their own success rather than about the good of the country. Now, it may not be the case with these individuals and I've never met any of them and I doubt very much that I ever will. But I worry that that's the case. That's why it's a good question to ask in an election. Is this person standing for themselves or for me? It's a good question to ask. But politics is just an example. I think we see this kind of mindset in many, many places. So we have self-expression that leads to self-satisfaction, which ultimately leads on to self-indulgence. Because we are living in a world that has the mindset, if you want something, then just indulge yourself.

So if you want more possessions, the world says get them. Even if it means going into debt, just go for it. Get it. If you want a laugh, the world says go. Let yourself go with whatever it may be, with alcohol or anything else. Go. Let yourself go to the max. If you're hungry, the world says keep filling yourself. Even if you have plenty, keep going, keep filling, keep going. And even in terms of sexual desires, as Andy touched on today, the mantra of the world today is do not deny yourself. Go and go and do whatever. And this seems to be the way the world is going. And for us, the world seems to think that it's just so backward and oppressive and wrong to do anything other than express yourself, satisfy yourself, indulge yourself. And that's the moral standard that people live by today. If it's what you want, then it must be right. So we live in a world today that says very loudly and very clearly, be yourself. The Bible says something very different. The Bible says control yourself. And that's why I think of all the things that Paul lists. This is the most relevant and urgent for today. And I want us just to think about it a wee bit together. And we're going to ask three very simple questions. First question is, what is self-control? When we talk about it, what do we mean? Well, it's interesting because the Greek, we had Andy here today talking about modern day slavery. The Greek word for self-control basically means and conveys the idea of being a master of yourself. And so it is the language of slavery. Instead of being a slave to your own desires, you are a master over them. Now, the word was often associated with sexual desires. You read a passage like 1 Corinthians, chapter seven, and it's using the word in that context. But it also refers to a wider application to every area of life. We are to be masters of our own desires, not slaves to them. And of course, the language of slavery is pointing us very closely to what Paul has been emphasizing throughout the letter of Galatians. In this letter, there's a lot of talk about slavery and freedom. Paul is basically saying in this letter that without Christ, we are under the law and we are slaves to the law. And so we stand condemned. It's like the law is a weight a burden upon us. And it's like a cage constraining us, confining us in captivity. But Paul is saying that through faith in Christ, we are set free from that situation. We are redeemed, bought out of slavery. And our status has changed from being slaves to sin to becoming the adopted children of God, sons and daughters of God himself. So we are taken from one realm, the realm of slavery, and we are brought into a new realm into the family of God. And so sin no longer has power over us. Without Christ, sin had power over us. We were condemned under the law. But Christ has set us free. The law no longer condemns us. So the theological truth that Paul is emphasizing is that we have been set free from the power and the penalty of sin. Three says in chapter three, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. For it is written, cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree. So because of Jesus, we're no longer slaves, we're no longer condemned. We are free from the power and penalty of sin. However, that's the theological truth. The practical reality is that we are not yet free from the presence of sin in our lives. Isn't that true? Every day you and I battle with sin and we see the effects of it. Everything that Andy spoke about today is the effect that sin has had on this world. And Paul emphasizes that in chapter five. Sorry, back one takes it. I went too fast there. The desires of the flesh are against the spirit. The desires of the spirit are against the flesh. For these are opposed to each other to keep you from doing the things that you want. It's describing the tension, the conflict that we have between ourselves and sin. So as Christians, we're now in this challenging situation. We are no longer under the law's curse. We are free. The penalty has been taken away, paid for us by Jesus. We're no longer under the grip of sin. We are free. We've been redeemed. The power of sin has been broken, but we still face the presence of sin, both in the world and in our own flesh. And so we ask ourselves, what can you do in that situation? When I face sin tomorrow morning, what can I do? And we tend to think, I can't do anything. I can't help the fact that I sin. I'm too weak and I keep failing and I keep failing. We are confronted by passions and desires.

We are battling with the fact that people may be annoying or frustrate us. We can face situations that perplex us and anger us, temptations lure us and passions attract us. And you think, I am just a slave to all of this. We can very easily feel that we are still slaves to sin. But the whole point of the letter to the Galatians is that we are not slaves anymore. And as a Christian, you are not a slave to sin anymore. You are free, which is exactly what Paul says in verse one of chapter five, for freedom Christ has set us free, stand firm therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. And Paul is emphasizing the fact that that freedom should shape how we live. If God the Holy Spirit is now dwelling in us, it means that God is on the throne of our heart. Sin is not on the throne of our heart anymore. Sin is not in government. Sin is now in opposition. That's exactly what Paul says in verse 24 of chapter five, those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Our flesh with its passions and desires and attraction towards sin has been defeated by Christ through our union with him in his death. Now that's quite a lot of theological information. I've put it into a wee diagram that I hope will help. Okay, so here's you and me. Our natural state is that we are under the power and penalty of sin. And we know that in our experience, we see the effect of sin on life in so many different ways. So that's where we find ourselves. The message of the gospel is that Christ has come to our level, come alongside us, and he has taken that penalty himself, and he has broken that power himself. And the result is victory through Jesus over sin. So if you look at that, we are under the power and penalty of sin, but above that Christ has conquered.

[14 : 53] Christ has broken that power and penalty of sin. He now reigns over it. And the great message that Paul is emphasizing is that through faith in Christ, we are no longer stuck down there. We are united to Christ in his victory. And so the point I want to emphasize is the fact that although sin is present in our lives, and although it still looks powerful, and although it can seem so influential, it is in reality a totally defeated enemy. You are united to Christ in his position of victory over sin. Therefore, instead of being a slave to sin, you can now be a master over it. And that is why the fruit of the spirit is self-control, mastery over the power of sin. That's what Jesus has done for us, and that's one of the amazing, transforming blessings of being a Christian. In other words, as a Christian, you are now free to be self-controlled. But that raises our second question. Why is that so important? And that brings us back to the great difference between what the Bible says about self-control and what the world says about self-expression. Because the world and the Bible are both proclaiming a message of liberty. They're both saying you can be free, but these messages look very different. The world proclaims a message of liberty for self-expression.

As we said, we are free to be ourselves, to satisfy ourselves, to indulge ourselves. And according to the world, that is true freedom, isn't it? Free to be whatever you are. But it is here that the world is tragically, tragically wrong. And the reason it is wrong is this.

If you live your life indulging yourself, you do not become free, you become a slave.

The world's message of liberty is actually a path to desperate bondage. And we can prove this easily. An obvious example is something like alcohol. The world will say enjoy, indulge, have fun. Now, we do not condemn alcohol. I have a glass of wine with a meal. I'm not tea total. And we don't. Some Christians would insist on that. But in our own denomination, we do not. We think it can be used responsibly as Jesus himself did in his own experience.

The point is that if our indulgence is not kept in check, if it's not controlled, then it leads to slavery, to awful slavery. But there are other examples that maybe aren't so obvious. Exercise. Exercise is a good thing. We need to exercise. It's essential. And the world loves to enjoy sport either by participating or by following it. But we can reach the point where we cannot imagine life without our involvement in this sport. I ask myself the question, every Saturday I take my phone out and I check the football score. And I ask myself, can I live without seeing the football score in my life? Could I live without that? If you told me next season you are not going to know a thing about what happens in the Premier League. If I say I couldn't handle that, then am I free or am I a slave? Fashion is another example. You probably think, how on earth can you stand up there and talk about fashion.

[19 : 20] But every year, new designs, new styles, new labels, and here the advertising industry wants us to indulge, wants us to satisfy ourselves. But if you find yourself in a situation where you have to have a certain type of clothing, or you have to have a certain type of shoe, or you have to have a certain type of handbag, in that situation, are you free or are you a slave? And another example that maybe affects us all is popularity. We all want to be popular.

We all want people to like us. And the world encourages us to express ourselves so that we will be loved by others for who we are. But whether it be at work or when we are out with our friends or even through something like Facebook, if my self-worth comes from impressing other people, if my self-confidence comes from what other people think of me, then in that situation, am I free or am I a slave? And the key point is that the world thinks that self-indulgence is the ultimate expression of freedom. But the truth is that self-indulgent is the doorway to slavery. And all of this makes perfect sense because the Bible gives us a theological explanation for us. It tells us that the fall of man has left us all affected by sin in every part of our lives. That's what we call total depravity, every part of life affected by sin. And one of the features of that is a desire for what we do not have. Who of us is guilty of that? I am. And that's exactly what you saw with

Adam and Eve. God granted them access to every part of the garden except one tree. And yet that was the one they couldn't get out of their minds. That was the one that became the most appealing of all. And it's been characteristic of humanity ever since. We want what we don't have. And that feeds the worlds, craving for self-indulgence. We see something and if we can't have it, we want it more. If we get it, we just want something else. And we end up in this ever-perpetuating cycle of trying to fill a void in our lives that only God can fill. Because we are created in the image of God. That's how we are made.

But sin has corrupted that. And it's left us falling short of what we were made to be and that leaves us incomplete. That's why people feel incomplete. And we try and try and try to fill that void with stuff and activities and things. But we end up in this never-ending dilemma where we try to indulge ourselves and yet we are left empty. And we are slaves to the chase, aren't we? And that's probably true in all of our lives. Have you ever had the experience where there's something where you think, I can't wait until I do this? And then afterwards you think, I wish I had never done that. And that's exactly the effect that sin has on us. It's time to fill a hole, but it's just making the hole deeper and deeper and deeper. And the great message of the Bible is that when we put our faith in Jesus, God himself comes to dwell in our hearts and the void in our heart is filled perfectly. And we are being restored by the influence of that spirit back into our original destiny to bear the image of God, to be what God has made us to be. And the result is that our slavery to indulgence is gone. And all these things that once upon a time looked so important now do not matter. And that's where the Bible, the Bible's message of liberty is so different.

The world's message of liberty will just leave you in a never-ending cycle of chasing your tail. The Bible's message of liberty will set you free from all of that. And as a result, we are free to be self-controlled. And the vital point I want us to grasp is that this freedom to be self-controlled has extraordinary potential for transforming the world for good.

[24 : 09] We talk about the mission of IJM, they are trying to correct what's a desperate wrong in this world. And that's the role of the church in so many ways to bring good into this world. And this is part of our role and part of being self-controlled is fulfilling this role. Because if you look again at the list of works of the flesh in Galatians 5, Paul talks about sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sociality, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies and things like these. These things all manifest themselves today in some of the most desperate areas of suffering that are being endured in our society. We can think of some examples.

Think of people whose lives are in the grip of addiction, whether that's gambling or alcohol or drugs or whatever it may be. These people are in a desperately hard situation and our hearts should go out to them for what they're having to live with every day. You come across people who find themselves having children when they didn't plan to and it leaves them struggling to work this out, mothers on their own trying to bring up children with nowhere near the resources that they need and without the support that they need and they're struggling.

People who are victims of abuse, physical, sexual, whatever it may be. Horrendous suffering for these people. People who face violence, domestic violence, local violence, whether it's rival groups or even global violence or bullying, whether it's at school or at work. It's a manifestation of these things, any form of inequality that we have in our society. People are treated unfairly and as a church we must always, always, always show every ounce of love and care and comfort and support to anyone who finds themselves in that situation. We have absolutely no right to look down on any of these people and people in these situations are welcome here and we want to help them. Our goal is to bring good into these people's lives and so I do not want to sound as though I am

condemning anybody in these situations. I am not and I could have been in that situation myself were it not for the grace of God. But the point I want to raise is this. If you look at all these problems in our society and ask the question, what's the answer to addiction, to unplanned pregnancies, to violence, to abuse, to inequality, what could prevent all of these things, the answer is self-control. Self-control has phenomenal power for good in our lives.

That's why the Bible says control yourself. It is such wise, wise advice. Now it's easy at this point to say to ourselves, oh yes, I know lots of people who need more self-control and we can think of people who aren't conforming to this standard. But if we are thinking like that then we've missed the point. Because self-control is self-control. And so I don't look at the self-control in others. I need to examine myself. That's exactly what Paul says in verse 1 of Galatians 6. If anyone's caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. So whether it's your victim of violence or your addict or your pregnant teenager or whatever it may be, our role as a church is to restore that person and to help them. And then Paul says, keep watch on yourself. And it's so, so important that we do that. And so that brings us to our last question, which we'll deal with very briefly. How do we do that? How do we maintain and cultivate our self-control?

I could say many things. I just want to highlight two points. The first thing is we need to identify the areas where we should strive to exercise self-control. And the Bible gives us many, many examples. I'll just go through these. They don't need explanation. Eating and drinking, Proverbs 23-20. Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat.

[29 : 31] No desire for this is the will of God, your sanctification that you abstain from sexual immorality. Abstain, that's a word that's controlled, self-control language, your temper.

Be angry and do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. And when Paul says that he's not giving us an excuse to be angry, he's saying, be incredibly careful with your temper. Time, our time, I am rebuking myself as I say these words. Walk in wisdom towards outsiders, making the best use of the time. It is so easy to waste time, isn't it? So easy, so easy. Speech, no human being can tame the tongue. It's a restless evil, full of deadly poison. We need self-control with our tongues. Possessions, if we have food and clothing with these, we'll be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmless desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. Isn't that, that's the language of slavery. Snaring, despair. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. We have to be careful about possessions. And idolatry, which includes covetousness, put to death there for what is earthly in you. Sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry. Likewise topics like hatred, selfishness, temptation, all of these areas as Christians we must exercise self-control. Now please, please don't misunderstand me, because none of this means that we are to never enjoy anything. And some people think that as a Christian you must just lock yourself away and never do anything that remotely resembles fun or happiness in your life. That goes completely against the mandate that God gave us from the very beginning. He gave us this world to enjoy, to explore, to treasure and to make the very best of. But we do that with self-control. And Paul likens it to being an athlete. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Paul is saying God wants the best for us, the best prize. But it takes discipline and care to reach that point. Now that's obviously hard and it's not easy to exercise self-control, but we must strive to. And we must remember that God, the Holy Spirit is dwelling in our hearts, helping us. That's why our prayer should always be, oh God, please give me the self-control that I need. So we want to highlight these areas. The second thing we want to do is to always look at the example of Jesus. Because he was the model of self-control. He was beaten, but he didn't retaliate. He was mocked and insulted. He didn't open his mouth. He was challenged and ridiculed. He just kept on teaching. He was criticised, but he remained obedient. He was tempted, but he did not give in. So being self-controlled is simply to be like Jesus. The key point is that if you are a Christian, you're not a slave to sin anymore. You're a master over it. So let's live that way. But if you are not yet a Christian or seeking the Lord or not sure, and if in the midst of that you feel the crushing burden of sin upon you, if you feel like sin is weighing you down, there's only one place to go. Go to Jesus. Because if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. Let's pray. God our Father, we thank you that your word is so wise. We pray that we would listen. We pray that you'd help us to be self-controlled.

To enjoy every blessing that you've given to us and to live every day to the maximum that we can for your glory. But help us, Lord, not to go too far. Help us to be careful. Help us to be wise. And we just thank you, Lord, that in Jesus Christ we have such perfect freedom. And so bless us in His name. Amen.