

“FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT, SELF-CONTROL.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Proverbs 16:32; 25:28; I Corinthians 9:24-27; Galatians 5:13, 16-25

Introduction.

This morning we come to the final of the nine fruit of the Spirit, self-control. In Proverbs, we read:

Proverbs 25:28 A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.

In ancient times the walls of a city were its primary defense. Without walls, it was prey to enemy invaders. This is a picture of utter vulnerability. Proverbs uses this same image to describe our souls.

Self-control is the wall to our hearts and souls, the means of waging war against the sinful desires that attack us from all sides. Without self-control, every temptation becomes an opportunity for sin.

Character of Self-control.

Self-control is control over one's self. It is the ability to control our desires, emotions, attitudes, thoughts, words and actions. Control simply means being able to govern or regulate or restrain or keep in check, to exercise self-discipline.

In Greek culture self-control was considered the highest virtue, the foundation to all the other virtues. Controlling one's passions and desires was the most important character trait.

The NT goes beyond the Greek concept of self-control or self-mastery. For the Greeks, the focus was on the self, on our own inner ability.

In the NT, it is understood that our self is corrupted and controlled by sin. We are slaves to sin. In the NT, there is a new power, a power not of our own making, a power outside of us, that makes a new life and a new way of living possible.

Paul is not teaching some form of self-mastery. Paul says that is impossible without outside help. True and lasting self-control is impossible without the power of God by the indwelling of His Holy Spirit. Before we can govern ourselves, we must be governed by God. Rather than self-control we should call it Spirit-control.

The term self-control can easily be misunderstood or misleading. We are not just talking about the self in control, but the self under the control of the Spirit. Our willpower is not enough, this can only be done under His power. True self-control is not natural, but supernatural. We are to live and walk by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16, 24-25).

Obstacles to Self-control.

Ourselves and our sinful natures.

The greatest obstacle to self-control is our selves. There is a war battling inside every one of us. We are a walking battle ground from here to heaven. The corruptions of the flesh and our fallenness remain and tempt us and pull us down.

Our selves produce desires we must deny and control. The apostles had much wisdom about this.

James 1:14-15 Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. 15 Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

I Peter 2:11 Beloved, I urge you ... to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

Our biggest obstacle is inside, it's an inside job.

How many times have you firmly resolved to stop doing something or start doing something only to have that resolve run out or fall short?

Why is that? Why does our tongue seem to have a mind of its own? Because we have put too much confidence in our own ability to change or control ourselves. We cannot master our self by our self. We cannot pull ourselves up by our own boot straps.

There are times and seasons in our lives when God hands us over to ourselves and to our sin to expose how weak and foolish we are and how desperately dependent we are on Him.

Our culture.

Paul tells Timothy in II Timothy 3:1-5 that in the last days people will lack self-control, that the people will be increasingly self-indulgent and unrestrained.

You can see the progression in magazine titles, Life, Time, People, Us, Self, Me. Our culture is self-indulgent, self-oriented. We live in a culture that celebrates excess. You have heard me sum it up before with, some is good, more is better and too much is just right.

We live our lives in the pursuit of the pleasures of life, which necessarily means we are living for ourselves. Our Declaration of Independence says we have an unalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, which we now define as a pursuit of pleasure.

Our culture indulges in addictive behavior. We joke about being addicted to TV shows or chocolate or ice cream or coffee or romance novels or a sports team or fill in the blank.

Some people have addictive personalities, a susceptibility toward certain addictions. Our culture has an addictive personality. Just look at how many twelve-step programs there are for alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling, overeating, spending, stress and being a workaholic. There are even some people addicted to twelve-step programs (Kenneson, p. 229).

We spend millions indulging our desires and millions more trying to overcome the effects of our lack of control.

Cultivating Self-control.

Cultivate Spirit-enabled self-control by acknowledging our lack of it and our need for a greater strength than we have.

Learn from our repeated failures that our own will power or natural ability are not sufficient. We need Spirit-empowered self-control.

One of the positive things about the *Twelve-step movement* is their requirement for every person involved to admit their own powerlessness to change and their need for help from a power outside of themselves.

True and lasting self-control is impossible without the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Cultivate Spirit-enabled self-control by understanding the Gospel.

The law-oriented life tries harder to be better and do better. This leads to either bitterness because I can't do it and I am failing, or it leads to pride because I am doing it better than most.

The gospel-oriented life depends on God, submits to Jesus and relies on His Spirit for wisdom and strength to cooperate with what God is forming and changing in us. This leads to peace and joy and faithfulness because we see the slow steady work of God in our hearts and lives.

Cultivate Spirit-enabled self-control by understanding life as warfare.

Cultivate self-control in the same way an Olympic athlete does, even when it hurts.

I Corinthians 9:27 I discipline my body and keep it under control.

Look back over your life at the addictions, uncontrollable habits, anything you were in bondage to. How did you deal with it? Did it feel like a battle, with lots of winning and losing?

When God gave Israel the Promised Land what did they have to do? They had to fight for every square inch of it, one city at a time. It was a fight and so it is for us, a Spirit-enabled fight.

Cultivate Spirit-enabled self-control pursuing higher pleasures.

Self-control is not just saying no to all pleasures, it is saying yes to higher pleasures. If we only deny ourselves the sinful pleasures but don't fill the void with good pleasures we will end up worse off, like the person who swept out the evil spirit but then had seven worse fill the vacuum.

There is an *illustration* of this from Greek mythology. There was an island off Greece which sailors often passed inhabited by Sirens, half woman, half birds creatures who lured the sailors onto the rocks with their beautiful, beguiling singing. Odysseus aware of the danger had all the sailors fill their ears with wax and tie him to the mast of ship with strict orders that when he ordered them to untie him they were not to obey him. In so doing they were able to pass by.

Orpheus had a better strategy, he played a harp and played music that was louder and more beautiful, drowning out the Sirens and his sailors took no interest in them.

Fill your mind and heart with God's superior music, His superior pleasures, like the treasure in the field that is worth more than anything else this life has to offer. Remember the Psalmist.

Psalm 1:1-3 Blessed is the man who

2 [delights] in the law of the Lord, and on his law, he meditates day and night.

3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water

that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

Psalm 42:1-2 As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.

2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?

Psalm 63:1-5 O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

2 So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.

3 Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.

5 My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips.

Fill your soul with the lasting pleasures found in God and in serving others.

Cultivate Spirit-enabled self-control by repairing the very first breach in the walls, not when sin has put up ladders and scaled the walls and is pushing the gap wider and wider.

Unwatchfulness, lack of concern, slothfulness toward sin, being casual about small sin will lead to greater sins. Sin never stays the same, never stays on a plateau.

If anger is not dealt with it will become murder, unattended lust or a momentary indiscretion becomes adultery, a small lack of integrity turns into embezzling, a white lie turns into a huge cover up.

It's so much easier to gain victory over a single assault than when a whole platoon is coming at us. It's easier to fight a peashooter than a bazooka.

Cultivate self-control from an early age to old age. We are never too young or too old to learn and practice. Self-control is a character trait of all believers in all ages, for young and old, for men and women, for husbands and wives.

We have all lived with too much lack of self-control for too long. Let's confess and submit to the Spirit and pray for ourselves and for each other. Husbands and wives, pray for each other, acknowledge we need help and want help in this area. God is willing and ready, are you?

Cultivate Spirit-enabled self-control over your body, tongue and emotions.

Concerning what you eat and drink, what you see and think, what you do with your time and energy.

Now days controlling your tongue needs to include what you say in social media, texts, blogs, twitter, Facebook or comments of other people's sites.

Are you lazy, do you waste time, does everything else seem better or more interesting than investing some time with God.

Control your anger, temper, impatience, resentment, self-pity, bitterness. If you let them simmer in your mind long enough the steam will start to come out our ears. Uncontrolled temper hurts not just us but those we love and care about.

Proverbs 16:32 Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.

Controlling our emotions isn't just about concealing them and keeping a lid on them, but changing them and bringing them under Christ's control. We must root out and put off the old and put on the new self.

I Corinthians 10:31 So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Cultivate Spirit-enabled self-control by avoiding anything bordering on sexual immorality.

We live in a culture that is completely out of control sexually and a culture that encourages complete lack of self-control. Do whatever you want. We are throwing off all restraints and becoming pagan and godless to the destruction of our souls and our families and church.

I Thessalonians 4:3-5 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, 5 not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God

Self-control in this area is more necessary now than ever more. I can't emphasize this enough. We need more prayer, more vigilance, more diligence. We need to raise the bar for the sake of purity and holiness. We need to treasure and protect God's good gift from being destroyed by the devil.

Indulging in pornography and sexting ruins how you think about sex and women. Indulging in pornography ruins your conscience and how you think.

Titus 2:11-12 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.

Cultivate Spirit-enabled self-control by taking your thoughts captive.

Remember the city without walls, so is the mind where every thought is given freedom to roam.

II Corinthians 10:5 ... take every thought captive to obey Christ.

How often do we play negative tapes in our mind, thoughts of bitterness, anger, criticism, complaints, revenge, envy, lust, greed, gossip, selfishness?

Stop them as soon as they start, don't let Satan get a foot hold. When something negative or critical comes in about another person, quickly turn the thought into a prayer of blessing for that person.

Jerry Bridges calls our minds mental greenhouses where we allow all kinds of plants to grow, poisonous and fruitful.

Our thoughts are the gateway drug to what eventually turns into sinful actions. For Moses, his anger turned into disobedience. For King David, his lustful thoughts turned to adultery, for King Ahab his covetousness of Naboth's vineyard turned into murder.

Our thoughts are also our first line of defense, stifle and stop the sinful thoughts before they become actions. If we guard our thoughts it will be easier to guard our tongues.

A famous golfer said the toughest six inches in golf is the six inches between your ears. And that's the toughest part of self-control, controlling our thoughts. That's where the battles are won and lost, whether on the golf course, the playing field, the battlefield or in the spiritual life.

Guard your heart, flee from temptation, take thoughts captive, fear God and love what is good.

Conclusion.

Parents and grandparents, as you seek to teach and instill this fruit please remember it can't be done by rules and regulations. You can only control the behavior of your children for so long and then you will fail and they won't have what they need to truly succeed.

This is a heart issue and a Holy Spirit issue. Talk with your children about why they do the things they do, which is because of sin in their hearts. Then explain to them the only way to get help, repentance and dependence on God. Then pray with them, teach them how to pray for this, and don't let a day go by when you don't pray for them.

The battle is real, the enemy is evil, the stakes are high, but God is great and good. Don't give up, don't grow weary in well doing, for in due time you will reap a harvest.

You know your particular area of struggle, you know where and when you are most vulnerable, you know how Satan loves to attack.

Take that and lay it before the cross and pray and ask God by His Spirit to enable you to trust and obey, to die to self and live for Christ by living by the Spirit. Ask God to enable you to take small steps, to fight the good fight, to gain small victories.

By God's grace and power, He will enable you to make progress toward cultivating fruitful Christian character.

Prayer: Holy Father, grant us your grace through the indwelling of your Holy Spirit to manifest the fruit of the Spirit for your glory and for our good and the good of those around us. Give us a greater desire to desire you. Enable us to do all you command, for in this is our joy and peace.