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Matthew 4:1-16
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Self-Control

Thank you for allowing me yet another time to be away. Karen and I have entered into what is known as the Sandwich Generation who must care for family members at both ends of the generational spectrum. Our children and our parents. While our parents are still quite healthy and independent, there are still times that require a little extra support over certain life hurdles like relocating to new places and knee replacements. I am happy to report that my father is doing very well after his second knee replacement in four months. With two new knees, his hope is to be out golfing once again by mid spring.

But in order to do so, it takes work. Hard work! Getting used to new knees just doesn't happen on its own. You've got to follow the doctor's instructions. You've got to stretch out your new joints. And you need to suffer through the pain of physical therapy. Anyone who has gone through this understands what I'm talking about. While your body says, "just take it easy." Our inner voice says, "No pain, no gain."

Which brings us to the last fruit of the Spirit that we are going to address today. Self-control.

Any major life milestone such as getting through school, recovering from addictions, or reclaiming life after major surgery takes a good bit of self-control. But the self-control that the Apostle Paul talks about in Galatians 5:22 is more than our American notion of just pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps and making something happen in our own strength. It's a fruit that Holy Spirit produces within us as we yield ourselves to God's loving care.

We see this fruit evident throughout Jesus' life. Right after his baptism and before his public debut in ministry, Jesus found himself in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. It's a familiar story, but not one we usually pair with something like self-control.

Join me as we read from Matthew 4:1-11 and we hear how this fruit was manifest in Jesus' life.

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. **2** After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. **3** The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

4 Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. **6** “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:

“‘He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

7 Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. **9** “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

10 Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

What a terrible thing to bring up on the heels the most gluttonous American holiday when we struggle to exercise self-control. Thanksgiving! Either I’m cruel or God has something to say as we head into our times of celebration together!

Before we dive in, I want to say thank you to Geordie Ziegler for preaching for me last week. It’s always a joy to watch online. I was struck by several things. We are blessed to have such a great team of worship leaders, staff, and elders who take their roles seriously by creating such meaningful worship services. Can we just give them around of applause to say “Thank you?”

The other thing was how excited I am about partnering with both Geordie and Sharon Ziegler as they provide spiritual support to pastors and ministry leaders in Kenya AND Open House Ministries as they care for unhoused families in our community. We are living into our call as Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem to our own people, in Judea to our neighbors, in Samaria to those who are unlike us, and at the ends of the earth or the poorest of the world’s poor.

But getting on topic for today, there are several things that I want to address as we look at this scripture and talk about self-control. We will define what is self-control. We will see how Jesus exercised self-control even when he was alone. We will see how Jesus relied on the Word of God to fill him with wisdom and knowledge. And finally we will consider what God is saying to us today and how can we cultivate this fruit of self-control in our lives.

What is self control? It an odd fruit of the Spirit because we have been emphasizing all along that these are qualities that Jesus cultivates in us. But there

is this problem with the part of the word. Self. It implies that this is something we do on our own. Right?

Author's Thomas Trask and Wayde Goodall in *The Fruit of the Spirit, Becoming the Person God Wants You To Be* define self-control as a combination of two Greek words. en kratos. "En means 'in' and kratos means "strength, power, might, or dominion.' A person en kratos is a person who has strength from within. Kratos is a word that has been passed down to our English language in words like democratic (people-power/rule), theocratic (God power/rule), and autocratic (self power/rule). The question Trask and Goodall raise is 'Who rules our lives?'"¹

Great question. How would our American culture answer that?

We do! Right?

A toddler might tell us "You aren't the boss of me."

Nike tells us "Just do it!"

American sexuality tells us "Do what feels right."

Self-control is the opposite of the sinful behaviors listed in Galatians 5 which precede the fruits of the Spirit. Paul lists them as "sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like." Each imply a sense of not being in control of oneself, whether it's our actions, our thoughts, or our words.

But our Christian faith tells us that we aren't the creators of our own manifest destiny. NO! As followers of Jesus, we willingly subject ourselves to his Holy Spirit that lives and reigns in us. We give Jesus control. We let him take the wheel and be our driver.

The Apostle Paul exhorted the Galatians, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me."²

Paul was talking to a group of people who felt enslaved by the Old Testament Law that drove everything they did. What he hoped was show them the freedom and fullness they could have if they just lived subject to Jesus' Spirit and not an obsolete system of condemnation.

Proverbs says, "Like a city whose walls are broken down is a person who lacks self-control."³ The Hebrew is en masar le ruhow. It literally translates as one who has no rule over their own spirit.

¹ Thomas E. Trask and Wayde I. Goodall, *The Fruit of the Holy Spirit, Becoming the Person God Wants You to Be* (Nashville, TN: Emanate Books, 2000), 153.

² Galatians 2:20

³ Proverbs 25:28

As we look at this fruit of the Spirit we see how Jesus cultivated it in his own life as he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness at the start of his public ministry. At first reading, it seems like Jesus was alone when Satan tempted him. In reality, Jesus always had the company of the Father and the Holy Spirit. He was always keenly aware of their presence which gave him strength and accountability.

Imagine if we lived in this constant awareness of God's presence, with Jesus at our side! We would not turn to those pornography sites that we visit when no one else was looking. We would not spend that money on that thing that we already have four of. We would not let those words slip from our mouths that often wound others. We would not let our minds dwell on how nice our neighbor's new car is over our old beater. We would have sex with people outside a covenantal relationship with God. You get my drift.

NO! We would take those thoughts captive, acknowledge God's presence in our lives right now, and not let them gain footholds that later would become much harder to get free from.

Another thing that this communal aspect of self-control shows us is that we can't do this on our own. Self-control only comes as we yield ourselves to the strength and power of the Holy Spirit. Addicts wanting to break free from the vices that enslave them understand this. This is why twelve step programs are so successful. They teach the importance of yielding to a higher power which will give them sobriety. Because they cannot do it on their own.

Also meeting together with other addicts provides we accountability to make sure we don't fall back into our old patterns and habits that lead to abuse. They also provide the encouragement that we aren't alone in our struggles. Once a person thinks that they have graduated from requiring this accountability, we can be sure that chances are good that they may slide back to the worst state they were in prior to seeking help.

Notice how Jesus combated the temptations and accusations that came from Satan? He relied on the Word of God planted in him. Each time Satan tried to get Jesus do something that Jesus knew was not in keeping with God's plan, he remembered what God the Father had told him in his Word. Jesus said, "It is written..."

You see, Jesus had God's Word tucked away in his heart so that when the time came when he needed to remember what God thought of this situation, he could act on that and not the words that Satan provided. God tells the truth. Satan tells lies.

But know that this works to a point. Because our Satan is smart and crafty.

In the story, Satan takes God's Words and twists them to get Jesus to self harm. But Jesus knew that self-harm is never God's plan. He could discern truth from lies.

We also see how Jesus trusted God to take care of him. When he was hungry, he trusted his Heavenly Father to provide for him. When he was tempted to prove that he was who he said he was, he let God fight the battle for him. Jesus didn't need to provide a rational explanation for why he was right and Satan was wrong. Instead, when he was tempted with power and authority, Jesus didn't fight with Satan because he already knew that he had the power and authority over all things, even Satan.

So what is God saying to us and how can we cultivate this fruit of self-control in our lives today?

1 John tells us “God is light and in him there is no darkness. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his son, purifies us from all sin.”⁴

Romans 8:1 says, “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ.”⁵ We all struggle with self-control and sometimes throw gutter balls. God's forgiveness covers it all.

We can control our thoughts. Adultery doesn't begin with having sex with someone who is not our spouse. It begins with our thoughts. What we think about dictates our actions, our actions, become our habits, and our habits determine our character. It's a slippery slope, my friends. It begins with little decisions.

Author Christopher Wright in his book, *Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit, Growing in Christlikeness*, writes, “And so often, sadly very often, the worst scandals begin with a momentary loss of self-control, or with the slow failure over time to exercise self-control over one's eyes and imagination, until the longed for but unthinkable becomes available and then actual.”⁶

Paul says, “Do not conform any longer to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing on your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, his good, pleasing, and perfect will.”⁷ Paul encourages us to take our thoughts captive to God's will and then think about things that God would have us think about instead.

We can control our tongues. The Apostle James said, that not many of his readers should aim to be elders if they did not have control over what they said.

⁴ 1 John 1:6-7

⁵ Romans 8:1

⁶ Christopher J.H. Wright, *Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit, Growing in Christlikeness* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2017), 148.

⁷ Romans 12:2

He talked about taming the tongue which is often used to praise God and to tear others down. James says, “This should not be.”⁸

The Wisdom writer of Proverbs says, “Better a patient person than a warrior, a person who controls their temper than one who takes a city.”⁹

We can control our bodies. Being in relationship with others who can hold us accountable is crucial for being in control of our bodies. Author Jack Kuhatschek says this can involve one person or several people that you can display real honesty to. The Apostle James likewise urges us, “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”¹⁰

We can control our desires. Just last year, the Wall Street Journal reported how ever since the launch of the 2007 iPhone that “smartphones have granted billions of people customized, password-protected, hand-held access to a near-limitless array of digital stimuli. And this portable, pervasive parallel universe is highly addictive, often by design.

The leading online pornography site, Pornhub, was founded in 2007, a few months before the first iPhone dropped. By 2009, the site was already receiving millions of monthly unique visitors. In November 2022, Pornhub was visited 10.2 billion times, making it the fourth most popular destination on the web, and 97% of that traffic came from mobile devices.”¹¹

Folks, can we see how Satan has developed a foothold our lives, right through our iPhones? Again we need to be in covenanted relationships where we can be honest with our cellphone usage so that we don’t get snagged in sexual addictions that will later destroy future relationships.

The Apostle Paul told those in Galatia, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”¹²

We can control our appetites. “People who exhibit addictive behavior often have trouble admitting it. Yet being honest about our addictions - even the ‘small ones’ - is essential to breaking them. If you think you might be addicted to some form of behavior, seek help from a respected friend, a support group, your pastor, or a professional counselor. Taking that step could put you on the path to greater freedom and joy.”

⁸ James 3:4-10

⁹ Proverbs 16:32

¹⁰ James 5:16

¹¹ Mary Harrington, “Smartphones Have Turbocharged the Dangers of Porn,” The Wall Street Journal (10-13-23)

¹² Galatians 5:24-25

We can control our finances. If we want to know how in control of our finances we are, take a look at our checkbooks. That will tell us everything about our spending habits and priorities.

Author Jack Kuhatschek again suggests, “One of the best ways to break a hold that money and possessions have on us is to live generously. How might we be more generous with our money and possessions? What step could we take this week toward becoming a more generous person?”

We can choose to clothe ourselves with Christ. Some of us spend a lot of attention to what we wear from week to week. What if God were inviting us to spend just as much, if not more, attention to the moral wardrobe we wear? Perhaps we could invest a few minutes each day in prayer, Bible study, and reflection. What if we asked Jesus to clothe us with the fruits of his Holy Spirit? How might that impact the way we live in this world? Younger generations writing off the church today might give us more thought.

And finally, authors Trask and Goodall write, “This fruit [of self-control] develops in our lives as we stay close to Jesus and mature in our Christian walks.”¹³

So may we stay close to Jesus as we mature in his likeness. May we rely on the Holy Spirit to cultivate this fruit in us. But may we take the necessary baby steps to cultivate self-control in our lives.

Breath prayer.

Holy Spirit come. Give me self-control.

Holy Spirit come. Give me self-control.

Holy Spirit come. Give me self-control.

¹³ Trask and Goodall, *The Fruit of the Holy Spirit*, 154.