

## COLLECTIVE

# Life in the Spirit Series (Lesson 17)

## Fruit of the Spirit – Self-control

Our connect group lessons this year will focus primarily on Galatians 5.

In our previous lessons, we learnt about Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness and Gentleness. In this lesson, we begin our study on the 9<sup>th</sup> Fruit of the Spirit – Self-control.

### **Read: Galatians 5:16-25**

Finally, we come to the last on Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit—self-control. This word throws us back sharply to that horrible list of “the works of the flesh” that comes immediately before the fruit of the Spirit.

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19-21)

Many of the behaviours that Paul lists show human nature out of control and at its sinful, excessive worst. That kind of uncontrolled life lets people give in to self-indulgence, sexual gratification, pride, gluttony, and so on. Self-control is the opposite of those kinds of sinful behaviours.

That fact is probably the reason why self-control is the one and only fruit of the Spirit for which we don't have a matching quality of God. For God does not need to exercise self-control over any sinful tendency within himself. God does not have to hold in check any evil desires. “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all,” as John said (1 John 1:5). God is not tempted in any way by evil. So, in that sense (self-control over evil desires), this is not a quality of God.

Why then is it included in a list of the fruit of the Spirit? Surely it is because one of the things that the Holy Spirit does within us is that he enables and empowers us to control our sinful desires. This does not mean that, in this earthly life, we achieve perfection and never fall or fail. But it does mean that we remember, as Paul taught us, that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and so we ask the Holy Spirit within us to control us so that we learn to control ourselves.

We have powerful drives and passions that need to be kept under control. But since some of our passions are part of our fallen, sinful nature, how can they be controlled? We do not have the ability in ourselves to do so successfully in our own strength. Sin has a power of its own operating against our best intentions, and it very quickly gets out of control and carries us along with it.

## COLLECTIVE

Paul, on the other hand, knew only too well about the power of sin and the flesh, and he knew that the only power sufficient to keep it under control is the Holy Spirit. So, he adds this final piece of the Spirit's fruit. Part of the work of the Holy Spirit within us is the way he enables us to keep the sinful desires and impulses that still lurk within us under control. Self-control does involve effort of the will, but it is an effort inspired and empowered by the Spirit of God as his will bears fruit in our will.

Probably the main thing (but certainly not the only thing) that Paul has in mind in regard to what we need to control is our sexual desires. As you can see, his list of "the works of the flesh" begins with sexual immorality, and in several other places Paul includes that among his lists of sinful behaviour that Christians should put aside altogether (e.g., 1 Corinthians 5:9-11; Ephesians 5:3-7; Colossians 3:5-10).

If you look for examples from the Bible, you can see the example of Joseph who had the fruit of self-control in his life when facing the sexual temptation from Potiphar's wife. On the other hand, you also have the example of King David who lacked self-control and committed sexual sin with Bathsheba, and eventually even murder. Even though he repented and experienced God's forgiveness, his loss of personal self-control meant that he also lost moral control over his own family—especially two of his sons, Amnon and Absalom—who amplified their father's sexual sins to their own eventual destruction (2 Samuel 11–17).

Temptation to sexual activity and relations outside the good context God provided for sex (within marriage) remains very strong and is a powerful enemy for any of us at any age. We need to recognize what a dangerous enemy it is, whether in actual practice, or in the world of our thoughts and imagination, through pornography and other sources. Sexual temptation targets both men and women.

Those of us who are in any form of Christian leadership need to especially heed Paul's teaching here more than most. Because with depressing frequency, the evil one somehow manages to precisely seduce such people into sexual sin, sometimes to the destruction of whatever ministry God had entrusted to them. Of course, there is grace and forgiveness whenever there is true repentance. We know the cleansing power of the blood of Christ and the amazing redemptive, restorative truth of the gospel. But the damage done may be irreversible at a human level, and the damage done to the name of Christ in the world is a grievous pain to God and a shame on the church. Sadly so 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 deed becomes available and then actual.

But maybe for some of us, we have come to a place in our lives where the temptation of sexual immorality is something we can well control. Or maybe our circumstances in life and ministry are very unlikely to provide or cause us the temptation or the opportunity to fall into sexual sin.

## COLLECTIVE

Still, we are warned, “If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (1 Corinthians 10:12), Paul’s list reminds us that “the flesh,” our fallen human nature, has plenty of other desires and tendencies, bad habits, traps, and temptations for us to fall into if we don’t exercise self-control with the help of the Spirit. Just look at the list at the start of this lesson (Galatians 5:19-21).

Are you in control of your temper? Paul includes fits of rage in his list. I know of some senior Christian leaders who are notorious for getting very angry with others, shouting at their staff, and so on. Where is their self-control in those moments?

And what about your appetite? Is that under control? We can all enjoy good food that God provides as a blessing to be received with thanksgiving. But drunkenness and gluttony are among the sins the Bible condemns.

Are you in control of your attitude towards others? When others do well or get what you would like for yourself, can you control the urge to jealousy and envy and selfish ambition? Are you in control of your time, or wasting a lot of it in laziness or lack of self-discipline? Are you in control of what is perhaps the hardest thing of all to exercise self-control over—your tongue?

James 3:5-7 says “the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

Lack of self-control in the use of our tongues is a huge cause of damage in Christian fellowship. And that can apply not only to what we say with our mouths, but also what we write in emails, blogs, or comments. The language that some Christians use with each other and about each other is simply shameful at times. The evidence of the fruit of the Spirit through the exercise of self-control of our tongues is something all of us truly need.

So, Paul has come full circle in his portrayal of the fruit of the Spirit. He began with love, which is a quality that directs our thoughts and actions outward toward others. And he ends with self-control, which is a quality that directs our thoughts and actions inward toward ourselves for our own good and that of others. And probably, Paul has in mind that unless we exercise this somewhat negative but necessary practice of self-control and live in a disciplined way (a way disciplined by the Holy Spirit), we will not likely bear the rest of the fruit of the Spirit.

### Reflection/Discussion:

- 1) Where, in your own life, do you see the need for greater self-control? What steps will you take, spiritually and in practice, to cultivate this part of the fruit of the Spirit?**