

The Ripe Stuff Sermon Series
#1 – Self-Control
Jan. 6, 2019
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Happy New Year! I hope you all had a joyous holiday season and that 2019 is off to a great start. A new year always brings with it a new resolve, an opportunity for a fresh start, a chance to make some changes and improve our lives. For our new sermon series to start the year, we're going to see what changes we can make to help us be more fruitful Christians and we're going to use as our guide the fruit of the Spirit Paul lists in Galatians – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. How can we focus on producing these fruit in our lives, especially in a world and a society that seems to work against every single one of those fruits? That will be our focus for the next several weeks.

Now, before I go any further, I have to point out the huge paradox that I'm creating by preaching this sermon today. For those of you who were here on Dec. 23, the last time I preached, you may remember – and you may not – that in that sermon I encouraged you not to count the costs of Christmas, but instead to enjoy all the blessings Christmas had in store for you. In short, I encouraged you to eat the cookie. And now, in my first sermon after Christmas, I'm preaching about self-control. You could draw the conclusion that I took my own advice a little too well, and you'd be exactly right.

It's important to note as we start this series the context in which Paul gives us these fruit. He doesn't offer them in a vacuum, but instead as a response to the worldly behaviors that he sees infiltrating the Galatian church. I want to read that list for you, but I want to read it from the Message translation, because it's much more colorful. Paul says this: "It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on."

The question for each of us is not if we have a behavior on that list, but how many. And if you are high-minded enough to think you don't do any of those things, remember Paul's last words: "I could go on." So, Paul says, because we all give into the works of the flesh, he encourages us instead to produce the fruit of the Spirit, ending that list with self-control, which is where we're going to start.

The Message renders this phrase "being able to marshal and direct our energies wisely." The Greek root here is "enkratos," from which we get words like "democracy" and "autocracy." "Enkratos" translates to "inner strength," the ability to stay strong against the forces that oppose us. In some ways, this is the most interesting of all the fruits because it's the only one God doesn't exhibit. We can talk about the love of God and the patience of God, but no one has ever said, "Geez, God, get a grip, you're out of control." God doesn't need to exercise self-control. That responsibility is reserved for us humans.

And it's something we've needed from the very beginning. When God created human beings, God chose to give us an incredible amount of power by bestowing upon us free will. We have the power to choose. Adam and Eve's first choice in exercising their power was to disobey God.

Having power doesn't mean we have the ability to control it. For example, last year for Christmas I got a new golf club. A big golf club. Very powerful. The club's makers promised it would help me swing even more powerfully and drive the ball further than ever before. And they were right! Now I can drive the ball 50 yards out of bounds instead of 20. Just because we have power doesn't mean we know how to control it.

Exercising self-control is imperative if we want to be able to use our power to produce the other eight fruit Paul lists. But you could argue that it's also the hardest fruit to produce. Why? Because what we're being asked to do is to control our selves using our selves! That's a bit like asking the fox to guard the hen house or asking me to guard a slab of brisket. It seems like we're being set up for failure when we are encouraged to exercise self-control.

Paul completely gets this. Listen to what he says in Romans 7, and, again, I'm reading from the Message. See if you hear anything about Paul's struggle that resonates with you: "I've spent a long time in sin's prison. What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't *do* it. I decide to do good, but I don't *really* do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge."

Anyone who's known addiction knows this battle Paul talks about all too well. And it's easy for those of us who've not been addicted to look down our noses at those who have. If we're willing to admit it, we've all thought to ourselves, "Just stop taking drugs! Don't drink that beer! How hard can it be?" But here's the thing: we all have our addictions. It's just that some are more visible and more destructive than others. As Peter writes in one of his letters, "For people are slaves to whatever masters them." For some, it's drugs or alcohol. For others, it's frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness or all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants or small-minded and lopsided pursuits or the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival. We all are human, so we all wrestle with the issue of self-control. Just because some people's shortcomings are more visible doesn't mean yours are more excusable.

So, the first lesson we can learn about self-control is grace. We should extend grace to ourselves when we succumb to our temptations and we should extend grace to others who succumb to theirs, as well. We are not perfect. We have too much power and not enough control and inevitably we'll make the wrong decision and our lives will land out of bounds. So, we need for grace to abound in and around us.

That's especially true in our world where the temptations to stray from a Christ-centered life are in our face every single day. We are tempted to over-indulge, to spend wastefully, to spew judgment or hatred, to categorize people as "them," to serve ourselves before serving others. Exercising self-control is harder than ever, it seems.

Or is it? At the end of the passage I read from Romans, Paul writes, "I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me?" We could be asking those questions today, couldn't we? And yet, Paul has a response: "The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does." Go figure! The answer was Jesus all along. The best way to learn self-control is to not only try and control ourselves, but to invite Jesus into the process. So, how do we do that?

Self-control was obviously an issue for Paul because he writes a lot about it. In the passage from 2 Corinthians I read at the beginning, he compares self-control to an athlete in training and says, “I do not run aimlessly or box as though beating the air.” Great visuals there! In the only fight I ever got into while in school, I was being picked on by a bigger kid, so in a moment of unbridled rage, I closed my eyes, turned around, and just started swinging haymakers. After about 10 seconds of not hitting anything, I opened my eyes to see the boy standing about 10 feet away, laughing his head off.

If we’re going to fight this fight we call faith – and doesn’t having faith today sometimes feel like something we have to fight for? – we need to have a goal. Paul says athletes can exercise “enkratos” because they have a defined goal in mind. My goal should have been that boy’s nose, but it wasn’t, so I wasted all that energy. We should marshal and direct our energies wisely, exercising self-control not just from something, but for something. This isn’t like giving up chocolate for Lent. This is about making space for Christ by clearing out the clutter that stands in the way. It’s about inviting Christ’s transforming love into our daily lives.

As we stand here on the precipice of 2019, what’s your goal? If there were one thing you wanted to accomplish in your spiritual life, what would it be? Maybe it’s to pray more. Or to read more of the Bible. Or to give more. Or to be more regular in your worship attendance. That’s great! Those are all noble resolutions. But they aren’t goals. A goal is definable, measurable, achievable. So if you want to pray more, what does that mean? When? How often? How long? Set a goal. You want to worship more? Awesome! Set a goal. How frequently? You want to read the Bible more? Go for it! By the end of January, what do you want to have read? What about February? March?

As we move into this sermon series, we’re going to talking about the challenge of bearing fruit and the blessings that come from doing it. But it starts here, with each of us making the intentional choice to say we need Christ’s help to control our selves, because Jesus offers both a different focus and forgiveness when we fall short. I read a great quote from one commentator about self-control. She said, “Our minds are mental greenhouses. What do we plant there? Because that is what will grow.” What will you plant in your mental greenhouse this year? What do you hope to cultivate, to nurture, to bring to blossom? I know people who’ve planted a lot of stinkweed and crabgrass. What will you plant this year?

Christ died on the cross to free us from sin, not so that we can just do whatever we want, but so that we can marshal and direct those energies toward serving God and God’s people. When we put our energy toward growing our faith, it’s amazing how our desires for the works of the flesh diminish. Let’s start 2019 by setting a goal, asking Christ to walk with us each day as we seek to live lives worthy of our calling as Christians. What do you want to plant? What do you hope to grow? Who do you want to be? It starts right here, right now, with each one of us. But we can’t do it alone. Our selves can’t control our selves. Thank God for Emmanuel, for Christ is with us once again.