

“The Spirit’s Fruit (Part 9): Self-Control”

Psalm 5; Galatians 5:22-23; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Proverbs 25:27-28

Surely you’ve heard about the Stanford researchers who in the 1970s offered kids either one marshmallow immediately, or two if they could wait a little while. Well, a bunch of kids wanted the second marshmallow, but couldn’t sit there in front of the first marshmallow and not eat it. So they only got one.

Later, they found that kids who didn’t immediately scarf the first marshmallow were less likely to end up obese and more likely to have positive educational outcomes. So if you’ve got self-control, you get more marshmallows without getting fat while you study at Harvard.

They ran another experiment and found out that people who had less economic security tended to have less self-control. It wasn’t just will power, but economic status.

The reason this study was funded at Stanford, and the reason it’s taken seriously, is not because the meaning of life is to have more marshmallows. We all know that the stakes are much higher when it comes to self-control.

Self-control is the last of the fruit of the Spirit. What’s the secular fake fruit of self-control? What’s the religious fake fruit of self-control? And what’s the Spirit’s fruit of self-control? Let’s take a look.

The Fake Fruit of Secular Self-Control

I said last week that gentleness was not valued in ancient cultures. Well, guess what: by contrast, self-control was the great value of the Greek world.

Tim Keller makes a great observation. He says that religious people have a lot of zeal for self-control because they want to please God to get rewards from him. But religious people often have stoics for children: their kids decide to have the same rigorous self-control, but for their own sake, rather than for God. And then stoics tend to have epicureans for children: epicureans agree that they should live for themselves, but they decide “forget self-control. I’m having fun now!”

Insofar as our culture is post-religious, it’s pretty well divided between stoics and epicureans, huh? Some people, mostly older people, still emphasize hard work and delayed gratification. Some people, mostly younger people, just want to live their best lives now. Sometimes kids grow up a little and realize that, actually, they do want two marshmallows, and they’re going to wait for them. But the principle is still

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self, whether you’re stoic or epicurean; whether you’re disciplined or indulgent: the goal is to please yourself—later, or now.

Keller points out that often the culture’s emphasis on self-discipline can either lead to pride, or, ironically, to addiction! We lose 5kg, and all of a sudden we start looking down on people who eat marshmallows, and along the way we become addicted to fad diets. We decide we’re going to give the best presentations at ETH or at UBS, and we work tirelessly. We start feeling superior to our classmates and colleagues, and along the way we become addicted to caffeine pills.

Nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche sought to become a new kind of human by strictly regulating his diet and by constant alpine hiking. He went from vegetarian to carnivore to fasting completely. His biographer John Kaag went to Graubunden to retrace Nietzsche’s steps, to get some control over his life. He ended up anorexic and addicted to dangerous mountain climbing--either of which could have killed him. Getting control of yourself can easily mean losing control of yourself.

The problem is that, whether you’re an epicurean or a stoic, whether you’re fanatical about self-discipline or addicted to fun and pleasure, the world is telling you to do it for yourself.

The Fake Fruit of Religious Self-Control

I mentioned that sometimes religious people have stoic kids, and stoic kids have epicurean kids. But you know what happens then? A lot of times, when pleasure-seeking selfish parents have kids, those kids return to religion!

Why? Because we want constraints. We actually want authorities in our lives to draw boundaries for us, to help us restrain our worst instincts, to challenge us, and, ultimately, to submit to. In fact, young women who grew up with indulgent parents can often run into the arms of religious cults. Young men especially without strong father figures often run to radical Islam or hyperfundamentalistic Christian fringe groups. The same secular culture that pushes people out of mainstream religion can end up ironically pushing people back to dangerous forms of religion.

All religious versions of self-control tell you: stop living for yourself; please God instead. God becomes either the demanding parent you never had, or God is the demanding parent standing behind your demanding parents.

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Religion asks you to cut a deal. If you’ll be self-controlled and submit to the rules, God will be obligated to give you marshmallows or good jobs or a good spouse or eternal paradise. Religion like this is purely transactional. It’s trying to manipulate spiritual reality to get what you want. I pay with my submission; God gives me the self-interested outcomes I want. I keep my hands off the one marshmallow; God has to give me two later.

I don’t think I have to tell you how religious self-control makes you even more proud than its secular version. Religious people look down on the poor and say “you never get the second marshmallow because God hates your laziness. Too bad you’re not self-controlled and religious like me.”

The Spirit’s Fruit of Self-Control

As we’ve seen over the course of these studies on the Spirit’s Fruit, this kind of religion often has more in common with secular irreligion than it does with Christian faith. The Spirit’s Fruit is self-control. But the Spirit of Jesus Christ is sent into your life to produce a self-control that has, alongside it, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness Remember: the fruit of the Spirit is singular. They all go together. If you are a Christian, you have the Spirit, and the Spirit is bearing the fruit (not fruits) in you. Your self-control will be on same fruit tree with love and joy and peace. Self-control, that prized Greek virtue, will be right there growing on the same branch as gentleness, that despised “feminine” attribute of the ancient world.

And so, when we read Paul’s boxing metaphor here in 1 Corinthians 9, we have to read it alongside the nursing-mother picture he drew of himself in 1 Thessalonians 2. If Paul is a prize fighter, rigorously training to win the prize, he is also a nurturing mother toward others— gentle and loving, and not merely self-controlled. Indeed, part of his self-control is the use of his freedom to serve others gently. He says here in 1 Cor 9:22 that he is ready to become all things to all people in order to draw anyone who will come into the family of God. I can hear Nietzsche and all his existentialist friends laughing at Paul. What a waste, they’d think, to use your self-control to become all things to all people! It’s meant for you to become a super-charged version of yourself! How are you going to become the *Übermensch* when you’re playing the part of a slave, Paul!?

And that’s Paul’s secret, isn’t it? He can take all his skill, all his intellect, all his cultural capital, all his linguistic sophistication, all the toughness he developed, and

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with the Spirit of God working through him, he can exercise spiritual self-control, so that these superpowers of his are channelled, in love, toward the needs of his neighbors. He makes his very body, he says, a slave, so that both he and the Greek Christians of the ancient world have a chance to experience the truest of freedoms in Jesus Christ. He trains, and runs for the prize. Not so he can put a trophy in his personal trophy case and brag about it. But so he can offer himself and the people he serves to the true Victor, the Lord Jesus, as trophies of God’s grace. Only this, he says, is the crown that will last forever.

Paul’s “self-control” is not “running aimlessly.” It’s not self-control for self-control’s sake. It’s a pilgrimage. It has a finish line. A destination. A victory wreath. For many people, we work out and eat right so that we look a little more like our current society’s definition of beauty. We’re looking around and running aimlessly for an elusive prize that we’ll never win. But when we wake up one day and realize: I want to watch my children become parents. I want to overcome my family history of heart disease or diabetes. I want to swim across Lake Zurich with my neighbor. Now we’ve got a goal.

The Christian life is self-controlled and self-disciplined because it is teleological. It has a goal. Paul has a personal goal:

He wants to know Christ--yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. To press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of him (Phil 3).

And Paul has a vocational goal:

To give the Spirit of God such free and full access to his moments and days that, at the end of those days, it would be clear to everyone that he had been poured out, so that women and men and boys and girls could be filled to overflowing with abundant life in Christ.

The Spirit’s fruit of self-control begins to grow in our lives when we are ready to say “no” to all kinds of bad things, and to say “no” to all kinds of legal and permissible things, and to say “no” even to all kinds of good things, in order to be able to say “yes” to just a few ultimate things: growth in God’s grace; a life’s calling to bless other people through our work; and the privilege of pouring ourselves into the people that God has placed in our lives, who need our fruitful, spirit-filled lives.

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Jesus the self-controlled

Did you notice, as we have gone through the Fruit of the Spirit, that each of these qualities is just another way of describing the character of Jesus? We should bear the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness, and it turns out that Jesus has first been loving, joyful, peaceable, patient, kind, good, faithful and gentle toward us.

Some people have said—ah, but that pattern falls apart here, with self-control. Self control is negative, they say. You only exercise self-control in order to prevent what Paul calls “the obvious deeds of the flesh” from growing up like weeds and choking the fruitfulness of your life’s soil. Jesus didn’t have besetting sins that weighed him down, from which his self-control would have to untangle him. Jesus didn’t have a raging temper that he had to keep under wraps. Jesus didn’t have a quarrelsome disposition that had to be overcome through discipline. So really, Jesus doesn’t bear the fruit of self-control.

But let’s look at it differently, shall we? The self-control of Jesus is exhibited every time he said “no” to something evil in order to say “yes” to his Father, and to us. His self-control is active each time he says “no” to something legal, allowable, in order to say “yes” to his God and to his beloved people. The self-control of Jesus is demonstrated every time he said “no” to something good, like public displays of his equality with the Father; like the just judgment he could pronounce and enact upon the wicked; to the impulse to turn a stone into a loaf of bread and to eat after fasting for forty days.

Jesus has laid aside more good things than we could ever imagine, in order to pursue the one good thing that he most desired: having you and me to share abundant life with.

And for that he gave up his right to a fair trial. His right to judge. His right to strike down evildoers. And he said, instead: I am going to the cross, and I’m giving myself completely for people whose fruit trees are withered and fruitless. And out of my death and new life, their fruit trees will bud and flower and be thick with fruit.

Oh, friends: Jesus was self-controlled. Not for his own sake. But for ours.