

Fruit of the Spirit

Week 9: Self-Control

Proverbs 25:28

Robert Morris ---- August 6, 2023

All right, good morning, Grace. I'm glad you're here today

Everyone has a weakness. I mean, everyone has that food that if I put it front of you right now, you're going to eat it. I don't know what yours is. For me, if you put sausage, egg, and cheese on a jalapeño cheddar biscuit from Whataburger in front of me, I will demolish it in about five and a half seconds. For my wife, it's creamy jalapeño sauce from Chuy's. I don't know what yours is, but if you would, could you imagine with me that thing that you are almost powerless against. What if I said that if you won't eat that food for ninety days, I'll give you ten million dollars?



Immediately what would happen is there would be this surge of excitement. *Oh, I can totally do that! Ten million dollars! Are you kidding me? I could do almost anything for that kind of money.*

But, let's just say, for instance, that it's day eighty-three and it's been a long day at work. And you drive by a Chuy's and it catches your eye, and you remember that taste—oh, man, that sweet taste, that perfect blend of spice and ranch with salty and flavorful chips. (I think just by doing this illustration I'm on the hook for buying my wife some of that on the way home.)

But let's just say, again, it's day eighty-three and you've had a terrible day at work. The kids are driving you crazy, or the coworkers who are acting like kids are driving you crazy, and you just want to feel a little bit better. You just want a little bit of relief. You just want something to take the edge off. And there it is. On day eighty-three there's this choice. There's this moment. Am I going to tell myself no? And in that moment, there's a lot of mental math happening, and it's happening in split seconds. Because there are a lot of values and desires that are colliding in your brain and in your heart.

For one, you love creamy jalapeño. I mean, it tastes great. But two, there's this promise of ten million dollars. But then maybe you start wondering, maybe doubting. *I don't know that Robert has ten million dollars. I've seen that fourteen-year-old truck he drives. I'm not sure he's sitting on ten million. Can he be really trusted?* But if you were to believe that it was true and verifiable and legit, that ultimately every sane and rational person would say, *That's just too valuable. It's ten million dollars.* I mean, it's good—creamy jalapeño from Chuy's. But we would say that's a bad trade. There's too much on the line. There's too much value to be lost there.

And so, today we're wrapping up our series on the fruit of the Spirit. And we've done love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness. And now we're on to self-control. And it's going to be my premise with you today that our struggle with self-control has more to do with a misaligned value system before it's ever a discipline issue; that at the heart of self-control it's about seeing the real value of things and then responding accordingly.

The problem, though, is that we have a really hard time assessing value. Our hearts are more bent to the deeds of the flesh, that old man, that old woman that lives inside of us. There's still this residue of deep brokenness within us; there's a self that's at war with itself sometimes. And frankly, we're really just accustomed and have a lot of practice at making bad trades. You

see, I've seen too many times in my life that it's a misaligned value system, and simply doubting or flat-out unbelief in the promises, the things that have been promised to me; that have me saying yes to the beast that barks and bellows to be satisfied and placated and appeased.

So, the topic of self-control is robust. There are a lot of different rabbit trails we could go down today. But here's what I'd like to accomplish with you today, my goal. I want to define self-control: what it is, and what it isn't. I want you to see the two words that the Bible uses for self-control. And then I want us to ask, *What is Spirit-fueled self-control?* Because we'll see that there are a couple of counterfeits that exist in our world. I want to give a brief overview of a couple of passages that I think are well worth your time on this topic. And then I want you to see how Jesus our Savior exemplifies this characteristic. And then, like always, I want us to ask this question at the end: How do I get more of that fruit? How do I get more of that?

As we begin, let me remind you of the larger context of Galatians 5. I think it's important. We're told that we bring deeds of the flesh to the party. But we've also been promised that the Holy Spirit lives inside of us as disciples of Jesus Christ. And we're told that if we will walk by the Spirit, we will not gratify the deeds of the flesh. Instead, His Spirit will produce fruit ... much fruit and more fruit. And one beautiful aspect of that fruit is self-control.

Defining Self-Control

So, let's start with what it is and what it isn't. The word that Paul uses in Galatians 5 for self-control is a combination of two smaller words kind of jammed together. The two words are *ego* and *krat*. So, *ego* as in self, and *krat* as in autocrat or master or ruler. Literally, the word means self-mastery. Sometimes in the Greek language of that time and in other literature, it's used of an emperor who does not let his private interests influence the way he governs the people. He's asserting power or management over his desires, lusts, emotions, feelings, and behaviors. This word really is about the governing of one's desires. It's governing one's self.

But there's another word that is used in the New Testament for self-control, and sometimes it's translated "self-control" and sometimes it's translated "sober-minded" or "sound judgment." And it's this picture of a sound mind, seeing things clearly; mental alertness. This is the word you see in 1 Peter when Peter reminds the disciples to be self-controlled or "sober minded and alert because the enemy is prowling around like a lion."

These two words give us a fuller picture of this concept of self-control from the Bible. And honestly, I think they work together. You see, seeing properly, being sober minded and alert, ought to lead to right thinking, which ought to lead to right acting. It's thinking soundly that leads to the inner strength that helps us know the difference between fool's gold and real gold, or maybe knowing the difference between ten million dollars and creamy jalapeño ranch. So much of self-control is about paying attention. Before you need the strength to hold yourself back, you'll also need to be able to see—really see. In other words, you'll need to be able to see values properly and then act based on the truth of what you're seeing. And again, these judgments happen in split seconds sometimes. So, these are the two words that inform what self-control means in the Bible.

But I also want to talk a bit about the kind of counterfeits or the subtle nuances that we see in our world. On one side of our world we see this to be true. It's built on instant gratification. It's easy all the time, everywhere, do whatever makes you feel the happiest, right? Do what makes you feel good.

But there's also this other growing trend. Call it self-help, call it motivation speaker, call it whatever you want to, that's "just do it." Set your alarm, rigid self-discipline, you can do this. But underlying much of that is still motivation towards self. It's perhaps self-preservation, self-success, self-righteousness, because I can do it and you can't. Or maybe it's just self-serving wrapped up in something that looks like self-control when you really dig down into it.

You see, the late Tim Keller said this. The counterfeit, the fake version of self-control is willpower through pride or through more functional idols. He would say that self-control is not something you do for yourself; it only comes when you want something more than yourself, more than your own happiness, more than your own pride, more than your own ego. And it's a subtle difference. There's some nuance there to this modern version of self-control.

One of the examples you might see of this is in the diet-and-exercise camp. Wake up early, do your workouts, drink your green powder, eat these carbs, not those carbs... I don't know, I'm lost—I don't know what I'm supposed to eat these days. But some—and hear me clearly, workout warriors—some of what's at the bottom of that is that you want to be seen as a disciplined person. *I'm self-righteous because I figured out how to win this game. A pride, that I can do this, maybe in my own power. I want to be this kind of person.* Or sometimes, simple just the vanity that *I want to look good in a swimsuit.*

I'm all for taking care of your body, exercise, and all those things. Don't send me e-mails about this. But we have to be careful. There are some real motivations, sometimes, underneath this discipline and perceived self-control. Many times, what we want underneath that is still things of self, not necessarily the things of God. And so, what looks like self-control is really me controlling things to get what I really want. It's a means to my own personal ends, maybe not God's ends.

Self-control is not just simply saying no. I think it's a kind of saying no that's built on a belief in the promises of God and relying on His power to accomplish that. We have to remember we can make this inference from the Scripture, that if I can do this in my own power it is a fruit of Robert, not a fruit of the Spirit. So, I'm going to need to be enabled in a supernatural way to get some of these things done.

Self-control is the exercise of inner strength under the direction of sound judgment, that enables us to do, think, and say the things that are pleasing to God.

--Jerry Bridges

So, we've seen the concept of self-control, those two words based in Scriptures. We've talked a little bit about the counterfeits. I think we can define it this way. The best definition I could find for you for self-control comes from Jerry Bridges. He wrote a book on the fruit of the Spirit. And he defines it this way: "Self-control is the exercise of inner strength under the direction of sound judgment, that enables us to do, think, and say the things that are pleasing to God."

And I might add, "... fueled by value given and attributed to the right things; fueled by a lack of self, not a serving of self, masquerading as discipline."

Scripture Passages on Self-Control

Now that we've defined it, let's take a look at some—again, not all, not an exhaustive list--of some important passages on self-control that I think are worth your time this morning.

In the first of those I want you to see the dangers of a lack of self-control.

In [Proverbs 25:28](#), Solomon says this: “A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.” Without walls in that day and age, you were defenseless. The invader had full access. You are easy pickings. A city without a wall is not a city for long. It’s why Nehemiah wept when he heard that his hometown was without walls. Walls were the difference between a flourishing city and a ravaged one. Having a strong wall meant you could sleep at night knowing the attackers were at bay. Without it, you’re open to disaster and ruin. And I love this ... it’s a great picture. Because in the same way, human beings without self-control aren’t human beings for very long. We need walls and boundaries around us to flourish in life. It’s just a true statement.

They’ve actually done sociological research on preschoolers playing on different kinds of playgrounds, ones that have some kind of physical boundaries of fences, and others that don’t. And wouldn’t you know it, they find out that when there are no boundaries around the playground, kids hover closer to their teachers, there is more anxiety, and less freedom of play. But the ones that have fences lead to this open expression, this freedom, this harmony. All of these things are good for preschoolers.

We need this. You do not want to be a wall-less city. It does not end well and there are real dangers, the Bible says, to a lack of self-control.

The next verse I’d love for you to see comes from the Apostle Paul. It’s a very familiar passage to some of you. In [1 Corinthians 9:25-27](#) he says this: “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” Paul uses this metaphor of an athlete. They exercise self-control in all things. If you’ve ever known a high-level athlete, they have to say no in some very ruthless and merciless fashions to get to their goals--their calendars, their diet, all the things.

But don’t miss that there’s a value system at play here, Paul says. They’re after something. They’re after the prize. Don’t be mistaken. They value that so highly that they’re willing to do all the things necessary to try to attain their goal. The sacrifice of all those things pales in comparison. There’s a value system that’s properly aligned. They’re striving towards certain goals.

The Bible also tells us that we all need self-control. I love [Titus 2:1-12](#). Four times to three different groups of people, he says, “I urge you, be self-controlled.” He tells the old men this, the young men this, and then the women who are teaching other women—to be self-controlled. But listen to Paul’s summary of that section of Scripture in verse 11: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passion and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age.”

What’s the motivation, what’s the fuel for renouncing ungodliness and living a self-controlled life? Did you catch it? God has appeared and He has brought salvation. And it’s so good and so valuable to me that it motivates me to live and act a certain way.

Not only do we see those verses, but if you study the life of our Savior, here’s a quick overview of a couple of times in His life when He demonstrates this characteristic of self-control.

[Matthew 4](#)--I love it. It’s the narrative where Jesus is in the wilderness facing temptation from the evil one. It’s a great model for us. He battles temptation with truth and a rightly aligned value system. And so, when you hear your Savior say, “Man does not live on bread alone” after He’s been offered a meal after forty days of no meals, He’s saying, *There’s something more valuable to me than satisfying my stomach.* He’s saying, *There’s something still more satisfying to me than that. I’m after ten million dollars. I’m not after creamy jalapeño ranch.*

[Luke 9:51](#)—I love it. It says that Jesus “set His face” to Jerusalem. And I love the way it says that, because it’s like His eyes went somewhere. He set His face towards the goal, the mission, that He had been given. And He was not going to be deterred from that. And He knew. He knew that it was going to be painful. He knew it was going to be the least pleasurable experience of His life. But He set His face towards something. He started to see what was out there.

The conclusion of that process is in [Matthew 26:36-46](#). We see Him in the Garden of Gethsemane where He prays, *I would rather not do this. This is going to be terrible. Not my will, but Yours.* In other words, *I so highly value the mission that I’ve been given, and I’m willing to do this. I won’t use my power to forward it. I’ll see it all the way through, I so highly value the will of God.*

I had the privilege of being at the Garden of Gethsemane last fall. And we had about twenty minutes there of quiet, and I sat next to a tree in the Garden of Gethsemane, and I just kind of marveled at my Savior.



It was one of those moments that made the trip completely worth it for me. I'm having a moment, it's just me and God, and I'm just saying, "God, I want to be like Your Son Jesus. I want to be the kind of guy who says, 'Not my will, but Yours.' I find myself wanting me so bad. My fingers are so tightly wrapped around my will for my life. Would you make me the kind of man who says, 'Not my will, but Yours'?"



So, we see Jesus exemplifying self-control. And these are just a few examples. And again, my assertion is that He was able to do that because He rightly saw value. He had the right value attributed to the right things and it made it natural for Him to say no to himself.

How to Cultivate Self-Control in Our Lives

We see this concept all over the Scriptures. We've seen our Savior who exemplifies it. And I think the natural and right question for us is, *How do I get more of that in my life? How do I do that? I know there's a Spirit element at play here, and so I know I can't just muster this on my own. How do I do it?*

I'd love to keep hammering the same application strategy we've been working for the past few weeks. I think the first thing you could do is you could know where you are. You could do a fruit inspection. You could do a fruit check. I've asked you to do this every week, because I think it's the natural and right starting point for how to apply the fruit of the Spirit. I've got to know where I'm at. I've got to know how I'm doing here.

And if you're like me, there are probably a couple of areas where you're killing it. And if you're also like me, there are probably a couple of areas that are killing you. Everybody seems to have that place where his or her self rules and they're out of control. And in this fruit inspection, you might need to be painfully and ruthlessly honest with yourself. You might need to go the extra step of being painfully and ruthlessly honest with a trusted friend and name these areas, so that you might take that step of naming them out loud—those places in thought and action and word where you can least control yourself—the places where you look up and say, *I don't know how that just happened.*

And while you're digging around in there and you're inspecting things, while you're looking under the hood, you could maybe try to find the root; maybe try to find the engine that's literally driving that train. Because more often than not it's a misaligned value system, or it's us believing a lie that this will somehow satisfy us or bring us more joy.

I think one of the best things you could do today as we wrap up this fruit of the Spirit series is to have a level of self-awareness that acknowledges, *I have some area that is out of control. My self is running rampant here. It's connected deep in my unique flavor of brokenness*

and bents, and I need a clear understanding of my motivations. I need to know why I keep saying yes to this thing. I need to know why I keep saying yes to this kind of tyranny of self.

I don't know where yours is. Here's a short list. Some of this may cover most of us—it's not an exhaustive list at all. But for some people it might be food. That might be it. Many of us are not treating the temple of the Holy Spirit well. For the sake of your taste buds you are trashing the temple on an ongoing basis.

For some of you, it might be sexual temptation. You know what the Lord requires of you. It's just not a high enough value in your heart. Your body and your passions rule you and master you.

It may be your digital device or some form of entertainment. If you're like me, you can pick up your phone for no reason, and all of a sudden, forty-five minutes are gone.

Maybe pride. Maybe your pride is running rampant. You can't say no to yourself at all. You're always right, you're never the problem. If the world would just do it your way, everything would be great. And your pride and your self-righteousness rule your life. It's a ruthless tyrant you serve.

For some of you it might be your tongue. You can't stop putting your foot in your mouth. That juicy piece of gossip is always going to get shared, or you can't stop yelling at referees at kids' youth games. Or is that just me?

Maybe for you it's greed or a lack of contentment. You just want more and more. You can't tell yourself no. The Amazon man knows you by name because you love that little hit of buying something. *Maybe this will make me feel good.* And enough is never quite enough.

Friends, it could be so many different things. We are humans, after all. We will come up with endless ways to serve ourselves.

But I want you to have a beautiful harvest of self-control in the next year and in the next decades, with the Spirit's help. But the starting point of that is knowing where you're at and figuring out what is in you that is causing you to value this over that.

I think the second application for us this morning—again, broken record, a little bit—it the only application we get from Galatians 5. We're told to [“walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the deeds of the flesh.”](#)

A couple of weeks ago, Pastor Ray taught us: I've repented, I am facing this direction, I am walking a certain way. And as I do that, I'm trying to do my part. I'm trying to cooperate

with the Spirit's work in my life. And many a time that looks like using the tools the Lord has given me. And the three tools I try to use the most in my life as I think about walking by the Spirit are these. I shared them with you last week; I'll share them with you again: **pray, memorize, believe.**

First, you could pray. What would happen if every day you got up and said, "Lord, help me. I can't do this on my own." What if you prayed, "Lord, would you get me to lunch time?" And then at 12:01, "God, would you get me to 1:00 pm? I need that kind of daily bread, that ongoing connection, because this thing is ruling me in some way." You could pray, "God, help me to see clearly here. Help me to see what I'm really looking at. I'm so blinded by the me that's always driving the train that I can't see what You really want from me here."

And as you say those kinds of prayers, you could also memorize. You might need to have something on a loop, something on repeat. Maybe it's about a more particular area that you are struggling with in self-control. It might be the thing that's constantly going on in the background. Friends, one of the very first verses I ever memorized, thanks to my grandmother, was [Psalm 119:11](#): "I have hidden Your word in my heart that I might not sin against You."

My mind and my heart are saturated with the promises of God, so that in those split seconds when these decisions are happening, sometimes even unconsciously, I would devalue the things of the earth and rightly value the promises of God.

As you pray and as you memorize, I think the rubber hits the road for a lot of us. The real struggle of self-control, the real miracle the Lord needs to do in us, is that we need to believe some things in some deep, profound, and convincing ways.

I want to remind you of the elite Olympic athlete. They do not do that because they're virtuous; they do that because they're after a prize. They go through all the training, all the pain, all the early mornings, all the workouts, all the lack of food, because they want the pleasure of the prize, the pleasure of that championship or that ring or that gold medal. And that's far superior to them, so that they're willing to sacrifice all those things.

The power for self-control comes from seeing the prize and then believing that that prize is worth it. And I think one of the main challenges of the Christian life is to consistently do this kind of mental math and really believe that this purity, this honesty, this integrity, this area where I tell myself no, has so much value.

If you'll allow me, I'd love to share a personal story from my own life about how I've seen this kind of prayer, Word of God, and belief all line up to help me begin (and I mean begin) to win a self-control battle.

Part of my story is that high-speed internet and unfettered access to that hit me in college. That's how old I was when that cultural moment happened. And for like many young men of my generation, it hit me like a ton of bricks. For the first time in my life, images, videos, were always there, always around, always free, and only two clicks away.

And it beat me up, friends. I was a slave to it. It was my master. And as many young men and even old men who battle this and know that God has more for them than where they're at, I yo-yoed between small successes and abject failure for years. I did all the things—all the accountability groups, read all the books, did all the studies, knew all the right answers, could quote you all the right Scriptures. But for me, there was a moment in my mid- to late twenties when it all kind of clicked. And I want to be very clear here. The battle is not over for me. It rages on every day. But it was the first time in my life when I felt like I had the right tools in the toolbox.

So, in my mid- to late twenties, after almost a decade of slavery, of being totally out of control, I'm sitting in a random church service in a church you've never heard of with a pastor you've never heard of. And he gets to a certain place in the Bible, and to this day I cannot tell you what that message was about. It had nothing to do with this topic. But I just knew he got to Psalm 16, and God used that passage of Scripture to radically alter the way I saw a self-control battle I was having to fight.

He read from Psalm 16, and he was talking about God being our refuge and how our inheritance has fallen in pleasant places. And he gets to the last verse of *Psalm 16*, and it says this: “You have made known to me the path of life; in Your presence there is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” And in that moment, God began to change the way I saw things. I felt like the Lord was saying to me, *Robert, do you believe that at my right hand are pleasures forevermore? Do you really believe that I could give you a fullness of joy that you've never had, ever, in your life? Would you for a moment imagine with me that my way is better, within the boundaries that Yahweh God has given you?*

And I had this “aha” moment where I realized that I was not going through a knowing-the-right-thing-to-do battle; I was going through a value battle, a belief value. Was I going to

believe that God's promises from His Word are true, and that I, one day at a time, with the help of the Holy Spirit, begin the process of undoing years of not believing Him and replacing it with a belief that He could be trusted and that He had my fullness of joy and my pleasure in mind?

And from that point on, friends, my prayer life began to shift. I was the guy who prayed, "Lord, take this away from me." And it changed to, "Help me believe you, God. Help me believe you. Convince my mind and my heart that at Your right hand is fullness of joy. Help me believe that the pleasure you offer me is better than the pleasure of a screen. Permission to do the miracle in me, God. Help me."

Now I don't know if there's an area of your life where you need to apply a principle like that. I don't know what yours is. But what if you believed? I mean, really believed that the Lord's instructions and His loving boundaries are the real place to life and the real place to find fullness of joy and the real place to find pleasures forevermore; and that those other minor satisfactions will begin to lose their luster and begin to lose some of the power in your life. And you're able--maybe it's a little bit easier—to say no because of the power of the Holy Spirit of God living inside you, and you're starting to value the right things the right way.

Friends, I want to tell you, though, that shame will not motivate you to more self-control. It won't do it. I'm here to tell you. I tried it. There's not long-lasting power in that. But there is power in the Holy Spirit of God that might be able to convince me in a moment when it's needed, as you repent and you've cooperated with the Spirit and you've walked with Him and you've prayed and memorized and you believe ... as you pray, "God, I can't do this. You're going to have to do this for me. I don't have the strength to pull this off." And as you memorize Scriptures that might be on the front of your mind and deep inside your heart, that you might believe, and I mean really believe, that there's greater value on the other side of that thing, and *I will tell myself no for that.*

C. S. Lewis would say it this way. There's a better feast available to you than those 'mud pies in a slum' that you keep eating.

And as best as I can tell, friends, the challenge of my life of following Jesus for the past thirty years, and the next thirty or forty or however many He gives me, is if I will believe His promises. Will I believe His promises? Will my heart place a greater value on the things of the Spirit instead of the deeds of the flesh? And some days I feel like I'm doing okay. But there are a lot of other days where I find myself crying out like the father of that demon-possessed boy in

Mark 9, where he says, “Lord, I believe ... help my unbelief.” *Lord, I believe, but help my unbelief.*

Friends, the fruit of the Spirit—the reason it’s His work, the work of the Holy Spirit and not the work of us—is that your heart is going to have to value things properly. And the Bible tells us that your heart is desperately wicked and beyond cure. But it is not beyond the power of the Spirit of God. The same power that enabled Jesus to rise from the dead lives inside of you, friends. And that miracle He can do is to give you a brand-new value system. And you’re going to need the Lord’s help to do this, to see, to really see, and not accept the deeds of the flesh as so satisfying.

People of Grace, you don’t trade ten million dollars for creamy jalapeño. It’s a bad trade. It always will be. But you’re going to need the Spirit’s help in your life to do a miraculous work in your heart to help you say that saying no to yourself is worth that and more; that at His right hand is unspeakable pleasure, joy to the full, and it’s worth it. Oh man, that value is so high. There’s so much on the line here. I’d be foolish to keep making that trade.

Let me pray for you.

God, we come to you today, and we confess, God, our value systems are so misaligned, and there are so many areas of our life that have gotten out of control, where our self is running rampant. But God, You’ve promised to produce a fruit of self-control in our lives if we will walk by the Spirit. God, I invite you here today to do that work in our hearts. We desperately need Your help. Would You help us to believe in the promises of Your Word? Would You help us to attribute the right value so that we might so highly value the things of God that we would naturally and rightly say no to ourselves? Spirit, would You do a good work in us? And when You do it, we’ll give You the glory. We ask these things in Your Son’s name. Amen.