



The Fruit of the Spirit is Self-Control
Saying No to Say Yes to Something Better
1 Corinthians 9:24-27

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[Video] A professor from Stanford University created the marshmallow test in 1970 to study human nature. He wondered if children, who had yet to mature and develop self-discipline, could delay instant gratification to receive something better. Time and time again when the test was conducted, two-thirds of kids ate the first marshmallow. Only one-third of the children could resist the temptation and wait for something better.

So, let me ask you, what kind of child were you? Be honest, when you were a kid, how many of you would have eaten the first marshmallow? How many of you would have waited for the second marshmallow? What about now? Beyond marshmallows, what kind of person are you? What kind of discipline and self-control do you have in the more significant areas of life?

That's what we're going to talk about this morning as we conclude our summer series on the fruit of the Spirit. Jesus said, "A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit." And then speaking of people, He said, "You shall know them by their fruits."¹ In other words, *the way you live proves what lives in you*. The fruit of the Spirit includes the character traits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. But there's more to it than being a good person or a nice person. The fruit of the Spirit is proof that *Christ lives in us*. God's desire is that we would be "conformed to the image of His Son."² He is constantly at work in us; molding us to look like Jesus, to love like Jesus, and to live like Jesus in every way. What we see in Jesus is what others should see in us.

Again, *the way you live proves what lives in you. Therefore, when you look in the mirror, do you see the fruit of the Spirit? When others look at you, do they see the fruit of the Spirit? Do others see Christ in you?*

SELF-CONTROL MUST HAVE AN INSPIRATION

The Apostle Paul wrote, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). In another letter, Paul wrote specifically about self-control.

"Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified." (1 Corinthians 9:24-27, NAS).

Self-control must have an inspiration. Self-control must have a motivation, an aspiration, a reason, a purpose, a passion, a desire, an ambition, a prize. Self-control must have a why. That's why Paul used athletes to illustrate this point. "Do you not know that those who run in a race all

run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win” (1 Corinthians 9:24, NAS). An athlete runs to win.

That’s true today and it was true in Paul’s day. Paul was referring to the Isthmian Games held every other year in Corinth, similar to the Olympic Games. The games were held in honor of their Greek gods. An athlete competed with both a sense of patriotic and religious pride. Events included boxing and wrestling, jumping and running, throwing the discus and the javelin, and also included horse races and chariot races. A winning athlete received 500 drachma (equal to 500 days of wages), was celebrated with fame, and crowned with a wreath made of pine leaves. That was the inspiration for ancient athletes. They ran to win.

And that’s why they were willing to endure grueling discipline. Paul said, “Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things” (1 Corinthians 9:25, NAS). Greek athletes trained for 10 months, under strict supervision. And they were required to take an oath, vowing to submit to the training. Winning requires discipline; it requires commitment.

Michael Phelps is the most decorated Olympic athlete in history, winning 23 gold medals and 28 medals in all. Let’s say you like splashing in the water, and think you might want to be an Olympic swimmer. Well, you might want to count the cost first. Here’s Michael Phelps’ daily routine. He swims 80,000 meters a week, that’s swimming the length of a pool 1,600 times, that’s 50 miles a week! His drills include an hour-long swim for endurance, 2,000 underwater kicking exercises for speed, an hour of sculling to build upper body strength, deep water snorkeling to expand breathing capacity, weightlifting three times a week, and fast speed, weighted power pull-ups for cardio. And all that training burns a lot of calories. That’s why he has to eat 12,000 calories every day. For breakfast he eats a five-egg omelet, 3 fried egg sandwiches, a bowl of grits, 3 slices of French toast, 3 chocolate chip pancakes, and two cups of coffee! He’s in the pool six hours a day six days a week. During one interview, Michael Phelps said, “I feel like I’ve spent most of his life looking at a black line on the bottom of a pool.” And that was a clue to his post-Olympic depression. After becoming the most decorated Olympic athlete in history, he would sit alone in his bedroom for 3 to 5 days, not eating, barely sleeping, and thinking about suicide. With all the success and fame, he didn’t want to live anymore. Why? Because he realized what Paul said next.

“They do it,” athletes endure the discipline Paul said, “to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable” (1 Corinthians 9:25, NAS). The athlete endures grueling discipline to win a “perishable wreath”; a wreath that will dry up and crumble and fame that will fade away. But we, as followers of Jesus, discipline ourselves for an “imperishable” crown. Our crown is eternal. The New Testament mentions our eternal crown four times; as the “crown of righteousness,”³ as the “crown of life,”⁴ as the “crown of glory,”⁵ and as the “crown of rejoicing.”⁶

For us, winning is about seeing Jesus. He is the inspiration, the motivation, and the aspiration of our discipline and self-control. He is our desire and our passion. He is our ambition and our prize. We run the race for a prize greater than anything this world can offer.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul talked about his own race, and about pursuing Christ. He talked about “straining toward what is ahead,” and then said, “I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12-14, NIV).

And then he said, “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21, NAS). For Paul, life was about faithfully serving Jesus, and death was about finally seeing Jesus.

The “imperishable” Paul mentioned points to heaven. Heaven was part of Paul’s inspiration, and it should be for us as well. What will heaven be like? Will we sit on a cloud and play a harp all day? To be honest, that sounds boring. So what will heaven be like?

For one thing, ***heaven will be a real place***. Heaven is not a state of mind. It is a place being prepared for us at this very moment. Jesus promised His disciples and He promises us, “In my Father’s house are many rooms ... and I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:2-3, NIV). Do you hear Him? Jesus is preparing “a place for you” at this very moment.

In heaven we will see God. The Bible says, “To be absent from the body” is “to be at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8). As a Christian, the moment you close your eyes in death will be the same moment you open your eyes in heaven and see Jesus! Paul said we will see Him “face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Surely, that moment will trump every other moment in our lives. Surely, no sports highlight, no academic degree, no career achievement, no grand adventure, and no amount of money will ever compare to that moment. The greatest moment in our existence will be the moment when we see Jesus face to face.

In heaven, there will be relief. Revelation 21 promises that “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain” (Revelation 21:4). Heaven will be a place of relief, of rest, of peace. No more tears, no more pain, and no more struggle.

And heaven will be Paradise. The thief on the cross next to Jesus begged Him, “Remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” And this is what Jesus promised. “Today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:42-43). I love that! Jesus called heaven “Paradise.” Heaven will be wonderful, peaceful, satisfying, fulfilling. It will be a place beyond our wildest imagination.⁷

The athlete endures grueling discipline and runs the race to win a crown that is “perishable,” a crown that will dry up and crumble and fame that will fade away. We, as followers of Jesus, submit to discipline and self-control because one day we will see Jesus face and face, and we do *not* want to stand before Him with any regret, any embarrassment, or any shame.

Self-control must have an inspiration. For Paul, that day – seeing Jesus face to face – was his inspiration, his motivation, his aspiration. Self-control must have a desire for something better; a “superior pleasure” as John Piper calls it. We submit to discipline and self-control to win a greater prize, for a superior pleasure.

THE URGENCY OF DISCIPLINE & SELF-CONTROL

Because there is a greater prize, a superior pleasure, the Bible says a lot about the urgency of discipline and self-control.

- “Make every effort to respond to God’s promises. Supplement your faith with a generous provision of moral excellence, and moral excellence with knowledge, and knowledge with *self-control*, and self-control with patient endurance, and patient endurance with godliness” (2 Peter 1:5-6, NLT).
- “For an overseer (an elder), as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, *self-controlled*, upright, holy, and disciplined” (Titus 1:7-8, ESV). This is the standard for leadership, but this is also the standard of spiritual maturity for every Christian.
- “Say ‘no’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and live *self-controlled*, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:12-13, NIV).
- And there is another verse about self-control in the book of Proverbs, written by King Solomon. A verse with a warning. “A person without self-control is like a city with broken-down walls” (Proverbs 25:28, NLT). Without discipline and self-control, we make ourselves vulnerable, unprotected, easily attacked, and easily defeated.

I read an article this week about why toddlers lack self-control. The study cited three areas in which toddlers have yet to develop self-control. Impulse control, toddlers tend to take things from one another. Emotional control, toddlers just start crying for no reason at all. And movement control, toddlers wiggle, they can’t sit still. Toddlers have a hard time controlling their impulses, their emotions, and their bodies. Then I read this deep theological study on why adults lack self-control. And the answer was the same as the study with toddlers. Adults have a hard time controlling their impulses, their emotions, and their bodies. Without self-control, we’re just like toddlers.

And all of us struggle with ...

- Our emotions – We struggle with anger, with frustration, with impatience, and sometimes we hurt those we love the most.
- Our words – Our words can be harsh, insensitive, even profane, and we say things we regret and things that offend our God.
- Our lusts – Sexual temptation hovers all around us. And without spiritual discipline, self-control, and the Holy Spirit’s restraint, we do things we regret.
- Our money – We live in affluent times. We see a lot we want to have, and it’s so easy to give in to impulsive spending. Even if we don’t have the money, we just use the credit card and pile up debt that we later regret.

The point is that without spiritual discipline, self-control, and the Holy Spirit’s restraint, we do things we regret. That’s why Paul said, in 1 Corinthians 9:26, “Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave” (1 Corinthians 9:26-27, NAS). The word “discipline” is also translated “buffet,” and it literally means to punch in the face. Paul was referring to boxing, to taking punches to toughen up the athlete for the real fight. Athletes must practice at game-speed intensity to be ready for the real game. Soldiers must train at battle-level intensity to be ready for the real battle. Paul

was saying, “I am willing to put myself through the most grueling discipline, so that I might run ... so that I might win!”

The Christian life requires discipline and self-control. If you want to lose weight, you can’t just pray, you’ve got to exercise. If you want to make good grades, you can’t just pray, you’ve got to study. But don’t miss this. The Christian life is not just about trying harder. Because we are not alone. The Holy Spirit lives in us, empowering to resist temptation, to be holy and Christlike, and to live victorious lives. I love this analogy. God will not do what the farmer can do, and the farmer cannot do what only God can do. The farmer must plow and plant. But the farmer must rely on God to cause the sun to shine, the rain to fall, and the fruit to grow. We must live in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. That’s why self-control is a fruit of the Spirit.

I think Paul was saying, “I know I can’t do it alone. I need the Holy Spirit’s help. But I’m also going to do my part, because I want to win. And winning for me is seeing Jesus face to face and standing before Him without regret.”

And then Paul made this chilling, dreaded statement. “So that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:27, NAS). Having preached to others, only to fail and be disqualified. Unfortunately, the list is long of Christian leaders who have been disqualified, and the list is long of church members who have been disqualified. Paul was not talking about losing his salvation; that’s impossible. He was talking about standing before Jesus with regret, having wasted his life, and shaming His Savior. That’s why we hear over and over in the Paul’s New Testament letters, “Walk in a manner worthy of the calling ... Walk in a manner worthy of the gospel ... Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, pleasing Him in every way.”⁸

To do that requires spiritual discipline. Donald Whitney’s book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* is a must-read for every Christian, a book which teaches us how to master the spiritual disciplines. Whitney says spiritual disciplines are simply ways to place yourself before God.⁹ He says if you are not under the influence of God, you will be under the influence of something else. Call it discipline, devotion, or a quiet time, it doesn’t matter what you call it. The point is spending time with Jesus. ***It’s not about doing something; it’s about being with someone.***

To walk in a manner worthy of the sacrifice and love and grace of Jesus takes ***time in God’s word***. I’ve said this before, and I’m going to say it again. The most important thing you can do in life is grab a Bible and grab a chair. Every day, you and I have the opportunity to meet with God. The Bible was written so we may know Him. Therefore, a hunger for the word of God is a hunger for God Himself. And yet, a lot of Christians don’t take time to read the Bible. I’ve heard people say, “It’s too hard to understand ... It doesn’t seem relevant to my life ... I don’t have time.” To those who say that, I say again, to hunger for the word of God is to hunger for God Himself. Time in the word and time in prayer are the primary means through which we experience a personal, intimate, day-by-day, moment-by-moment relationship with God.

To walk in a manner worthy of the sacrifice and love and grace of Jesus takes ***time in prayer***, talking to God and listening to God, confessing our sin and committing our way to Him. The Bible says, “Jesus would often slip away to the wilderness and pray” (Luke 5:16, NAS). If He needed to set aside time to pray, so do we. And one of my favorite verses is Psalm 62:8, when

David said, “Pour out your heart to God.” I love that verse, because it gives us permission to be honest and real with God.

To walk in a manner worthy of the sacrifice and love and grace of Jesus takes *time in worship*.

Yes, you can worship God in a fishing boat, but we are also worship God together. The church gathered in worship is a privilege and a priority. Together, we come into His presence. Together, we sing our praises to Him. Together, we bow before His holiness. Together, we confess our sin. Together, we commit our lives to Him. If God is a priority in your life, then worship will be a priority in your week.

If you want to walk in a manner worthy of the sacrifice and love and grace of Jesus, you must feel the urgency of spiritual discipline and self-control.

SELF-CONTROL IS ...

Self-control is saying “I won’t” because “I want.” Self-control is saying, “Because I want ____, I won’t do ____.” Because “I want” something so great and so precious to me, “I won’t” do anything to distract or derail me. “I want” refers to that superior pleasure, to the greater, the ultimate joy, the satisfaction, to that which pleases God. “I won’t” refers to the immediate pleasure, to the lesser, the superficial, to that which grieves God. The stronger your “I want,” the stronger your “I won’t.” The weaker your “I want,” the weaker your “I won’t.”

So, what do you really want? For Paul, winning was seeing Jesus face to face and standing before Him without regret. That was his inspiration. May it be ours as well. Therefore, self-control is ...

- Self-control is restraint, discipline, and wisdom.
- Self-control can be hard, unpleasant, and grueling.
- Self-control is deciding ahead of time what kind of person you want to be.
- Self-control is saying no to immediate pleasure in order to say yes to ultimate joy.
- Self-control is resisting temptation, saying no to indulgence, holding your tongue, and looking the other way when you’re tempted.
- Self-control is developing habits that steer us to do what is right, what is good, and what is best.
- Self-control is not killing the excitement and fun of life, but choosing to pursue a greater excitement and fun found only in walking with God.
- Self-control is living with guardrails to avoid going off a cliff, to stay on the road and reach your desired destination.
- Self-control is choosing to agree with the Holy Spirit’s prompting in your life.
- Self-control is saying no to a superficial pleasure in order to say yes to a superior pleasure.

CONCLUSION

This summer series on the fruit of the Spirit has been about character. Only the Holy Spirit can produce the character of Christ in us. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).¹⁰ As I’ve asked every week, I’ll ask one more time. ***When you look in the mirror, do you see the fruit of the Spirit? When others look at you, do they see the fruit of the Spirit? Do others see Christ in you?***

NOTES

¹ See Matthew 7:17-18, 20.

² See Romans 8:29.

³ See 2 Timothy 4:8.

⁴ See James 1:12.

⁵ See 1 Peter 5:14.

⁶ See 1 Thessalonians 2:9.

⁷ Read Revelation 4, as John describes the glory of heaven.

⁸ See Ephesians 4:1, Philippians 1:27, Colossians 1:10.

⁹ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1991), page 18.

¹⁰ See Ephesians 5:18, Galatians 5:16, Galatians 5:25.