

The fruit of the Spirit – Self-control

Titus 2:1-15, Proverbs 25:16-28

So, as Anthony said, we come to the end of our series on the fruit of the Spirit. I wonder how you've found it?

Have you enjoyed our time thinking about particular characteristics like peace, patience and joy which if you're a Christian, you *should* be growing in gradually week by week?

These aspects of the fruit of the Spirit are very much to do with what we are *like*, in fact particularly how we treat others.

The time we've spent in these last 10 weeks or so has hugely underlined for me that **our faith is not just a Sunday thing**, that God needs to be the driving force in our whole lives. And I've been challenged, some weeks I've come away thinking (for example) Yes! I want to be more gentle. And we've prayed, that the whole church would feel that way too.

But I wonder if those intentions, stay just that, intentions.

Today we're thinking about the last aspect of the fruit, self-control. Which in once sense means, **actually doing** what we should or plan to do. We might want to be more patient, but it could be we need self-control to do that.

Now, everyone likes a practical sermon, so we're going to start with something practical. I want you to try this – with your right foot, on the floor, make little clockwise circles, round and round. Now with your right hand, draw the number 6 in the air.

What happens? Your foot changes direction!

Controlling ourselves can be harder than we might think!

And I want to do 4 things this morning, and the first picks up from there really, and that is to persuade you that to some degree we all lack self-control.

I also want to persuade you that having greater self-control would be a great thing, I want to speak about self-control spiritually, and I want to speak about it practically.

So let's start with that idea that it's an issue for all of us.

1. We all lack self-control

First and foremost, I say this because the bible makes it clear.

The passage we had read from Titus splits up people into four groups – older men, older women, younger women and younger men. Titus has different things to teach to each group, and in different ways. But, **all four groups** are to be taught to be self-controlled! For the older women particularly wine is mentioned, and for the younger men: let's have a look at this v6 – it makes me laugh, **nothing** else is said, just self-control.

Young men! If you can just learn self-control then apparently (for now) that will be enough – I guess it will keep you occupied just doing that.

So the bible thinks it's important for everyone! And with just a little thought, we can see that:

Of course, some people have more obvious and in some sense more serious problems with self-control...

Alcohol addictions, problems with eating (or shopping) for comfort, gambling addictions or other money problems, sexual unfaithfulness, things like looking at pornography, bursting into fits of rage – all those things have to do with self-control.

And if that's you, you might be painfully aware of your struggles to control yourself.

What you **should** do – in the moment you find you **can't** do.

But self-control is not just those big things, but small things too.

How do we react to each other, under pressure? Do we snap? Last week when Dave spoke about gentleness, we thought how some react more like a Rhino and charge! Others like a hedgehog get prickly? I wonder which you do? We need to ask ourselves, when we're tested like that, do we control ourselves?

If you're anything like me, you'll feel the battle for self-control in things like bedtimes – do you get to bed at the time you would really like to? Do you get up and out of bed when you plan to. Or do you say over and over, just 5 more minutes.

Perhaps it's how much time you spend on your smartphone, or on Facebook, or on any of those time-killing games.

Perhaps it's websites or places you said you wouldn't go to.

Perhaps it is the old new years' resolution problem with the chocolate bar.

Perhaps you are one of many who get distracted from work.

I found out, amazingly, youtube is watched so much, that in just 1 min of real time, almost 16 years of possible human working-time is spent. I dread to think how much actual work time is lost

And we find that don't we, when we try to stop and pray, or read the bible, suddenly there are so many other things which need to be done! (or feel like it)

A large part of self-control is breaking bad habits and putting good ones in their place: We **all** lack self-control.

If you're a Christian you won't or shouldn't be surprised by that.

The very concept of "self-control" implies a battle between a divided self. It implies that our "self" produces desires we should not satisfy but instead "control."

We should "deny ourselves" and "take up our cross daily," Jesus says, every day our "self" produces desires that should be "denied" or "controlled."

And how much harder are challenges from within us than those outside it really feels at times! Jesus calls all who follow him to deny themselves, so we shouldn't be surprised to hear, we all lack self-control.

But do you want self-control? Do you *really* want it.

I read an article to help addicts which asked that very question.

It says: "Consider the question wisely. That is, think about it. The easy answer is, "Yes, of course, look at what my addiction has done to me" but the real answer is usually much more complex.

- You do want self-control, but without personal effort – you'd like it to magically appear.
- You want it because you are supposed to want it.

- You want it, but not at the cost of saying “no” forever to something that you love.
- You want it – sometimes, or someday.
- You want it, but you’re waiting for God to take away your cravings.

You see we all need more self-control, but I wonder as those questions imply, whether we really do want it?

So 2nd I want to persuade you that

2. More self-control would be good for all of us

You see, self-control means living within boundaries, it sounds so restrictive, it sounds boring, and perhaps even soul-sapping.

But,

Being self-controlled is like a train on a track. If the train came off the track, don’t think it would be enjoying living free! Really getting to do what it always wanted. It’d be stuck and trapped going nowhere.

Actually the track lets the train wiz along! The train is **most** free on the track! So it is with self-control, actually it sets us free and keeps us moving!



And yet I know that some people will fear that being self-controlled would mean turning into a robot or something. As if you lose all emotion and passion. And that doesn’t sound very appealing at all! “I want to be **me**”, you think.

But biblical self-control isn’t cold and calculated. The bible tells us to be really passionate. In fact, it says the problem is that we’re not passionate enough about God and what’s good and right. Passion is a great thing, we just need to be passionate about the right things. And as we’ll see later, that helps us to be self-controlled.

That’s the first picture of the goodness of self-control. It sets us free, not like robots, but like a train on the track.

Secondly self-control protects us. Sin always wants more, is a reckless consumer, it never gets enough. “Just one more” is it’s catchphrase.

Our OT reading in proverbs gets us to imagine a city: “Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control.”



All those years ago, a city without walls was unthinkable.

It would be crazy because any old army could just march right up and take the city, guaranteeing suffering for everyone who lived there.

Only big strong walls could guarantee a peaceful night's sleep.

“Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control.” There's danger, it says: poor self-control takes away peace and security and leaves you vulnerable to attack.

Alcoholics Anonymous, (which indecently is a fantastic thing and was utterly Christian in its foundation) calls the problem that alcoholics face “self-will run riot”

If self-control helps us fight that, protects us(!) what a blessing it is! It helps us stand against the challenges from the world around us and from within our own hearts. What a great gift from God the Holy Spirit, what a wonderful thing!

We need to see self-control in this light!

It is a good thing!

Like the wall around the city or the tracks for the train.

God the Holy Spirit *wants* to see self-control in our lives, because he is for us, it pleases God, and it's good for us

So what Spiritual help does the bible give us?

3. Spiritual help

Our reading from Titus is clear where the power to change comes from, *how* we can be self-controlled.

I wonder how many of you have heard about the “Just say no” campaign?

It was an American thing, from the 1980s, a huge campaign against drug use. Nancy Reagan, the president's wife was hugely involved.

The idea was, if someone offers you drugs – just say no.

There was obviously more to it than that, but *that* was the catchphrase. The problem is, and was, that the campaign had absolutely no effect, and drug use among young people continued to increase. Some even suggested that the ‘just say no’ campaign ended up leading people to say yes!

Now, you'll all know from experience, when you're trying to resist a chocolate bar, or trying to get to bed earlier, whatever it is: A rule which says, *just do this/don't do that!* Doesn't help you all that much, not if you really want to do the other, and if you've been doing the other for a long time.

What you need is a change of heart, to *want* something different – not a rule saying ‘just do that’.

And that's exactly what Titus 2v11 gives us.

Look at v11

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. ¹² It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly

lives in this present age,¹³ while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ,¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

Do you understand what it's saying?

Not 'just say no' - but we are *taught* to say no, taught by something – what was it? The grace of God. We are changed on the inside, so that we are self-controlled, *eager* to do what is good.

God's grace works this way: you were a desperate case, lacking self-control and full of sin. Yet the lord loved you, Jesus gave his life for you and saved you. He loved you as a sinner! (Not provided [or on the condition that] you changed)

If you've responded, and turned to follow him, He guaranteed your place in heaven – no matter how bad your self-control – (and all the other fruit of the Spirit for that matter).

So you love him! And *your love* is the power for your self-control

You see, it's not earned, we are accepted by God because of Jesus not us.

And we love him for it, we want to thank him, to honour him! Jesus gave up his life for you, and you've given your life *to* him, so you want to live in a way that pleases him!

The cross has changed what you want.

Is that true for you? Think about it, in that moment of testing, when the chocolate bar is there, you want to eat it but you told yourself you wouldn't, why shouldn't you?

Don't try to say no for you, the problem with that is *you do want* it, if you try to say **no** for yourself, but yourself wants to say yes, that's not going to work.

Instead, you need to do it because of, and for God.

Let me try to explain it like this:

I'm doing a funeral this week for a guy with an astonishing life story. He *nearly* died 32 years ago from a heart attack, he'd been told to quit, but never had. After he was confronted with the very real possibility of leaving his wife and two little girls without a dad, he never smoked again! And he went to the gym, played golf, played badminton and cycled – he became really fit!

And it makes total sense why *doesn't* it, it's not astonishing, he stopped smoking because **he loved them, and also because he knew he was bound to them**. He realised that in one-way *he was theirs*, not just his own, he had to change his behaviour to what honoured them. And those things motivated him.

And it's the same with us, we love the lord, and we are bound to him, we want to live in a way which pleases and honours him, because of his grace!

It may not be giving up smoking, it may not be eating less chocolate – it may be bigger, or smaller. But if we're either breaking God's laws in some way and we need to stop, or if we just know it would be better if we had more control in a particular thing – like the guy who stopped smoking, our motivation needs to be out of love for the lord, and because we're bound to him.

And bit by bit, (my experience of this has been quite gradual), in our lives we will learn: “the grace of God... which teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives”

Can you see – it’s not: “Let go and let God”. But a new strength, a determination, a resolve, a power within us, that *wants* to live God’s way, because of his grace at work in us.

But that’s not instant, so let’s finish by considering some

4. Practical help

Be prepared for hard work

I don’t want to suggest that changing habits and being self-controlled isn’t hard work, it is.

Paul compares Christians striving for self-control to Greek athletes, you might think of the Olympic games!

In the bible he says “Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. *They* do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we seek an imperishable one” [a prize that lasts forever!]

He continues “I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave”

Great language isn’t it. You can see what he’s saying. He trains and fights for self-control, like an athlete preparing for the Olympic games.

And it comes back to that question I asked earlier – do you *really* want self-control? If you do, you’ll be willing to work hard for it.

Alcoholics anonymous – which I mentioned before, follows 12 steps – they are deeply practical, but they are also completely Christian and deeply spiritual.

You need both!

Here are the 12 steps, we don’t have time to go through them but they overlap a lot with what I’m going to suggest, particularly

4) make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

That means, **think deeply about your problem, and yourself**. You need to understand God’s grace, you also need to understand yourself.

So for me, with procrastination, I notice that there some things I do where I can concentrate really hard very easily – maths is a good example of that. I find it easy, I do it quickly, I feel good and it makes sense to me.

However there are some things when I try to sit down and do them, I can’t order my thoughts I struggle to concentrate and I end up reading football news on bbc sport. Why? I needed to drill down and think it out clearly. And part of what goes on, deep down is I’m afraid of not doing a good enough job, and feeling inadequate about my gifts. Partly I’m afraid of missing something= of not covering everything so the amount of work I need to do becomes overwhelming.

Do you see, there’s fears, which the grace of God ministers to and helps me with. And It’s important that I’ve thought deeply about myself and my struggles, to know that.

After thinking deeply, **make a plan.**

What needs to change, what should you avoid or do differently. It could be you'll need help making a plan, or it could be as simple as saying, at 10 o'clock I'm going to head upstairs towards bed, or the computer goes off.

Make the plan, and pray to God about it, ask him to help you get it right, and help you to stick to it.

On that plan, you must **include praying** to God. Saying sorry for your failures, and asking for his help. Giving him thanks for how he's helping you as you really begin to do better with whatever it is.

If you need it, your plan should include **help from a fellow Christian.**

This isn't appropriate for everything, *but*, I deliberately said if you need it, not if you want it. In AA they have a buddy system, because sometimes we're not strong enough on our own. If there's even the tiniest someone else could help you better serve and live for God – then why wouldn't you?

Are you too worried about what they may think? Think of the guy who gave up smoking! He knew it mattered, and he was willing to make big changes – well God cares about your self-control, it does matter, he loves you, he cares about your life! It's ok to ask for help! Next, your plan should address what you allow yourself to think: **thoughts matter.** Don't believe the lie that it doesn't matter what you think, only what you do.

The bible talks again and again about how what's on the inside of us, comes out.

If we're trying to look after our behaviour, how we cope and what we do in certain circumstances – we need to remember that what we think about, how we daydream, the thoughts we dwell on and find comfort from and so on – have a huge impact on us, and they can be the first step towards self-control, or losing control. It could be you need to find distraction, in the moment of testing to drag your thoughts onto something else, something good!

Lastly **keep coming back to the lord, and his grace.**

If you fail, which you will, remember he loves you and Jesus died for you as a sinner! Look at things again, ask him and think about whether there's a better way or a different way – and don't give up, but keep going, in his grace.

So now, I'm going to end with just a moment, where the different elements of the fruit of the spirit are on the screen, and you can say to the lord "I'm sorry, help me to grow in this"

Lord give me the desire to change, hold me secure in your love and grace as I try to do that,

And if there are things I need to plan or do differently, help me to know what they are.
Amen.