

WITH SELF-CONTROL
Live Fully
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Our scripture today is once more from Galatians 5:22-23 as we near the end of this summer's series on the fruit of the Spirit. We'll take one more Sunday on this theme. Next week look at verse 24. But today "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control..." the ninth fruit of the Spirit is self-control.

It's always a temptation when we know a word to immediately assume we understand its definition. I found this not to be the case when I did a word study on self-control. In the Greek, in which Paul writes, the word "self-control" is the word *en kratos*. *En* is the preposition meaning "in" and *kratos* means "strength, might, power or dominion." Therefore self-control literally is an "in strength" person, different than an out of strength person.

The word *kratos* has worked itself into the English language in the word for example "democracy." "Cracy" comes from *kratos*. Democracy means people power or people dominion. Theocracy – God power, God dominion. Oligarchy – the few rule. And autocrat is a person who is in control.

It's interesting that Paul here in choosing to speak of self-control does not use that word "autocrat." It has a very negative connotation in our language of being a person who just won't take advice at all. That's sometimes what we think a self-controlled person is. But Paul uses the word *in control*. Or *in strength* person.

How do you develop this in your life? How do you become a self-controlled or an in strength person? The easiest thing for me to do as a pastor at this point would be to hit you over the head with self-control and say, "Here's three easy steps for getting self-control. One, make up your mind. Two, grit your teeth. Three, get to work." And everybody goes out of here lashed with legalism. Get a hold of yourself and go do it.

There is in self-control a kind of a balance. Critical, theological, biblical balance between what God does for us and what we then do for ourselves. If we all were self-controlled people by nature, by inclination, by choice none of us would be Christians. We wouldn't have needed a Savior. It's because our lives have been out of control. It's because we cannot extricate ourselves from our own dilemmas and free ourselves from our own sins nor give ourselves eternal life that we have come to Jesus. Every time in our own life whether it's before we became a believer or afterwards that we judge our relationship with God upon how well we are doing on our effort. We will find ourselves not being satisfied with our level of self-control.

Paul says, in Romans 7 I believe speaking of the Christian life or the non Christian life which attempts to gauge your relationship on how well your own efforts are doing, he says "What I would not do I do," and then he says "What a wretched man I am!"

What a contrast with his statement in Philippians 4:13 "I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me." On the one hand he says I can't. On the other hand he says I can. The balance is simply that he finds he can't when he says "I can do it on my own" and he finds he can when he recognizes the indwelling presence of the Lord.

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How do you then become an “in strength” person? At the risk of being simplistic it seems to me there are at least three major things the scripture teaches us about being an in strength person.

First, through God’s grace draw real close to Jesus. If you want to be filled with strength be real close to the Lord. Self-control is the fruit of his presence in your life. It’s not something you conjure up. The people that I’ve found that are great, strong people are people who are very close to Christ. And have a sharp understanding and experience of his goodness, his grace, his love.

Keeping this balance between our efforts which bring us into a feeling that we’re not under self-control and the grace of God, keeping this balance is so critical. We draw control into our life as we come near to the Lord. I become a different person as I think of how Christ would want me to behave in a situation.

I could give you a lot of law on “pull yourself together.” But I need to first of all give you a lot on grace. A lot of things just die by themselves when you get close to Jesus.

I look for examples from scripture of how this idea of appealing to people from God’s grace ministers to them on the theme of self-control.

Two outstanding individuals in the Philippian church were having a conflict with one another. Two good women but women who had sharp differences of opinion. Euodia and Syntyche. Paul has to urge them to agree together in the Lord. It’s interesting that before he comes to that appeal in Philippians 4 he backs into it by the teaching in Philippians 2. He says “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus who though he was in the form of God thought not equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself.” In other words Euodia & Syntyche how could you be standing on who’s number one? How could you be in this contest, this power struggle for leadership when you’ve been at Calvary? When you’ve seen how Jesus handles those situations. Your whole attitude will be changed once you see that Jesus is a servant.

The closer we get to Jesus, the more different we’ll be. Look at how Christ behaved. Look at what he is doing for you and let that be a pattern for how you treat someone else.

Another example in the New Testament of grace being needed to impose self-control is the story of a man named Felix. His story is told for us in Acts 24. Felix is a Roman procreator. The time comes when Paul appears on trial before him and the scripture says that he had his wife Drusilla with him. Paul spoke to him about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come. It’s very instructive that Paul would talk to him about self-control. We get a reason why he did this when we look at Felix’s background.

About this time in his life, Felix was in his fifties. A couple years before Paul stands before him he had been at another king’s – a petty king – estate. He had seen there this king’s young wife, a teenager named Drusilla. She was the youngest daughter of the Herod who murdered James the apostle, Acts 12. She was just six years old when James was killed. By the time she was a teenager she was married to this petty king in Syria. Felix fell in love with her. So he sent an emissary to her secretly saying “If you will leave your husband and come and live with me I will

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make you happy and give you many things.” So she obeyed the invitation. She ultimately gets a divorce and legalizes her marriage to Felix. She happened to be Felix’s third wife.

So here is this prisoner Paul appearing before Felix. His wife Drusilla is now about twenty. He’s in his late fifties. Paul appeals to Felix about self-control. What I think Paul probably said to him in defining that and beginning to illustrate was simply, “You need Jesus Christ. Once Jesus Christ gets in your life you’ll never act that way again.” Felix and Drusilla’s problem was they had money but they didn’t have wealth. They had power but they didn’t have respect. They had sex but they didn’t have love. They lacked the one thing most needed in life, a sense of obedience to God, to his law and to his way.

People that are in self-control don’t take somebody else’s wife. So Paul appeals to him about self-control. He’s saying Felix, you need Jesus. If you get Jesus, you may be in governmental authority. You may have power over me. But you’re not in power over yourself. Get Jesus.

Scripture tells us that Felix put him off.

But a new nature comes to those in whom Christ truly dwells. The key to getting self-control and to being in strength is first of all that Christ dwell in you.

As we define that point we can move on to others.

I think the second key of scriptural teaching to developing in strength, being an in strength person is seeing how the Spirit sequentially develops the fruit of his personality in your life. The fruit of the Spirit is exactly that. It is the evidence of the Spirit’s life in you. The Spirit’s life is really ministering Jesus to you. It’s his personality characteristics that surface in your life when he is there. Paul has given us one at a time, the nine fruit of the Spirit. Notice that self-control is the last fruit that is mentioned. And the first is love. I’m so grateful that he didn’t begin with self-control.

Paul understands why the Galatians – remember he’s writing Galatians only twenty years after Christ’s resurrection. So it’s probably the first letter of the New Testament written. He already has a very clear understanding of what it means to have the Christ life living in. He says begin with love.

When you begin to become a person of love and we’ve tried all through this series to define the how to be these kind of people. But when you begin to becoming a loving person it’s marvelous how love initiates joy. And when love and joy begin to become present in your life it’s easy to see the development of peace. And when love and joy and peace are present in your life it’s kind of hard to be impatient. Patience just sort of flows naturally out of that. Then as you’ve gone through those four steps of love and joy and peace and patience, kindness flows. And when that’s in place, goodness. And when that’s in place, faithfulness. Then when that’s in place, gentleness. And finally sort of the jewel of the crown self-control. It’s part of all the systematic development of the Spirit’s work in our life.

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The third way that self-control becomes present in our lives is through effort.

This principle does not contradict the grace of his presence, the first point. But most everything in scripture has balance to it. We balance between the grace of his presence (making Jesus real to us) and the need to bring effort to bring self-control in our life. We don't get effort first. It comes second. Paul says to us in Philippians 2:12 & 13 I giving us the balance, work out your own salvation in fear and trembling for God is at work in you. Balance. You're working and God is working.

Peter says in 2 Peter 1:6 "Make every effort to add to your faith goodness and to goodness knowledge and to knowledge self-control." Make every effort. Make every effort to add self-control. So scriptures teach us that some effort is involved on our part if this is to be a trait in our life, if we are to be a person of strength.

The balance again between living in a room with God's grace and drawing near to Christ's presence and effort is I think seen in a study that was carried out. A psychologist gave a paper that as the result of twelve years of study that he had been doing on people who sought to kick the habit on smoking drinking or overeating. He had some fascinating observations to say about the people who succeeded and the people who failed. He said the failures are more likely to see their failure as lacking will power instead of trying to cope with their slip they see it as a sign of total failure. A person who will not break the bad habit, the bad behavior, will inevitably come back on themselves and be hard on themselves and not simply see that one thing as a failure but see their whole life as a failure.

But on the other hand, he says, the people who are successful in dealing with breaking smoking, drinking, overeating are not as hard on themselves when they slip. But they ask what can I do next time so this doesn't happen?

I thought that's where the balance of God's grace comes in because when we do fail we fail in the context of being held in God's hand. Our concern is not "I'll never try this again because I know I'm a failure." I know persons who have committed their life to Jesus Christ and somehow the mistaken concept that once they commit or recommit they will never ever fail or sin again. They say, I've got to know I'll have strength to live the Christian life, as though all the strength is coming from us. And it's all self-effort. Then when something happens and maybe they lose their temper or have a lustful thought they say, See I knew I couldn't live it. I'm not even going to try again. Not living in the context of God's grace. There's always danger of coming down on one side as to the other. If you come down on effort you wind up with legalism and frustration. If you come down on God's grace you have permissive people saying go ahead and do anything you want – God forgives anyway! But I'm talking about a balance between the two. And saying that within the context of that balance we have the courage to see strength move into our life. Yes effort is needed but when we exercise that effort if we have a failure or a setback we've got to know that God is for us and it's his intention to put strength in our life.

The New Testament exhorts us to self-control. To being an in strength person in a number of specific areas in our life. Such as the care of our body. Feeding it. Sleeping or resting it. Exercising it. "Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit." 1 Corinthians 6:9.

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Scriptures exhort us to self-control in regard to our minds. 2 Corinthians 10:5. “Bring every thought into captivity of Jesus Christ. Exercise control. Be strength in your mind. Let your mind do the choosing rather than things just coming to you. Choose what you are going to consider.

We’re to be in control of our time. Ephesians 5:16. We’re to be in control of our money. Matthew 6:33 and 2 Corinthians 9:8-11. Being careful to seek first the kingdom of God and live with our money in such a way that we are good stewards of what God has allowed us to be a channel of. We’re to be in self-control of our sexual life. 1 Corinthians 7:9 and 2 Timothy 2:22. In control and an in strength person in that area of our existence. We’re to be in control of our tongue. 1 Peter 3:10 and James which tells us that the tongue of all the members of the body is the most difficult to control.

Controlling the tongue by the way not only relates to staying away from abusive and cursing kinds of speech. But the control of our tongue also involves knowing what to say about an incident or an event or a person we may not be happy with. Or maybe we need to give some correction. We need to give it in such a way it becomes a helpful rather than a hindering correction. In control of our tongue.

And Paul says in Romans 12:1-2 that we are to be in control of all of our life. He says “I beseech you by the mercies of God to present your bodies a living sacrifice holy acceptable unto God which is your reasonable service.”

Paul in writing the Corinthian letter was writing to people who they themselves knew that it was like to prepare for the Olympics. He talks in 1 Corinthians 9:25 about the world class athlete. “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training.” The literal a Greek, you could translate that as “Everyone who agonizes in all things controls himself.” Everyone who agonizes. The word literally in the Greek is the same as in the English. It’s “agony” in both. We just carried it directly out of the Greek language. Everyone who agonizes. If you’re going to be a world class athlete you’re going to have to really put your body to the wall. Sheer agony to get in shape. Everyone who agonizes in all things controls himself. The person who agonizes, the person who brings discipline in their life comes to be an in strength person.

When we begin doing that in our prayer life, when we begin to agonize and begin to make the effort to be present on a regular basis in prayer. To be present in our study of the scripture. To be present in our assembling with other believers. When we bring the effort to be a good steward of our time, our money, our resources. When we put discipline into our life, we find ourselves becoming in strength.

You don’t get strength overnight. But somewhere along the line there has to be a commitment in your heart to pursue it, to make an effort. To balance that effort with the understanding that all during that process you are in God’s grace, in his care and in his love. It’s not grit your teeth and try harder. It’s get close to Jesus. Let his presence live more deeply in you, which gives you the motivation and the incentive to want to give it your best.

Christ calls you to be a person of self-control. Will you respond to his desire to make your life more like his?

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Our Father, we thank you for the scripture and we thank you most of all for Jesus who shows such control on the way to the cross. He set his face to go to Jerusalem. Such control in the midst of his accusers and crucifiers. We want strength like that to face our situations of life. We want strength to face the encircling sin, which besets us. To see it broken in the name of the Lord. Thank you for that, Lord. I sense, congregation, that God's Spirit is going to be upon you and all of us in fresh new ways. I think there are some things that we've allowed to creep into our lives and because we've tried before to break their hold upon us and that hold hasn't been broken we have settled into an attitude that we must carry that all the rest of our life. I feel that as this church begins intensive fasting and prayer we're going to see the Holy Spirit move in some ways to set people free and to bring us to an in strength position in our life. That some of the aneurysms of our life, some of our weak points which are almost bursting, are going to be that way no more. We're going to be so strong and so filled with the Spirit of the Lord that the things which have bound us and encircled us – attitude patterns and behavior patterns that have sort of slipped into our life that are unlike Christ, God is going to give us the strength to overcome. We bring those, Lord, before you. We do make it our intent to capture every thought and every action. And by the Spirit of the Lord to bring it into subjection to Jesus Christ. We thank you for that Lord.

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