

**Pastor Jim Lloyd**

**Date: December 2, 2018**

**Title: Fruit of the Spirit Series – 10. Self-Control in Perspective**

**Text: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27**

Today we are concluding our series on the Fruit of the Spirit. For 10 weeks we have been looking at the nine qualities that define the Spirit's work in our life. Today we'll be looking at SELF-CONTROL. During the course of this series I have challenged you to pray a simple prayer, similar to the prayer John Stott prayed each and every day of his life: "Holy Spirit, I pray that this day you will fill me with yourself and cause your fruit to ripen in my life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." It's such a simple prayer. We would all do well to make it a part of our daily prayers from now on.

In Galatians 5, after Paul lists the qualities of the Spirit's fruit, he says... *"against such things there is no law"* (5:23). What does this phrase mean? It was an exact quote of something Aristotle had said centuries before when he had made his own list of virtues and summed it up by saying, "against such things there is no law." Paul, then, was referencing this common phrase from the classic philosopher to say the same thing, in effect: You can't go wrong with any of these qualities. You are doing no one ill and you are doing nothing detrimental to the good of society when you practice the fruit of the Spirit.

The fruit of the Spirit can be summed up in one word. Character. And, as I said in week one of this series, Christian character is defined, to a great extent, by how you treat others. This is holiness in action – the way you speak to others, the way you relate to others, and even in the way you respond to the needs of others. The fruit of the Spirit is most evidenced in your interactions with others. That's why Jesus said, *"By their fruit you will recognize them"* (Matthew 7:16). When you're walking in the fullness of the Holy Spirit, your life will demonstrate these nine qualities. We saw as we looked at the first characteristic that **LOVE** is not optional in the Christian life. It's a fundamental priority. And it's not a feeling or an emotion. It's an ACTION. Love takes the first step toward others. Love says, "You're worth it." Next we saw that **JOY** is not only the good feeling that comes with knowing that you are in a right relationship with God, it's a good feeling that we are called to share with others. We're to be joy-makers. In a similar way, we saw that **PEACE** is not only a promise, it's a command. When you walk in the light of the Holy Spirit, you will experience the peace of God's presence AND it is your job to create peace among others whenever you can. *"Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification"* (Romans 14:19). Then we saw that the quality of **PATIENCE** is simply the willingness to wait a little longer for God to do His work in your life. We look at the clock; He looks at the calendar. We wait on His timing. When it comes to the short-comings of others, our attitude is: I will be as patient with you as God has been with me. When we looked at the quality of **KINDNESS**, I challenged you to ask yourself, in every situation, two questions: 1. How would Jesus treat this person in this situation? What would Jesus do? What would Jesus NOT do? 2. How would I treat this person if he or she were Christ? Just like we do with patience, God expects us to take the kindness we have received from Him, and share it with everyone we know. Then we looked at **GOODNESS** – the idea of BEING good versus DOING good. Goodness is NEVER LESS than an action. It has nothing to do with the way you feel. You can do good even on those days you woke up on the wrong side of the bed. We saw that goodness is determined on a case-by-case basis: What will I do this time. That's how we put goodness to work. The next week, we considered the quality of **FAITHFULNESS**. We saw that our willingness to be faithful is never a bargaining chip, as in "I'll be faithful if all the pieces fall into place." No, we're to be faithful - even if our resources are limited; even if no one is paying attention to what we do; even if we don't know the outcome of our efforts. Last week we looked at **GENTLENESS (or MEEKNESS)**. What is meekness? It's NOT weakness. It's power under control. It's knowing when to be tough and when to be tender...and preferring to be tender. Today we arrive at the quality of **SELF-CONTROL**. I have said this from the beginning of this series that the paradox of the Christian life is that you can't become spiritually mature BY YOUR OWN effort, and neither can you become spiritually mature WITHOUT YOUR OWN effort. Growing in the fruit of the Spirit is not a passive experience or an accidental occurrence. These qualities don't just overtake you without any engagement on your part. Paul referred to these qualities as fruit, because everyone knows that in order for fruit to grow, it must be cultivated. It's the same with the fruit of the Spirit. It must be cultivated. You can't do it all BY YOUR OWN effort. Neither can you do it WITHOUT YOUR OWN effort. That's why Paul closes this list with this quality of self-control. It's different from the others. All the other qualities, you'll notice, are rooted in the nature of God: God is love. God is kind. God is patient. God is good. God is faithful. And so on. But self-control is a quality that God doesn't have, and He doesn't need. The ancient Greeks loved this word – in the

original language it is “egkrateia” – and they wrote about it often. Socrates considered it to be the foundational human virtue. His teaching was that all of the knowledge in the world won’t do you any good if you can’t control your own passions and desires. From the very beginning of time, humans have understood that we have passions and desires that do not serve us well. If we yield to our every impulse, we are going to create a huge mess for ourselves. This is not a 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon. Unbridled passion has been wrecking lives for thousands of years, and it will continue to do so. This is why we need this quality of the fruit of the Spirit at work in our lives AND why this quality is different from the rest. God doesn’t need to practice self-control, because His desires are never out of control. On the other hand, our desires most certainly are, because we are steeped in sin. God is holy and good. He’s NOT like us. However, when we practice self-control, we are able to become more like Him. Now, I don’t have to build a case for the idea that we have desires that we shouldn’t have, and that we want to do things we shouldn’t do. The least introspective among us is aware of this tendency. Our initial desire many times is not to express love, not to spread joy, not to make peace, not to be patient, not to show kindness, not to do good, not to be faithful or to treat others gently. Man’s burning desire, all too often, is to pursue those things that will sabotage our relationships, wreck our health and destroy our lives. Man’s desires, left unchecked, will produce the inevitable – chaos, turmoil and misery. So Paul includes this idea of self-control – what the Greeks considered a foundational virtue – as one of the qualities that the Holy Spirit will empower you to put into practice as you walk in the light of God’s love. Without self-control, the other eight qualities of the fruit of the Spirit will always be hit-and-miss. One day you’ll knock it out of the park, the next day you’ll strike out with the bases loaded. However, mastering self-control enables you to be more consistent over the long haul. The question is, then, how do we master this quality? How do we cultivate self-control? Today I want to talk to you about three new perspectives that will help you get a handle on self-control. When you rightly understand these three things, you’ll have greater success in keeping your desires in check.

**1. Understand the significance of all that is at stake.** We’re often motivated by the immediate payoff of whatever our desire is calling us to do. We know that gorging on pizza and ice cream for days on end isn’t good for us, but it tastes so good, and it tastes good NOW. So I’ll eat it NOW, and I’ll worry about the long-term results LATER. And if I have to do damage control somewhere down the road, I’ll do damage control SOMEWHERE DOWN THE ROAD. This not only applies to the decisions we make about our health. It also applies to our marriage and family life – the things we say to our spouse and children, the time we spend with them, the priority we give them. Many times we take the immediate satisfaction of blowing up in anger, being critical, being unfaithful, being absent, being distracted by other things – we take that immediate payoff of indulging an impulse without giving serious consideration to what the long-term results might be. And, of course, this applies to our spiritual lives, and our attitude toward sin. When you take a serious look at all that is at stake, you realize the immediate payoff isn’t nearly as satisfying as it appears to be. I’m saying that in order to cultivate self-control, we need to learn to look at the big picture. I heard the account of a man who struggled for years with obesity. He said, “I used to joke that if someone would pay me \$1000 for every pound I lost, I could lose one hundred pounds *very fast*. And if that same person would pay me money to keep the weight off, I would keep the weight off forever.” Most of us who struggle with weight can relate to that. Then the gentleman said this, “One day (after a health scare) it dawned on me that what was at stake here was worth a lot more than \$100,000. I realized my health was at stake. My future. Not only the medical costs that I might incur, but the years of my life that I was taking from my family.” When he was able to get a handle on what’s at stake, he was able to get a handle on a healthy lifestyle. Today he’s about half-way to his goal. Paul said, “*Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever*” (25). In the next verse he says that he endures self-discipline “*...so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified*” (27). He’s saying: I know what’s at stake here. It’s an ETERNAL crown. It’s too important to miss for the mere sake of immediate gratification. Sr. Henry Cloud talks about the importance of understanding the inevitable sequence of cause and effect. Every action has future implications. He says, “Any one thing you do is only a scene in a larger movie. To understand that action, you have to play it out all the way to the end of the movie.” He’s talking about being able to understand what is ultimately at stake with every action. We kid ourselves into thinking that we’ll beat the system this time: This inappropriate conversation won’t come back to haunt me. This binge won’t hurt me. This Black Friday spending spree won’t sabotage my security. And on and on. And so we give in to the whim. If you want to cultivate self-control, you need to understand the cause-and-effect nature of every action, and the inevitable long-term result. That’s what is really at stake.

**2. Understand the significance of each particular moment.** There are no throw-away SEASONS in the Christian life. There are no throw-away RELATIONSHIPS. There are no throw-away MOMENTS. Every minute matters. Every action makes a difference. This is why Paul said, “*Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating*

*the air*" (vs. 26). He's saying, in effect, I'm not just stumbling my way through life, scrambling around here and there, without any idea of where I am going. I do what I do with a sense of direction and purpose. If you make any kind of commitment, you can be sure a well-meaning soul will try to talk you into breaking it, at least a time or two. I read of a gentleman whose bedtime is 9:00, and he won't break it for anyone. If he is at a party or a social event or even a business meeting, he'll get up and leave so that he can get home in time for lights out at 2100 hours. He won't even let a football game keep him up, if you can believe that. People are always saying, "Ah, come on. Don't spoil the party. You can stay up late just this once." He always says, "Thanks, but no thanks," because he knows that breaking the rule once might lead to breaking the rule twice, and breaking it a third time, and...it becomes more and more difficult to get back into the habit. Now, bedtime is minor compared to the other areas where we're tempted to compromise JUST THIS ONCE. Just this once I'll take this drink. Just this once I'll look at this website. Just this once I'll pad my expense account. Just this once I'll splurge. Just this once...AND SO ON. It's not long before JUST THIS ONCE becomes a situation out of control. There's no JUST-THIS-ONCE clause in the Christian life. Every moment matters, including this one. If you want to cultivate self-control, don't kid yourself into thinking that it won't matter JUST THIS ONCE. There's a bumper sticker/t-shirt/button that I've seen a few times: How much sin can I get away with and still go to heaven? It's a joke, but there are many who live with this mentality. In the same way, there are many Christians who ask, "How many times can I say 'just this once' and still qualify as being 'spiritual'?" I'm saying that just-this-once never works in your favor. I encourage you to strike it from your vocabulary AND remove it from the options on the menu of your daily activities.

**3. Understand the significance of every minor victory.** A couple of weeks ago, we looked at the verse where Jesus said, *"You have been faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things"* (Matthew 25:21). There's a principle in the Christian life that smaller victories lead to bigger victories. We see this in King David. He was a young shepherd boy watching over a flock of sheep. When predators approached, he defeated the lion and the bear and kept his sheep secure. These smaller victories prepared him for the day when he would deliver the army of Israel from the predator known as Goliath (1 Samuel 17:34-37). Every SMALL victory in the area of self-control leads to a GREATER victory. This is why Paul said, *"No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave"* (vs.27). He was speaking somewhat metaphorically here, but his point is that he practices self-discipline in every area... *"so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."* I don't know if I ever told you about a young man whose New Year's Resolution was to make his bed every day. His family teased him about it, saying, "You've set the bar really high this time, haven't you?" He later said that it was this daily victory that helped him develop the discipline to experience greater victories – both personally and professionally. A successful man in his seventies stated that his most valuable lesson in recent years was that there is an unbreakable connection between physical exercise and obedience. He said, "When I am more disciplined physically, I'm more disciplined spiritually." My point is not that you should go out and join a gym. My point is this: Begin today to implement small victories into your routine. Begin today to develop discipline in one or two areas. Always making the bed, or taking a ten-minute walk, or clearing your desk before you're done for the day, or washing a dish every time you use it, or all of the above. That's because EVERY time you practice discipline in ANY area – no matter how small – you're paving the way for a bigger win down the road. If, on the self-control scale of 1-10, you consider yourself a zero, I want you to know that this is an area where you can begin to experience victory. That's because self-control is a product of the Holy Spirit's work in your life. This victory comes to you step-by-step. Every time you are faithful in a smaller area, you prepare yourself for greater victory.

**Conclusion.** Self-control is the one aspect of the fruit of the Spirit that oftentimes sustains the others. Self-control takes us from merely saying that we want love, joy, peace and the rest, to actually putting these qualities into practice – even when our desires lead us in another direction. Like every aspect of the fruit of the Spirit, self-control is a quality that you cannot develop by your own effort. Neither can you develop WITHOUT your own effort. That's noted in SELF-control. It's your job to till the soil, to plant the seed, to water, fertilize, nurture and prune at every opportunity. But you are not on your own. God will empower your every effort. When you do what you CAN, He'll do what you CAN'T. When you do this, the Holy Spirit will take root in your life, and every aspect of His fruit will grow into abundance. Your life will be characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And against such things there is no law. When you're filled with the fruit of God's Spirit you are not only blessed beyond measure, you're then a blessing to those you encounter. So let's make this our prayer... "Holy Spirit, I pray that this day you will fill me with yourself and cause your fruit to ripen in my life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."