



THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: SELF-CONTROL

Genesis 45:1-15; Luke 9:51-62

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Some time ago a colleague on the staff of the church I served gave me a coffee mug decorated with the nine attributes of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. I believe she had more in mind with the simple gift than a mug for coffee. On days when I was unusually frazzled, when everything seemed out of control, and when I was a bit out of control myself, I noticed that this particular coffee mug would always appear.

We all struggle to be open to receive and to nurture the various gifts of the Spirit; certainly, self-control is one of the most challenging. At the same time, self-control gives us a clear avenue to fulfill our calling to be faithful servants of Jesus. Self-control is the capacity to master the self, to restrain our needs, desires, emotions, and actions in order to obtain a greater good or a higher purpose. On one hand, it is a gift of the Spirit; on the other, it is a discipline to master.

In Genesis, Joseph is a talented young man, but who is foolish enough to tell his brothers that he will rule over them one day. He is a favorite of his father's, but he was hated by his brothers. Dressed in a long-sleeved robe, we get the impression that he is spoiled and does not have to share in his brothers' hard work. One day his father sends Joseph out to check on his brothers who are far away tending the sheep. His brothers decide to kill him. Instead, at the last minute, they sell him into slavery in Egypt. In Egypt, Joseph's story becomes one of dramatic ups and downs. Eventually, Pharaoh puts him in charge of the state to store up grain during seven years of great harvest which will be followed by seven years of famine. All those years, Joseph waits. He could have fallen into despair, given into temptation, languished in prison, clung onto bitterness, nursed his anger, and sought revenge. Instead, Joseph restrains himself. He has a sense that there is a larger purpose for his life, a divine hand at work even in the betrayals, the dangers, the schemes of others. He never gives up his trust in God.

The famine drives his brothers to Egypt in search of grain. At first, Joseph hides his identity and puts his brothers through several tests. He restrains his emotions, until he cannot contain himself any longer. He reveals his identity to his brothers. Releasing his emotions, Joseph declares, "And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life...to keep alive for you many survivors" (Genesis 45:5-7). Later, Joseph says, "Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it for good" (Genesis 50:20). Joseph learned to master himself so that he might serve the purposes of God.

The Spirit instills self-control in our hearts so that we might use our gifts to serve God. Dwight D. Eisenhower grew up in a modest home in Abilene, Kansas. He was one of seven brothers. He had a serious problem controlling his temper. When he was ten years old, he was not allowed to go trick-or-treating with his older brothers. He flew into an uncontrollable rage. Beating his fists against a tree, he tore the flesh off his knuckles. His father whipped him with a hickory switch and sent him to bed sobbing. Later his mother came into the room and silently rocked in the chair next to his bed. After a long while she said, "He that conquers his own soul is as great as he who

conquers a city.” It is a paraphrase of Proverbs 16:32. She told him of the futility of anger and the self-destructive power of anger. For the rest of his life, Ike remembered that moment and those words. That experience helped him throughout his life to control his anger (p. 32, David Brooks, *The Road to Character*).

We forget that Jesus not only grew physically, but also emotionally, spiritually, and in his understanding of his mission. Luke says that Jesus “grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him” (2:40). A part of spiritual growth is learning self-control – learning when to let go and when to take hold, learning how to sacrifice less important desires for more important causes, learning how to put aside distractions and stay focused on what God wants.

Luke tells us that when the time of Jesus’ ministry on earth was drawing to a close, Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem” (9:51). It is a way of saying that Jesus knew what he had to do, and he would not let anything get in the way of his destiny. When a Samaritan village would not receive him, the disciples wanted to call down fire upon the village. Jesus knew that this too was a distraction. Whatever frustration or even anger that he may have felt, he put them aside for a greater purpose. Along the way to Jerusalem, he met various people who wanted to follow him. They had good excuses why they could not drop everything and go. To our ears the excuses sound reasonable – burying a father, saying goodbye, or plowing a field. Luke is giving us a dramatic picture of the kind of sacrifice and the path of self-control that following Jesus requires.

Each one of us here today is struggling with important things and situations that we are not sure how to handle. We know that the way we are dealing with them is draining us of our energy and time and keeping us from doing what we know in our hearts to be most important. For some it is an interior struggle of the mind, heart, or spirit; for others it is an outward pressure, trouble, or demand. The Spirit is here longing to give us the grace we need to manage those things that press upon us, to discipline ourselves, and to practice self-control so that we may lead the life God wants us to lead.

The church I served in Indianapolis had a food program with a number of schools in a particular district in Kenya. One day we received a letter from a young Kenyan high school girl who participated in the lunch program at her school. She wrote, “I am blessed with a wonderful mother. I did not have a father. I also lacked another essential need – food. I remember sharing the neighbors’ threshold with their dog, eyeing the neighbors at the table at mealtimes, prompted by hunger pangs. Of course, that earned me the nickname *dog*. I was in lower primary. I could ignore it. I finished my class three. I was moving to class 4. This was upper primary! How could I bear the thought of the canine nickname? This name also applied to my mom! It was hurting, yet we had no food security. Trust me, the school lunch program was an answer to my prayer... I was able to shake off the name *dog*. My mother was able to walk straight from her shameful stoop. My renewed self-worth and confidence enabled me to face my fears head on in academics.... My grades improved. My spirit soared. I made it through primary school... As I look back, I can not only afford a smile, but also a sigh of relief. Next year I will take my end of high school exam. I want to go straight to university. I owe it all to the school lunch program....”

The real name of this resilient girl, once called *dog*, is *Regina – Queen*. She did not let hunger or ridicule keep her from achieving her most important goal. Through the work of the Spirit and the compassionate help of faithful Christians, she learned the self-control she needed to triumph over the circumstances of her life and grow into the beauty of her name. One day, Regina will make a difference in her nation.

We struggle as a people to keep our faces fixed on God. Sometimes those who manifest the spiritual gift of self-control can be the most surprising people of all. The Harvard psychiatrist, Dr. Robert Coles, has studied the social, moral, and spiritual lives of children. In an address he gave at Agnes Scott College, Dr. Coles told of his experience in 1961 with six-year-old Ruby Bridges, the first black child to integrate a formerly all-white elementary school in New Orleans. We are familiar with the story of how she, under the protection of federal marshals, had to pass each day through an angry mob. Ruby's teacher, Ms. Barbara Henry, reported to Dr. Coles that Ruby was cheerful and eager to learn. Her parents said that she slept well and ate well. "Well," Dr. Coles replied, "She is mustering her strength to deal with the trouble by denying it." He continued that it will eventually wear thin, and she will be in trouble. The teacher responded, "You mean that because Ruby is doing well, she is in trouble; when she starts to have trouble, it will mean she is better." The doctor replied that was right. How wrong he was. Ms. Henry saw Ruby open and close her mouth as she passed through the angry crowd. She asked Ruby to whom she was talking. Ruby said that she was praying for them because they needed praying for. She prayed, "Please, God, try to forgive these people because they don't know what they are doing." In a dangerous situation with violence and threats all around, God gave her the strength and the self-control to keep her eyes on Jesus.

We discipline our unruly passions, reign in our scattered thinking, open ourselves to the Spirit, and come to embody – individually and as a community – all the spiritual gifts of God. There is a divine hand in your life and in my life leading us to – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and – oh, yes – self-control.