

Self-Control, A Rare and Precious Fruit`

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Hello Listeners;

It's the last of the spiritual fruits mentioned in Galatians 5: 22-23 and it is a term that's not frequently found in the bible. Yet *self-control* is a necessary component of the Christian life. John Piper, a well-known theologian, calls it a "Fierce Fruit".¹ Why this intriguing title? Because Piper considers "the very concept of "self-control" to imply a battle between a divided self. In fact he begins his article with a quote from Edward Welch a counselor, and Professor of Practical Theology who writes,

As the Hebrews were promised the land, but had to take it by force, one town at a time, so we are promised the gift of self-control, yet *we must also take it by force.*²

What does it mean but that self-control, or self-discipline is not something you and I can quickly take off some shelf. It is something that will not, cannot be obtained without a battle, a spiritual battle. For the fact is that of ourselves we are prone to live while rejecting any kind of leash on our desires, our wants, our behavior. You can see it, hear it from very young children as well as mature adults, even aged ones! Their common cry is, "I want it" and "I want it now!"

Self-control then is saying "No" to sinful, selfish desires, even when it hurts. That takes an effort, a sincere and constant Christian effort. So we hear even someone as faithful as the apostle Paul saying (in 1 Corinthians 9:27) "*I pommel my body and make it my slave*" (or " I subdue it.") He

¹ John Piper in an article found on www.desiringgod.org

² Edward Welch , " Self-Control: The battle Against 'One More'" In the Journal of Biblical Counseling, Vol. 19, No 2, Winter, 2001, p. 30 . Quoted by Piper in " The Fierce Fruit of Self Control."

means, as he explains in this same chapter, that he doesn't conduct himself carelessly. No, he's serious to live a Christian life that he might gain "the prize". That is, the prize of gaining eternal life as a gift of God and a reward for thankful, obedient living.

To be sure Paul knew that his sincere God-honoring desire to serve the Lord in a disciplined manner would run into conflict with what he elsewhere calls his "*old self*, his sinful human nature. In Romans 7:15-20 he even cries out "*What I want to do I do not do.... the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing... it is because of sin in me.*

Yet at the close of those words he says, "*Thanks be to God - through Jesus Christ our Lord.*" There it is, there's the answer to this woeful quandary that so often sees you and me failing to control our emotions, our urges, our life!

The answer is Christ and self-discipline like all the other eight fruits is one "of the Spirit" and not *of man*. It's not the result of a human attempt at bettering oneself. You know what happens to such attempts. They end up in failure and even if they give an appearance of self-accomplishment it's only a mirage. It is the devil and our sinful nature who would like nothing better than to cut God out of our schemes of thanks.

Yet it is this Holy Spirit, whom the church confesses to be "*The Lord³ and Giver of Life*" who is the Gift Giver, "par excellence." Says Paul to his close fellow missionary Timothy, "*God did not give us a Spirit of timidity, but a Spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline*" (2 Tim. 1:7). Those who belong to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are not controlled by their sinful nature nor by the dictates of this proud and self-seeking world. They are, says Paul in his letter to the church at Rome, controlled by the Spirit.

³ The Nicene Creed

There's a book of the Old Testament, that of Proverbs, largely written by that very wise king Solomon that has a lot to say about self-control. In fact right at the beginning of that book we read that Solomon wrote these proverbs, or wise sayings, “ *For attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life*” (ch. 1: 2, 3).

But now this self-control is not a matter of stoicism and of living a stern and spartan life. It isn't, as even sincere Christians have thought at various times in the history, a matter of *avoidance* and *more avoidance*. It isn't God's rule that you and I walk with rocks in our shoes and forego all thoughts of ever having a sumptuous meal. Nor is it a matter of setting your jaw and adopting the slogan, “ *Just grin and bear it.*”

What it does mean is that your life must come under the control and authority of Jesus Christ. It does mean that I must honor His claim to my life. It directs me to come to know him as the gardener of all my thoughts, emotions, wants, and the purpose for which I live. The wonderful thing is that as he has said, “ *My yoke is easy and his burden is light*” (Mat. 11:30). Offer yourself to him, sincerely and gladly and you will not be sorry. He doesn't write you and me off when we fail him and think far more of ourselves than we ought to think. ⁴

Of course we must be satisfied with the fact (as Philip Keller aptly states in his book ⁵ that the best people “*Have feet of clay*”. That is, we all have character flaws, and the paths we walk with those brittle feet are full of danger.

⁴ This is clear from Psalm 103

⁵ Philip Keller [A Gardener Looks at the Fruits of the Spirit](#)

Once again, the answer is Christ. When you and I look to him and follow him and take hold of him as it were, he promises to give us courage and make us strong to fight the temptations that confront us. “*In him*” we are “more than conquerors”.⁶ “*In him*, that is in close fellowship or communion with him. With a heart, a soul, a spirit that is united to him by a true faith.

Even then it means dying to sin daily, that is, fleeing all miserable, sinful, selfish, intemperate thoughts and words and deeds. Yet not living a sallow, life full of frowns and “humbugs” but one of joy. Joy in the Spirit. Says Paul in that same chapter eight of Romans

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. v. 5

Dear listeners we live in a society in which excesses and “exceeding the limit” appear to be the orders of the day. From fights on the ice and rumbles in the stands to clashes with police and violence in the home, self-control seems to be in desperate short supply. Pride and preoccupation with the self are often found to be the pompous rulers of our minds.

What’s the answer to this very sad situation? Is it the taking of some behavior modification training by an expert in psychology and conflict management? Is it that more people ought to visit some maharajah in the Far East in order to “Go placidly amidst the noisier and haste”.

No, for these and a host of other suggested solutions are for the most part, wasted efforts. Yes they may be able to help change attitudes for a while but they offer no lasting solutions.

⁶ Paul in Romans 8: 37

The Word of God makes it clear that there is *real and lasting hope* if our minds, thoughts, actions are *transformed* and *renewed* by the power of God and his Holy Spirit. What it involves is turning one's life over to God and praying, pleading, for him to effect the changes necessary.

Outside of God's gracious presence in my life, my feelings and my actions can be terrible tyrants. Road rage, a lack of patience with my wife, my husband and children threaten to take over on a daily basis. I become irritable, and I really do not have any rest.

But Jesus Christ did not die on Calvary's cross, nor did he send down his Holy Spirit to see my life go to pieces. He died and he lives that I might live by faith and so learn to control my tempestuous emotions. "*It is he*" says the Holy Spirit himself, "*who works in me both to will and to do his good pleasure*" (Phil. 2:3)

Turn to him and take a good hard look at the garden of your life. Let his Word, his very powerful seed grow in you and also this fruit of the Spirit will appear in abundance. Amen and thanks for being with us.