

The Fruit of the Spirit (10): Self-Control

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[0 : 00] And then once more back to Galatians 5 and verse 23. Galatians 5, verse 22 and 23.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. Self-control. I don't watch the news anymore. I'd rather choose to watch something cheerful than subject myself to the gloom of the news.

It's not that I don't keep up with current affairs. It's just that I don't feel the need to fixate on every news story on the BBC website. The most depressing stories I find aren't necessarily those which are dealing with international pandemics and natural disasters.

Well, they are sad. But I find the most depressing stories to be where men and women in positions of power, either in politics or sport or the media, prove undependable.

[1 : 22] They are not just content with having dirty little secrets in their own private lives. They even defend their hypocrisy in public. They may control governments and nations, but they cannot control themselves.

For all their worldly power, they are slaves to their own minds, desires, and words. They lack self-control.

Now, the word translated by the NIV and the ESV as self-control is an intensified form of the Greek word for power.

To control oneself takes more power than to control others. When we're being provoked, it takes more power to control our speech than it does to lift a car above our heads.

When we're suffering, it takes more power to control our thoughts than it does to fly through the air like Superman. And when we're being tempted, it takes more power to control our desires than it does to hold back the tides of the sea.

[2 : 34] I rather like the way in which one Bible lexicon translates the word self-control. It talks about mastering yourself.

Mastering yourself. Like a rider masters a horse, so we master our desires and our minds and our speech. Like a gymnast masters the parallel bars, so we master our minds and our desires and our words.

To master others is not nearly as difficult as mastering oneself. It takes divine power within us, the Holy Spirit, to help us to subdue our wandering hearts and our sinful tongues.

With frightening regularity, we learn that the great men and women of our world who control nations cannot control themselves.

Because it takes a greater power than any man possesses to do that. It takes the Holy Spirit. Many commentators, as I said in the first sermon, see the two most important fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, 22 and 23, being the first, love, and the last, self-control.

[3 : 57] It takes great love to control oneself. It takes great self-control to love as we should. These two virtues are rather like brackets around all the others.

Love is joyful, and joyfulness requires self-control. Love is peaceable, and to live at peace with ourselves and with God and with others requires self-control.

Love is patient, and it takes self-control, does it not, to be patient. Love is kind. We need self-control to be kind to those who provoke us.

Love is good, and living for the good of others and not ourselves requires self-control. Love is faithful, and surely we need to control ourselves in order that we may be faithful to the promises that we have made.

Love is gentle, and we need self-control to have quiet tempers. Love is gentle, and we need self-control to have quiet tempers. Love is not going to control ourselves. They belong together.

[5 : 07] And that's one reason why we must be very careful to define our words using the thought world of the Bible and not the world around us.

the world thinks of love as expressing itself and letting yourself go so the expression goes well you can't help who you fall in love with or when two people are in love they say well we just can't control our desires the opposite is the truth love and self-control belong together as intimately as wave and particle in the nature of light and so when a christian begins a wrong relationship and tries to justify it by saying well you can't help who you fall in love with the bible wants to disagree and say yes you can christian master your desires or or when a pre-married christian couple are engaged in behavior they should not be but justify it saying but we just can't control ourselves the bible wants to disagree and say yes you can christian brother and sister master your desires but then before we go on to discuss these areas in which we as christians want to express our self-control as a fruit of the spirit in our lives we want to ask the question how then can i control myself how can i control myself how can i master my desires and my words and my mind because every world religion views self-control as a desirable virtue but how can i become self-controlled new age mysticism building upon buddhism and hinduism and islam views self-control as emptying oneself of all earthly desire emptying oneself of all earthly desire emptying oneself of all earthly desire it means to deny that one is in pain it means to strive to empty oneself of every sensation and live on a higher plane of existence the path to self-control lies in emptying oneself of consciously straining using meditation fasting and other ascetic techniques to subdue desire and empty yourself of that desire the christian faith takes the diametrically opposite view it's because the christian faith isn't founded in what we do for god but in what god does for us the christian faith is heaven come down not earth gone up for the christian the path to self-control does not consist primarily in emptying ourselves of one thing rather it consists in filling ourselves with another our greatest forefather in the free church thomas chalmers from manstruther once preached a sermon called the expulsive power of a new affection chalmers insisted that if we should fill our hearts and minds with the gospel of jesus christ that new affection of which he spoke it will expel the sin and the shame which fills our hearts and minds by nature in other words the more we trust in jesus christ the more we desire him the lesser our desire for sin will be when i was a teenager growing up in cyprus there were so many mosquitoes that we all bought ourselves machines which if you put a particular tablet into this machine would send out a smell into your bedroom which would drive the mosquitoes away the mosquitoes hated this particular smell i can't say i liked it anyway either so we always had one of these little machines plugged in beside our beds in the same way we can drive sin away by filling our hearts and minds with the scent and savor of the gospel the path to self-control does not lie in emptying oneself but in filling oneself in filling our minds with jesus and his gospel do you want to learn how to control your desires then invest yourself in understanding believing and experiencing the gospel in your daily life jesus will become more precious to you than any seedy carnal desire you want to learn how to master your mind fill it with the glory of the gospel there won't be room for the for the shameful greed and sinful disunity which can so disrupt us oil and water they don't mix they can't occupy the same space the gospel is oil sin is dirty water fill the glass with oil and leave no space for the water fill your heart and your mind with the gospel that is how you shall learn to control yourself and in so doing you shall learn to love to be joyful to be peace loving and so on as we've said all the way through the key to the fruit of the spirit does not consist in doing more and trying harder but in believing more firmly in the lord jesus christ and in his gospel these are the fruit of the spirit expressed in your life yes effort is required but primarily effort to believe the promises of the gospel this is no let god let go and let god in activity it is the expression of active faith and trust in the gospel this is how we learn to master ourselves by being completely mastered by jesus and his gospel in other words freedom in christ is only found in slavery to christ mastering oneself is only achieved by being mastered by the holy spirit being mastered by grace will make you a holy christian you want to learn how to control yourself self-control consists in being controlled by the spirit of god in living by the spirit galatians 5 16 being led by the spirit galatians 5 18 keeping in step with the spirit galatians 5 25 it consists in believing the gospel more firmly not in emptying but in filling in filling your heart and mind with the scent and savor of jesus that fragrance which drives sin away well having said these things and believe me these things are the most important things to say let me briefly list three areas in which we need to express the self-control of the spirit at work in our lives first master your desires second master your mind third master your words self-control does not consist in new age emptying of the mind it consists in a christian filling of the mind with the

gospel

master your desires first of all master your desires the fruit of the spirit in verses 22 and 23 exist in conflict with and opposition to the so-called acts of the sinful nature listed in verses 19 through 21 let me list them for you and see how many of them are caused by and dominated by the expression of desires sexual immorality impurity debauchery idolatry witchcraft hatred discord jealousy fits of rage selfish ambition dissensions factions and envy drunkenness orgies and the like this is what happens when we let our desires get the better of us when we fail to master our desires with the gospel we leave behind us a trail of broken relationships dominated by our sinful lusts we leave behind us a trail of broken fellowships dominated by our envy and selfish ambition when desire takes hold of a man he is emptied of all reason and becomes little better than a beast in human form pandora's box opens and an evil world is unleashed desires which shall stop it nothing to be satisfied yes it may be for fleshly gratification you understand that for the benefit of our children I'm refraining from being explicit in any way that fleshly lust will stop it nothing to be satisfied no matter who it hurts even those closest to you who you love the most many a christian man his faith his family his work his ministry has been ruined because he failed to control himself in this particular area need I say more or it may be a desire for selfish recognition you don't feel that you're being recognized for the great man that you are so you'll stop at nothing stepping on every head you need to to get where you want to go there may be others in the church fellowship and you wish you had their status you'll do anything to rise up the pecking order of leadership within a fellowship you'll drop a tidbit of gossip there the suggestion of scandal there anything just so that you can get to where you want to go and the net result is broken relationship and broken fellowship suppose we conducted a study of the word desires in the new testament we'd find a sorry litany of sins brought about by our failure to control our sinful desires yes young men and young women we must master our desires through faith in Jesus Christ remembering that at the point of temptation knowing Jesus is far more enjoyable far more desirable far more satisfying than any sinful gratification of our desires

[16:59] Augustine was a man who in his pre-Christian days liked to gratify his desires the Roman world of his day was very hedonistic with all kinds of pleasures available at your fingertips the very concept of a Roman fertility festival isn't something which exists in our day but it did in his and Augustine took full advantage but his heart was wracked with guilt he had tried to control his sinful desires but he found he could not but then one evening as he was sitting in a quiet garden he heard the words of a child take up and read take up and read he happened upon a Bible he had close by given to him by his mother Monica and having picked it up he read the words of Romans 13 verse 14 put on the Lord

Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires how then St. Augustine can I master my desires he says put on the Lord Jesus Christ believe and experience the transforming power of the gospel through faith master your desires master your mind second master your mind let me ask you a question do you control your thoughts or do your thoughts control you do you control your thoughts or do your thoughts control you I'm not a psychologist I don't have the technical language to describe the relationship between what I think and who I am but I know it's possible to control and change the way we think to discipline our minds in such a way that we master our thought processes and are not mastered by our thought processes this is the basis for cognitive behavioral therapy where someone challenges their thoughts and rewires their thinking processes to more fairly reflect the truth what some psychologists call I believe neuro linguistic programming well we can talk about all these modern therapies CBT or NLP but I think we're all familiar enough with both our own thought processes and the teaching of the Bible to know that we need to master our thinking not for our thinking to master us going back to that list we looked at in verses 19 through 21 every one of these vices is the result not merely of sinful desires but also of wrong thoughts of what one Christian counselor calls stinking thinking stinking thinking for example we think that gratifying our carnal desires will bring us satisfaction so we press ahead we let our desires get the better of us but all the time our thoughts are lying to us because gratifying our sinful desires is like drinking salt water to quench our thirst it only makes us thirstier than we were before master your mind control the way you think again let's think of how it is that that person who causes divisions and factions in a fellowship of God's people gets to that place in his head he thinks he is underappreciated and so out of selfish ambition he campaigns on behalf of his own reputation he lets the green eye of envy get the better of him

thinking that somehow having real status will satisfy him but all the time his thoughts are lying to him because the truth is that standing on the heads of other people in order to establish our own reputation dividing fellowships just so that we can be the main man is like finding fool's gold at the end of a leprechaun's rainbow master your mind control the way you think don't allow your thoughts to master you because half of what you're thinking this evening is a lie in

Philippians 4 Paul commands whatever is true whatever is noble whatever is just whatever is pure whatever is lovely whatever is commendable if there is any excellence if there is anything worthy of praise think about these things think of these things don't think of the opposites of these things again in Colossians 3:2 Paul commands set your minds on things above not on things that are on the earth master your mind this is true especially for those of us myself included who tend to walk in the darkness our minds play tricks on us our thoughts are pessimistic they're not true we're not the failures our minds tell us we are we're deeply loved by our savior we need to listen to Paul in Philippians 4 in Colossians 3 in Galatians 5 if you don't believe me and that's fine you don't have to believe me then listen to Martin Lloyd Jones who wrote have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life this is amazing coming from this man Martin Lloyd Jones have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself you're listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself fill your mind with the gospel of Jesus Christ the grace that's come to us by the cross and resurrection when tempted to think despairing thoughts think of grace which brings joy when tempted to think immoral thoughts think of the gospel which sets us free from the power of sin do not attempt to empty your mind of thoughts fill it with thoughts of the gospel and of

[24 : 23] Christ and then lastly master your words master your words I don't know about you but I find James 3 verse 2 very challenging indeed James 3:2 we all stumble in many ways and if anyone does not stumble in what he says he is a perfect man able to bridle his whole body imagine that to be a perfect man requires us never to stumble in what we say to master our speech to be self-controlled with what we say we did only read on in James 3 to realize the truth of what James says to quote him our tongues are a fire a world of unrighteousness it's no coincidence that the apostle

Peter when reflecting on the perfection of Jesus proves his point by saying of Jesus there was no deceit in his mouth death this Jesus by whose power demons were expelled and storms on the sea of Galilee were still he exercised the greatest of all power in this he was in complete control of his words he carefully selected every word he used and as we recently reflected when we spoke about speech acts he was intentional that every word he used had a purpose we might even say it takes more power to control your own tongue than it did for God to create the universe in the first place it takes more power for you to control your own tongue than it does for

God to create a universe you all know that I can't begin to tell you how many times my words have gotten into trouble I'm sure you can all say the same about yourselves that it's not so much what you do that bothers you it's what you say that bothers you again it's no coincidence that having assessed the perfection of God's word in Psalm 19 verse 14 David concludes with the prayer may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing in your sight oh Lord my rock and my redeemer words words and more words in their multitude there is more possibility of losing control the words we use express our love for others our joy in God our desire for peace our patience with those who disappoint us our kindness toward those who hurt us the good things we want to do for one another our faithfulness toward one another and the gentleness of a quiet temper it is so hard not to talk back to those who have hurt us it's so hard not to retaliate with our tongues to speak harshly to them and to speak harshly about them that's why

I spoke this morning about the hardest thing to say is nothing snide comments what others might call sarky unthinking un hurtful we're all guilty of the odd one or two flattery exaggeration deceit slander gossip crudeness they're all part and parcel of the person who cannot control their speech but is being controlled by their speech the list of vices in verses 19 through 21 are caused described and worsened by the words of our mouths by contrast the person in whom this holy spirit is working is progressively mastering his tongue he is controlling what he says how he says it of why he says it and perhaps of equal importance what he doesn't say how many fellowships of God's people have been torn apart by the failure of its members to control their words how many Christians have been irretrievably hurt and lost to the church by a failure of leaders to control their words by contrast if we carefully control our speech and use our words well we can bring others into

the faith and build them up in the gospel we can encourage one another give each other the words we need to hear just at the time we need to hear them even if these words are so very simple keep going then I give up I'm on your side I'm not suggesting that any of us pretend to a holier than thy attitude but given to us that the Holy Spirit wants to speak to us about Jesus perhaps as we express his presence within us we might want to speak to others about Jesus we might want to speak to our fellow

[30 : 17] Christians about the Lord we might want to speak to those who are not yet Christians about Jesus and most important of all we might want to speak to Jesus himself and that's what we call prayer just like my mosquito machine when I was a teenager filled my room with a smell the mosquitoes hated Christ filled words will drive our sin away well look the fruit of the spirit far from being an easy study which I thought it would be has been very challenging indeed for me not just in terms of understanding what each word means and how we relate them to the gospel but in assessing where our hearts are before God and to what extent we are truly cooperating with the Holy Spirit in conforming us to the likeness of

Christ what we call sanctification no not very easy very challenging indeed but can I close this sermon and in fact this whole series of sermons with just one plea just like a nail is hammered into a piece of wood hammer down the teaching of this series into your hearts by earnest prayer prayers of repentance and recommitment prayers of resolution prayers of determination prayers filled with gospel prayers filled with Christ Amen