

“CONFIRM THY SOUL”

Life on the Vine – (#9)

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (p. 1111)

These past weeks we have been looking at the fruit of the Spirit. That phrase is Paul’s way of identifying the various aspects of that all-round quality of life that is characteristic of the person who is living both in obedience to and dependence on the Spirit of God. Today we come to the final aspect of the fruit of the Spirit, self-control. Katharine Lee Bates in her hymn *America the Beautiful* wrote these timely words: “*America, America, God mend thine every flaw. Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.*” It’s that phrase “*confirm thy soul in self-control*” that has haunted my thoughts lately.

“*Confirm thy soul...*” That is to say: “*Establish your character, fortify it, equip it, affirm it, give it staying power – and do that by exercising the discipline of self-control.*” It seems to me that if ever the soul of America needed the confirming, bracing power of self-control, this is certainly one of those times. Look around. This society generally doesn’t appear at all hesitant to throw off all sorts of restraints and just “let it happen” (whatever “it” might be). The need for self-control is becoming increasingly evident. (And that’s true for Christians as well as non-Christians). So today I want to address three issues: First: **What do we mean by self-control?** Second: **Where are we expected to exercise self-control?** And third: **How does one acquire self-control?**

I. Before we go further, I think it would be wise to define our terms. **What does the Bible mean by “self control”** as an aspect of life in the Spirit? Well, the word itself probably couldn’t be any more clear. The Greek word *egkrateia* which we translate as “self control” means exactly what it says. It means “controlling yourself.” It’s hard to be much more direct than that.

You will find the word *egkrateia* fleshed out in Acts 24. You may recall the scene. Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem and was to stand trial before Governor Felix. Now, Felix was a singularly corrupt politician. In fact, the Roman historian, Tacitus, couldn’t think of one nice thing to say about him. But Felix did have one interesting trait. He had a keen intellectual curiosity about religion. So when Felix learned it was Paul awaiting trial, he arranged a private audience with the prisoner, inviting him to explain this particular “sect” of Judaism to him and his wife, Drusilla.

At Acts 24:25 it reads: “As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, “*That’s enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.*” But, of course, he

didn't send for him. In fact, he let Paul sit in prison for two years without contact. I find that incident fascinating. Here was a small but obviously interested congregation listening intently to a well-outlined three-point sermon. All seemed to be going on nicely until, suddenly, the preacher was rudely interrupted. *“Hold it! Stop! I don't want to hear any more! Get out of here! And don't call me – I'll call you.”*

What do you suppose happened to trigger such a violent reaction? Unfortunately we have no transcript of Paul's message. All we know is that the topic of the sermon was “Faith in Christ Jesus,” and that it had three points: righteousness, self-control and judgment day. But given that information alone, perhaps we can piece something together.

Consider this. Someone like Felix, one who dabbled in all sorts of religious information, could probably go all day listening to a discussion on the subject of “righteousness” without batting an eye. He could listen to endless hours of speculation about the coming “judgment day” and it wouldn't faze him a bit. But Paul began to talk about self-control, it says, and I don't think Felix was ready for that. Suddenly this corrupt little man found his game of religious trivia turning into something quite personal. Paul was beginning to meddle in Felix's affairs (literally).

I suspect that's what happened to Felix. He was very interested in Jesus – as long as Jesus didn't make any difference. Felix was eager to learn more about “the Way” (which was the early name of the Christian faith) – as long as he could have “the Way” his way. Christianity was fascinating to him – as long as it didn't involve changing his behavior. When Paul started pushing self-control, Felix pushed the panic button.

Of course, there are people for whom the same is true today (both outside and in the Church). They may be very interested in spirituality, in matters of faith, perhaps even interested in Christianity and Jesus. But they draw the line when it comes to self-control. It's interesting to me that, quite often, that is the point where they opt out, or refuse to enter in the first place. But Paul is quite emphatic. Self-control is not an optional exercise for Christians. If you have made a commitment to live in obedience to and dependence on the Holy Spirit of God, one aspect of that life is self-control, i.e., disciplining yourself to do things you may not feel like doing, as well as refusing to do some things that may be really very enticing.

But let me interject a word of caution. There are times when what we assume is self-control turns out to be a form of self-deception. Jesus gave us a chilling example of this in Matthew 23. Debating with some self-righteous religious folk, Jesus said: *“Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cummin. But you have*

neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness... Woe to you...you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.” The word translated “self-indulgence” is the word “self-control” in the negative. In other words, “*You have no self-control.*”

What an indictment! “*You think you have self-control. Well, you do have religion, I’ll grant you that. But you have become so obsessed with keeping the superficial disciplines of religion that you have lost touch with the deeper disciplines that matter far more.*” Jesus wasn’t necessarily accusing them of being deliberately, maliciously indifferent. In fact, he said they were “blind.” They were misguided, foolish religious people who really believed they were practicing godly self-control but in reality it was self-delusion.

The kind of self-control Paul spoke of as a fruit of the Spirit, the self-control that focuses on justice and mercy and faithfulness, is not a routine that you can impose on yourself from the outside. It issues from the inside – it comes from the heart. And because it comes from a heart that belongs to the Lord, it is willing to do some unsavory things, if need be, as well as to forego certain pleasures. That is self-control.

2. Now: where are we to exercise this self-control? Well, I’m not going to offer an exhaustive list. But let me suggest a general rule. The self-control that is the fruit of the Spirit is called for wherever there is the potential for abuse – either in self-indulgence or in self-expression. I say that because immediately preceding his list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, Paul lists what he calls “the acts of the sinful nature.” And they really do fall rather neatly into one or the other of these two categories: abuses of self-indulgence or abuses of self-expression.

Paul identifies abuses of self-indulgence as “*sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery...drunkenness, orgies, and the like.*” Now, I want you to notice what Paul does not say. He does not say that there is anything intrinsically wrong with sexuality, drinking or parties. In fact, I think you would have a difficult time making a biblical case against any of them. What Paul is talking about here, however, is the abuse of those pleasures.

In his *Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis has a devil named Screwtape writing to his protégé, Wormwood: “*I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His (God’s) invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden. Hence we always try to work away from the natural condition of any pleasure to that in which it is least natural, least redolent of its Maker, and least pleasurable. An ever-increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula. It is more certain; and it’s better style.*”

The point at which you and I are expected to exercise self-control is not when we are faced *with “any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form”* (to use C. S. Lewis’ terms). And that remains true whether we’re dealing with our sexuality or our reason or our property or any other gift that God has given us for our pleasure. But when you and I are tempted to abuse those gifts, to indulge them *“at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which God has forbidden,”* that is when we stand in great need of self-control. And God help us to exercise it!

But we are expected to exercise self-control not only in the area of self-indulgence but in self-expression as well. And here Paul’s list of abuses of self-expression includes: *“hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy.”* By God’s good design we have been given the capacity to feel things deeply and to be able to express those deep emotions. There’s nothing wrong with that. But we create all sorts of trouble when we allow those feelings to control our behavior.

For example, getting angry is alright. In fact there are times when it would be wrong not to be angry. But we can’t allow that anger to so completely dominate our thinking that we fly into *“fits of rage.”* There you have, in brief, the problem of domestic violence. And if you know someone wrestles with uncontrolled anger, believe me: they need help in learning self-control, and they need it badly!

Now granted, God has made us all different. We have different ways of thinking, different languages, different temperaments, different ways of looking at things. The remarkable thing is that, when we accept those differences, we usually manage to get along fairly well with each other. It’s when we abuse the ways we express those differences that we create *“discord, dissensions, factions, envy and jealousy.”* When we no longer practice self-control in expressing our positions with restraint, we invite all sorts of disaster.

So the general rule is this: Wherever there is the potential for abuse, either in the area of self-indulgence or of self-expression, that is where we are expected to exercise the self-control that is the fruit of the Spirit. We may not feel like exercising self-control. We may not want to. In fact, we feel like giving up. But we don’t – because that’s what self-control means. It means doing things that you don’t feel like doing, as well as refusing to do certain things you would really enjoy doing.

3. Here’s one last question. We’ve talked about what self-control is and is not. We’ve considered circumstances in which we are expected to exercise self-control. But how do you acquire it? **Where does this self-control come from?** Some folks seem to be blessed with it. Apparently self-discipline comes quite naturally to them, it’s a piece of cake. Others of us seem to drift from one crisis to the next. (Usually we arrive late. And then someone has to tell us when the crisis is over so we can move on to our next one.) So where does this self-control come from?

In one sense it's a gift. Like any other gift from God, it comes at His initiative. It's His choice. And so if you find yourself one of those un-self-disciplined Christians, it is possible that God has been offering you the gift of self-control for a long time. But your life has been so disheveled you've never quite gotten around to accepting the gift.

On the other hand, it also needs to be said that even though self-control is God's gift, it is up to you to exercise it. It's here that Paul's image of the athlete in 1 Corinthians 9 seems so appropriate. Paul says that everything he is, he owes to the grace of God. Heaven is God's gift, and it is nothing we could earn or deserve. *"Nevertheless,"* he says, *"I am going to approach my Christianity with all the intensity and care and discipline and self-control of the serious athlete who is training to win."*

In the same way, Paul urges you and me to first set our goals high. Don't settle for mediocrity in your Christian life. Go for the crown that will last forever. Second, we are to develop our sense of direction. Don't allow yourself to be distracted or pulled off-course. Don't *"run like a man running aimlessly,"* as Paul puts it. Third, we are to be tough on our illegitimate desires. If those desires are wrong, knock them down. If you're doing something you know is wrong, if they are abuses of God's good pleasures, then be tough on them. Say, *"To hell with them!"* And I mean that quite literally, because that's where those abuses came from, and that's where they belong.

One last thing: remember that when it comes to self-control, you can't do it on your own. Self-control is not what you do any more or less than it is what the Spirit does. As with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and gentleness, self-control is what you do both in obedience to and dependence on the Spirit of God.

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