

Last week we were blessed to have Dr. Bernard Mukwavi share his heart with us from the pulpit. God truly spoke to our hearts as he shared of how desperately we need personal and corporate renewal and revival in the midst the chaos and terrorism and moral decline that is happening in our world today. This past week affirmed his words as France, in seeking to root out those who were responsible for 130 deaths on November 13th – once again experienced gunfire and bombs and death of the global war that has infected the plant we live on. We see further affirmation of Bernard’s words in that this past week Islamic terrorists killed 21 people in Mali, two Air France flights bound for Paris were diverted because of bomb threats, and six people were killed by four suicide bombers in Cameroon.

Just a quick glance of the events that seem to always be happening today could cause one to think that the world out of control. But those who us who place our trust in Jesus Christ know that everything that is happening today is really not out of control because *God is still on His throne*. Psalm 46:6-7 tells us: “*The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.*” Job 12:23-25 tells us that God is sovereignly on the throne over any and all chaos in the world: “*He makes nations great, and he destroys them; he enlarges nations, and leads them away. He takes away understanding from the chiefs of the people of the earth and makes them wander in a trackless waste. They grope in the dark without light, and he makes them stagger like a drunken man.*”

In one sense we are truly blessed to be alive here on earth in times of chaos and terrorism and moral decline. This is not only our opportunity to be witnesses for Christ by sharing and living out the gospel at a time of great struggle and unrest – it is *also* our opportunity to watch the providential unfolding and sovereign outworking of God’s purpose to glorify Himself in everything that happens. Psalm 145:10-13 speaks of our witnessing the sovereign power of God: “*All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your saints shall bless you! They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom and tell of your power, to make known to the children of man your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations.*”

Praise God that He is in control *because* there is little we can do to control the events of the world. While we can control some things, there are things we will never control. We cannot control when the tides comes in or goes out. We cannot control the weather. We cannot control what people say or do or think or feel. We cannot control the traffic, the economy or the price of gas. We cannot control natural disasters or famine or war. We cannot control when we are born and when we die. We cannot control the past or the future or the will of God. We cannot control pretty much most of life – which, despite the fact that we know that to be true - we are still get pretty frustrated and angry when we can’t. The supreme irony in all of this is that in reality we exercise very little control over *ourselves*. Sometimes we wake up to the truth that we are enslaved, even addicted, to habits created and engraved on our character over years of practice. This discovery is usually a devastating, humbling blow to our ego – and it often occurs after we have thought or spoke and behaved in a way that reveals how out of control we are *according the standards of God*. As the gentleness of the Holy Spirit opens the eyes of our hearts to the fact that we have become so self-centered that we see our thoughts and ways higher than God’s thoughts and ways - we wake up to our desperate need for spiritual renewal and revival.

Self-control is the ninth and last of the fruits of the Spirit listed by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23. Though it is listed last, it is surely not last in its foundational importance to our walk with Christ - as well as its essential significance in planting and growing and bearing the fruits of he Spirit. God’s Word tells us that when we “*live by the Spirit*” and “*keep in step with the Spirit*” we will bear the “*fruit*” of “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self- control*” – all by the power of the Spirit. Once again, remember that we have seen that “*the fruit of the Spirit*” in the life of a born-again Christian is the emotional, intellectual, and physical manifestation of that person’s spiritual life that has been dramatically and powerfully transformed by the indwelling Spirit of Christ.

Remember also that the “*fruit of the Spirit*” is not something we can do or achieve, but rather a gift of God’s mercy and grace we receive and experience when we humbly surrender our hearts, minds and wills to Holy Spirit. The only “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*” we can know here on earth is that which is empowered by the Holy Spirit. The implication of all this is in regards to the spiritual fruit of “*self-control*” is that the “*self*” in “*self-control*” must be humbly and fully surrendered to the will of the Spirit of God. In other words the Holy Spirit must be in control of the “*self*” before “*self-control*” can be a fruit of the Spirit. Otherwise we are just hooped!

The New Oxford Dictionary defines “*self-control*” as “the ability to control oneself, in particular one's emotions and desires or the expression of them in one's behavior, especially in difficult situations.” Webster’s dictionary simply defines “*self-control*” as “restraint exercised over one's own impulses, emotions, or desires.” When the Greeks wanted to illustrate self-control, they built a statue of a man or a woman in perfect proportion. To them, self-control was the proper ordering and balancing of the individual. Aristotle once said, “I count him braver who overcomes his desires than him who conquers his enemies; for the hardest victory is the victory over self.” Plato believed that our animal urges must be governed or else they will produce “a feverish state in the soul, a city of pigs” which knows no limits. The picture being that when we’re not self-controlled, our lives look and smell like a pigsty. The Greek word translated as “*self-control*” in Galatians 5:23 comes from the word “strength” and means, “one who holds himself in.” The question is – “*self-control*” is the strength to hold ourselves in from what? Well, our context, which is Galatians 5:16-25, tells us what we are to hold ourselves in from.

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.” Gal 5:16-25

The spiritual fruit of “*self-control*” is the mastery of one's fleshly cravings and impulses. To be self-controlled is to not live in bondage to the desires, passions and appetites of the flesh. Our fallen flesh, our fallen bodies, our fallen inner emotions and yearnings might be good servants but they are miserable masters. While “*self-control*” is a good translation of the Greek word, it’s a bit deceiving because we all know that we can’t control ourselves simply through our own willpower or self-determination. “*Self-control*” is not self-help because we are desperately lacking in our ability to help ourselves. Paul spoke of this in Romans 7:18: “*I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.*” A few verses later Paul gives a summation of his desperate need for God’s help and of God’s fulfillment in doing so: “*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin*” (Romans 7:24-25).

We can get a fuller meaning of “*self-control*” from Paul’s extended discussion of his ministry in 1 Corinthians 9 where he contrasts exercising control over his body with running “*aimlessly*” in verse 26. He argues that athletes exercise self-control because they have a clearly defined purpose or goal. They cannot afford to be distracted by every passion or desire that comes along. As followers of Christ we can therefore define this final fruit of the Spirit as the “*control of the self by the Spirit for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.*” What looks like self-control is actually the result of letting the Holy Spirit take control. “Self-control” - biblically speaking - means walking by the Spirit as we live out our lives under the control and authority and will and purpose and power of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Now God is not ignorant to the fact that we will struggle with us, as more often than not we will either blindly or deliberately succumb to the flesh when it comes to self-control. Jesus spoke of this when he chastised the hypocrisy of those who professed to be self-controlled but their hearts and lives revealed they were really self-indulgent: *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence”* (Matthew 23:25). The apostle Paul understood how a lack of self-control could ruin the intimate relationship between a husband and his wife: *“Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control”* (1 Corinthians 7:5). And he was also well aware of the catastrophic effect that a lack of self-control has on all relationships in life: *“Understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people”* (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

In order to fully understand the spiritual fruit of self-control, it's helpful to describe what the absence of self-control looks like. Proverbs 25:28 provides a dramatic description of the individual living out of control: *“A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.”* When the book of Proverbs was written, one of the main sources of strength and protection for a city consisted in the building and maintaining of walls. A wiped out wall was considered a breach in security. The picture we are given is that of a city whose walls have been so nearly destroyed as to be without defense against an enemy; so is the man or woman or child who has no restraint over their flesh, no defense against self-righteousness or selfishness or anger or lust or pride or greed or any other unbridled emotion. Proverbs 16:32 says: *“Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.”* This is the spiritual fruit of self-control. Here Solomon uses the word *“rule”* rather than *“self-control”* but the sense and meaning of *“self-control”* remains. A comparison of these two proverbs reveals the great significance of self-control as both an offensive and defensive attribute.

A longer look into the deeper meaning of *“self-control”* reveals that *“self-control”* could actually be described and defined in terms of *self-denial* and *self-sacrifice*. Self-control and self-denial and self-sacrifice are means by which we can *“walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. . . . strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy”* (Colossians 1:10-11). This is not something we can do on our own as the remnants of our fallen sinful human nature persistently exert upon us and in us a strong desire to distance ourselves from God. Romans 8:7 tell us that, *“the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.”* We must take care in how we understand what it truly means to *“control”* ourselves. When we do try to control ourselves on our own, which would be in the flesh, we naturally become passively or aggressively *“hostile to God.”* But if we control ourselves by surrendering ourselves to the Spirit, we will become *“hostile”* to the flesh, *denying* and fighting against the remains of our fallen, sinful, human nature's impulse to satisfy its desire, and even to the point of *sacrificing* ourselves so that we would stop excusing sin as a way of life.

The Bible gives us all kinds of examples of people who lived out-of-control lives. One of those people was Samson, whom we read about in Judges 14-16. Samson was one of Israel's judges who was empowered by the Spirit of God. Known for his strength, Samson led God's people for 20 years and one of his primary tasks was to protect His people from the influence of the pagan Philistines. But his lack of self-control with a prostitute caused him to lose his hair, his strength and his life. In 1 Samuel 21-23 we read of King Saul, another man who was out of control. He was so determined to destroy David that his life spun completely out of control. But David, on the other hand, demonstrated remarkable self-control when he had the opportunity to kill Saul. Instead of allowing his passions to control him, David refused to harm Saul as God's anointed leader. But sadly and tragically when David became King, his life went out of control and he committed adultery and murder.

King David's life is a reminder that when we try to control our lives on our own, we will fail. We see this in Hebrews 12:1-2: *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."* What we are reading here is that when we run the "race" of life for Jesus we will often find ourselves bogged down with "every" good and bad "weight" - along with habitual "sin" - and we will neither win nor will we finish the race if we don't desperately depend on the power of Jesus, *"the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."* On the surface, being a Christian might appear to be easy to do, in that being a Christian is basically defined as someone who believes/trusts in Jesus Christ. No one is more worthy - Jesus sacrificed his life on a cross and rose from the dead so that those who surrender their lives to him will be forgiven and redeemed and brought fully into the Kingdom of God forever. But it's much more than that. The truth is being a Christian will quite often be very difficult because a true Christian is one who, because they trust Christ, must set his or her heel upon the remains of their fallen, sinful human nature within themselves - and subordinate the appetites of their flesh and the desires of their minds, so they might grow in faith and purity and holiness as they seek to please God. This is our created purpose in Christ. Ephesians 1:2-3 says: *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him."*

Self-control - the control of the self by the Spirit - is foundational to our conversion (coming to faith in Jesus) and our sanctification (our ever-deepening walk with Jesus) and our glorification (our resurrected, eternal life with Jesus). But self-control - the control of the self by the Spirit for the sake of the gospel - will always be difficult because our hearts tend to bend towards ourselves rather than toward God, because as saints who still sin, we are still a work in progress. Jesus said: *"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few"* (Matthew 7:13-14). But Jesus also said: *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6). Jesus is the only "way" that we can know and live out a Spirit-controlled life.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. Titus 2:11-14

Jesus is the "grace of God" who "appeared" not only save us from sin and death but also to "renounce ungodliness and worldly passions" and to live Spirit-controlled lives of integrity and godliness in the fallen, chaotic world we live in, as we wait for "the blessed hope" of Jesus' return to take us home, because he gave himself up for us, not only us to save us and redeem us, but also to "purify for himself a people for his own possession" - purify us from all sin and iniquity self-righteousness and selfishness and anger and lust and pride and greed or any other unbridled emotion, so we might be completely and fully pure before our Almighty God because we completely and fully belong to Jesus. And because we will be completely and fully controlled by the Holy Spirit, we will be "zealous for good works."

God has given us His "grace" so that we might be controlled by the Spirit. Because "the grace of God has appeared" we can give ourselves to God and we can give up control of our lives to the Holy Spirit. And even though our natural reaction and response to doing so will most often range from reluctance to resistance to rebellion, God has provided a "way" by His grace to transform "self-control" into Spirit-control. Jesus is the "way" which changes self-control into self-denial and self-sacrifice. It was through Jesus' self-denial and self-sacrifice that we can know a new life - controlled by the Spirit.

As we close we need to remember that the “*fruit of the Spirit*” Paul lists in Galatians 5 has to do with *humble character* that produces the *fruit of unity and service*. And so what does humble character that produces the fruit of unity and service in “*self-control*” look like in our lives and in our church? Again, as has been my habit throughout this whole series, I am going to let God’s Word speak to us about this. Today we are going to look back into Romans 12 where in verse one the apostle Paul challenges those who claim Christ to be “*a living sacrifice*.” Now that particular phrase clearly implies that we should be modelling our lives after Jesus, who exemplified the self-denial of self-sacrifice that flows out of a Spirit controlled life. What is highly significant about Romans 12:1 is the context in which it is written. Romans 11 concludes a lengthy dissertation on the doctrinal foundation of Christianity, showing the essential significance of faith and grace – and then in chapter 12 Paul shifts from *instruction* to the *practical application*. The apostle links the two sections together with the word “*therefore*” clearly implying that living out faith and grace is inseparably bound to what we believe. Self-control – the control of the self by the Spirit – is the only “*way*” we can know and live out the proper ordering and balancing of faith and grace in what we believe about Jesus and in how we live out our lives for Jesus. From Romans 12 to Romans 16 we read of what that should look like in our lives and in our church.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. Romans 12:1-2

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. Romans 12:3-8

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Romans 12:9-21

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.
Romans 13:1-4

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. Romans 13:8-10

We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.” For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.
Romans 15:1-7

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen. Romans 16:25-27

The fruit of the Spirit of self-control is the control of the self by the Spirit for the sake of the gospel. The Holy Spirit empowers the “self” of our lives in a number of different ways. The Holy Spirit gives us the self-control to practice self-restraint so that we are able to exhibit moderation in all our relationships, ministries and personal habits. 2 Timothy 2:22: *“So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.”* The Holy Spirit gives us the knowledge and wisdom to realize that godly balance is better than human extremism. 1 Corinthians 10:23: *“All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up.”* The Holy Spirit enables us to do everything that God asks us to do with the help of Christ who gives us the strength and power. Philippians 4:13: *“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”* The Holy Spirit guides us out of our complacency or apathetic attitudes towards God’s call for our lives. Hebrews 12:10: *“He disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.”* The Holy Spirit brings us back into fellowship with God whenever we fall into sinful behaviour, bad attitudes or false beliefs. 2 Corinthians 13:14: *“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”* The Holy Spirit inspires us with truth whenever we lean too far in a wrong direction in our thinking or actions. 2 Timothy 3:16: *“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”*

The Holy Spirit gracefully encourages us when we feel we are not making progress. Philippians 1:6: *“He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”* The Holy Spirit shepherds us whenever we are feeling weak, discouraged or frustrated. Psalm 23:1-3: *“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”* The Holy Spirit speaks into our lives and warns us and teaches us when we become angry and bitter with others. Ephesians 4:31-32: *“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you”* The Holy Spirit grants us discernment regarding what is of Him and what is of us, so we might bear the fruit of the righteousness of Jesus Christ in this life and in the life beyond. Philippians 1:9-11: *“My prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”*

It is by the grace of God that God offers us the Holy Spirit to take control of our hearts and lives. God’s grace redeems us and God’s grace reforms us and God’s grace reforms when we give up the control of the self to the Spirit of God for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We have been created by God with a multitude of moods, passions, and desires – and because we are saints who still sin as we still live in the shadow of the fall, all of our moods, passions and desires must be under control or they will end up controlling us. Our appetites and longings have their proper place only when they are first focused on God. Jesus told us that when we seek first the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, everything else we need in this life and in the life to come will be given to us (Matthew 6:33). God’s Word tells us that the “way” we can seek the kingdom of God is the “way” of Jesus. Jesus is the “way” of self-denial and self-sacrifice that leads us into a new life that is controlled by the Spirit. It is then we can come to know and bear the fruit of the Spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. And so if we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Amen? Amen!