

# Followers of the Way

## The Fruit of the Spirit – Self-Control

Steve Campbell 30-06-24

**Deut 32:1-6; Matt 25:14-30**

We have come to the final in our series on the Fruit of the Spirit, and the last segment of the fruit is self-control. This may be a bit surprising as all the other parts of the fruit are a reflection of God's character – love, peace, patience, faithfulness and so on. But self-control is different, there is no corresponding characteristic of God here, so why is it included?

Although the Spirit works in us to develop the fruit of Christlikeness, God knows that we continue to struggle against sin and we need self-control to overcome our sinful desires.

Talk of self-control smacks a little of self-help. In the secular world there is a plethora of self-help books and courses to facilitate our achieving a goal – slimming, playing guitar, how to paint like a master, public speaking etc. There are even some who proclaim a form of Christianity a bit like this – read this book, follow that programme, give to this particular ministry and you can claim God's blessing of health, wealth and longevity. This is not true Christianity, it is a false religion! Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. The initiative comes from God; it's not what we can do for God by our efforts, but what *He* has done for us in Jesus.

As we accept Christ as Lord and Saviour of our lives, His Spirit starts the work of reshaping and moulding us into the likeness of God's Son. And yet there is also a sense of co-operation; the Spirit does not force His way into our lives, but we must allow Him access so He can grow the spiritual fruit within us.

Good fruit cannot grow on a bad tree. We know that; Jesus told us that in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7:18:

A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.

And so the Fruit of the Spirit cannot grow in a life that is steeped in sin. That's why we need self-control. We do not achieve sinless perfection in this life, there is always a battle going on between our new spiritual nature and the old sinful nature, the flesh.

The Apostle Paul discovered this in his own experience. Whereas in his old life as a zealous Pharisee, persecuting the Church, he had confidence in himself; in his new life as a disciple of Christ he found a constant struggle between sin and righteousness, good and evil. We know he had a thorn in the flesh (2 Cor 12:7) though we don't know the exact nature of it – was it a physical ailment such as his eyes; or was it a spiritual condition, like the old sense of pride raising its ugly head? Paul's struggle was so intense at times that he cried out in frustration, see for example Romans 7:24, 'What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?'

Then in the very next verse there is the answer, 'Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!'

Self-control allows us to create the right environment in our lives for the Spirit to grow His fruit. There is certainly a negative element to it and it leads us back to the ugly list of vices in Galatians 5:19-21,

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.

Some of these we may never have been involved in – sexual immorality, witchcraft, orgies ... but what about hatred, jealousy, selfish ambition? There is no hierarchy of sin, each is a barrier to God's grace and requires self-control to overcome it. So we need self-control alongside all the other segments of the Fruit of the Spirit. And it's interesting to note what Paul says immediately after listing the nine-fold fruit in v.23 'Against such things there is no law.' What does he mean?

Galatians was written to show the difference between life governed by the OT Law and life directed by the Spirit. The Law is good in that it shows up our sin, where we have gone astray, but the Law in itself cannot save us, only God can do that. Indeed, the Law can be seen as negative, outlining those activities we need to avoid – do not murder, do not steal, do not commit adultery. You cannot, however, legislate for people to love one another, or be kind to each other. These are qualities of character that the Spirit grows within us. No law can make us do these things, only God can, through His Spirit.

But again, we have our part to play, vv24-25:

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

We must say 'No' to the flesh (the sinful nature), and 'Yes' to the Spirit. This is where self-control really kicks in.

Paul's language here is very strong and decisive; we who belong to Christ, who have been born again, 'have crucified' the flesh. Not so much an instruction as a statement of reality, this is our current status. And yet there is a sense in which we must continually crucify the flesh. In Luke 9:23 Jesus says those who follow Him must take up their cross daily.

Having said 'No' to the flesh we are to say 'Yes' to the Spirit. Living by the Spirit of God and keeping in step with the Spirit means we are out of step with the world. There is so much in the world to tempt us, whether it is to gain personal pleasure, or simply live a quiet life free from oppression. We therefore need the Spirit's help to develop self-control. When I was thinking about this, one word that kept coming to me was 'determination.' We need to be determined to live by the Spirit, keep in step with Him and overcome the sinful desires of our flesh.

When you think of the word determination, who comes to your mind? Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing – Mt Everest. Roger Bannister – run a mile in under 4 minutes. Mary Peters – at 33yrs won gold in Pentathlon.

When I think of determination, my mind goes to two men in bowler hats pushing a piano up 133 steps. I am talking about Laurel and Hardy's 1932 film, the Music Box. No matter how many times they pushed the piano up those stairs, and it fell down again, they carried on until they completed their task. That's determination! We must be determined, with the Spirit's help, to overcome temptation, and not allow our old sinful nature to take control. Once again there is that co-operation between the Holy Spirit's power and our deliberate actions.

When I was training for ordination, it was the early days of women's ordination, and our year group consisted of 17 males and one female – Jacqui. We each were assigned a pastoral counsellor, who was a local ordained minister, with whom we could discuss any problems or issues we had. One day Jacqui went to see her counsellor: her problem was not being the only female in the group; nor any issue with her studies; nor even anything of a theological or spiritual nature. Her only problem was – she couldn't get up in the morning! Her pastoral counsellor, whether he found that amusing or not, nevertheless gave her some wise advice, 'Pray to the Lord, and when your alarm rings in the morning you get your first leg out of the bed, and God will make sure the second one follows it!'

We rely on the Holy Spirit to grow His fruit in us, including self-control, but at times we must take the first step. \*\*\*

One area where self-control needs to be exercised is with the tongue. Just listen to the words bandied about by politicians, Church leaders, the media, social media etc. All would do well to heed what James 3:8ff says, 'no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness.'

I have experienced this first hand. I was helping lead a youth camp in Jersey; 56 teenagers from Northern Ireland over the first two weeks in July. If you know anything about Northern Ireland you will realise 12<sup>th</sup> July is a big day, the commemoration of the Battle of the Boyne when Orange-men parade across the Province; and many of these teens were from that background.

On the Twelfth, in the evening we had a beautiful time of worship, then after supper some of the teens lit a bonfire and started their own mini parade, singing songs that were offensive to Roman Catholics, known locally as 'Kick the Pope' songs. They had to be severely reprimanded.

So here we had the same group of people who had been praising God and then later cursing those who are different from themselves.

This is an extreme example, but we all must be careful with our words. What we say and how we say it has the power either to bless or to curse, to uplift and encourage, or to tear down and destroy.

The singer from the band the Divine Comedy, Neil Hannon, who incidentally was the son of an Irish bishop, has written some of the most thought provoking lyrics of the past 30 years. One song which sums up the danger of an uncontrolled tongue is *Sticks and Stones*.

Verse 2 goes like this –

Broken bones fuse together  
Bruises never last for long

But once they're said, words stay spoken  
And hearts stay broken from that moment on

Each morning in my daily devotions I pray for the Armour of God and the Fruit of the Spirit. Each segment of the fruit is important, but the one I pray for an abundance of is self-control, because it is necessary to enable all the rest to take root and grow in my life.

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So we come to the end of our series on the Fruit of the Spirit, those qualities of character every Christian is promised through the Spirit of God in order to fashion us into the likeness of Christ.

We began our series by being reminded of the campaign by the government to encourage us to eat more healthily, 'Have you had your five-a-day?'

We end by asking 'Have you had your nine-a-day?' It is as this nine-fold fruit of the Spirit develops in our lives that we become more like Christ, the goal of every Christian.

I close with a prayer from a Salvation Army hymn -

Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me

All His wondrous compassion and purity

O Thou Spirit Divine, all my nature refine

Till the beauty of Jesus be seen in me. **Amen**