

# SELF-CONTROL

## SERIES: FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT



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Galatians 5:22-23  
Final Message  
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### *Galatians 5:22-23*

This morning, I have with me one of my favorite morning treats. I think an almond croissant is the perfect morning treat. It is light and flakey, nice and buttery. A little gooey from the almond filling, but not too sweet. I love a good almond croissant. How many of you would like to take a bite of this right now? A lot of you! Not surprising. It's delicious.

I have some good news and some bad news. I'll start with the bad news. Most of you will not be able to eat this croissant this morning. After all, there is only one croissant and many of you, and I am not planning to reenact the feeding of the 5,000. Here is the good news: one of you will get this croissant this morning. You can keep it for yourself or share it with a friend, but here is the catch: you can't eat it during the service. You can look at it. You can smell it. But you cannot taste it until you are on the patio after the service. So who would like to volunteer?

This morning, we are finishing our Fruit of the Spirit series. We will look at the last of the nine virtues listed in Galatians 5:22-23. The final virtue on the list is self-control.

This morning, our lucky volunteer is going to be demonstrating self-control. As they look at that delicious almond croissant and smell its fantastic aroma, they will be filled with a desire—perhaps a very strong desire—to eat that croissant. Will they resist that desire? I hope so! But to do so, they will have to exercise self-control. Whether this will be easy or difficult for them, I don't know. We will find out. But self-control is the goal.

### **Driven by desire**

At the beginning of this series, we noted that love, the first virtue in the fruit of the Spirit, is the most important virtue on the list. This is why it is first. Love is meant to surround and infuse all of the other virtues. It is meant to run through all that we do as followers of Jesus. Some commentators see self-control—the last virtue on the list—as also receiving special attention, special emphasis on the list, and I think that is probably true.

Self-control is all about desire. When I gave our volunteer an almond croissant this morning, that croissant awakened a desire in many of us. For that person, they were filled with a desire to eat that croissant right away. Those around them might be filled with a desire to steal that croissant so they can eat it. Self-control is the ability to restrain that desire, to hold it at bay. To say “no” to it. So, self-control is all about desire.

Desire is fundamental to what it means to be human. James K. A. Smith, a philosopher-theologian at Calvin College in Michigan, makes this point in his book, *Desiring the Kingdom*. In that book, he poses the question, What, fundamentally, is a person? These are questions that philosophers think about that the rest of us do not have time for. Different philosophers have answered this question differently. Rene Descartes famously said, “I think. Therefore, I am.” What he was saying is that the most fundamental thing about a person is that they think. You are fundamentally a thinking thing. This idea might resonate with many people in this valley and maybe with many of you. You have spent much of your life learning how to think and sharpening your mind. You are a problem-solver, a creative thinker, and someone who knows how to use your mind. But is your ability to think really the most fundamental thing about you?

Others, after Descartes, thought there was something more fundamental to personhood than thinking. They argued that all thoughts were undergirded by beliefs. You might be able to think your way through a complex physics problem, but you can only do that because you believe in the laws of physics. And this really is the way that all of life works. So you are not most fundamentally a thinking thing. Rather, you are most fundamentally a believing thing. Many of the Reformers thought this way.

Smith, however, wants to push back against both of these models of personhood as he claims that human persons are “fundamentally desiring creatures,” or, he says, “embodied agents of desire and love.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, as humans, we are not primarily driven by what we think or believe but rather by what we desire. Want we want, what we love.

Think about our almond croissant again. Why would you choose to eat an almond croissant? Is it because of what you think about it? I think this croissant will taste good, fill me up, or make me happy. No, that is probably not why you eat it. Is it because of what you believe about it? I believe that I deserve to treat myself with this croissant, or I believe that eating this croissant is going to bring me joy. Maybe, but there is something more basic going on. The most fundamental reason you will eat that croissant is that you want to. You desire it. You crave it. You smell that sweet and savory aroma, and you see that almond and powdered sugar topping, and your brain tells your body, I need that. It is your desire. You are driven by your desires. All that you do you do because somewhere inside of you, you want to.

Some of the things that you want are wonderful, healthy, God-honoring things. Praise God for that. Seek those things! Other things you want are harmful, toxic, selfish, and even evil. Sometimes these desires are strong. Incredibly strong. That is why self-control is so important.

So what is self-control? Self-control is the ability to restrain, retrain, and redirect your unhealthy desires into healthy desires for God. To restrain is to say “no” to unhealthy desires. To retrain is to gain mastery over unhealthy desires. And to direct is to come to truly desire God.

The significance of self-control is seen in the context of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. Let’s look at Galatians 5:16-17. As we do, pay attention to all the talk about desire.

#### **Galatians 5:16-17:**

**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.**

The Apostle Paul here affirms that we, as humans, are driven by our desires. But he notes that as followers of Jesus who have been born again and received the Holy Spirit, we have competing desires. On the one hand, we have what he calls the “desires of the flesh.” That is, we have sinful desires, selfish desires. Desires started as good but have been perverted and changed into something bad—evil. But we also have the desires of the Spirit—the desire for God and the things of God. On a macro

level, we might want to live a life pleasing to God, but sometimes the desires of the flesh overpower our desire to please God, and we end up doing something that we do not really want to do.

We have all been there, right? You decide that you are going to eat healthier, but then you see the almond croissant. It looks so good and smells so good until you can’t help yourself! Eating an almond croissant is not a moral issue, but it works the same way as something like pornography. You do not want to look at pornography, yet you do want to. You believe it is unhealthy and unholy, yet you desire it. You don’t want it to be a part of your life, yet you find yourself continuing to come back to it over and over again. The same thing could be said of any sinful habit. Why does this happen? Because the desires of the flesh and the desires of the Spirit are at odds with each other, you need to grow in self-control. You need to restrain, retrain, and redirect that unhealthy desire into a healthy desire for God and the things of God.

#### **Restrain**

So let’s think about these three components of self-control. First, restrain. Self-control is the ability to restrain our unhealthy and ungodly desires. To say “no” to that which is sinful. That which is evil. That which is unhealthy. That is hard to do, isn’t it? Sometimes it feels impossible. But it is not impossible to restrain our sinful desires.

Listen to what Paul says just after listing the fruit of the Spirit.

#### **Galatians 5:24:**

**And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.**

This verse sounds a bit confusing, doesn’t it? Those who belong to Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires? Why, then, do I still struggle with materialism? With anger? With lust? It does not feel like the desires of my flesh have been crucified in me. How can Paul say that?

It has to do with what theologians call the already/not-yet. The already/not-yet means that we have already received some of the benefits of the victory of Christ, but we have not yet received all of them. In this case, it is true that we have been freed from the power that our sinful desires once held over us, even though the presence of those desires has been fully removed from our lives.

What we need to recognize if we want to restrain the desires of our flesh is that we are not enslaved to our sinful desires anymore. Just because you want to do something does not mean you have to do it. The power that sin once held over you had been broken. Full stop. That is the truth. That is reality. Even though the presence of sin in your life has not been removed, the power of sin has been broken.

Paul says it this way in **1 Corinthians 10:13**:

**No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.**

There is no temptation that you will face, no unhealthy desire that you will experience, for which God will not provide a way of escape. You always have the power to say no. It is not your power. It is the Spirit of God within you. But God will always provide a way out from under a temptation.

We have to remind ourselves of what is true at the core. We belong to Jesus. We are his children. We have the Spirit of God living inside of us, showing his power in our weakness. That is the truth, our reality. We have to remind ourselves of that reality.

There is a prayer that has been passed down through the history of the church in which we remind ourselves of that reality. It is called the Prayer of Recollection. In the Prayer of Recollection, we recollect or remind ourselves of what we know to be true. I am in Christ. I am a new creation. I am forgiven. I am loved. I am not defined by my performance, by my actions, or by my good or bad decisions. I am defined by Jesus, who says that I am already righteous on account of the righteousness that he has given to me. Thank you, Jesus! I pray this prayer every morning because I need to. I need to remind myself of what I know to be true. I am a new creation in Christ—fully forgiven, fully accepted—and I have his Spirit living inside of me, working to make me more like Jesus every day. I am not enslaved to my unhealthy desires. I belong to Jesus.

I encourage you to remind yourself of this—to pray the Prayer of Recollection—every day. This is an important part of growing in self-control. It helps us learn to restrain our unhealthy desires.

## Retrain

Self-control is about more than just restraining our unhealthy desires because the reality is that we can only do that for so long. You sit in front of that almond croissant long enough, you get hungry enough, and eventually, your willpower will run out, and you will eat that croissant. Restraining only takes us so far. If we are actually going to gain mastery over our unhealthy desires, we also need to retrain those desires.

Charles Duhigg, in his book *The Power of Habit*, writes about the science of habit formation. In this book, he tells about a habit he wanted to break.<sup>2</sup> Duhigg ate a cookie at the office every afternoon, and he was beginning to put on weight. He recognized that if he were not intentional about breaking this habit, it would just continue on and on. This is the way that habits work. Habits don't take energy to maintain. They take energy to break.

Our unhealthy desires lead to all kinds of unhealthy habits in our lives. If we are going to break those habits, we have to retrain our desires, which takes intentionality. Retraining our desires takes intentionality. It does not just happen. You do not just become less sinful over time. You do not just grow closer to God over time. These things take intentionality. You have to want it. You have to work at it. This retraining of our desires is also part of self-control.

Let me give you one way to retrain your desires intentionally: the spiritual practice of fasting, voluntarily refraining from eating food for a certain amount of time.

Just before Jesus started his public ministry, he engaged in a long period of fasting. We read about this in Matthew 4.

### **Matthew 4:1-4:**

**Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"**

As Satan tempted Jesus, he was playing with his desire. You are hungry, Jesus, aren't you? If you are God, why don't you just turn these stones into bread? Why don't you just satisfy your desire?

Hunger is not an unhealthy desire. It is an essential desire. If you did not get hungry, you would probably die because you would not eat and need to eat to live. In the discipline of fasting, we are taking a God-given, healthy desire, and we are saying "no." That is restraining. It is also retraining because, in that act, we are teaching ourselves that we are not ruled by our desires. If I say no to the almond croissant once, that is restraint. If I get up in the morning and decide not to eat all day as a part of a fast, and then I do that repeatedly, I am teaching myself that just because I am hungry does not mean I have to satisfy that hunger.

That retraining of my desire for food will then translate into other desires, even sinful ones. I really want to lie to my boss, just to fudge the numbers a little so that I might get that bonus or that promotion, but I do not have to. I am not controlled by my desires. Through the discipline of fasting, I have practiced saying no to my desires, that now I can do that when it really counts.

Retraining our desires takes intentionality. It does not just happen; it is a really important part of self-control.

## **Rerirect**

Most fruits of the Spirit are positive virtues about things we do. We love one another. We are joyful. We have peace. Self-control is more about things that we do not do. It is about saying no, as we have seen. Restraining and retraining our unhealthy desires. But there is also a positive component to self-control. Even if we can successfully restrain and retrain our unhealthy desires, that does not take us far enough. That is still going to leave us lacking something. That brings us to the third aspect of self-control: rerecting our desire so that we find ourselves truly desiring God.

David, the Old Testament shepherd-turned-king-of-Israel, was a man of deep desire and passion. That desire led him to make a number of genuinely destructive decisions, including rape and murder. And yet, David also experienced something of what it meant to rerect those unhealthy desires into a healthy desire for God.

David writes this in **Psalm 27:4**:

**One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.**

One thing. One thing I have asked of the Lord. To be with him and to see his beauty.

Throughout his life, David learned a lesson that he wants us to learn as well: Our desires are created to be satisfied in God.

When we fulfill our unhealthy desires—our desires for things that are sinful and selfish, and evil—we will find ourselves empty at the end of the day because that is not how God created us to be. We are fundamentally desiring creatures. God built us that way. We are people who have wants and needs, dreams and goals and ambitions. This is right at the heart of what it means to be human. But our desires are created to be satisfied in God. Only he can truly satisfy our deepest longings and desires. Only a relationship with him can fill that hole inside us that we all have, that we all try to fill with all kinds of things that are not him. With money. With power. With sex. With stuff. With other people. With ourselves. Those things will leave us feeling empty because none of those things was ever meant to satisfy our deepest desires. Only God can do that.

So that is the invitation this morning. Take an inventory of your life to see what you have used to fill that hole. Turn those things over to God and ask him to fill that hole that only he can fill.

## **Walk by the Spirit**

When we look at the list of the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control), we get a list that almost everyone—Christian or non-Christian—would say sounds pretty good. Most people would agree that if we could become people like this, we would be doing alright.

Aristotle thought the same thing. He gave his life to figuring out how to be this kind of person. Do you know what he concluded? It is basically impossible. Most people have no shot at actually being good people. He said the only person with any hope is someone who starts as a very young child and gives themselves fully to becoming a person of virtue. Most people have no shot at getting anywhere close.

I would agree. The Apostle Paul would agree. Most people have no shot apart from the Spirit of God. But that is the point. These are not things that we can do in our own power. The fruit of the Spirit is not a list of goals we are trying to accomplish ourselves. Rather, these are the things that naturally flow out of those who are filled with the Spirit and walking by the Spirit.

## Endnotes

James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 40, 47.

Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit* (New York, NY: Random House, 2012), **quoted in** Charles Duhigg, “How to Break the Cookie Habit” (The New York Times Magazine Video, 2012), <https://www.nytimes.com/video/magazine/100000001362755/how-to-break-the-cookie-habit.html> (accessed 8/27/2022).