

**FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH**  
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**SCRIPTURE:** Gal. 5:22-23a, I Cor. 9:23-27    **DATE:** October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023

**SERMON: “Much Self-Control”**

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So a few weeks ago my daughter Olivia came to me and said, “Hey Dad, you want to hear a good joke?” I said, “Sure, Livy, go ahead, let me hear it.”

She said, “Well, there was this man, we’ll call him Jethro, and he wasn’t the brightest bulb in the chandelier. One day he was out shopping, and in this one store he saw something on the shelf called a thermos. He said to the shopkeeper, ‘What’s a thermos?’ And the shopkeeper said, “Ah, a thermos...It keeps hot things hot and cold things cold.” Jethro said, ‘I like the sound of that.’ And so he bought it.

The next day Jethro is headed off to work and he’s got his thermos there with him. His wife takes notice and says, ‘Hey Jethro, what’s you got there?’ Jethro said, ‘It’s a thermos.’ She said, ‘A thermos? What’s a thermos?’ Jethro said, ‘Well, it keeps hot things hot and cold things cold.’ She said, “Really? I like the sound of that. What do you have in it?” He said, “Two cups of coffee, and a popsicle.”

When Olivia told me that joke, I thought it would be a good way to start out this morning’s message, not because of any desire on my part to do stand-up comedy, but because it helps me tackle a question that we have to deal with here at the beginning.

We’re wrapping up a sermon series called **“Some Fruit, More Fruit, Much Fruit”**...looking at this passage from Galatians where the *Fruit of the Spirit* is found...

**Galatians 5:22-23a ...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.**

Nine character traits that should be increasingly evident in our lives as we grow and mature as followers of Jesus. This morning we come to the ninth and final characteristic, that is, **Self-Control**.

And it's that word "self", that raises a question we need to deal with. Makes it sound as if this one's on us, right? And yet it's clearly listed among those character traits where it's God's Spirit that is working in us and through us. So what's going on with this one?

Well, unlike Jethro's thermos, where it had to be one or the other...either filled with something hot *or* filled with something cold – but not both at the same time – in this case we have two things working hand in hand...God's Spirit doing His part, and followers of Jesus, we're doing our part, all at the same time.

We're going to start out this morning by talking **About Self-Control**...what it is and what it isn't. Then we'll talk about **The Key to Self-Control**...and then I'll ask each of you to consider **Your Next Step** in response to whatever God reveals to you this morning.

Okay, let's talk...

## **1. ABOUT SELF-CONTROL**

The first thing that needs said: This isn't easy. When we wrapped up our Sermon Lab last Sunday, Shaun pointed out to the group that since I'm bringing the message, I'll also be leading the discussion...and someone in class turned to me and said something like, "And you're talking about self-control, good luck with that!"

See, we all have had problems when it comes to self-control. Whether it be the classic examples - unable to control our drinking, our spending, our eating

habits...or the more subtle examples – where we can't control our tongues, our thoughts, our time, our emotions, we all know how challenging this is.

You could even argue that the previous 8 character traits that we've looked at all point to this one...it will be hard to show love and gentleness if we can't control our tongues. It will be hard to work towards peace and show patience and kindness if we can't control our emotions.

The truth is, some people have a lot of problems with self-control, and *all* people have some problems with self-control, and so we need to figure this out, because a lack of self-control can impact our health, our finances, our relationships, including our relationship with Jesus.

And this sermon is going to be a little different because it's going to be a bit more personal. What I mean by that, I'll simply be looking to share some of what has and hasn't worked for me as a follower of Jesus when it comes to self-control.

Now I would think that a lot of people would say that self-control is all about **will power**. Know what I mean?

Let me give you an example. Back in the 1980's when Ronald Reagan was president, his wife Nancy was the face of this campaign that took a stand against illegal drug use. Some of you remember the 3-word slogan used by this campaign? **(PP operator...please wait until I affirm or give the answer before bringing picture up). Just Say No.**

Just say no. Somebody offers you drugs...use your head...think it through...just say no. Simple as that.

The truth is, while this campaign increased public awareness when it came to drugs, research indicates it had no real impact when it came to reducing actual drug use.

You like your sweets? Donuts? Life-Savers? Ice-Cream? You like your caffeine jolt? You like your screen time...your phone, laptop, big screen TV? Ever say to yourself, *"I've got to exercise more will power in this area...have to learn to just say no sometimes."* How's that working for you?

Back in the days of the early church, it was the Greeks who felt that self-control was simply a matter of will-power...our mind over our emotions.

Except the Bible doesn't really say that. When we read the Bible, we see that we have been made in the image of God...and that includes not only our mind but our emotions. We read the Bible and God reveals to us that He loves, He grieves, He has desires...God has emotions. Our minds and our will and our emotions are all equal reflections of God's image.

And so the Bible never really teaches that self-control is as simple as just saying no. And so let's see if we can't identify...

## **2. THE KEY TO SELF-CONTROL**

I want us to turn our attention to a passage in I Corinthians chapter 9. The apostle Paul is talking about how he goes about practicing self-control in his own life, using an illustration from these athletic contests that were held in Greece back at that time. He wrote...

**I Corinthians 9:25-27 Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.**

Now you don't find the word "Self-Control" anywhere in this passage do you? But it's there. You see, what we're using is our English translation of the Bible, but there at the beginning, verse 25 it says, **"Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training."** The Greek word for "strict training" is the same Greek word for "self-control" found in the Fruit of the Spirit, except it's being used as a verb. *"Everyone who competes in the games exercises strict self-control."*

Or in our case, "Everyone who follows Jesus exercises strict self-control."

Easier said than done, right? We've already acknowledged that our desires are real, and very much a part of us. To drink, spend, eat, talk, view more than we should or in ways that we should not. My desires are strong...I have good, healthy desires, but broken and misguided desires as well. And for me it's never been as simple as just saying no.

But notice that Paul uses this illustration of the athletes. These athletes want sweets just like everybody else because they have desires just like everybody else. There's probably a part of them that *wants* to relax and sit around and be entertained and do whatever they like. But they don't. They go into strict training, they've learned to exercise strict self-control. Why is that? Because while they might want the sweets and the relaxation...

**They want the crown *more*.**

And to me, this makes so much sense. While I may have the desire to buy clothes I don't really need or eat an entire bag of chips...what keeps me from giving in is that as I mature, I'm finding that I want to please Jesus *more*. I have found...

**It's not a matter of the will, it's a matter of the heart.**

Whatever our hearts are truly set on, that is what will have control over all other desires. How do we get to the point where our desire to please Jesus comes before all other desires?

Let's go back and see what Paul says. He says, "I'm not unfocused, that is, I'm not running aimlessly, I'm not beating the air..." **"I beat my body and make it my slave..."**

Wow, that sounds terrible, doesn't it? We get this image in our mind of what they call "self-flagellation"...Paul intentionally harming himself, beating himself, but that's not what he's saying at all. The word **"beat"** means **"to wear down that which is against you."**

That same word is found in a parable Jesus told about a widow who kept going before this judge, and he kept resisting her, telling her no, sending her away. But she kept coming back and coming back to the point where he says, "she's wearing me out"....he gives in. She kept working, wearing him down.

Paul isn't literally beating his body, he's looking to wear down the parts of his life that are working against him and his desire to please Jesus..

For any of you who have just started following Jesus, I imagine possessing a desire to please Him more than any other desires...desires that are very real and very strong...well, I imagine it sounds pretty daunting.

You probably have deeply engrained attitudes and behavior patterns that you may feel will be hard to break. You may also be hesitant to go "all in" with Jesus because you don't want to get burned. Jesus is being portrayed so many different ways...how do you come to see Him as He really is?

You see, in most relationships where we are looking for intimacy, we tell people, take it slow, get to know the other person before you set your heart on them.

Because your heart could get ripped out, you could get burned if the person turns out not to be the person you thought they were.

But if you are one who is thinking about following Jesus, or if you've just started following Jesus, my encouragement would simply be..

### **A. Give Jesus Something to Work With**

It does no good for a runner to run aimlessly, he or she is aiming for the finish line. It does no good for a boxer to beat the air, he aims for the chin. You've got to envision what you're after, and that is wanting Jesus more than any other desire. So you've got to give Him something to work with.

I'm going to use an illustration from my own life, one area where I have seen this play out. For the past 10 years or so, Karen, Olivia and I have been able to vacation at the beach every year. And one thing that's great about vacation is it gives me a chance to sleep in. And 10 years ago, I would take advantage of that, no alarm going off, telling me I have to get up. Though I would make an exception for one day.

I would set aside one day out of that week to drag myself out of bed while it was still dark, and head out to the beach in order to watch the sun come up, to experience and appreciate the beauty and order of God's creation, but also to just have a chance to talk with Him at the start of that day.

There was something working against me, which was my desire to sleep in. It was real, but my desire to spend this one morning with God at sunrise was greater. You could say I was giving God something to work with. And I came to sense that God was working with me as well. The sun coming up over the horizon certainly helps one get an experience of God's power, but I would also be able to say that I experienced His presence on that one morning when I was able to wear down that which was working against me.

We don't have the luxury of being able to begin our day by watching the sun come up over this vast ocean, but we can experience God's power and His presence if we are willing to give Him something to work with, beginning with **our time and our attention.**

If you are a new disciple, you begin the process of setting your heart on Jesus – above all other desires - by giving Him your time and attention. I have found that it begins by just talking to Jesus as you look to wear down that which is against you, that which has control over you. You identify what it is and acknowledge it to Jesus, and this is a huge step.

And I have then found that the process of wearing it down – drinking, spending, eating, talking, viewing – is a day by day process...but day by day, you begin to see in your life **Some Self-Control** that wasn't there before.

Let's say you know you have trouble controlling your tongue. Jesus will do His part and through His word He will get your attention...you read or hear about those who come into a church setting and use their tongues to praise God and then go from here and use their tongues to condemn others. Through God's Word and through God's Spirit, we come to recognize if we're guilty of that. If that's me, I don't want to run aimlessly or beat the air, because if I do, nothing's going to change.

But by giving Him my time and my attention, I can acknowledge my problem to Him, and commit to Him that on *this* day, I will resist the desire to condemn, criticize, judge, speak badly of relatives, neighbors, coaches, teachers, politicians. The desire may be there, but I have to decide what I want the most...give in to my desire to unleash my tongue or follow through on my desire to please Jesus.

When it comes to my tongue or any other desire, I'm not committing to "forever", that's too big a bite for me to take...but on *this day*, I can commit to Him that I'm going to wear it down, that urge to use my tongue as a weapon. If it's my something

I'm putting in my body, if it's an anger issue, if it's a website I'm going to, if it's an unwillingness to overlook an offense...I'm not going to run aimlessly, not going to flail my arms in the air.

Just like the runner who is focused on the finish line, just like the boxer who is focused on the chin, we now see where we want to go. Throughout our life we were trying to figure out what we're here for, what life is all about, and now we've found it because we've found Him. It doesn't mean that there aren't competing desires, but we know we're headed in the right direction, and...

## **B. We Find We Want More**

Back to the beach for just a moment. Within a few years, I was no longer getting up one day a week and heading out to meet with Jesus...because of what those mornings and those conversations with Him meant to me, I found myself wanting more.

That one morning became every other morning...one day to sleep in, one day to get up around 5am to walk and talk with Jesus. **Some intimate moments with God became More intimate moments with God.**

In this morning's passage, where Paul is talking about the lengths that he has gone to - the beating of his body as it were - he says...

**1 Corinthians 9:23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel...**

We know from Shaun's last sermon series that the gospel makes up the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. All the steps Paul was taking, the gradual wearing down of the things that were tempting him, looking to control Him, it was for the sake of Jesus, his desire to place Him above all other desires.

As you give Jesus something to work with – your time, your attention – I'm convinced you will see the changes He is making in your life and you will find

yourself wanting to please Him more. There is more honesty in your conversations, there is more vulnerability in these conversations as you grow closer to Him.

When you see that you can get through a day without unleashing your tongue, without visiting certain websites, without putting this into your body, or too much into your body, or too little into your body...when your desire to please Jesus overcomes all other desires, I don't know how else to describe it other than to say, it leaves you feeling good. *It pleases me to please Jesus.*

On the flip-side, on those days when what is fighting to control you regains control for that moment, that day...it leaves you feeling genuine remorse. It's not a great feeling, but it's a sign that Jesus is working.

The remorse that we feel, Jesus sees. He's been working in your life and He knows you're sincere, and when He sees your remorse, I imagine there's nothing He'd want more than to help you never have to experience that again. There's nothing more that He would like than to help you come to experience **More Self-Control**.

There have been some who are trying to figure out how to talk with Jesus, and they'll ask me what my conversations with Jesus look like, and as with any relationship, the range of topics is pretty much endless. But when it comes specifically to the topic of self-control, I have found that what Jesus will often do is reveal to me the role and the power of deception.

Behind all of our broken and misguided desires are lies...whether coming from spiritual beings or lies we tell ourselves, there is this pull, this enticement to think, say or do something that would seem pleasurable. But Jesus is so good in pointing out the deception...that while thinking that or saying that or doing might be desirable...He is so good about getting me to see what comes next. It's eye-opening, and in these conversations with Jesus He reveals and blows up the lie, and any misguided or broken desires that I may have take a direct hit.

As we mature and continue to give Jesus our time, our focus, our openness and vulnerability, God's Spirit will be working in us and through us and producing evidence of more self-control.

And as that desire increases, I think all of us eventually come face to face with...

### **C. The Ultimate Battle**

Remember earlier I listed some of the classic addictions: Drinking, spending, eating habits? I then named four of the more subtle areas, and here they are...you tell me which one you think presents the biggest challenge when it comes to self-control?

- **Our Tongues**
- **Our Thoughts**
- **Our Time**
- **Our Emotions**

I suppose it's possible that we'd all come back with different answers, but for me, I don't want people to think badly of me, so I look to keep control of my **tongue**... when I have an appointment, I show up on **time**...I look to control my **emotions** rather than have them control me. I want people to like and respect me.

The thing is, the behavior we display can be shaped not by our desire to please Jesus above all else, but our desire to please others above all else.

When it comes to our **thought** life, we fall back on the fact that no one else sees, no one else knows. Except Jesus.

That's why I refer to this as the ultimate battleground. When we're ready to take this one on and take steps to wear down those broken thoughts and desires that no one other than Jesus sees, I know He will be pleased. It will be a real sign of maturity

and growth, and God's Spirit will be leading us and helping us experience not just some, not just more, but **Much Self-Control** in our lives.

Okay, time to think about...

### 3. YOUR NEXT STEP

What step or steps do you feel God is leading you to take in response to what He's revealed to you this morning?

I would think that He would be expecting all of us to **consider the example that Jesus set for us**, since it's our desire to live like Him. And there's a great example found in Hebrews 12 where it says...

**Hebrews 12:2-3 ...let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.**

It says **"consider him who endured such opposition..."** We know what Jesus endured...on an emotional level, the mocking, the jeers, the humiliation. On a physical level: the whip, the thorns, the nails. And haven't we all said, "How did He practice such self-control? Why did He practice such self-control?"

You and I, we can get angry and lose control of our tongues if someone looks at us the wrong way, or says something we don't agree with on social media. How, why did Jesus do it?

It says He endured **"for the joy set before him."** For Jesus, it wasn't just a matter of the will, it was a matter of the heart. And what did Jesus set *His* heart on?

It wasn't the Father, He already had the Father. It wasn't heaven, He already had that too. What was the one thing Jesus didn't have that drove Him to maintain self-control?

You. And me. His heart was set on us, above all things. His desire to have us come to know Him, come to love Him, come to follow Him overruled all other desires, including the desire He surely had to put an end to the incredible physical pain being forced upon Him.

We say we want to follow Jesus, we want to follow His example...we don't think about Hebrews 12 every day do we? But right now, today, this week, I think you'd find it helpful to reflect on the self-control that Jesus practiced because His heart was set on you. That's a good step to take this week, don't you think?

One more suggestion...**Consider giving Jesus more to work with.**

How much of your time, how much of your attention, how much of your focus is Jesus actually getting? Whatever it is, can you give Him more? Because if you've been following Him, you've come to experience the difference He's made in your life. Why wouldn't you want more of that?

I just feel so strongly about this because this has been my experience. Like I said, when it comes to misguided and selfish desires, I've tried will-power, and it just doesn't work. Any success I've ever had in gaining control over broken areas in my life is simply because I want to please Jesus more. Still got a lot of growing to do, but I know how to get there.

Let me wrap up this message and really this entire series by going back to the beach one more time. I said that 10 years ago, my experience with Jesus that one morning was so meaningful, it left me wanting more, and turned into every other morning. Yes, I still had the desire to sleep in, but I wanted to experience this time with Jesus more.

It was two years ago I started getting up every morning while it was still dark, walking the two blocks it took to get to the beach, and just take in this daily display of God's power. But the reason I was going out every day was not to see a power show...in all honesty, by the time you get to the end of the week, the sight of the ocean and the sun coming up starts to become a bit routine.

What never became routine were the conversations I would have with Jesus. It wasn't about a power show, it was about the meaningful, intimate time I was having with Jesus. My phone would go off at 5am and I wouldn't think twice about getting up and out to the beach.

I think I've shared some of this before, but it was last September I was sitting there on my beach chair one morning, the sun had already come up and I was reading the verse that I had sent to me every morning on my phone.

That one morning the verse was **Colossians 1:28**, **"He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ."**

Now I was getting these verses every day, back here at home, down there at the beach, and they are all good verses of course, but this was different. I was doing my part by giving Jesus my time and my attention, I sensed He was now doing His part and telling me..."This is for Five Forks Church."

I'm always hesitant to say the "The Lord told me this"...I'm much more comfortable saying, "I *believe* the Lord told me this.." and then sharing it with others, asking them, "What do you think?" So I brought this back to the staff and then to the Church Board and we sensed that God was wanting to stress to us that He is looking to work in our lives and help us to mature in our walk with Jesus.

And so this year – in addition to other passages and other topics - we've taken nine weeks to explore these **nine characteristics**, talking about how we can look to God's Spirit to help us display some, then more, then much when it comes to each of these traits.

I don't know if keeping these before us has impacted *you* and encouraged you to take any steps that would help you to mature and follow Jesus more closely, but again, if you give Him something to work with, I'm convinced He will work with you...sometimes powerfully, often times quietly, intimately...and in the end, it helps you, me, all of us come to desire Him more than all other desires. And that for me, is the key to self-control.

## **PRAYER**