

Today marks the final day of our Fruit of the Spirit sermon series. And today's aspect of the fruit of the Spirit is self-control. Right on time for most of us, huh? I know some of us are hopeful and excited after this week while others of us are afraid, sad and weary. Regardless of where we find ourselves, today's sermon was to be and is on this final aspect of the fruit of the Spirit regardless of the election outcome. But before we talk about self-control...first a little review of today's text in Galatians. Remember Paul wrote a letter to the churches in Galatia, not to one person. He wrote the letter because these early churches were struggling to define their mission and identity in Christ. They were some teachers misleading them by keeping Jewish laws like circumcision as a sign of inclusion in God's covenant. Paul insists that Christ came to set people free from the Law and that Gentiles did NOT need to be circumcised. He argues this because they were already in a right relationship with God due to their faith in Christ. "While Paul welcomed Gentiles, some in the Galatian church feared that if Gentiles were allowed to be Christians it would somehow negate God's covenant with the people of Israel. Therefore, the Jewish Christians said that Christ (grace) and circumcision (law-keeping) gave one right standing before God. Paul maintained that Christ alone does that" (*Tending The Wild Garden*, Eugenia Anne Gamble). According to Paul, a person is made right before God based on what God has done in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ rather doing the works of Moses' Law. In other words, salvation is God's gift; it cannot be earned (*The CEB Study Bible*). That's what grace is all about. Therefore Paul may say it is misguided to think that the law can defeat the power of sin. *Sin has tarnished all—even*

God's good creation. Paul points out that there is a constant battle between the flesh that has been corrupted by this superpower of sin, and the Spirit that is at work transforming and redeeming (Carla Works, workingpreacher.org). **PRAY. READ.**

Why does Paul mention these nine aspects of fruit as tangible markers of the Spirit's work in this letter? The Galatian believers are eager to practice their new faith. They have welcomed these opposing teachers and their message. Adult men wanted to be circumcised to show their faith in Christ. People were willing to adopt new food practices to show their piety. They wanted tangible markers of their new existence in Christ (Works). Again, the fruit of the Spirit is not intended to be an exhaustive list, but it is impressive list of tangible markers, nonetheless—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Self-control. That's a fun one to end a series the week after an election. I read a friend and colleague's social media post venting about comments that "God is in control" in relation to the election. He writes, "this messaging rings as if God endorses any outcome. You would have folks believe God endorsed slavery, holocaust, lynching, etc. It happened. Wasn't God in control?" "Instead," he writes, "I believe God has told us what is expected of us and we fail time after time! I don't necessarily think another result would've been more favorable to God. Are we any closer to loving our neighbors or even our enemies? Let's be careful not to put God's name on our human depravity! Yes, God is in control, but we are out of control and so far from who we claimed to be!" (Jerrod Lowry, *Facebook*). I think Paul would have

seconded my friend. Paul is using this word, self-control, in a different way than we may think. The word here is not *that self-righteous feeling of power that comes from choosing not to have a second scoop of ice cream, nor is it the teeth-gripped determination to give us doughnuts for Lent only to find yourself on Easter morning, not at the sunrise service, but at the back of a long line at the Krispy Kreme drive-through. No. Spirit self-control is the capacity to regularly choose actions that are consistent with one's truest values and are consistent with who God is and what God values. Self-control is not about self-denial; it is about freedom. Self-control's goal is the majestic freedom that arises from a heart that is no longer ruthlessly driven by immediate desires. Self-control arises when consequences beyond the moment become real and we refuse any action that causes harm (Gamble). For you see Spirit self-control harnesses the tyrannical wounded ego that wants what it wants when it wants it, regardless of the consequences that may result from trying to get it or from actually having it (Gamble).*

Paul bookends his list of fruit of the Spirit with love at the beginning and self-control at the end. *Each aspect is like a window or a frame into which we look and see a characteristic of God (Gamble).* Looking at my chalk piece over here and having preached through this sermon series with y'all, I'm beginning to wonder if I've gotten it all wrong, for you see the fruit are not really in any particular order or a line but rather in a circle. Do they make circle canvases? I may need to redo this piece into a circle for each aspect of the fruit overlap and intermingle with one another; they are circular rather than linear. Even though Paul says that Christ came to set them free

from the Law, he reminds them not to take advantage of this freedom saying, “You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don’t let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love” (5:13). For Paul says there are two different ways of living: being guided by the Spirit or not. For according to Paul, there is no disguising ourselves when we’re serving “the world.” *There are behaviors that are signs of a lifestyle ruled by something other than God. These behaviors and the fruit of the Spirit cannot occupy the same ground at the same time. For example, when the ego self is in control, possession of the sacred (another person, ourselves, or our power) is inevitable. It is all about me, me, me, now, now, now. You know when you’re attempting to cope in unsuitable ways and you’re constantly looking for anesthesia: because you have decided that anything is acceptable if it makes you feel better. Temporarily. But Paul reminds us that we are not helpless in the presence of our worst impulses. We have Spirit power that we can employ to deal with them (Gamble).*

What is sin? *Sin is whatever stops the flow of the Spirit in us. The weeds in the garden are the result of a dammed-up flow. Each instance of sin is a lost opportunity to love, and we pay a price for that. Remember that sin is always chosen. We could have made a different choice. Sin is an attitude, a disposition, in which ego rules and rebels against the good. John Calvin called this total depravity, which just means that there is nothing in us that is completely free from the taint of self-serving broken ego. Eugenia Anne Gamble, the author we’ve been referencing in this series, says, *Over the**

*years, I have come to realize that I am rarely punished for my sin. I am punished by it, by the memory of it or the consequences unleashed. But God doesn't stop loving or forgiving. The Spirit does not stop working and transforming. But y'all know when we feel small and afraid *and convince ourselves that the darkness is out there, not in us, and all our problems are somebody else's fault. We will do almost anything to feel alive, worthwhile, indispensable, or numb or not to see the truth about our lies. And so one choice becomes another, and a cycle becomes a lifestyle. At his rock bottom moment in his battle with alcoholism, he described this cycle as what it looks like when we resist the Spirit in favor of lesser gods (Gamble). Lord, awake our souls! Awake our souls! For many of us fail at not repaying evil with evil, especially when the stakes are highest in the toil of peacemaking or justice work or even intimacy in our own relationships. Yet, even Calvin, who considered depravity to be at the heart of human experience, did not consider it as defining us. The image of God is present and discernible in each person, even in our floundering state. For sin is never who we really are (Gamble). The cross teaches us what love looks like, and the work of God's Spirit in us is the only way that we are ever going to be free from our own selfishness and sin to exhibit a fraction of that kind of love toward anyone—let alone people whom we do not like (Carla Works, workingpreacher.org). I read a meme the other day that said, "Christianity is about helping others and controlling yourself. When it becomes about controlling others and helping yourself, it ain't Christianity. Maybe we need a litmus test for self control as well? You know- like doctors take the hypocritic oath to do no harm. Maybe we can ask ourselves, "Is this thing**

I'm about to do going to be harmful to someone, something that God loves? Is this thing consistent with my truest values and consistent with who God is and what God values? Does this thing I'm about to say or do live out the greatest commandments to love God and our neighbor as ourselves?

James Clear, author of *Atomic Habits*, says “every action you take is a vote for the type of person you wish to become.” How will the Galatians know that they are indeed a people being transformed—children of God, clothed in Christ? How will we know? Song- And they'll know we're Christians by our love...by our love. *Because we are a people who bear one another's burdens, love one another, as Christ has loved us. We are a people whose actions are marked by the shape of the cross rather than our own selfish desires. We are fulfilling the intention of the law—to love our neighbors. For Paul, Christ has fulfilled the law by embodying what the love of neighbor looks like (5:14). Thankfully, neither the Galatians' salvation nor our own rests on our ability to fulfill that commandment. We are called, however, to follow in Christ's footsteps—to love one another (Works). Because when we mature in the fruit of the Spirit, we find that we cannot love ourselves and simultaneously harm, dismiss, or oppress others. We cannot live in freedom when others are being held captive. We cannot exploit the natural resources of the planet or refuse to acknowledge truths we wish weren't true. What we do to one, we do to all, including ourselves. Sometimes self-control is needed in order for us to remember that we are **one** during agitated times of division and vitriol. Self-control teaches us to control our thoughts, our*

judgments, and our fears. It trains our hearts to see the good in others and lift it up. When we activate Spirit self-control, we say and do only that which is needed and loving for others and ourselves (Gamble). Have you ever just tried pausing in a moment and asking, “What aspect of the fruit is the Spirit growing in me?” Warning label- this isn’t easy, but it sure is faithful. You see...self-control is a risk, and it is a sure pathway to freedom (Gamble).

When one is walking in the Spirit fruit comes. *God’s work of renewal through the resurrected Christ is the good news—not the law, and the Spirit is the very vehicle of that renewal. And the great news is that God’s Holy Spirit—that Great Change Agent—is at work among the Galatians. And two thousand years later, God hasn’t given up on us either. The Great Change Agent is still working and still transforming with evidence all around us (Works). We only need to look for it in one another! Freedom is coming! May it be so. Amen.*