

## **“Self-Control”**

### *Fruit of the Spirit, part #5*

#### 1 Peter 1:13-25

There is a truth you need to know this morning: God’s got your back. Turn to your neighbor and say, “God’s got your back.” Sometimes we come to church fearing judgment. We can be apprehensive that God is against us. The truth is, God is for us. Yes, we still have to face the parts of our lives God desires to change. But we know that God will give us the strength we need to live according to his will. God’s got your back. Let’s pray.

Lord of heaven and earth, you are amazing. Your love comes for us exactly the moment we need it, all the time, every time. Please guide us today as we consider your word. Reveal your truth to us. Do not allow us to be complacent, but put in our hearts a deep desire for the fruit of your Spirit. God, I simply ask that you hide me behind the cross of Jesus, to whom I owe everything, even my very life. It is for his honor and glory that we pray this request. Amen.

The winter holidays are finally upon us. Have you considered how many special days we have in the next six weeks? There’s the Big Three: Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s. Technically, Christmas and New Year’s are double days, since each has an “Eve.” Even Thanksgiving is followed by the ritual of Black Friday. And that’s not all. The holidays also include Saint Nicholas Day, Boxing Day (for the Canadians among us), Epiphany, and of course the non-Christian holidays of Hanukkah, Ramadan, and Kwanzaa. That’s twelve holidays!

Truly it is a wonderful time of the year, but nevertheless these next few weeks are particularly filled with stress, anxiety, and especially temptation. There is temptation to buy. (Look at all those ads! Are you kidding me?) There is

temptation to over-eat. (One word: cookies!) There is temptation to fight with uncle Fred or aunt Myrtle. (Those aren't their real names, but you know who they are.) Honestly, there is the temptation to curl up in a ball on December 23rd and say, “Dear God, how am I going to preach three sermons in one day?” OK, maybe that last one is not a common temptation for any of you.

There are several things that can help get us through this time. Ear plugs and anti-acids are helpful. But there is one fruit of the Spirit in particular that often escapes us under the pressure of the holidays. The final fruit in the list: Self-control. (Not to be confused with Elf-control. That is what Santa needs.)

Self-control is an oxymoron. To be in control of yourself is to resist your inward impulses to over-eat, over-spend, argue, and/or run away. All the other fruits of the Spirit are bound together by self-control. To love, we have to exercise control over our emotions. To have joy, peace, patience, kindness, and goodness, we have to overcome our own selfish desires. Self-control is a major advantage to those who have it. As for the rest of us, we need it desperately.

Does anyone else in this room feel like this world is out-of-control? I feel like the world is feasting at an all-you-can-eat banquet of consumerism, egoism, narcissism, and a bunch of other “isms”. While I believe in the hope of the holidays, I see how they can bring out the worst in humanity: jealousy, envy, anxiety, and even apathy. It seems like self-control is hard to find these days.

This feeling that the world needs more self-control is hardly new. When 1st Peter was written, the early church also felt that their world was out of control. Scholars debate exactly when this letter was written, but we can narrow the time frame down to no later than the second generation of Christians. We know the early church experienced persecution. They were at odds with the Romans.

Many Christians were martyred. I suspect more than one family had rowdy arguments at holiday meals. Whoever wrote this letter, they knew there was a deep need for the church to live under control of the Holy Spirit. Just like we need to in our world today.

If this letter comes from Peter with advice for the church on how to live, a quick background on Peter's life is helpful. The truth is, self-control was not part of Peter's nature. As a disciple of Jesus, he was brash and had a habit of sticking his foot in his mouth. For example, in Matthew 16, Peter actually told Jesus not to offer his life by being crucified. In Matthew 17, Peter saw how Jesus was transfigured and said, "Hey, let's set up camp!" In the garden of Gethsemane, Peter drew his sword and cut off someone's ear. (John 18) Peter denied Jesus three times just hours before the crucifixion. (Mark 14) Really, what right does Peter have telling us to be self-controlled?

I can tell you how: Peter changed, and as a leader he inspired the church. After the resurrection, Jesus reinstated Peter by asking Peter three times, "Do you love me?" (John 21) Three times, Peter said, "Yes, Lord." And that moment totally changed his life. Based on the sermons he preached and miracles he did in the Book of Acts, I would say, we can trust the advice found in this letter.

So what does the author tell his church? Let's start with verse 13. "Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming." My older version of the NIV says, "prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled." Peter commands the church: be self-controlled, set your hope on Jesus, and be holy.

The irony of being self-controlled is you have to submit to others who give you give advice, like authors from 2,000 years ago. Think about it: to be self-

controlled, you must intentionally give up the right to call the shots. Honestly, Peter has to make a good argument for us to be self-controlled, because it goes against our human nature. It is not something we can take for granted. So Peter appeals to something more powerful than our human nature. Peter appeals to the grace of Jesus Christ. To influence us to live for God, Peter points out how we received the grace of Christ in the first place.

Look closely at verses 18-21 with me. “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors,<sup>19</sup> but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.<sup>20</sup> He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.<sup>21</sup> Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.”

The undeniable fact according to Peter is that we were redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. Here Peter uses an Old Testament reference – Jesus was a perfect lamb, without defect, the way sacrifices were offered for forgiveness by Jewish law. Peter states that gold and silver are perishable. That is rather ironic at Christmas time! But Peter judges these gifts by eternal standards. Jewelry does not last forever. This week I found an old ring that had been discarded in a drawer. I’m sure at some point it had value to someone. But even gold and silver do not last. Only the blood of Jesus is eternal. When we focus on the kingdom of heaven, we say words like, “Lord, you are more precious than silver, more costly than gold, and nothing I desire compares to you.” (See Proverbs 3:15)

Peter is telling us that everything centers on Christ. The precious blood of Jesus has redeemed us. All the fruit of the Spirit, all of the bounty of the heavenly

table of grace, is made available to us through Christ. Let this thought sink in: God loved you enough to die for you.

It is no wonder then, if Christ is the most precious gift in the world, that Peter commands the church to be self-controlled. Look at verse 22. Peter concludes, in light of this purification we have in Christ, in light of the grace we have received through him, we should “love one another deeply from the heart.” (1:22) Remember, love is the first fruit of the Spirit. Through self-control, the circle is completed. Christ’s love is the greatest example of self-control the world has ever seen. Peter, through Christ, asks us to apply this grace in our lives, be self-controlled and love deeply.

Do you feel like you have self-control in your life? Do these words inspire you, or trouble you? As you think about what you will experience in the next six weeks, what emotions are you feeling? Are you experiencing love, joy, peace, and patience? Or stress, anxiety, and the sense that you have lost control?

Peter knew his church was in trouble. So he reminded them how to live. These words written 2,000 years ago still speak to us. In fact, the whole letter of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter speaks to us. Peter later gives other important commands.

1 Peter 3:15 – “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”

Be ready to give an answer for your hope. If someone asked you today why you trust in Jesus, would you know what to say? Read the book of Acts, and you will see how many times Peter gave his answer.

1 Peter 5:8 – “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”

Guess what? Being alert and having a sober mind is – ding, ding, ding – evidence of self-control.

Peter knows, when we know Christ, we have a message to share. We have a story to tell. And the devil knows it, and would do anything to prevent us from sharing that story. The world needs the church! I do not mean that the world needs an hour on Sunday morning (although that would be nice.) The world needs disciples of Jesus, people who are willing to share how they have trusted Jesus, how they have overcome the battle of self-will and learned self-control and unconditional love. Prepare your hearts, prepare your minds, prepare your hands, feet, and mouths. Practice self-control. This is the task appointed to us.

I know, it is hard to do this alone. Commitments are much easier when made within community. Since we are speaking of food, let me take Weight Watchers for example. Many of you know that my wife has lost a bunch of weight this past year. Weight Watchers is a big reason why. The goal of the members is to live healthy lives, and they require great self-control. When the members exercise that self-control, the results are amazing and people notice. My question to you is: should Weight Watchers be getting more credit at changing lives than the church?

God gave us the church so we could share the good news and help each other practice self-control. Peter says: "This is the word that was preached to you." (1:25) Peter is not telling the church anything new. He reminds them of what they should already know. What we should know. God created us. God loves us. We have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. God sent his own beloved Son, Jesus Christ, into the world, not to condemn the world, but to save the world by offering his perfect life and dying on a cross. Jesus rose again and

lives and reigns forever. Jesus gives us a choice. Live on our own, or live for him. It is a free offer of eternal life, better than anything you will receive on Black Friday, guaranteed. And with it comes grace, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – all gifts of the Spirit who wants us to lead fruitful lives.

One meal won't make or break your diet. One three-mile jog won't change your health forever. It's a long-term commitment that makes you healthy. If you trust the perfect lamb who laid down his life for you, he will change your life forever. You will cultivate the spiritual fruit that God wants you to have. You will have the self-control to restrain your anger, speak words of kindness, and care for your body and your family because they are gifts that God gave you to enjoy.

My prayer is that we will all use this holiday season to trust Jesus, for the first or fiftieth time, and that God will use our faithfulness to grow the love and kindness that this world needs to bring it back under control – God's control.

Memory Verse:

Reflection Questions:

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