

August 14, 2016

Tasty Fruit
Galatians 5:13-25

We've been talking about the fruits of the Spirit since July 18. As you've heard many times now, this was our theme for Vacation Bible School this year based on Galatians 5. Paul captures some of the essence of the Christian life in his list: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. So far we have explored peace, patience, kindness, and faithfulness. Of the ones remaining, we have love, joy, generosity, gentleness and self-control. Now one of these is not like the others – which is it? Yes, you've got it. Self-control is the ugly stepchild of the fruits of the Spirit. No churches that I know of call themselves “the church where you find unconditional self-control” or “the church where self-control reigns supreme.” What do we do with this fruit of the Spirit? Lucky for you (and yes, I'm being a little tongue in cheek!), self-control was the guiding theme in my research when I was writing my dissertation. In fact, I wrote over 300 pages on the place of self-control in the ancient world. I thought I might read that to you later on – no, no, just kidding. We'll get to that in a moment – and I promise I'll be brief on it.

Let's back up just a little bit, though. The epistle from Paul to the Galatians is actually fun to read, and I encourage you to go home and just read through the book on your own. I would be happy to do a Bible Study on this book at some point in time. Reading the entire letter will take you about an hour. Part of why it's fun is because Paul is furious at the Galatians. He starts the letter with his traditional greeting and it seems pretty nice – “grace and peace to you” and but by verse 6 he is *lighting into* them: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different Gospel.” He goes on to defend his right to tell them what to do and the truth of the Gospel that he received. And Paul's

anger and his argument revolve around a particular issue: circumcision. I often have told my students that studying the Bible will be impossible until one gets comfortable with frank discussions about the body and sexuality. Circumcision was obviously a huge marker of Jewish male identity in the ancient world. Nevertheless, Paul is adamant that Jesus followers do not need to be circumcised or adhere to the formalities of Jewish identity such as circumcision.

Central to the faith that Paul proclaims is freedom in Christ. In fact, it is in Galatians 3 that Paul states the early baptismal formula of Christians that you have heard me preach on before: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Then we get to Galatians 5 that Barbara read for us. It also talks about the nature of Christian freedom.

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ¹⁵ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another” (vv. 13-15).

Paul here quotes directly from Leviticus. He never abandons the law – he summarizes it just as Jesus did as love of one’s neighbor – but he does not think that circumcision should still apply to Christian men.

We have, of course, been talking about the fruits of the Spirit. Paul first lists, though, the *opposite* of the fruits of the Spirit – the works of the flesh. He describes the desires of the flesh as opposed to the Spirit. Then he says:

¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. ¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Paul was a little concerned with the actions that people who lived according to the flesh may take. And well he should have been concerned – Christians were a teensy minority religion who were under public scrutiny in few places where they existed. Paul does not wish for them to be given a reputation as carousing, licentious, idolatrous, jealous, angry, factious people. Paul is often given a bad rap for trying to tell people how to live their lives. And that is, well, a little justified. I don't always agree with Paul on the *particulars* of what he recommends. But his caution to live by the Spirit? That, I can get behind.

Paul encourages Christians to live by the Spirit always. What does this mean exactly? Paul's idea is that when someone comes to Christ, the Spirit comes into them and lives through them. What does it mean to have the Spirit enter into our lives? Does it mean that we are no longer have strife? That we are no longer jealous? That we never get angry or have quarrels? That would be *amazing* – but it would practically make us non-human. But it does mean that we get to turn to the Spirit within us first in our actions and our choices. Little by little, we turn to consider the feelings and actions of others before we satisfy our own desires in the moment. Living by the Spirit means that we consider everyone. The irony here is that Paul writes to the Galatians with a fair amount of anger at their theological choices -- especially their theology that dictates that men have to be circumcised in order to be saved. Paul is not the only Jew at this time period who debated the role of circumcision in Jewish life, though he is the main one we read about today. But Paul does something unwittingly here – when he declares freedom in Christ, he also opens the door to a more inclusive theology for – guess who? – Christian women. Women naturally were barred from circumcision. When Paul declares that freedom in Christ means one should **not** become circumcised, he also includes women in his theology

Most of the fruits of the Spirit are ones that we welcome into our lives as Christians: love, joy, peace, generosity, kindness....who can argue with those? Self-control, though, is the last of the fruits listed. I have to admit – it’s one I struggle with. When I first arrived in the church office holding regular hours in 2013, I noticed that a bowl of candy was set on the desk by the door. Not just any candy. Jelly beans. Always there. Every time you walked by. Briony and Jesse had chosen a candy that neither of them liked. Little did they know that I love jelly beans. And I don’t care to exercise a great deal of self-control. There’s not a jelly bean nearby that is safe with me. And I don’t just eat them one at a time. I take them and stuff them into my mouth like they’re disappearing.

I’m sure you’ve all got your own moments of weakness. The particular Greek word that Paul uses here that we translate as self-control is *enkrateia*. This word does mean self control in general, but it also means self-control specifically over the desires – **especially the desires of food and sex**. One reason I gave the sermon this title is because I think Paul would have hated it – and we have to find a little fun once in a while in these things. The ability to govern oneself over these desires was held highly in the ancient Roman Empire. So it makes sense why earlier in Galatians 5, Paul warned about the dangers of vices like drunkenness and carousing and licentiousness.

In the ancient world, control over food and sex was a quality that was expected of men. And when I say it was expected of men, what I mean is free men, especially elite free men. The person who was supposed to have the *most* self-control in the ancient world was the emperor – and free men were supposed to follow suit. We have many examples of how free men who did have self-control are exalted and those who did not are shamed. A man who did not have basic control over the desires of his body could be publicly shamed, especially if a public figure. In

fact, Mark Antony, the lover of Cleopatra and the one time friend of Julius Caesar was shamed by ancient writers for his lack of self-control in the court of Cleopatra's Egypt – characterized as an alcohol and drug ridden den of iniquity that was used to discredit Antony.

So why does Paul suggest that this fruit of the Spirit is one that belongs to Christians? Is Paul suggesting that my lack of control over jelly beans means that I do not have the Spirit of God? Well, maybe. But let's look at it another way. Who is Paul writing to? Who are the Galatians? They are a group of people living in the Roman province of Galatia. They are probably not super elite. They have men and women. They have slaves and free. They are mostly Gentile, maybe a few ethnic Jews. And who was self-control usually reserved for? For elite men. But what have we been saying about the fruits of the Spirit over and over in the past few weeks? They are available to everyone – we cultivate them in our walk with Christ. Paul says that *all* of them can gain self-control – the usual elite men but also the poor, women, slaves, Gentiles and Jews. Suddenly the quality that was usually reserved for a select few is open to everyone in their walk with Christ.

What does the virtue of self-control say for us today? Does this mean that I'm not following the walk of Christ because I love jelly beans? Does it mean that we don't have the spirit if we are overweight? Or if we've looked with desire at another human being? Or if we've had an affair? I hope not! But we do have some lessons to learn from it. Is self-control valuable? Absolutely. Self-control means that we don't get instant rewards all the time. In the past week we have been watching the Olympics. Athletes train for years and years to reach their desired goals. The winners of the gold, silver and bronze medals have practiced self-control for years, decades for some, in order to get to their goals.

Christians today are called away from instant rewards. We are in this for the long haul. Fruit does not grow overnight on trees, and it doesn't grow overnight in our lives, either. Just like fruit trees have periods where the fruit is more plentiful and seasons when it's not as abundant, so is our Christian lives. Self-control is recognizing the fallow periods and trusting that our walk in the Spirit will continue – everything needs the invisible season to gather energy before the fruit starts to show.

Self-control does have its place in the Christian life, and not only over the desires that Paul may have had in mind. Self-control is what keeps us from pushing “send” on an email that perhaps communicates anger instead of constructive critique. Self-control helps us to think “What would Jesus do?” before we fly off the handle. And when we lose self-control, because we're human beings, we know that the Spirit is there to help us step back on the path of love, joy, peace and kindness – they are always available to us. We sometimes punish ourselves for what we perceive as a lack of self-control – the extra jelly bean, another drink we don't need, or making a purchase beyond our means – but it's actually self-control that prompts us to seek help. Self-control helps us evaluate potentially self-destructive behaviors and to make small changes, one at a time. We *all* have our problem areas. And self-control is often much easier when we are together – it doesn't require martyrdom. Are the rewards instant when we recognize these behaviors? No. Do we cultivate rewards over time? Yes. The fruits of the Spirit are not about instant success but about the long and steady response to God's Spirit in our lives.

I'm not dismissing Paul's understanding of self-control, either. You've all heard me talk about my sex positive understanding of sexuality so this is not a finger-wagging sermon that is chastising you for any impure thoughts (!). After all, we are human. But the ability to control sexual desire is, of course, important. As a culture, we portray sexuality as a component of life

that does not *need* self-control. We see the devastating consequences of the loss of self-control in the widespread depiction of women's bodies in media as asking for sexual attention at all times. We expect young women to model self-control and restraint but we celebrate young men who do not. Two times in recent months we have heard of cases of young men who exercised no self-control, committed acts of rape and sexual violence yet suffered no consequences. This type of sexual exploitation is rampant in our culture. The sexual violence on the CSU campus, often related to alcohol, is alarming. So does self-control have a place in our society still? Yes, I think it does. So we do need to promote greater self-control and taking responsibility for actions in our society. And our Christian walk can help us do this.

So was Paul a stodgy old man trying to tell people how to live their lives and to ruin people's fun for the next 2,000 years? Maybe. But I don't think so. Paul was also opening the door up to a world that had not been seen often before – one of freedom where people get to make their own choices. You know the danger of opening the door up to freedom for people? They may not see things your way -- they may choose, through their own volition and self-study, a different path. This is what the Galatians did that angered Paul and made him write this letter. Does the fruit of the Spirit of self-control still have a chance to impact us? Yeah, I do think so.

We are not called to understand self-control *precisely* the way Paul did. I hope that this sermon might unearth some of the creaky ancient ways that self-control was viewed in the ancient world and explain why Paul includes it as a fruit of the Spirit. And self-control has the opportunity to be helpful for us today, too. Self-control actually doesn't limit us – it frees us to act in Christ-like ways sometimes against our natures. All of us struggle with our own desires sometimes – anger, jealousy, addictions. So if you do, too, you're not alone. What Galatians promises us is that in our Christian journey, we have the chance to invite the Spirit to walk with

us every step of the way. We are called to live by the Spirit. When Christ is in us, we have the blessed assurance that Jesus is with us, always.